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Stadiums are side-by-side, yet a mile apart

MILE HIGH

By Dawn Reiss

The Sporting News

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DENVER -- A controversy over naming rights for the Broncos' new stadium is swirling like the snowstorm that blanketed the Mile High City before the team's Monday night game with Oakland. Just a few hundred yards apart, the old stadium and the new stand practically side-by-side.

The orange and navy seats at Mile High Stadium seem a bit faded and worn, and the once-white concrete is a little less polished. The only thing that will seem the same in the new stadium will be the rearing horse that beckons all Broncos fans into their playground.

But the new stadium is like a new toy at Christmas, one that a child wanted, until his once-forgotten favorite item is remembered and clung to as tightly as a worn teddy bear. Side-by-side they sit, with the new stadium waiting to become the city's new most favorite thing.

But sometimes it is hard to give up the old for the new, and that's why fans want the name Mile High to stick with the new stadium as well.

Before kickoff of the Monday night game against Oakland, Broncos fans handed out Raider hater T-Shirts, along with orange signs imprinted with the saying: Mile High, The best stadium name by a Mile.

Some say keeping the name is for civic pride. Others say it's for tradition, or maybe even a sense of belonging. Fans want it. So do Denver's mayor and the Broncos.

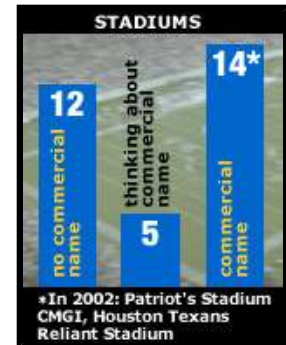
"It's our city, the name goes with the city," said 40-year-old Dale Chatlin of Golden, Colo. "It's a psychological advantage."

Even Raiders fans who are known for their harsh home-field advantage know the power of Mile High. Wearing a Darth "Raider" mask and black cape, Rod Bibona of Rapid City, S.D., joked that the new stadium should be called "The Raider Dome" for a new intimidation factor.

"But I do like the Mile High," said Bibona, 28. "I like keeping things in the tradition of the NFL, the way they have been over the years, just to keep the same rivalries going."

But most fans agree that even if a company buys the rights to the stadium, they still will support the team, even if they don't like the name.

"It's still one of the few holdouts that has a unique name to a stadium that's not a buyout for a corporate," said Stephan Hoyman, 44, of Denver. "If the name is bought, the fans will probably be upset at first and will eventually be OK with it, just how they were with the new uniforms. Everybody hated 'em. Then they went to the Super Bowl, and nobody



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has said a word about it in two years."

This isn't the first time a team has thought about selling its stadium naming rights to a company, and it sure won't be the last. Even Green Bay, where Lambeau Field was once considered a sacred shrine, has seen its pristine image come crumbling down. The Packers are considering selling their naming rights for their stadium, whose renovation will be complete in 2003. The Packers will pay \$140 million of the \$295 million tab, and the taxpayers would pick up the rest. Stadium naming rights could help defray those costs.

"We will start seeking clients in 2002, and it remains to be seen what types of offers we receive," said Lee Remmel, executive director of public relations for the Packers. "We are doing this to help defray the cost. The Packers and city of Green Bay would split the royalties 50-50. Depending on the amount we receive, potentially \$60 million would go to the city to help retire their debt a year sooner."

There are 17 stadiums that do not have corporate names, but Green Bay, Chicago, Seattle, Pittsburgh and Denver are thinking about selling naming rights to their stadiums. Twelve other stadiums already have commercial names, not including the Patriots' new CMGI stadium and Houston's Reliant Stadium, set to open in 2002.

"I never thought I'd see this day," said Kevin O'Connor, 25, of Broomfield, Colo., who was wearing a Packers jacket and Colts hat to the Broncos game. "As a Packer fan, that upsets me. Denver fans are loyal, too. It would just be horrible."

The new \$364.2 million facility in Denver is set to open for the 2001 season and will have almost twice the amount of space, with 1.7 million square feet. The 76,125-seat stadium is owned by the city and has similar seating capacity to its older counterpart. Mile High Stadium will be demolished to make room for a parking lot after the new stadium opens in August.

Broncos president and CEO Pat Bowlen is paying 25 percent of the cost of the stadium and Denver taxpayers pay the rest with a penny-per-\$10 sales tax on retail goods. After voters approved the 1998 tax, state law gave a nine-member stadium board the power to sell naming rights to the facility. According to the Denver Post, the stadium district suspended talks on naming rights, after mayor Wellington Web asked to keep the same name for the new stadium.

Matt Sugar, the Metropolitan Football Stadium District director of communications, said that AT&T Broadband and Invesco Group Funds both withdrew from negotiations to name the new Broncos stadium.

"The environment for structuring a naming rights deal has been polluted by political grandstanding," said Sugar, on the Metropolitan Football Stadium District web site. "Given the current political climate, all negotiations naming the new Bronco stadium, including those that may have kept the name Mile High, have been suspended."

Some fans understand the logic behind renaming a stadium.

"It will always be Mile High because you can never replace that, but I do understand the money part of it," said Brian Wages, 37, of Middleton, Colo. "People say that they won't have the same history over there, and they won't. It will make its own history over there. Once the game starts, it won't matter what's in that stadium."

Still, others are outraged, including Wage's 64-year-old father, Ron, who started coming to Broncos games in 1960. He didn't have the money for the tickets, so he financed them through a local bank. Years later, going to Broncos games is still a family tradition.

"Four-fifty isn't very much in today's standards, but when you were making 185 dollars a month, it was a lot of money back then," said Ron Wages, who was sitting next to his son. "I got to bring my kid, bring my family up as a Bronco fan and sit in the parking lot in my motor home, cook, play ball and enjoy the game."

Forty years later, he is still going to games, but he is not happy with the potential stadium name change.

"Every other stadium in the country has sold out their name, and I don't know if it's done any good," said Wages, a resident of Aurora, Colo. "Might as well stay with tradition. The corporate name doesn't give any character to the stadium; all you get is advertising.

"I'm tired of advertising. I can't even watch the television program without 27 minutes of commercials, so when I come here I don't mind looking at the screen. But I want to be part of something, not part of AT&T or whatever it might be. It doesn't matter what the name is, all I want to be a part of is Mile High Stadium and the Broncos."

Many Broncos agree that fans' opinions should come first. Both Broncos tight end Dwayne Carswell and kicker Jason Elam want the fans to come first.

"I'm going to be politically correct and say Mile High because that's what the fans want. I think it should stay that," Elam said. "Our fans have always been the 12th man around here. I might get in trouble with the management for saying that, but I think it should stay Mile High."

Carswell said the fans deserve more and couldn't imagine changing the name because the new stadium is next to the old one.

Broncos defensive tackle Keith Traylor joked that the new stadium should be called Mile High or at least Mile High 2.

"It's been here 40-some years," Traylor said. "I just like the name. It scares people when they come to Mile High."

Dawn Reiss covers the NFL for TSN's Ultimate Road Trip. Email her at tsndawn@aol.com.

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