SPARANO, from page 15

In his two years with the Dolphins, the only thing Saban proved was that his hard-line approach didn't work very well at the professional level.

He had a nasty habit of talking down to people, whether it be his players or the media. Veteran nose tackle Keith Traylor, for example, said after re-signing with the Dolphins in 2007 that he never would have returned had Saban not left for the University of Alabama.

Cameron had different problems. First and foremost, he looked overmatched for his first head-coaching job in the NFL. He didn't talk down to the media the way Saban did, but he also had a nasty habit of complimenting reporters for asking good questions before proceeding to avoid answering them.

Worse, he never earned the respect of some of his players.

"They (Cameron and Sparano) run two different programs," said Porter, whose problems with Cameron were well documented. "The way Sparano runs his program he's got the attention of all his players. You're supposed to fear your head coach. Not fear him like that, but when he talks it's completely silent. When he says something, everybody stops to listen. He demanded that from day one and when you do that you're never going to lose it (that respect)."

A handful of Dolphins players have played for Saban, Cameron and Sparano, but Patrick Cobbs can go a couple better because he also played for Bill Belichick and Bill Cowher during brief stints with New England and Pittsburgh, respectively.

While Cobbs described Saban, Belichick, Cowher and Sparano as "all grinding kind of guys," he said there is one clear difference when it comes to his current coach.

"He's real passionate," Cobbs said. "He shows his passion more than the other guys."

There's that word again.

Just watch Sparano on Sundays. Watch him throw his arm in one direction to signal a first down or watch him get in a player's face to express his displeasure.

The man puts in a nice workout on game day.

But it's not just on the field where Sparano shows that passion.

He recently spoke to a group of Dolphins fan website operators. One of the fans said: "Coach, I just want you to know you've been speaking for 10 minutes and I'm already scared of you."

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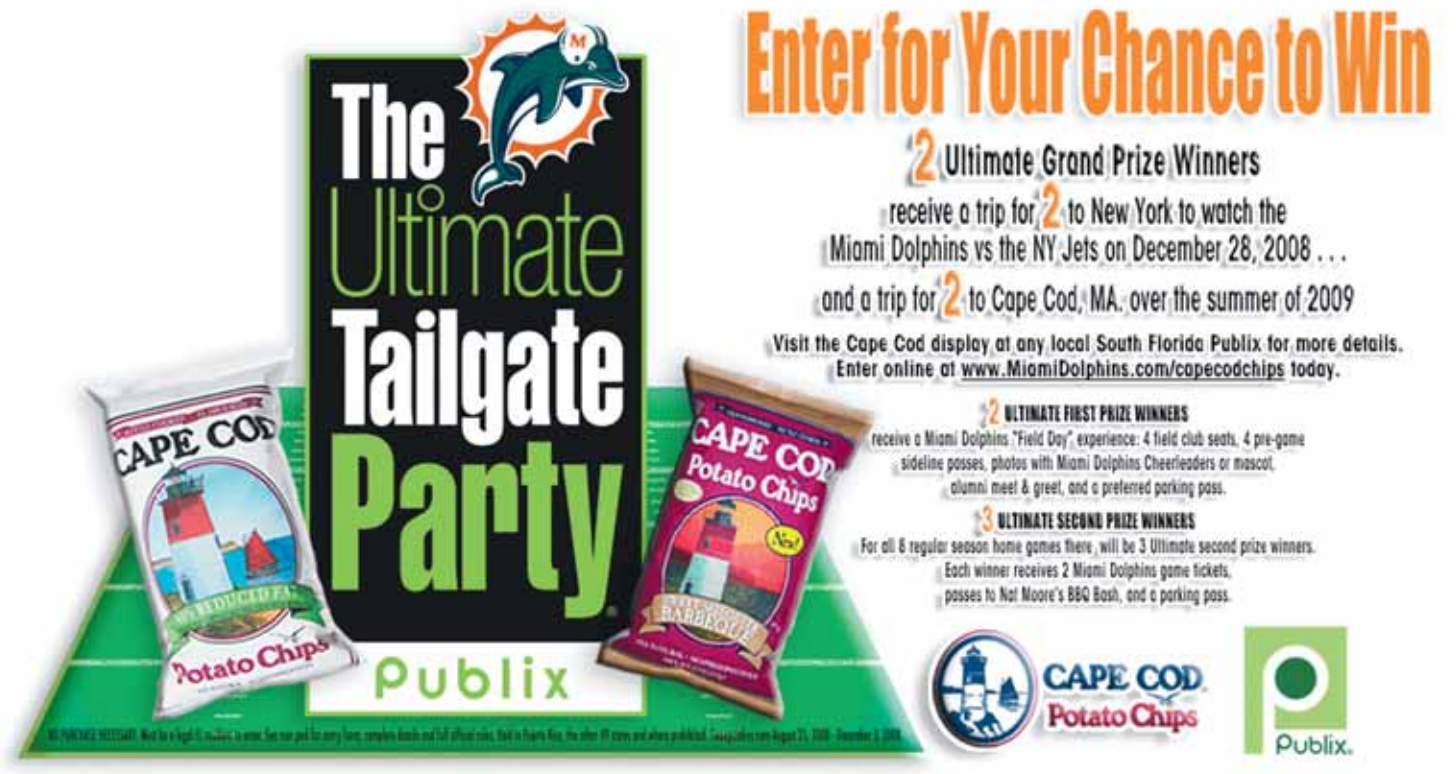
COACH OF THE YEARcandidates

Tony Sparano is clearly among the leading candidates for Coach of the Year honors, but it looks like he's going to have some tough competition. Here are some of the other front-runners:

- Mike Smith, Atlanta — Like Sparano, Smith is a first-year coach who has helped turn around a team that was awful in 2007.
- John Harbaugh, Baltimore — Another first-year coach, Harbaugh has benefited from the return to health — at least early in the season — of several of the Ravens' defensive stars.
- Jeff Fisher, Tennessee — Always recognized as a top coach, Fisher has the Titans tied for the best record in the league.
- Ken Whisenhunt, Arizona — He's bound to get recognition because the Cardinals have been so bad for so long.
- Tom Coughlin, N.Y. Giants — Helping his players avoid a post-Super Bowl letdown deserves recognition.