

COKE TAPE NOT



JACK GOODMAN

HEAVY HITTERS The Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton visit with boxing impresario Don King in undated photograph.

Probe of Don King dragged Rev. Al in

By **DAVE GOLDINER**
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Don King was once a young Al Sharpton's meal ticket, but their questionable relationship may have finally come back to bite the black activist.

The explosive FBI tape showing Sharpton discussing a possible drug deal with an undercover agent in 1983 was actually a small slice of a federal probe into the big-haired boxing impresario — not Sharpton.

Federal agents were investigating King's possible links to the mob in the early '80s, one in a seemingly endless series of probes. The feds eventually pulled the plug on the investigation, which was led by then-federal prosecutor Rudy Giuliani. No one was criminally charged.

Giuliani went back after King, filing tax-evasion charges stemming from thousands of dollars the boxing promoter allegedly skimmed from his company. But King beat those charges in 1985 — and walked away from an insurance fraud rap in 1998.

"This is a victory for all Americans," he gushed after the jury cleared him.

Giuliani declined to comment yesterday on Sharpton or King.

The flamboyant boxing promoter, now 72, served several years in prison for manslaughter stemming from a 1966 street fight in Cleveland.

He emerged from prison to become the most powerful force in the fight world, using a mixture of hucksterism and bare-knuckles deal-making. But there were persistent rumors that King had ties to mobsters in his hometown of Cleveland and sometimes tipped them off to fixed fights.

The feds decided to test the claims by sending undercover agents posing as South American drug kingpins looking to get into King's fight game.

The phony druglords approached mob capo Michael Franzese, the star of last night's HBO report on Sharpton, about laundering \$4 million in drug money through King.

Franzese steered them to Sharpton, then a 28-year-old street preacher who was serving as a go-between to King.

Sharpton had already known King for nearly a decade. The two met in Africa when King was promoting the 1974 "Rumble in the Jungle" between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire, which is now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Not yet out of his teens, Sharpton was there to help promote a James Brown concert in conjunction with the fight.

Sharpton agreed to hook up the fake dealers — he said he thought they were wealthy businessmen — with King in meetings that were secretly taped by the agents. One of those tapes, involving only Sharpton and the undercover agent, is the focus of the current furor.

The other tapes gathered dust in prosecutors' files until 1992, when a Senate committee launched hearings into the boxing industry.

King and other boxing officials took the Fifth Amendment. But after the hearings ended, King walked away more powerful than ever, spouting the mantra he has repeated over and over.

"Only in America," he crowed.



TODD MAISEL DAILY NEWS

ANGRY Threatening to slap HBO with a suit, the Rev. Al Sharpton denies he was involved in drug dealing in the 1980s, despite an incriminating video aired by the premium cable channel.

Split over political hit he'll take

Depending who you ask in political circles, the Rev. Al Sharpton is either a hot ticket or in a lot of hot water.

One Sharpton backer, Rep. Jose Serrano (D-Bronx), viewed the FBI tape with utmost suspicion.

"The minute he decides he's running for President, a tape from the FBI shows up?" asked Serrano, who said Sharpton "continues to challenge the system to the point where there are people who would love him not to be around."

"I suspect that if he has library books he hasn't returned, we'll be reading about him soon," Serrano said.

On the flip side, former Mayor Ed Koch said the exchange between Sharpton and an FBI agent posing as a drug lord "damages [Sharpton's] credibility." Koch added that Sharpton owes the public an explanation.

"I don't see how he can just dismiss it," Koch

said. "I don't think he's explained it away. . . . It's not going to be explained by simply saying he was set up. They may have targeted him, based on information, but they didn't do anything illegal."

But Assemblyman Keith Wright (D-Harlem) also questioned the timing of the tape's resurfacing.

"I think it's old news," he said. "It has no effect on his standing in the black and brown communities throughout the nation. I still believe he will fight for justice for all, from Michael Jackson [to] Abner Louima."

Rep. Charles Rangel, dean of New York's congressional delegation, didn't seem to give the matter much weight. "I don't know if anyone takes [Sharpton's] candidacy for the presidency seriously enough to harm it," he said. "Al Sharpton had a thousand lives and has gone through accusations, in my opinion, far more serious than this — and has apparently politically survived."

Celeste Katz

☆

Ex-Yank Chris rips fix claim

By ADAM RUBIN
DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

Mets hitting coach **Chris Chambliss** dismissed allegations by former Colombo family capo **Michael Franzese** that Yankees teams of the late 1970s threw games as repayment for gambling debts. **Franzese** made the claim during an interview televised last night on HBO's "Real Sports."

"I can't imagine us fixing anything," said Chambliss, who played with the Yankees from 1974 to '79. "We were in the World Series three straight years. I don't know anything about that." Chambliss said he had no knowledge of any Yankees with gambling problems.

Roger nailed: Roger Cedeño was held out of the starting lineup last night — a day after a baseball hit his bare hand, cutting him, as he tried to catch a fly ball. Cedeño got three

stitches after the edge of the nail on his right pinkie broke. "It's still open," Cedeño said of the cut. "The trainer said I need one or two days off to let it heal."

The crowd booed Cedeño as he came out of the game. "We get booed on the road. We get booed at home. We get used to it," Cedeño said with a laugh.

Getting physical: Al Leiter said there was "nothing imminent yet" about a contract extension with the Mets. However, Leiter took a physical this week in Manhattan as part of the process for re-signing, a team source confirmed.

Marco's moment: Rookie Marco Scutaro has a bootleg video of his first major-league hit — although the picture gets very shaky as he rounds the bases. Scutaro delivered a pinch-hit, two-run triple Monday to break a tie in the seventh inning against the Expos. His wife, **Marines** — who had flown in from Norfolk earlier in the day — videotaped the moment. "She started jumping," said Scutaro, whose 2-month-old daughter, **Maria Veronica**, also was at the game.

Scutaro, 26, plans to get the baseball signed by his teammates. "It's just unforgettable," said Scutaro, promoted when **Joe McEwing** went on the disabled list. "I think the feeling is going to be in my mind my whole life."

Ted kin nix mediation

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INVERNESS, Fla. — Two of Ted Williams' children withdrew their request to settle privately the dispute with their half-sister over the Hall of Famer's remains.

Robert Goldman, an attorney for John Henry Williams and Claudia Williams, filed a motion in Citrus County Circuit Court yesterday saying the elder daughter, Bobby-Jo Williams Ferrell, has "no intention of making any good-faith effort to reach a private understanding."

Goldman had asked a judge last week to order a mandatory mediation session with Ferrell to avoid a public showdown in court. Ted Williams died July 5.

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