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WELLS FARGO CENTER CELEBRATES 20 YEARS IN SOUTH PHILLY

On the night of Aug. 31, 1996, the Spectrum, the South Philadelphia arena once so proudly hailed as "America's Showplace," suddenly sagged in insignificance.

Across the parking lot, looming like a modern jumbo jet alongside an outdated biplane, its 750,000-square-foot replacement was ready to take off. So much larger was the newer arena that some joked it must have bulked up on steroids, a sports topic on no one's radar when the then state-of-the-art Spectrum opened in 1967.

The Spectrum is gone now and, two decades and three name changes later, the Wells Fargo Center, the oldest and most active of the three sports structures that make up the South Philadelphia complex, is marking its 20th anniversary on Wednesday.

Most of the hockey players from its premier 1996 event - a U.S.-Canada World Cup game - are retired. Ray Charles, who unofficially opened the building with an invitation-only performance three weeks earlier, died in 2004. Oasis, the rock band featured in the venue's first concert, disbanded in 2009.

But the South Philadelphia arena, already retrofitted to meet new demands in food service, customer amenities and especially technology, remains in its strapping prime, continuing to host up to 235 events a year.

In a sports world in which live attendance has become an increasingly costly and often more inconvenient option, the home of the 76ers and Flyers has thrived. It likely will enjoy a longer life as Philadelphia's primary sports arena than its two immediate predecessors. Convention Hall lasted about 30 years as the city's No. 1 indoor venue. The Spectrum held that distinction for 29 years.

"I think if you spend the money and keep it up and plan for the future, it can certainly go beyond what some of the older buildings were able to," said John Page, president of the Wells Fargo Complex. "It's the right size. It's just a matter of what you do to update it. You look at the Spectrum, and the real reason we moved over here was amenities - premium seating and revenue opportunities that would make sure the teams could stay competitive."

'Good for the city'

Constructed for \$215 million, with some financial assistance from the city and state, the building originally called the CoreStates Center grew out of a conversation between W. Wilson Goode, then the Mayor of Philadelphia, and Ed Snider, the late Flyers owner.

Five years after the city agreed to upgrade Veterans Stadium and avert an Eagles relocation, the two men met at a 1989 Police Athletic League dinner. Snider told Goode the 76ers were contemplating a move to South Jersey.

After a lengthy session in the Pennsylvania capitol of Harrisburg involving Goode, Snider, 76ers owner Harold Katz and city and state officials, a deal was reached for a new arena to be built where JFK Stadium then stood.

"It seemed like a good opportunity to do something good for the city," Goode said in 1996. "People don't realize how important sports teams are to the psyche of a city."

Even before it opened, the new arena demonstrated the growing power of sports as a business. On March 19, 1996, Comcast Corp. announced that it had agreed to buy majority stakes in the 76ers and Flyers, as well as the new CoreStates Center and the old Spectrum. Some reports valued the deal at \$500 million, with cash and debt. The new entity, Comcast-Spectacor, was a subsidiary of Comcast and eventually negotiated TV agreements with the Phillies. Comcast is now the nation's largest cable company.

The Comcast-Spectacor subsidiary sold the 76ers in 2011 to the team's current ownership group, led by Josh Harris. The Sixers have a long-term lease to play in Wells Fargo Center, though the team declines to refer to it by that name because the bank does not sponsor the team - only the arena.

The Philadelphia arena would be part of the largest sports building boom in American history. Between 1990 and 1999, similarly sized and outfitted facilities arose in places such as Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, St. Louis, Raleigh, Tampa and dozens of other cities.

"A lot of teams in major markets were playing in these old buildings," said Page. "Boston Garden. Chicago Arena. With the escalation of salaries that was happening in sports, you needed other revenue sources to really compete. And those older buildings couldn't be easily updated because of their size and their very nature."

So the new center included restaurants and many more concession options. It was larger, with a 20,000-plus capacity for basketball, hockey and concerts. Maybe most importantly, it had 126 suites, many of which are currently being updated during an \$18 million renovation.

But just as a steep increase in TV money and players salaries precipitated the last construction boom, Page and his colleagues understand that some unforeseen sports revolution could someday render this generation of arenas obsolete.

That revolution, Page said, is likely to be technological. So, to forestall its obsolescence, Wells Fargo already has upgraded its Wifi capacity, installed a new jumbo-tron scoreboard and added an LED display board that encircles the playing bowl.

It could also soon incorporate technology that will allow fans to interact with concession stands, with the scoreboard operators and perhaps someday even the players.

"We're competing with the home, the couch," Page said. "There's so much that goes on with your TV now that we have to make sure that you not only have a great live experience but that you're able to keep up with all the social media and other interactivity that devices like your Iphone allow."

In addition to suite and technology upgrades it has undergone these last two decades, Page and his team are examining options that might, say, eliminate a chunk of existing concourse and some seats, replacing it all with a corporate-sponsored specialty amenity, like the upscale bars and restaurants in the Dallas Cowboys' AT&T Stadium.

"We've got 126 suites," Page said. "Maybe it's not 126 in the future. Maybe there's a way to repurpose some of those. We went on a big building tour 1 1/2 years ago, and a lot of them are downsizing, contracting the number of premium suites. Maybe someday we'll take an area of the concourse bowl and connect the concourse with what's going on inside the arena. You want to keep the building fresh."

What's in a name?

What's changed most often in the arena's 20 years is its name. Mergers involving sponsoring banks have transformed the center from CoreStates to First Union to Wachovia to Wells Fargo.

Since John LeClair scored the first goal there in that U.S.-Canada hockey game, the building has been home to more than 1,000 Flyers and Sixers games. In that span, it has also hosted thousands of other events - Villanova basketball, professional lacrosse, arena football, men's and women's NCAA hoops tourneys, Olympic trials, X Games, concerts in virtually every music genre, circuses, family ice shows and everything from Wrestlemania to two political conventions (2000 and this summer).

Unlike the Spectrum, its roof has never blown off, but a canceled Guns & Roses show once resulted in a near riot and considerable damage. The arena's biggest crowd was the 21,424 who filled it for a 1999 Backstreet Boys concert. The 2002 NBA All-Star Game took place there. Todd Eldredge and Michelle Kwan won 1998 U.S. Figure Skating Championships there.

Connecticut captured the 2000 NCAA women's basketball title at the arena where Penn State wrestlers also won the 2011 national championship. But neither the Flyers nor Sixers have been champions in their Wells Fargo tenure, though both have appeared in their sports' championship rounds there.

Villanova, which played there three times last season, did win the 2015-16 basketball championship - in Houston not South Philadelphia.

The arena football Soul became a tenant in 2004, while the Wings, the indoor lacrosse franchise that played there for 17 years, left for Connecticut in 2014.

Though its frenetic and varied schedule seems to leave little opportunity for expansion, Page said there may be a new Wells Fargo Center activity on the horizon.

"One thing that's starting to explode is E-Sports," he said, referring to the activity at which crowds gather to watch teams of video gamers compete. "A number of venues, like San Jose, are doing a week or two of them. One of our guys is heading to a conference next week. He's going to learn as much as he can about them, and who knows? Maybe one day we'll fit it into our schedule."