

Pat Bowlen, influential NFL owner who guided Broncos to excellence, dies at 75

By [Harrison Smith](#)

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Pat Bowlen, a hands-on National Football League owner who guided the Denver Broncos from mediocrity to greatness, presiding over three Super Bowl victories while negotiating landmark television contracts that enriched professional football, died June 13 at his home in Cherry Hills Village, Colo. He was 75.

His family announced the death in a statement but did not give a precise cause. Mr. Bowlen had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and stepped down from the team's daily operations in 2014.

The son of a Canadian wildcatter, Mr. Bowlen was 40 when he acquired a majority stake in the Broncos in 1984. With a shy demeanor and short-lived habit of wearing a fur coat on the sidelines, he scarcely endeared himself to fans early on, only to become a Denver institution and the first NFL owner with 300 wins in his first 30 years.

With John Elway and later Peyton Manning as the Bronco's on-field generals, the team went 354-240-1 during the past 35 years, registering as many Super Bowl appearances (seven) as losing seasons. The Broncos' .596 overall winning percentage was the second best in the NFL during that period.

Outside of Denver, Mr. Bowlen was perhaps best known for his [brief on-field speech](#) after the Broncos won their first title, in 1998. "There's one thing I want to say here tonight, and it's only four words," he said, lifting the silver Vince Lombardi Trophy toward the sky before handing it to Elway, the team's 15-year veteran. "This one's for John."

The Broncos repeated as champions the next season and won a third Super Bowl in 2016, with Manning under center and Elway as the team's general manager. "This one's for Pat," Elway said that year, raising the trophy in an echo of his old friend, who was by then struggling with Alzheimer's.

Mr. Bowlen "gave you the opportunity and then wasn't the guy out front with an ego the size of New York," Elway later said. The owner is scheduled to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in August.

For decades, Mr. Bowlen started his work day with a visit to the Broncos training room, meeting with staff and players before running laps or lifting weights himself, maintaining a rigorous exercise routine that helped him compete at the Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii.

At the team's stadium, he kept a locker next to his head coach, whom he typically met after games. "He was very positive," coach John Fox told the [New York Times in 2015](#). "I can remember countless times we'd lose a game and I'd say, 'Sorry, Mr. B.' He was always very classy in the sense he'd say, 'You didn't play a down.'"

Mr. Bowlen took an active role in running the team, presiding over the hiring and firing of executives and coaches including Dan Reeves, Wade Phillips, Fox and Mike Shanahan, whom he ousted in 2009 after a 14-year run highlighted by the team's first two titles. But he said he avoided getting involved in the intricacies of play-calling and sought to remain behind the scenes.

"I understand that the NFL is in the entertainment business and the players and the coaches are the entertainment," he told the Times in 1998. "I am a producer."

Mr. Bowlen served on 15 NFL committees, including as chairman of labor and broadcasting, through which he negotiated television contracts that included an eight-year, \$17.8 billion deal in 1998 and the launch of NBC's "Sunday Night Football" in 2006, which used flexible scheduling to bring marquee games to a prime-time weekend audience.

From 1989 to 2014, the league's TV revenue soared to \$5 billion from \$473 million, according to a Bloomberg News report citing Julie Frank, a sports marketing analyst. Upon Mr. Bowlen's retirement from the Broncos, Dick Ebersol, then the chairman of NBC Sports, said he "had more to do with how we watch football in America right now than anybody else in the league."

The oldest of four children, Patrick Dennis Bowlen was born in Prairie du Chien, Wis., on Feb. 18, 1944. He spent his childhood in Alberta, where his father drilled oil wells, then attended a Jesuit boarding school in Prairie du Chien, where he ran track and played on the football and hockey teams.

Mr. Bowlen studied business at the University of Oklahoma, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1966 and graduating from the law school in 1968. He started a law practice in Edmonton, according to the Broncos, before joining his family in the oil business.

He also expanded into real estate and construction, with mixed success. Three of his companies filed for bankruptcy, and two banks he owned failed, according to a 1999 report in [the South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#).

After buying the Broncos from financier Edgar F. Kaiser Jr. for about \$70 million, he was sometimes painted as an arrogant, out-of-touch executive. Critics noted that he once owned a \$170,000 chandelier that belonged to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and that the Broncos' new stadium, which opened in 2001 at a cost of \$400 million, was largely paid for by taxpayers.

Mr. Bowlen, who spearheaded philanthropic efforts including a Broncos branch of the Boys & Girls Club of America, said he was misunderstood. "I've been able to accept all the criticism," he told the Sun-Sentinel. "But the truth is I don't have a wide circle of friends, and people don't know me. I'm basically a shy person. I feel like I've been anointed, and my mission is to save the Broncos and make them the best team in football. I'm sure that will be taken wrong, too."

Mr. Bowlen was an owner of the Colorado Crush arena football team and the Denver Outlaws lacrosse team, in addition to the Broncos. The franchise is worth \$2.7 billion, according to Forbes, and owned through a trust that Mr. Bowlen set up for his seven children, intending one of them to run the organization in his stead.

For now, the franchise is led by president and CEO Joe Ellis, one of the three trustees, amid an ownership dispute that the NFL recently said it would arbitrate.

Mr. Bowlen's marriage to Sally Parker ended in divorce, and in 1980, he married Annabel Spencer, who announced in 2018 that she also has Alzheimer's disease. In addition to his wife and their five children, survivors include two children from his first marriage; a sister; and two brothers.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm a very lucky guy that has the best job in this state, and maybe in this country," Mr. Bowlen once told the Denver Post. "I love what I'm doing, and I intend to do it until they put me in a pine box."

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Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago. [Follow](#) 
