

STEELE CALLS IN HEAVYWEIGHT DON KING STUMPS IN BALTIMORE

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Don King trailed his latest contender into a crowd yesterday, ready to pump up his fans for the big fight.

Only this time he wasn't entering a boxing ring, but into some of Baltimore's rundown neighborhoods and a gathering of potential city voters.

An American flag in each hand and a grapefruit-sized diamond cross hanging around his neck, King - the renowned promoter who is better known than many of the pugilists he represents - turned on the charm he usually reserves for selling the most buzz-worthy prizefights. He had the Nov. 7 election on his mind.

"Yeah, Michael Steele, y'all, the next United States senator of the great state of Maryland," King bellowed as he descended the stairs of the Republican nominee's big blue campaign bus and set foot on Pennsylvania Avenue. "He cares about Jesus."

King, who has promoted the best fighters in the world - from Muhammad Ali to Evander Holyfield to Mike Tyson - is nothing if not a closer.

He also knows his audience - and that a nod to religion, several signed autographs and talk of sending Maryland's first black senator to Washington - could play in Druid Heights and Upton, where boarded-up buildings line the streets.

"The august halls of the Senate need some coloring," said King, a permanent grin splashed across his face, his trademark poof of salt-and-pepper hair a bit tidier than usual.

But King is no saint, civil rights leader or voice for the chronically downtrodden. In fact, he's a convicted killer. And some candidates might opt not to embrace his endorsement.

King, 75, served about four years in prison for manslaughter for stomping a man to death in 1966, according to news reports. In 1954, he shot another man - King said the victim was a burglar - and was acquitted.

"He is brilliant, charismatic, hardworking and totally amoral," said Thomas Hauser, author and lead writer for the boxing Web site Secondsout.

Still, during two events, one on a depressed stretch of Pennsylvania Avenue and another at the nearby UMAR Boxing and Youth Development Center, Steele appeared to relish King's support.

"I have a friend with me who knows what 'Only in America' means," Steele said, referring to King's favorite catch-phrase, a slogan that also hung around his neck yesterday in the form of some serious bling, the words

emblazoned in diamonds. "I've got a friend who understands what it is like to not only pull himself up by his bootstraps, but, like Thurgood Marshall told us, to reach back and help others."

Maryland Democrats said Steele should be ashamed of himself and were quick to note that King and Steele grew close while campaigning around the country for President Bush two years ago.

"Don King is nothing but a publicity stunt, and that's all that Michael Steele has," said state Democratic Party spokesman David Paulson. "He's certainly not talking about issues."

Neither was King yesterday. As dozens of city residents gathered to catch a glimpse of him, King said nothing about increasing the minimum wage, improving access to health care, public safety improvements or job creation, matters that could improve their everyday lives.

"You want no pie in the sky when you die, you want something sound on the ground when you're around," King said. "A vote for Steele is history."