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# A FINE RIDE



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Little Caesars  
arena

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arena

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# IN DETROIT

**NOTHING LITTLE ABOUT IT:**  
Tom Wilson (right) and Chris  
Ilitch cut the ribbon at Little  
Caesars Arena in Detroit.

COURTESY OLYMPIA ENTERTAINMENT



# Tom Wilson, builder of arenas and brands, has helped reshape sports in the Motor City

BY DON MURET

**S**EAN HENRY WALKED into the Palace of Auburn Hills in October 1990 wearing his favorite Boston Celtics hat when he ran into Tom Wilson, president of the arena and the Detroit Pistons. Henry, now president and CEO of the Nashville Predators, was trying to find his way to Volume Services' office, where he started as a trainee for the food vendor.

Wilson asked Henry why he was wearing the colors of the Pistons' heated rival.

"I had no idea who he really was and I didn't really care at 22 years old," Henry said. "I looked at him like, 'What's wrong with this guy?' Here I am, fresh out of college, smarter than anybody. I told him I was a Celtic fan and walked away."

Henry discovered his gaffe after locating the office of Volume

Services General Manager Joe Ambrose, who heard about the exchange. "He was ready to kill whoever's walking through that door in a Celtic hat," Henry said.

"I thought I was going to die," he said. "From that moment on, I realized how important a team's brand was. I tell that story now to our young employees and they can't believe it, because I'm the most brand-centric guy in the world and learned that more from Tom than anyone else."

Wilson had that influence over many folks during his five decades in the business, whether it was the Pistons or the NHL's Detroit Red Wings, where he spent the past 10 years with Olympia Entertainment after 32 years with Palace Sports & Entertainment.

For Wilson, 71, a Detroit native who stepped down from Olympia in December, it's been a spectacular ride.

It started in the mid-1970s with Wilson working in ticket sales for the Los Angeles Lakers. He had moved to LA after college to become an actor and had a bit part in "Barnaby Jones," the TV detective drama starring Buddy Ebsen, as a player fixing basketball games for the mob. They filmed the scene at the Forum, where the Lakers played from 1967 to 1999. During shooting breaks, Wilson played hoops with Lakers staff, including head of marketing Dan Trutanich. After attending a few games with Trutanich, Wilson got a job offer and accepted it.

"Most sports administration programs don't suggest getting into sports this way, but it worked for me," he joked.

## DOWNTOWN DREAMS

In 1978, Wilson returned to Detroit to work for the Pistons and took over as team president

one year later. Over the course of his career, Wilson was instrumental in building two arenas in his hometown, starting with the Palace, which opened in 1988 in the affluent Detroit suburb of Auburn Hills, followed by Little Caesars Arena in 2017. He also spearheaded the purchase of Pine Knob Music Theatre, now DTE Energy Music Theatre, which turned into North America's busiest outdoor music venue (see story, Page 34).

Along the way, Wilson oversaw three championships apiece with the Pistons and WNBA's Detroit Shock; one Stanley Cup title with the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning in 2004 when Pistons owner Bill Davidson owned them; and a pair of minor league crowns in hockey and arena football.

The final chapter came in 2010. The Ilitch family was starting to plan Little Caesars Arena and District Detroit, a multibillion-dollar redevelopment covering 50 blocks in and adjacent to downtown. Wilson got immersed in the project after Chris Ilitch, president and CEO of Ilitch Holdings, owner of the Red Wings and MLB's Detroit Tigers, hired him to lead the effort.

For those who know the history behind the sports and entertainment landscape in Detroit, Wilson's move came as a shock, considering that he was entrenched at Palace Sports, a fierce competitor with Olympia and the old Joe Louis Arena.

It made more sense after Davidson died in 2009 and the team was sold to Tom Gores two years later. As is typically the case with new owners, they bring their own people in to run the organization. Wilson knew it could happen and one year before the Pistons were sold, he jumped at the chance to help reinvent downtown Detroit.

Little Caesars Arena ultimately became home to both the Pistons and Red Wings.

"Tom's experience in multiple



**LIGHTING THE FIRE:** At the Palace of Auburn Hills, Wilson created an arena that became a prototype for other NBA franchises.



**HOLDING COURT:** Wilson speaks at a halftime ceremony honoring Pistons owner Bill Davidson at the Palace on Dec. 16, 2005.

sports, his deep understanding of the concert business and his ability to enhance the customer experience brought tremendous insight and perspective to our team,” Ilitch said. “Being from Detroit, Tom understood how the heart and soul of the area could be reflected in the arena experience.”

Similar to the Palace, Little Caesars Arena, built for \$863 million, set the bar high for design. The main concourse, themed as The Via with an ethylene tetrafluoroethylene ceiling to bring natural light into the space, gives patrons the feel of walking down a European street in an open-air market environment, tied to concessions designed as storefront restaurants.

Wilson, among many others, sat at the table as those plans were developed, and his experience at the Palace was invaluable in steering the development, said architect Ryan Gedney, HNTB’s national director, who at the time was working for HOK on the project.

“Little Caesars Arena did a lot of things really different in design and to take those ideas to fruition requires people like Tom to make sure that innovation speaks to the business of Olympia Entertainment and their bottom line,” Gedney said. “There were a lot of people on that project saying ‘What if?’ Tom kept things grounded, and you don’t get that on every project in one person.”

It became a pricey venture, with about \$325 million in public money involved. Little Caesars Arena, owned by the

Detroit Downtown Development Authority, doubled in cost from the original price tag, and some critics point to what they feel is the District’s slow development.

Others, such as veteran Detroit concert promoter Rick Franks, point to the Ilitch family’s commitment to bringing life back to the city’s inner core.

“It’s so unfounded,” Franks said of the criticism. “You need to look at it 10 years later, not 10 months. The only thing I can point to is all of the housing, condos and apartment development in and around downtown, and the final piece was putting Little Caesars Arena together. The Ilitches put a billion dollars of their own money into it. That doesn’t happen often.”

Most recently, the pandemic has slowed District development, Wilson said. It’s going to take a few years to get back on track, but it was the right thing to do for the city, he said.

Rebuilding a key piece of the city brought everything full circle for Wilson, Henry said. “To redevelop such a big part of downtown with the team that he fought against for many years has to be rewarding for him,” he said. “Just watching that (unfold) myself, it’s been fun.”

## A REVOLUTIONARY PALACE

The Pistons’ decision to move to Little Caesars Arena came in late 2016, one year before the arena opened. It spelled the end of the Palace, which was torn down last summer. But the mem-

ories remain of a building that set a benchmark for design and a business model tied to running most aspects of arena operations in-house for a privately funded venue.

Under owner Davidson, the Pistons desired an arena to call their own after playing 10 years at the old Pontiac Silverdome, an 80,000-seat NFL stadium. For basketball, the sightlines were poor. Overall, it wasn’t a positive experience for Pistons fans. They drew well for the Celtics and Los Angeles Lakers. Otherwise, Silverdome crowds were in the range of 4,000 during those lean years in the late 1970s through the early ’80s, resulting in promotions such as four free Pistons tickets with a fill-up at Marathon Oil gas stations, said former Palace sales executive Dan Hauser.

At the time, the Pistons were going through a stretch of six subpar seasons on the court, but things turned around starting with the 1983-84 season, two years before Palace construction started in 1986.

“We were fortunate that Bill Davidson decided he was going to pay for the arena itself, which gets you out of the red tape (with public bodies),” Wilson said. “The big thing was it needed to be designed in a way that we weren’t coming to him every six months, saying we didn’t make our numbers again and we needed more money.”

The Palace’s 180 suites, positioned midlevel as part of architect Rossetti’s design, were distinct in terms of the sheer

number and proximity to the floor — the first level was 16 rows from the court. The lease terms reflected their position. Suites ran from \$30,000 to \$120,000 annually. At that time, nobody else in the NBA charged more than \$50,000 a year for suites, Wilson said.

It helped pay for the \$90 million in construction, a key move considering the Palace borrowed money at 17% interest in the late 1980s, he said. Making it all work was a heavy lift but it all came together. The Palace set off one of the biggest building booms in sports with many other NBA teams developing new arenas over the next decade.

Wilson remembers NBA Commissioner David Stern telling everyone at an owners meeting: “Gentlemen, you have one job this year; you’ve got to get to Auburn Hills and see that arena. We’re no longer just in the basketball business. We’re in the arena and entertainment business.”

“There was a steady stream of people coming in and the early adopters were in Chicago and Phoenix,” Wilson said. “The building proved it could make money as opposed to others funded by municipalities that were such a money pit. It really changed an industry.”

## FILLING DATES

It wasn’t easy. Competing against Joe Louis Arena, which opened in 1979 and was controlled by Olympia Entertainment, Palace Sports & Entertainment had to get creative to fill the venue with special events apart from Pistons games.

Olympia had locked in booking exclusives at Joe Louis Arena with Feld Entertainment and the old Brass Ring Productions, a concert promoter. Those deals meant that Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and Disney on Ice, for example, couldn’t play Auburn Hills, plus major concert tours in a strong rock market that produced the likes of Alice Cooper, Ted Nugent and Bob Seger.

Palace Sports countered by booking the Royal Hanneford Circus, a show dating to the 1600s. Palace Sports gave away a lot of complimentary tickets, but the circus drew 150,000 people, performing two to three shows a day over a 10-day stretch. Most important, Palace Sports paid the circus a flat fee and kept 100





CELEBRATING A LEGENDARY CAREER

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# TOM WILSON

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Tom, your vision and commitment to excellence will long be a testament showcasing your dedication to entertainment and sports fans in Detroit.

Congratulations on your retirement,







**GOING YARDLEY:** Wilson (center) and George Yardley's family recognize the former Detroit Pistons great in 2008.

percent of ticket, concessions and merchandise revenue. Feld brings in its own branded line of food and retail concessions, keeping all revenue.

"We made a lot more money than we would have with Ringling," Wilson said. "It kept the lights on and people got comfortable coming out there. It was considered the boonies at the time. We had come from the Silverdome, which was considered the end of civilization and we moved three miles past it."

Franks knows the situation well regarding the booking exclusives at Joe Louis Arena. He worked at Brass Ring for seven years before leaving the firm to form a partnership with Jack Boyle at Cellar Door Productions. The Brass Ring-Olympia deal effectively "boxed" them out of The Joe. They worked around it, booking regional shows in Grand Rapids and Lansing, plus Toledo and Columbus in Ohio.

When the Palace opened, it gave Cellar Door a prime opportunity to bid for tours and put the arena on the map, Franks said.

For those working under Wilson at the Palace, the entrepre-

neurial spirit coursed through their veins. He let the sales and marketing staff "run with ideas" to generate revenue and exposure for Detroit's new kid on the block, said ex-Palace Sports executive Marilyn Hauser.

She spent 25 years in Auburn Hills in booking and marketing at the Palace and is now senior vice president of programming for Barclays Center in Brooklyn, New York. (Dan Hauser, her husband, worked 30 years with Wilson dating to the Silverdome).

"Tom never micromanaged," Hauser said. "It's the old saying, there's no bad idea except for no idea. Whatever we came up with, he supported. I never felt like I 'worked' there. I loved it and that was because of him. He created a great culture. We were like a family."

#### **A NEW LEVEL OF SERVICE**

The highest level of customer service became part of the culture under Wilson's stewardship. The Walt Disney Co. set the standard, and Wilson paid close attention to their operation and applied those principles at the Palace, years

before big league teams took the extra step to hire Disney Institute to train staff in customer service.

The Palace introduced a parents room, where adults could hang out, drink coffee and snack on Danish while their children attended a show. Similar to the Disney touch, it's a feature at entertainment venues that's common now, but 30 years ago it was relatively new in the industry.

The arena was immaculate as well, another point of distinction, said those who worked there, including Henry and media relations professional Bill Wickett. Together, they moved to Tampa in 1999 with Henry after Davidson bought the NHL team. Wickett recently accepted a job with the Predators, where he rejoins Henry as the team's executive vice president and chief marketing officer.

Guest services was "priority one," Wickett said. If a customer dropped a soda or popcorn, for example, staff were empowered to escort them to the nearest concession stand and immediately replace the item at no charge.

"It's something simple, but Tom wanted to make sure

every time a guest came into the facility, they were the most important customer," Wickett said. "It didn't matter whether they sat in a lower level suite or the upper deck. They all needed to be treated equally and first class."

As 2021 unfolds, there's still a lot of uncertainty over sports and entertainment as the pandemic retains its grip on the industry. Wilson agrees with others predicting that live entertainment will explode with tours after everyone is vaccinated and feels comfortable returning to concerts.

Whether Wilson is part of it remains up in the air. He enjoys retirement on Florida's Gulf Coast, but somewhere, there might be another venue to be built.

"We have a home in Naples and I'm sitting outside and the sun is shining and it's 80 degrees," he said in late December. "But there's a part of me that thinks maybe I'll do it again if the phone rings. I've got this little thing on my shoulder that says, 'You've got nine championship rings. Wouldn't it be nice to have 10?' Yes, it would." ▀



**PALACIAL DIGS:** The Palace of Auburn Hills set a standard for design and programming.

# HOTTICKETS PALACE OF AUBURN HILLS

Ranked by gross. Based on data from concerts and events 1988-2017, as reported to Pollstar.

RANK	GROSS	EVENT	ATTENDEES	PROMOTER	DATE	SHOWS
1	\$7,780,700	Barbra Streisand	45,160	Cellar Door Concerts, Belkin Productions	May 15-19, 1994	3
2	\$4,733,526	Paul McCartney	33,511	Live Nation	Oct. 14-15, 2005	2
3	\$4,669,250	Billy Joel & Elton John	41,836	Clear Channel Entertainment	May 2-3, 2003	2
4	\$4,454,302	Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band	71,123	Live Nation, Blackbird Productions	Dec. 20-30, 2006	4
5	\$4,127,533	Madonna	35,407	Clear Channel Entertainment	Aug. 25-26, 2001	2
6	\$3,951,103	U2	41,379	Live Nation Global Touring	Oct. 24-25, 2005	2
7	\$3,446,730	Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band	119,177	Cellar Door Concerts, Belkin Productions	March 10-14, 1996	6
8	\$3,349,343	Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band	47,632	Live Nation	May 17-21, 2011	3
9	\$3,193,346	Simon & Garfunkel	31,011	Clear Channel Entertainment	Oct. 18-19, 2003	2
10	\$3,171,218	Tim McGraw & Faith Hill	39,968	Live Nation	May 5-6, 2006	2

# HOTTICKETS DTE ENERGY MUSIC THEATRE

Ranked by gross. Based on data from concerts and events 1982-2019, as reported to Pollstar.

RANK	GROSS	EVENT	ATTENDEES	PROMOTER	DATE	SHOWS
1	\$2,487,428	Kid Rock	63,082	Live Nation	July 19-25, 2008	4
2	\$2,348,280	Kid Rock	117,414	Live Nation	Aug. 9-20, 2013	8
3	\$2,021,997	Kid Rock	47,427	Live Nation	Aug. 13-15, 2010	3
4	\$1,952,915	Lollapalooza	61,388	Cellar Door Concerts, Belkin Productions, Ritual	July 23-29, 1994	4
5	\$1,807,377	Ozzfest	30,638	Clear Channel Entertainment	July 30-31, 2001	2
6	\$1,602,356	Ozzfest	28,799	Clear Channel Entertainment	July 24-25, 2003	2
7	\$1,565,845	Ozzfest	28,092	Clear Channel Entertainment	Aug. 7-8, 2002	2
8	\$1,512,175	Ozzfest	31,462	Cellar Door Concerts, Belkin Productions, SFX Music Group	June 25-27, 1999	2
9	\$1,497,799	Kid Rock	46,409	Cellar Door Concerts, SFX Music Group	Aug. 25-Sept. 1, 2000	3
10	\$1,488,651	Lilith Fair	44,364	Belkin Productions, Ritual, Cellar Door Concerts	July 6-8, 1998	3



# TOM WILSON BROUGHT BACK AN AMPHITHEATER — AND THE AMPHITHEATER BUSINESS

BY DON MURET

**T**OM WILSON IS most closely identified with developing two arenas in Greater Detroit. The sports and entertainment executive's vision for revitalizing the market's underperforming amphitheater sometimes gets forgotten among his accomplishments.

In November 1990, Palace Sports & Entertainment acquired Pine Knob Music Theatre, now

DTE Energy Music Theatre, for roughly \$10 million. The Nederlander Organization owned and operated the facility, which opened on June 25, 1972, with a matinee performance by TV heartthrob David Cassidy.

Over time, though, it became run-down and was booking fewer than 20 shows over the summer months in the 1980s, Wilson said.

Starting in 1991, after Palace Sports took over the shed, Pine Knob was packed with 80 concerts annually.

Some acts such as classic rocker Eddie Money became an annual draw at the 15,000-capacity venue. The "Money Man" traditionally kicked off the outdoor concert season on Memorial Day weekend. (Eddie Money's final concert was May 25, 2019, at DTE before he died of cancer that September).

"We just felt that outdoor entertainment was a gold mine in Michigan because our summer is so short and people go see anybody just to be outdoors," Wilson said. "We went from 18 shows to 83, almost every day, which is a little crazy. To do that, we booked everybody from (Canadian children's act) Fred Penner to Tony Bennett."

"It was all about the exposure and became part of the summer," he said.

The amphitheater is part of a ski resort in Clarkston, Mich., a Detroit suburb. Former Palace executive vice president Dan Hauser worked with Wilson for more than 30 years and in 2001 sold naming rights for the amphitheater to a local utility, an agreement that remains intact today.

"Tom could see how things could be and not how they are today, much like the Palace," he said.

Sports media relations professional Bill Wickett grew up in Detroit and got his start at the Palace

in 1993. Wickett remembers his father taking him to see his first concert at Pine Knob, Captain & Tennille, in the 1970s.

"Pine Knob was basically on the verge of bankruptcy before Palace Sports & Entertainment bought it and turned it into the most successful amphitheater in the country, year over year," he said.

In the late 1980s, part of the reason for Pine Knob's lack of programming was the Palace "stealing" a lot of concerts to keep the arena busy during the summer months, said Detroit promoter Rick Franks.

"It was our job to get every show possible at the Palace and we did, and then we carried that relationship over to Pine Knob," Franks said.

At first, the Nederlander family refused to sell Pine Knob, which prompted Wilson to propose building an amphitheater in the Palace parking lot. Hauser remembers the blueprints for a space west of the arena, next to the Pistons' practice facility.

Most of the 5,000 parking spaces were on wetlands, which most likely would have prohibited construction, Wilson said. In addition, Franks said the city of Auburn Hills probably would have opposed the project over traffic issues and noise violations in the neighborhood.

CHRIS SCHWEGLER; COURTESY OLYMPIA ENTERTAINMENT

**SHOW AFTER SHOW:** DTE Energy Music Theatre, with a capacity of about 15,000, is among the country's busiest amphitheaters.





In the end, regardless of their intentions, Nederlander got the message and sold Pine Knob to Palace Sports, which invested millions of dollars in upgrades over the next several years after surveying concertgoers about crowded bathrooms and concession stands, and traffic jams coming in and out of the venue.

Wilson was the “chessmaster” who made the Pine Knob deal happen, Franks said. Now with Live Nation, Franks has booked concerts there for 32 years. DTE Energy Music Theatre remains a top-grossing amphitheater today under the operation of 313 Presents, the live entertainment arm of the Ilitch family organization.

In 1994, building on the success of Pine Knob, Palace Sports signed a deal with Oakland University to run Meadow Brook Music Festival, a smaller amphitheater in Rochester Hills, Michigan. Today, Meadow Brook also falls under the direction of 313 Presents.

“It wasn’t just that Pine Knob was an underperforming venue; it was an underperforming industry,” said Sean Henry, president of the Nashville Predators, who ran concessions at the venue back in the day. “Pine Knob pushed it forward quite a bit. I still have a gym bag Tom Wilson gave me one Christmas that says ‘88 Shows.’” ▣



# AS THEY SAID IT

“Tom built two of the best venues in North America.”

— Rick Franks

“At one time, downtown was (considered) the ‘bad guys.’ Chris Ilitch saw what Tom did in helping develop the Palace from the very beginning. They put a deal together for what turned out to be Little Caesars Arena.”

— Franks

“Promoters made so much money (at the Palace) that they kept coming back. We kept telling everybody that it had the best acoustics in the country. We had no idea, but it seemed like it would.”

— Tom Wilson

“We used to preach this ... if we take care of the arena, so will our guests. We could put a heavy metal band in there and the building would look just as good when they left as it did when they came in.”

— Wilson

“A lot of times, people don’t get a chance to build one arena in their hometown, much less two. Little Caesars Arena was Chris Ilitch’s vision and dream, and all of us played a small part in making that come true.”

— Wilson

“I sit in the arena bowl with my family for every (Nashville Predators) game and

hang out by the doors when everybody leaves the building. Wherever someone asks me where I get that from, I laugh. I was lucky to grow up in (the Palace) organization where that was commonplace. You were the oddball if you didn’t do that.”

— Sean Henry

“Tom understood the power of the media better than anybody, not only earned media but any marketing and paid media you could take advantage of.”

— Bill Wickett

“A lot of teams came to (the Palace) to see what we did to bring it back to their cities and replicate it.

Tom was such a forward thinker, always positive. He gave us the opportunity to make our own decisions.”

— Marilyn Hauser

“We had a great owner in Bill Davidson that allowed us to do the business, starting with Tom. That’s a big part of the equation and shouldn’t be forgotten.”

— Dan Hauser

“Tom was informed about every single facet about the business and always had an eye toward future opportunity.”

— Henry

Gathered by Don Muret



**HAIL, CAESARS:** Wilson was part of the development of Little Caesars Arena in downtown Detroit.