

Franken's Future On The Line As Democrats Meet

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Al Franken arrived at the state Democratic convention in Rochester Friday with his young political career on the line -- a high-stakes weekend he'd been joking about as he met with delegates in the days leading up to it.

"We have a very important convention coming up. Maybe you've heard about it," Franken said to a group of about two dozen gathered at a St. Paul coffee shop this week.

Franken has often used humor as he tries to win over the Democratic activists who will endorse a candidate to run against incumbent Republican Sen. Norm Coleman. They're choosing Saturday between Franken and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, a peace activist seen as an underdog against the former "Saturday Night Live" performer and writer.

Franken's comedy background has been a mixed blessing. It made him the early favorite, but in recent weeks Republicans have damaged him by resurrecting old, sexually explicit comments and writings -- material that even some Democrats said is a problem for Franken.

Both Franken and Nelson-Pallmeyer were schmoozing delegates Friday, with Franken hosting a nighttime bash at a local hotel. The Franken campaign is betting that concern at the top of the party hasn't filtered to the 1,400 convention delegates who'll be casting their votes, and another 1,400 alternates.

"I think it's the ability to beat Norm Coleman," said Dale Hansen, an alternate delegate and an attorney from Fairmont, said of his support of Franken. He said none of Franken's edgy humor bothered him. "I'm well aware of his last career and what it entailed. There is a line between a satirist and a senator and I think I can recognize that distinction."

Nelson-Pallmeyer has refrained from talking about Franken's bawdy works, or problems with his personal finances that arose earlier in the spring. Instead he's presented himself as a serious, substantive candidate who'd be best able to make the election a referendum on Coleman's record.

"Jack understands the world," said Mike Falcon, a delegate and sixth-grade teacher from Albany. "Jack's not the kind of politician who just talks about issues superficially. He'd be the kind of senator who's going to see mistakes before they happen."

But some Franken supporters wonder if Nelson-Pallmeyer has the "chutzpah" to take on Coleman, in the words of Maplewood delegate Kelsey Neumann -- who said she was undecided but leaning toward Franken.

Franken has impressed many activists, as well as many Democratic elected officials, with his hard work in assembling a strong grassroots coalition and raising nearly \$10 million so far. A number of prominent Franken endorsers, while saying they still want him to get the endorsement, said they were unsettled about some of his more outrageous words.

"I think there's a group that's definitely concerned about these particular writings, and for myself I definitely when I read them was concerned about them," said House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher, of a racy Playboy article Franken wrote in 2000. "I think it is important that he addresses that concern" at the convention this weekend.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who hasn't endorsed either candidate, added to the chorus of concerns Friday. She told reporters after her convention speech that she found some of Franken's past writings "entirely inappropriate."

Klobuchar said she told Franken he needs to address the controversy head-on when he addresses delegates on Saturday.

"He needs to take this on upfront and more directly, and from what I've heard that's what he's going to do," Klobuchar said. "I think that's a good thing."

Klobuchar said she's confident Franken could beat Coleman if he does get the party endorsement.

While Nelson-Pallmeyer hasn't been talking about Franken's problems, some of his supporters -- as well as those who had supported prominent trial attorney Mike Ciresi before he got out of the race -- have been.

"Al Franken's shortcomings go way beyond the latitude we should expect voters to give a U.S. Senate candidate," said state Rep. Ken Tschumper, DFL-La Crescent, who backs Nelson-Pallmeyer. "People are real unsettled about it and they're not quite sure what to do or think. For me, it's real clear -- I think we should not endorse Al Franken."

Nelson-Pallmeyer said he's confident he can pull an upset win at the convention.

"The momentum looks good. The delegate movement is all in our direction," Nelson-Pallmeyer said. Both Nelson-Pallmeyer and Franken have said they won't run in the primary without the endorsement.

Former state Sen. Steve Kelley said people concerned about Franken, but worried about Nelson-Pallmeyer's viability, may simply be out of time to find another alternative.

"I think Al's going to win the endorsement on Saturday," Kelley said. After that, he said, "alternative scenarios are pretty tricky."

DFL activists aren't required to endorse, and if they don't it could mean a wide-open September primary that could include Ciresi. But the DFL has a long track record of sticking out conventions until endorsements are made, including a 19-ballot, 22-hour slugfest in the 1984 U.S. Senate campaign.

Ciresi has left open the possibility that he could still run in the primary. To take on an endorsed candidate in the primary would likely require a candidate who could spend his own money on the race, something Ciresi could handle.

"All options are on the table," Ciresi said. "This race cannot be about whether a statement is pornography or smut. It's got to be about the issues which are affecting all of our citizens, and America's reputation in the world, what we're doing domestically, internationally."

For his part, Franken is predicting an endorsement win -- and expecting the party to get behind him at that point.

"We're going to win this," Franken said. "And we're going to emerge from Rochester united."