

Tigers, Red Wings owner and pizza titan Mike Ilitch dead at 87

John Gallagher and Bill McGraw, Detroit Free Press

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(Photo: Amy Leang, Detroit Free Press)

Mike Ilitch rose from a humble west-side neighborhood to assemble a food, sports and entertainment empire that enabled him to return the Stanley Cup to Hockeytown, build both a new arena and a ballpark with a Ferris wheel, restore the grandeur of downtown's iconic Fox Theatre and introduce metro Detroit to the concept of "pizza-pizza."

From his first Little Caesars outlet in a Garden City strip mall in 1959 — where a pizza cost \$2.39 — Ilitch, aided at every step by Marian, his wife of 61 years, became a major metro Detroit personality and a key figure in the revival of downtown Detroit. In addition to founding the Little Caesars pizza chain, he owned the Red Wings, Tigers and the Fox Theatre, and operated city-owned Joe Louis, Cobo, and Little Caesars arenas, among other smaller businesses, teams and restaurants.



Mike
Ilitch,
one
of

the most famous Detroiters of his time, died today at the age of 87, according to his company, Ilitch Holdings. His family will honor him at a private funeral service, and a public memorial service is being planned and details will be announced as soon as they are finalized, the Ilitch companies said in a statement.

In lieu of flowers, the Ilitch family asks that donations be made to:

- [Ilitch Charities](http://ilitchcharities.org/)
- [The Detroit Tigers Foundation](http://ilitchcharities.org/)

- [Mitch Albom: Mike Ilitch loved his teams as much as we do](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/columnists/albom/2017/02/11/mike-ilitch-dead-red-wings-tigers/97787182/)
- [Mike Ilitch's complex relationship with Detroit](http://www.freep.com/story/opinion/columnists/henderson/2017/02/11/mike-ilitch-detroit-comerica-park/97792338/)
- [Ilitch leaves music, entertainment legacy in downtown Detroit](http://www.freep.com/story/entertainment/music/ilitch-entertainment-music-detroit/97773924/)
- [Would Mike Ilitch's story be possible today?](http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/obit-detroit-economy-immigration-tigers/97786944/)
- [Did you know? Mike Ilitch once paid Rosa Parks' rent](http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/ilitch-rosa-parks/97781552/)
- [Jim Leyland 'brokenhearted' Tigers couldn't win title for Mike Ilitch](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/mlb/tigers/leyland-mike-ilitch/97770030/)
- [Mike Ilitch was a great owner, a man of vision](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/columnists/seidel/2017/02/10/mike-ilitch-great-owner-man-of-vision/97768568/)

- [Tigers, Red Wings owner and pizza titan Mike Ilitch dead at 87](http://www.freep.com/story/money/busir-detroit-pizza-red-wings-tigers-hockey-forbes/91475642/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/money/busir-detroit-pizza-red-wings-tigers-hockey-forbes/91475642/>)
- [How legendary owner Mike Ilitch made Detroit 'Hockeytown'](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/nhl/red-wings/2017/02/10/mike-ilitch-dead-red-wings-remember/97766612/)
([http://www.freep.com/story/sports/nhl/red-wings-remember/97766612/](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/nhl/red-wings/2017/02/10/mike-ilitch-dead-red-wings-remember/97766612/))
- [How baseball and the Detroit Tigers became Mike Ilitch's true love](http://www.freep.com/story/sports/mlb/tigers-mike-ilitch/97766674/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/sports/mlb/tigers-mike-ilitch/97766674/>)
- [Mike Ilitch funeral: Private service, public tribute to follow](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/n-ilitch-funeral-private-service-public-tribute-follow/97767364/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/n-ilitch-funeral-private-service-public-tribute-follow/97767364/>)
- [Mike Ilitch legacy wall: Share your memories and condolences](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/n-ilitch-memories-condolences-death/97769900/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/n-ilitch-memories-condolences-death/97769900/>)
- [Chris Ilitch now in charge of dad's empire under succession plan](http://www.freep.com/story/money/busir-ilitch-chris-business/97768106/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/money/busir-ilitch-chris-business/97768106/>)

(<http://detroit.tigers.mlb.com/det/community/foundation.jsp>)

- [The Detroit Red Wings Foundation](https://www.nhl.com/redwings/community/foundation) (<https://www.nhl.com/redwings/community/foundation>)

"My father was a once-in-a-generation entrepreneur, visionary and leader, setting the tone for our organization and our family," said Christopher Ilitch, president and CEO of Ilitch Holdings, in a statement released by the company.

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[Ilitches' \\$7 million Wayne State med school gift tied to one doctor](http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2016/09/17/ilitch-2014-med-school-gift-tied-one-doctor/90120092/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2016/09/17/ilitch-2014-med-school-gift-tied-one-doctor/90120092/>)

[Ilitches make it official: Chris in line to lead family business empire](http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/michigan/2016/05/05/christopher-ilitch-ilitch-holdings-mike-marian-little-caesars/83992742/)
(<http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/michigan/2016/05/05/christopher-ilitch-ilitch-holdings-mike-marian-little-caesars/83992742/>)

"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. Together my family and the company celebrate the tremendous man he was, and we will continue to work hard to uphold his remarkable legacy. I'm honored to have had the opportunity to work with him to nurture and grow our businesses, but mostly, I'm grateful to have called him my Dad, and I know my siblings feel the same."

Success brought Ilitch and his family fabulous wealth. The 2016 Forbes magazine compilation of the 400 richest Americans listed Mike and Marian Ilitch at No. 88 with a net worth of \$5.4 billion. In addition, Marian Ilitch is the sole owner of the MotorCity Casino Hotel.

But perhaps more important to Ilitch were a different set of statistics: four Stanley Cup championships for his Red Wings, two trips to the World Series for his Detroit Tigers, and a vast number of trophies for team and individual player achievements.

Ilitch, whose first job was cleaning vehicles in a used-car lot, frequently expressed astonishment at the way his life seemed to imitate the full-screen Alger tale.

Remembering Mike Ilitch:

"At times, it's kind of like I'm still dreaming," Ilitch said in 1984.

Sports owner, pizza magnate, Detroit champion

In May 2009, speaking to Free Press columnist Tom Walsh about Little Caesars' 50th anniversary, Ilitch said: "You know, we didn't plan this. It just happened over the years, where there was an opportunity and we relied on our instincts and went ahead with it."

Related:

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(<http://www.freep.com/story/sports/nhl/red-wings/2017/02/10/community-reacts-mike-ilitchs-death/97766776/>)

Red Wings GM on Mike Ilitch: 'We lost an incredible owner'

(<http://www.freep.com/story/sports/nhl/red-wings/2017/02/10/red-wings-mike-ilitch-dead/97768578/>)

Today the Ilitch companies employ 23,000 full-time and part-time colleagues worldwide and posted revenues of \$3.4 billion in 2016. The Ilitch companies include: Ilitch Holdings, Little Caesars Pizza, Blue Line Foodservice Distribution, the Detroit Red Wings, the Detroit Tigers, Olympia Entertainment, Olympia Development, Little Caesars Pizza Kits Fundraising Program and Champion Foods.

Mike Ilitch's success made him one of the best-known people in Michigan. But he often squirmed in the limelight and appeared uneasy even in gentle interviews. He was intense and reserved. He kept his businesses private, and he could bristle when asked about internal matters, such as his financial relationship with the City of Detroit, which benefited greatly from his presence and lured him with public funds.

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Mike Ilitch talks with the press following press conference at the McGregor Memorial Conference Center on the Wayne State University campus in Detroit on Friday October 30, 2015. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Critics also could be harsh, especially when the Wings or Tigers struggled. Even though Ilitch's renovation of the Fox Theatre was one of the golden moments of historical preservation in Detroit, his stewardship of other old downtown buildings sometimes came under fire.

Unlike most people who run large businesses, Ilitch did not have a college degree. A close associate, Charlie Jones, once spoke admiringly of Ilitch as having a lot of Detroit street smarts.

The son of Macedonian immigrants, Ilitch grew up on Chalfonte, near Fenkell and Livernois. After graduating from Cooley High School, where he ran track and played baseball, he served four years in the Marines, then signed a minor-league contract with the Tigers. A shortstop, Ilitch argued constantly with his father, Sotir, a machine maintenance man at Chrysler, about the value of a baseball career, but he failed to make the big leagues.

While traveling in the minors, though, Ilitch became interested in a postwar food fad called pizza pie, and returned home one winter to run a pizza operation from the unused kitchen in the back of Haig's, a west-side bar. It was a success.

Ilitch quit baseball and became a door-to-door salesman who pitched awnings, pots, pans and china, earning enough money to open his first Little Caesars, at Cherry Hill and Venoy in Garden City. Soon, the Ilitches were opening Little Caesars outlets across the metro area and beyond. The chain became known for quirky TV ads and the "Pizza! Pizza!" two-for-one deals. By the early 1990s, the company called itself the "world's largest carry-out pizza chain," with more than 4,300 outlets.

As the business grew, Ilitch began sponsoring youth hockey and adult softball, but dreamed of bigger things. In 1982, he bought the Red Wings. It was a bargain: Ilitch didn't put up a penny of the \$8-million price. Instead, he gave longtime owner Bruce Norris a \$1-million down payment from season ticket sales collected after the agreement was signed.

Rebuilding the woebegone Wings took several years. Ilitch spent millions and was patient as general manager Jimmy Devellano and Jim Lites, Ilitch's former son-in-law, built through the draft and by sneaking players out of communist countries.

By the late 1980s, the Wings had become an interesting team; by the mid-1990s they had become a great team, and today they remain one of the most successful franchises in professional sports, having won four Stanley Cup championships since 1997 and through early 2016 had made the playoffs an astonishing 25 years in a row.

In the late 1980s, Ilitch cemented his role as a godfather of downtown Detroit when he and Marian bought and refurbished the spectacular Fox Theatre and defied the long history of Detroit businesses moving to suburbia by moving their headquarters from Farmington Hills into the 10-story building that contains the Fox. For years, their entertainment arm, Olympia Entertainment, has kept the theater one of the country's best-grossing venues. Another arm, Olympia Development, built the new hockey arena and other projects.

The new Little Caesars Arena just north of downtown proved controversial at its inception, with about half the cost borne by taxpayers, with the Ilitches controlling the revenues including parking and concessions. But the family softened the criticism of the deal somewhat by pledging to build at least \$200 million worth of spin-off developments, and by pledging tens of millions of dollars to build Wayne State University's new Mike Ilitch School of Business just north of the arena and a new Little Caesars headquarters expansion near the Fox.

Ilitch frequently admitted he always had wanted to own the Detroit Tigers, and he got his chance in 1992, when he bought the storied franchise from Dominos pizza founder Tom Monaghan. Once he had the team, Ilitch fought hard through complicated political and financial issues for a new stadium. The result was Comerica Park, with such amenities as a centerfield fountain, a carousel and Ferris wheel.

Opening in 2000, Comerica cost at least \$361 million; the public bore 37%, which was less than taxpayers paid for ballparks in some cities.

On the field, the Tigers were mostly terrible during Ilitch's first decade as owner. Starting in 1994, they recorded 12 losing seasons, but in 2006 the Tigers made it to the World Series, where they lost to the Cardinals. They made a second trip to the fall classic in 2012 but were swept by the San Francisco Giants.

Over the years, the heart of the empire — the pizza business — rose and fell. By 2016, there were about 4,000 outlets in all 50 states and 17 international markets.

Ilitch Holdings, the umbrella entity the family established to oversee its sprawling network, said the family's multiple companies collectively employ over 22,000 full-time and part-time employees worldwide and have 371 million customer interactions annually. In 2015, the organization's total combined revenue was \$3.3 billion.

Observers credited Mike Ilitch's drive, brains and vision for his success. He had a simple reason for his achievements.

"We believed in the pizza," Ilitch once said.

How to donate

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to [Ilitch Charities \(http://www.ilitchcharities.org\)](http://www.ilitchcharities.org), [the Detroit Red Wings Foundation \(http://redwings.nhl.com/club/microhome.htm?location=/foundation\)](http://redwings.nhl.com/club/microhome.htm?location=/foundation) and [the Detroit Tigers Foundation \(http://Detroit.Tigers.mlb.com/det/community/foundation.jsp\)](http://Detroit.Tigers.mlb.com/det/community/foundation.jsp).

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