

Ditka-hype begins in New Orleans

■ **DIVIDENDS:** Even Chicago residents have begun to buy Saints' season tickets

The Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The hiring of Mike Ditka is already paying off for the New Orleans Saints.

The calls are coming for season tickets.

"It's been incredible," Greg Suit, Saints vice president for marketing, said Wednesday. "It started Monday when the rumor was around that he was going to be hired. Yesterday we had a couple of hundred calls for season tickets, and today we had to transfer people in from other departments just to answer phones."

And it's not just people around Louisiana calling. In a day and a half, about 50 Chicago residents have become season-ticket holders, and more are signing up by the minute.

"We're faxing out forms to businesses that want to pass them out to employees," said Jasen Feyerherm of the Saints ticket office. "We're hearing from families who say they're switching allegiance from the Bears to the Saints because they love Mike Ditka."

Dave Gomez, 45, of Chicago was one of those buying Saints tickets. Gomez, a lifelong Bears

fan, said he purchased four season tickets and would make every game in New Orleans.

"We're sick inside that he's not coaching the Bears, but happy that he's coaching somewhere," Gomez said. "It will hurt, but I'm a Saints fan now."

The Saints did not sell out a single home game last year — their fourth straight non-winning season. And coming off a 3-13 record, it appeared to be a hard sell again this year. Then Ditka came to town.

Mike Sawka, 27, ordered two season tickets. He attended the Chicago game in New Orleans last year and liked the city. Now with Ditka the coach, he'll be making the trip eight times a year.

"And I won't be the only one from here," Sawka said. "There's going to be a big Saints contingent in Chicago from now on."

Callers said they would get to games one way or another.

"We had one man who said he and his two sons were going to get a group together and drive down in a bus for every home game," Feyerherm said. "He said they were willing to go anywhere to see coach Ditka coaching again."

Local fans were also buying season tickets. At least 200 tickets were sold on Monday, and the number increased on Tuesday

when Ditka officially became coach.

It's good news for the Saints, who watched season-ticket sales dip to 40,000 last year, close to a team low. New Orleans sold 53,000 season tickets in 1988, following their first winning season and first trip to the playoffs.

For a club that has had only five winning seasons in 30 years, promising that next season will be better gets harder every year.

"Obviously, marketing with a headliner like Mike makes it a lot easier to give people a reason to be optimistic about the season," Suit said. "It gives you a running start toward September and the time you actually get the team on the field."

Normally in January, even following good seasons, the ticket office is busy only with internal business, such as preparing the mailing that goes out to season-ticket holders every spring. But this is no normal January for the Saints.

"One of our people told me he was on the phone for an hour and 15 minutes without stopping this morning," Suit said. "It's more than just the sudden surge of publicity the hiring brought. It's that now fans have someone to pin their hopes onto — someone they believe in."

Coach: Reeves pleased with Brooks' knowledge

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the Falcons training facility in suburban Suwanee next Tuesday, according to Reeves.

Brooks is the fifth defensive coordinator in five years for the Falcons, who perennially have ranked among the worst defensive teams in the NFL. Even after signing Cornelius Bennett as a free agent last year, Atlanta still allowed an NFL-high 461 points.

"He realizes this is a challenge," Reeves said. "But he also realizes that through the free-agent system we're under now, particularly with the type of money we have to spend under the salary cap, that if we can make some wise decisions we'll be competitive and turn this thing around."

Brooks was a defensive back coach at San Francisco in 1974 and '75, and he also worked as a defensive assistant in college before he took over the Oregon program in 1977. Overall, he had a losing record

with the Ducks, but he took them to four bowls in his final six years, capped by Oregon's first trip to the Rose Bowl in 1994.

He won his first four games as an NFL coach, but St. Louis was plagued by a shoddy defense and a large number of penalties. The Rams allowed a team-record 418 points in 1995 and 409 in 1996, and they tied a team record with 133 penalties this season.

"Not all good coaches come from a winning background," Reeves said. "That's certainly something to look at, but I just have a lot of respect for him, and I know he'll come in and do a good job with the defense."

Brooks, who also has the title of assistant head coach, is the fourth defensive assistant named by Reeves. Earlier, Don Blackmon was hired as line-backer coach, Bill Kollar as defensive line coach and Ron Meeks as secondary coach.

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