

Herbert Kohl, Former Wisconsin Senator and Milwaukee Bucks Owner, Dies at 88

A member of the family that founded Kohl's department stores, he guarded federal budgets as a U.S. senator while spending lavishly to revive the N.B.A. team he owned.

By Robert D. McFadden

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Herbert H. Kohl, a Wisconsin Democrat who kept watch over federal budgets in four terms as a United States senator, but who as the die-hard owner of the National Basketball Association's often mediocre Milwaukee Bucks spent lavishly to keep the team afloat in his hometown, died on Wednesday afternoon at his home in Milwaukee. He was 88.

His death, after a brief illness, was announced by the Herb Kohl Foundation, his nonprofit organization.

By his own account, Milwaukee meant everything to Mr. Kohl. His parents had immigrated to the city from Poland and Russia early in the 20th century, and his father, Maxwell Kohl, had opened a corner grocery store there in 1927. Herbert and his three siblings were born and raised in the city, scions of a family that in one generation had built an empire of Kohl's stores across the Upper Midwest.

In Wisconsin and surrounding states, the Kohl name became almost as familiar as Schlitz, which called itself "the beer that made Milwaukee famous." By 1972, when the British American Tobacco Company bought a controlling interest in Kohl's, the company, still managed by the Kohl family, had 50 grocery stores, six department stores and several networks of pharmacies and liquor stores.

In 2012, under new owners, Kohl's became the largest department store chain in the United States, surpassing J.C. Penney, its biggest competitor.

Herbert Kohl was president of the Kohl Corporation from 1970 to 1979, when British American Tobacco bought the remaining corporate interest. He then left management, a tycoon in search of new challenges.

He found two: the Milwaukee Bucks, which he bought in 1985 for \$18 million and owned for 29 years of mostly losing seasons; and a seat in the Senate, which he held from 1989 to 2013, and where he became a popular advocate of working families, small-business owners and the elderly.

His political experience had been limited. He was chairman of Wisconsin's Democratic Party from 1975 to 1977, but he had never held office. The 1988 Democratic primary election to succeed William Proxmire, who was retiring, and who had fought wasteful government spending for 32 years in the Senate, centered on two major issues: campaign expenditures and name recognition.

Mr. Proxmire had boasted for years that his last re-election campaign, in 1982, had cost him just \$145.10. Mr. Kohl acknowledged that he had spent more than \$2 million in the 1988 primaries alone, mostly on television advertising, but argued that it was nearly all of his own money and that, as a senator, he would not be beholden to special interests.

Mr. Kohl greeted soldiers before a Milwaukee Bucks game at the Bradley Center in Milwaukee in 2012. He owned the team for 29 years of mostly losing seasons. Gary Dineen/NBAE, via Getty Images

Wisconsin voters knew the Kohl name from his family business and his ownership of the Bucks. But his primary opponents were well known, too: former Gov. Anthony Earl and Wisconsin's secretary of state, Doug La Follette, a shirttail relative of Robert M. La Follette, the former governor, senator and presidential candidate. Mr. Kohl won the primary and easily beat the Republican candidate, Susan Engleiter, in the general election.

With assets of \$265 million, he was Milwaukee's wealthiest resident and one of the Senate's richest members. What colleagues found in Mr. Kohl, however, was a friendly, unassuming and modest man, something akin to what the country's founders might have imagined in the Senate: a person of stature and accomplishment with a sense of obligation to the citizenry.

He believed that government, like a family, ought to live within its means, and he supported a constitutional amendment to require Congress to pass balanced budgets. It was never adopted. But he tracked deficits that soared for most of his

tenure, and he voted consistently to restrain spending.

Early in his Senate years, Mr. Kohl stopped taking money from special-interest groups. “I think I was the only person in Washington that didn’t solicit money,” he told The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel in 2016. “I stopped taking money from people because it detracted from my ability to do my job well. We need a system that gets the ugly money out of it.”

Senator Kohl strongly supported public education and educational savings accounts. On social issues, he favored abortion rights and affirmative action programs, and he voted to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. He also supported environmental protections.

He opposed legislation to authorize the Persian Gulf war in 1990, but in 2002 he voted to endorse military force against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. He often joined more liberal Democrats in trying to cut military spending. At times his voter approval ratings were as high as 73 percent, and he won re-election campaigns in 1994, 2000 and 2006. All of them were largely financed with his own money.

During his final term, Mr. Kohl supported President Barack Obama’s health care reforms, voted for the Affordable Care Act in 2009 and received high ratings from groups that sought universal health care. He voted to expand Medicare and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, which became a federal program providing matching funds to states.

When Mr. Kohl announced that he would not seek a fifth term in 2012, President Obama said, “America’s children will grow up in a better place thanks to his advocacy of childhood nutrition programs, a strengthened food safety system, access to affordable health care and child care and juvenile crime prevention.”

Herbert Hiken Kohl was born on Feb. 7, 1935, the third of four children of Maxwell and Mary (Hiken) Kohl. Herbert and his siblings, Sidney, Dolores and Allen, attended public schools in Milwaukee. At Washington High School, Herbert was an excellent student and played football, basketball and baseball.

He and another boy from the neighborhood, Allan Selig, who was known as Bud, became roommates and fraternity brothers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where Mr. Kohl earned a bachelor's degree in 1956. They remained friends as Mr. Selig went on to become the owner of the Milwaukee Brewers baseball team and the commissioner of Major League Baseball.

Mr. Kohl announced to the news media in 2005 that the Bucks had signed the shooting guard Michael Redd to a multiyear contract. Gary Dineen/NBAE, via Getty Images

After receiving a master's degree in business from Harvard in 1958, Mr. Kohl invested in real estate and the stock market for some years, and then created Kohl Investments to handle his assets. He and one of his brothers also helped manage the Kohl Corporation in the 1970s until the completion of the company's sale to British American Tobacco.

The chance to rescue the Bucks arose in 1985 when it became known that Jim Fitzgerald, the team's largest single shareholder, was ill, and that he and other investors wanted to sell. The Bucks, created as an expansion team in 1968, had won

an N.B.A. championship in 1971 and had been a regular playoff contender over the years, and yet they were playing in the smallest arena in the league.

As fears spread that new, deep-pocketed owners might move the Bucks to another city, Mr. Kohl bought the team for \$18 million in March 1985. He spent millions more on contracts for players, coaches and other personnel, as well as on team travel, promotions and arena maintenance.

Still, in the 1990s, the Bucks were mired in mediocrity. Even reaching the conference finals in 2000 seemed only a temporary respite from the gloom. In the 2013-14 season, the Bucks won only 15 games while losing 67. It was the worst record in team history.

In April 2014, Mr. Kohl sold the Bucks to two New York hedge-fund billionaires, Marc Lasry and Wesley Edens, for \$550 million. At Mr. Kohl's insistence, the team remained in Milwaukee. The new owners and Mr. Kohl put up a total of \$200 million for a new arena, Fiserv Forum, which was completed in 2018.

Mr. Kohl also gave bonuses, totaling \$10 million, to every member of the Bucks organization and every worker at the BMO Harris Bradley Center, the Bucks' aging and soon-to-be-replaced arena. Ushers received \$2,000 each, and some longtime Bucks employees got enough to pay off mortgages or buy new homes.

"I was happy to do it, and they were deeply appreciative," he told The Journal Sentinel. "It doesn't change my life, but it changes theirs."

Mr. Kohl, a lifelong Milwaukee resident who kept a horse ranch in Jackson, Wyo., never married and had no children. He is survived by his siblings.

He gave \$25 million to the University of Wisconsin for construction of the Kohl Center, a 15,000-seat basketball and hockey field house built on the university's Madison campus in 1998. He also founded an educational foundation that each year provides grants to graduating seniors and teachers in Wisconsin high schools.

Mr. Kohl's net worth was never disclosed, although in 2016 Forbes estimated that it was between \$630 million and \$1.5 billion. He remained a loyal Bucks fan, with season tickets at the Fiserv Forum, a few rows up from courtside.

As if vindicating Mr. Kohl's faith in the team, the Bucks ended decades of drought by winning the N.B.A. championship in 2021, defeating the Phoenix Suns in six games. Mr. Kohl was presented with a championship ring for his efforts to keep the team in Milwaukee, and he rode in the lead car in the championship parade.:

"This," he said, "is one of the big days of my life."

Orlando Mayorquin contributed reporting.

A correction was made on Dec. 28, 2023: An earlier version of this obituary referred incorrectly to the 2021 N.B.A. championship series. The Milwaukee Bucks defeated the Phoenix Suns in six games, not seven.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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