



## History

**Main:** Toast of the Town

**Top Ten:** Mile High Moments

**Faces:** Orange-and-blue memories

**Concerts:** What dreams are made of

**Memories:** Former Broncos share memorable moments

**Pat Bowlen:** Though he tore down Mile High, fond memories remain

**Numbers:** Mile High through the years

## Finale

**Victory:** Broncos 38, 49ers 9

**Finale:** One last salute

**New digs:** Owens, Bowlen join ceremony to 'top out' new Broncos stadium

**Stories:** Broncos past and present share memories

**Chronology:** Mile High's last day

**Souvenirs:** Fans make a play for seats

**Good seats:** Workers, kin watch game on big TV in new stadium

**Voices:** Qutoes from Mile High's last day

**Passion:** Family still has first season-ticket seats

**Tales:** 76,000 tickets ♦ 76,000 stories

**Farewell cry:** Tough South Stands fans say goodbye with tears

## Multimedia

**Video & audio:** Broncos, fans remember Mile High

**Destruction:** Video montage of the stadium's demolition

**Interactive timelines:**

Game day | Through the years

**Slideshow:** Orange-and-blue memories

## Perspective

**Proud reign:** A day at Mile High

## One last salute

Fans happily but nostalgically say goodbye to stadium after 52 years

By [Randy Holtz](#)

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It was the happiest funeral anybody ever saw.

Mile High Stadium, 1948-2000.

Rest in rubble peace.

The old war horse drew what may be its final breath, heard its final impassioned bellow, withstood its final stamped boot on a sentimental Saturday.

A total of 76,098 people of every age and every life's station attended the creaking edifice's wake, but they hardly could be described as mourners. They were more like witnesses to history, markers of time, human sponges who came to absorb 52 years of nostalgia.

There were tears, but not many. There was sadness, but not much. Mostly, there were memories, a host of marvelous ones and a few lousy ones.

Yes, it was only a building, a crazy-quilt erector set of a building, an architectural mis-marriage of concrete and steel. But to the 17 million people who came there for five-plus decades, it was more than that. It was a shrine, a cathedral, a place of worship.

Patrick Murphy was one of the earliest in the congregation, attending his first Broncos game in 1961, when he was 11 years old. Now a Denver lawyer, Murphy remembers crawling under the old east stands scrounging for coins that dropped from pockets.

He went on to sell soda and then beer there. That's how he put himself through the University of Colorado

**Q&A:** What'll happen to Mile High landmarks

**Gene Amole:** When Bill Redd, Bears Stadium ruled Denver's sporting world

**Dave Krieger:** Frigid night of football frozen in time, mind

**Bernie Lincicome:** The burning question: How to say goodbye

**The stars:** Rating the best Broncos team ever

## Interact

**Forums:** Reminisce with other Broncos fans

**Vote:** What Mile High moment is your favorite?

**Thinking back:** Readers remember Mile High Stadium

law school.

Saturday, he sat in his seat in Section 132, 10 rows above the field. He looked around, shook his head, smiled.

"I've never really grown up," Murphy said. "But to the extent I grew up, I grew up here."

He once sold boxer Sonny Liston a Coke at Mile High.

"Scariest-looking man I ever met."

What will he miss?

"The mystique."

Pause.

"But not the bathroom lines."

Laughter.

Even the bathroom lines were OK with Jim Fassler, 66. A season-ticket holder in the front row of the east stands in Section 133, the resident of Worland, Wyo., has driven to Denver for every game since 1977, the Broncos' first Super Bowl season.

"People complain about the bathroom lines," he said, "but I met some great people in those lines. I think it just added to the social experience of coming here."

Fassler looked to his left, at the skeleton of the fancy, state-of-the-art stadium, the one with no name.

"It will take years and years for that place to develop the character this place has. I'd rather stay here. The bigger and newer a stadium is, the less personal it is. Man, I'll miss this place."

Fassler was dressed in the basic Broncos sweat shirt, jeans and cap. Others went to sartorial extremes.

Headgear widely varied. Mike Devereux of Denver wore a white horse head over his entire face and head. "If I told you where I got it," he said through the horse's nostril, "I would have to kill you."

Sorry to see Mile High go, Horse Head Man? "Naw, they'll still be the Broncos. I can wear my horse head at the new place, too."

A group of enterprising fellows, led by John Ballen of Denver, attracted a crowd as they walked, high-fiving all the way, in front of the North Stands. Each wore an orange jersey with a cryptic or death-related name taped to the back. There was Heaven Moses, Boney Chavous, Randy Grave-ishar, Craig Rigamorton, Rick Dug-up Church, Billy Tombstone and Tomb Jackson.

"We are the ghosts of Mile High past," said Ballen, who said their coach, Dead Miller, couldn't make it to the game.

For Randy Haase and his 12-year-old son, Corey, their Mile High beginning was their Mile High ending. They sat in Section 526 of the North Stands, in the very top row. They drove in from Keokuk, Iowa. It was their first time in Mile High.

But a guy named Greg from Denver probably will. As he walked into the stadium about 15 minutes before the game, he smelled like a brewery and looked like a stringy-haired hobo.

"Who's gonna win today, ya think?" he asked no one in particular.

"Broncos!" someone answered.

"Bears!" he screamed as he wandered off, listing badly to the north. "Bears all the way!"

There was plenty of pomp and circumstance on the field involving presumably more-sober people. Old Broncos were introduced. Dignitaries spoke.

But the folks who really mattered were in the stands.

There was 28-year season-ticket holder L.L. Reilly, a farmer from Russell, Kan., shelling out \$10 for a T-shirt covered with pictures of Mile High highlights: the Muhammad Ali-Lyle Alzado fight, Joe Dimaggio playing in an old-timers baseball game in '83, Pope John Paul II's visit in '93, concerts by the Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen.

Then there was Betty Lou Sundseth, 70, of Lakewood. She and her late husband, Raymond, owned season tickets in various parts of the stadium over the years. She wore an orange sweatshirt that dated to 1966 that said only "DENVER."

"We used to have tickets in the South Stands," she said. "But my husband and his buddy Irv would get so

liquored up, the Broncos moved our tickets here. Those guys were too drunk even for the South Stands!"

In the end, after the Broncos' had hammered the San Francisco 49ers 38-9, Russ Frerichs of Denver was asked what souvenir he would take home to commemorate the occasion.

"Only my memories," he said.

Others wanted something more tangible. One guy reached over a railing and grabbed a chunk of Mile High turf. A security guy made him throw it back.

The game's aftermath was relatively mellow, with fans watching postgame fireworks and Broncos players reaching over the cyclone fence to high-five fans.

But some of the South Standers became rowdy. Several uprooted chunks of plastic bleachers and waved them about.

As of 10 p.m. Saturday, 20 people arrested at Mile High Stadium had been booked into the Denver City Jail, said Sheriff's Sgt. Darryle Brown. Most were arrested on suspicion of drunken and disorderly conduct.

Standing amid the postgame scene was Willie Wyrick, who has sold beer at Mile High since 1971. Wyrick, 47, of north Denver, had spent a goodly portion of his life here. He even got pneumonia here during the famous blizzard game with Green Bay in 1984.

As fans filed out, many turning to take one last photo, Wyrick's eyes were moist. "It was just like home, this place," he said. "Just like being at home."

*Staff writers Ann Carnahan, [Joe Garner](#) and Robert Sanchez contributed to this report.*

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