

The Athletic (Subscription required)



Legendary Chiefs QB Len Dawson, Hall of Famer who was Super Bowl IV MVP, dies at 87



Rustin Dodd
Earlier today

Len Dawson was 26 and unsure of his future when, after his fifth season as an [NFL](#) quarterback, he asked [Cleveland Browns](#) coach Paul Brown for his release. It was 1962, and Dawson had already spent five years languishing on NFL benches, waiting his turn behind Bobby Layne in Pittsburgh and Milt Plum in Cleveland.

He figured he had nothing to lose.

Dawson had been a star collegiate quarterback at Purdue, and then a first-round pick — a player once dubbed by Layne as “pro football’s next great quarterback.” He did not wish to sit any longer. Brown, the legendary NFL pioneer, granted Dawson’s request, placing him on waivers and allowing him to escape to the Dallas [Texans](#) of the upstart American Football League. But Brown — according to Hank Stram, then the coach of the Texans — also offered a word of caution:

“He said: ‘As a fellow coach, I want you to know: I don’t think Lenny can play football in the National Football League,” Stram later recalled. “I said: ‘Well, I appreciate that very much, Paul. But I’m still gonna take him.’ ”

What Brown did not realize was what Stram, a former assistant at Purdue, already knew: Dawson, standing a slender six feet and armed with a stoic demeanor and independent streak, was easily overlooked.

“His acquisition,” Stram said. “was really the turning point of our franchise.”

Dawson, who would follow the Texans organization to the Midwest, became the face of the [Kansas City Chiefs](#), and used an accurate throwing arm to become one of the most decorated quarterbacks of the early AFL — and eventually MVP of Super Bowl IV — has died, according to a family statement released early Wednesday morning. He was 87.

Dawson had entered hospice care earlier this month, his wife told local Kansas City station KMBC-TV.



Forever our quarterback.

Legendary Kansas City Chiefs quarterback and Kansas City broadcaster Len Dawson has died. He was 87 years old.

Rest well, Lenny. bit.ly/3KfuXft



“Len was my first sports hero, and he remained somebody I admired and respected his entire life,” said Clark Hunt, Chiefs chairman and CEO and the son of Lamar Hunt, the franchise’s founder. “Len was really the first big sports celebrity in Kansas City. Anybody who grew up during that era grew up cheering for Len Dawson. He was the undisputed leader of the Chiefs. He’s synonymous with the success of the early Chiefs teams that really helped establish the AFL.”

Nicknamed “Lenny the Cool” and the owner of a penetrating icy glare, Dawson led the Texans to the 1962 AFL Championship in his first season and guided the Chiefs to AFL Championships during the 1966 and 1969 seasons.

The first title in Kansas City resulted in an appearance in Super Bowl I, which the Chiefs lost to the [Green Bay Packers](#) in Los Angeles, while the second culminated in a 23-7 victory in Super Bowl IV over the [Minnesota Vikings](#) in New Orleans — a performance that further validated the AFL’s arrival after the [New York Jets](#)’ Super Bowl win over the [Colts](#) the previous season.

Dawson was named Super Bowl MVP after completing 12-of-17 passes for 142 yards, including a 46-yard touchdown pass to Otis Taylor. The fact that he appeared so poised under pressure was all the more impressive to Stram because his quarterback had spent Super Bowl week under intense scrutiny. Five days before the game, an NBC report surfaced that said Dawson would be questioned about his association with Donald Dawson — a Michigan restaurateur who had been implicated in a nationwide gambling investigation and to whom Len Dawson was not related.

Dawson told reporters in New Orleans that he had done nothing wrong, a stance that was backed by the NFL and eventually President Richard Nixon, who phoned Dawson after the victory to offer his congratulations. Years later, in an interview with NFL Films, Dawson recalled the concern inside the Chiefs organization as Stram and team officials tried to navigate the Super Bowl week drama.

“They were trying to determine what to do about this situation,” Dawson said. “And I can remember they were all sitting around and I said: ‘Why don’t we tell them the truth?’”

“I do know this person. I spoke to him twice this year. Once, when I injured my knee and he asked how I was doing. Secondly, when my father passed away to offer his condolences. I hadn’t seen this guy in I don’t know how long. I really don’t know him. I don’t associate with him. I didn’t know anything about his business. I said: ‘That’s the truth.’”

Dawson, who would play 19 seasons — including six once the NFL-AFL merger became official — finished his career with 28,711 passing yards, 239 touchdowns and 183 interceptions. He led the AFL in completion percentage seven times and passer rating six times from 1962 to 1969. During halftime of Super Bowl I, he was photographed by LIFE Magazine’s Bill Ray, an iconic image that captured Dawson smoking a cigarette on a folding chair in the locker room while a bottle of Fresca rested on the ground. While still an active player, he pursued a career as a sportscaster for a local affiliate in Kansas City — a job that launched a decades-long career in media. He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, in 1987.



Dawson’s arrival in Canton was an apt bookend. Born June 20, 1935, in Alliance, Ohio, Dawson was raised just 20 miles away, in a region

famous for its devotion to football. The son of a mill worker, Dawson liked to remind people that he was “the seventh son of a seventh son,” an oddity that, in European folklore, was said to result in special powers. Dawson, one of 11 children in all, found that his most potent gifts came on the football field, the basketball court and the baseball diamond.

At Alliance High School, he starred at quarterback for a man named Mel Knowlton, a head coach who appreciated the passing game in an era dominated by running attacks. When Dawson looked for a college program, he used his own experience to form the following calculus: Ohio State did not throw the football, but Purdue did.

It didn’t hurt that Dawson was recruited by a young Purdue assistant coach named Hank Stram, who would later tell Sports Illustrated about the first time he came to notice Dawson’s matter-of-fact nature.

“We were trying to get him to come to Purdue and we were in the gym,” Stram said. “Len was passing. He was a great passer even then. He was a fine basketball player, too, and the basketball coach came over to meet him. ‘I hope you come to Purdue,’ he said to Len. ‘I know you will be a big help to us in basketball.’ Dawson gave him that look and said, ‘You don’t know that. You’ve never seen me play.’”

Despite being just six feet tall, Dawson became a star for the Boilermakers, earning the nickname, “Golden Boy.” He had an accurate arm, solid scrambling ability and inner confidence that foreshadowed his days as “Lenny the Cool.” When Dawson made his first collegiate start against Missouri during his sophomore year in 1954, Stram stopped to wish him good luck before the game.

“Thank you, Coach,” Dawson said. “But you don’t need luck. You need ability.”

Dawson tossed four touchdown passes in a 31-0 victory over Missouri, inspired an upset win over Notre Dame the same year and led the nation in passing efficiency. He was a third-team All-American in 1956 and drafted by the [Pittsburgh Steelers](#) with the fifth pick in the 1957 NFL Draft, one spot ahead of Syracuse running back Jim Brown.

The Steelers acquired future Hall of Fame quarterback Bobby Layne for the 1958 season, which turned Dawson from a young reserve into a

permanent understudy. He would later cite his time backing up Layne as one reason his skills began to erode by the early 1960s.

“If you want to learn the proper techniques of quarterbacking, the last guy you would go to is Bobby Layne,” Dawson later told NFL Films. “So I developed some terrible habits. The accuracy, the touch, the release was no longer there.”

Dawson was traded to the Browns for the 1960 season, but it was not until he reunited with Stram in Dallas that his career began to take off. He was, in some ways, an unlikely franchise quarterback. In 1962, Sports Illustrated writer Tex Maule described Dawson’s right arm as “thin and white and unimpressive” and added that “Dawson has the torso of a captain of the chess team and he is as sparkling as a piece of wet liver.”

In the huddle, however, Dawson was indefatigable, equipped with a stare that “you could feel in your bones,” teammate Fred Arbanas once told the Kansas City Star.

“It was also how he talked,” Arbanas said. “When he talked real slow, kind of working on each word, you knew he was dead serious.”

In an era when quarterbacks dropped straight back into the pocket and lobbed deep balls down the field, Dawson took a slightly more modern approach. He used his legs to move the pocket. He relied on short and accurate passes. He excelled at reading opposing defenses and finding a weak spot.

“Lenny wasn’t a bullet-type passer for 60, 70 yards,” said Taylor, one of his finest receivers. “He threw a soft ball.”

Dawson’s career and life changed again when Lamar Hunt decided to move the Texans to Kansas City in 1963. He would later joke that friends chided him about moving to a “cow town,” but surrounded by one of the best defenses in football and immersed in a heartland city ready to embrace its new professional team, Dawson grew into one of Kansas City’s most prominent celebrities.

His profile only grew when he became the sports director at Channel 9 (KMBC) in 1966. For years Dawson balanced starting for the Chiefs and

delivering the nightly sportscast, regularly driving directly from practice to the television station. He later became a host for HBO's "Inside the NFL" program, the first NFL show to appear on cable, and the longtime color analyst for the Chiefs' local radio broadcasts, a role he held until 2017.

"Because of his unique role in the media, everybody who came to the team — as a (prominent) player, coach or general manager — ended up doing an interview with Len," Clark Hunt said. "In a lot of those cases, it was very intimidating. You're doing an interview with somebody who is a legend, a Hall of Famer. But he had this unique ability to make everybody feel comfortable, welcomed and important being part of the Chiefs. He was an ambassador."

The advent of football on television, of course, had helped introduce him to America, when Stram famously wore a microphone during Super Bowl IV and was caught continuously talking to Dawson.

"Come on, Lenny. Pump it in there, baby," Stram yelled at one point. "Just keep matriculating the ball down the field, boys."

Dawson would come to call Stram his "savior," the football coach who had resurrected his career. But it was Dawson who had helped fortify a fledgling rival league and build up one of the NFL's most enduring franchises in Kansas City.

"He was always under control," Stram said. "I said to him once: 'Leonard, make sure that you never let them see you sweat.' And he said: 'Coach, quarterbacks don't sweat. Quarterbacks perspire.'"