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MIKE ILITCH OBITUARY

1929 - 2017



Mike Ilitch, an entrepreneur who founded Little Caesars Pizza and owned the Detroit Tigers and Detroit Red Wings, died Friday, Feb. 10, 2017, in Detroit, according to multiple news sources. He was 87.

Ilitch was a Detroit-area icon, rising from humble beginnings to become one of the most admired owners in sports. He also played a significant role in efforts to revitalize downtown Detroit.

Born July 20, 1929, in Detroit, Ilitch was the son of Macedonian immigrants. After returning from his service in the U.S. Marine Corps, Ilitch played baseball in the Detroit Tigers' minor league system before an injury ended his athletic career.

In 1959, he and his wife, Marian, founded Little Caesars in suburban Detroit. The company grew into the largest carryout pizza chain in the world, and the couple were listed by Forbes magazine as having a net worth of \$5.4 billion in 2016.

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A passionate sportsman, he purchased the Detroit Red Wings NHL team in 1982. He built them into a perennial contender, breaking a 40-year drought with the first of his four Stanley Cup championships in 1997. Before the introduction of a salary cap, Ilitch assembled teams loaded with future Hall of Famers including Steve Yzerman and Nicklas Lidstrom.

Unfortunately, he did not achieve the same level of success with the Detroit Tigers, which he purchased in 1992. The Tigers would see some of their worst seasons during the 1990s. However, following the construction of Comerica Park in downtown Detroit in 2000, the franchise was reinvigorated. Ilitch spent lavishly on superstars like Miguel Cabrera and Justin Verlander in pursuit of a World Series victory. The team made it to the World Series in 2006 and 2012 but was unable to win a championship for the former Tiger farmhand.

"Heartbroken hearing of Mr I's passing. He was a family man. A self made man. A giving man. An icon for our city and nation. #RIPMrIlitch," tweeted Tigers pitcher Justin Verlander.

In addition to Comerica Park, Ilitch invested heavily in other downtown Detroit real estate development projects, including a new multipurpose venue, Little Caesars Arena. It will open in fall 2017 and serve as the home of the Red Wings and Pistons.

"He made such a positive impact in the world of sports, in business and in the community, and we will remember him for his unwavering commitment to his employees, his passion for Detroit, his generosity to others, and his devotion to his family and friends," said his son Christopher Ilitch, president and CEO of Ilitch Holdings Inc., in a statement.

Shortly after his death, an old story about Ilitch's generosity gained new legs: He paid Rosa Parks' rent for the last 10 years of her life. Detroit-area judge Damon Keith told the story of how Parks was robbed in her home in 1994, and Keith helped her find a new, safer apartment. When Ilitch learned of the effort, he offered to pay for the apartment indefinitely. His checks went out every month until Parks' death in 2005 – though he didn't spread the word of his own generosity, and the story wasn't made public until years after the fact.

Ilitch is survived by his wife, Marian, and their seven children.