

Arena celebrates 10 years: Southwest Florida leaders share what arena has meant to community

By Naples Daily News staff report

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NAPLES — Elton John’s been there, twice. So has Cher.

The Florida Everblades has called it home to professional hockey for all of its 10 years, and hosted Kelly Cup finals there.

It’s the 7,000-plus seat venue in Estero known as Germain Arena, formerly known as TECO Arena and originally Everblades Arena.

Wednesday marks 10 years since the first event there, when traffic backed up on Interstate 75 for several miles in each direction, delaying by 37 minutes the start of the first-ever Everblades home game.

There have been a few more I-75 traffic backups since. And a few more professional hockey and basketball teams have played at the arena. So have many other headline performers.

Here’s what some business and community leaders say the arena has meant to Southwest Florida:



“From our point of view, I would say up until the time our sports council got active about two years ago ... I don’t think we had seen a lot of benefit, but in the last two years with events like that roller hockey tournament that’s up there we definitely have seen some hotel stays and that type of thing.

“We think that the future will be pretty good. The sports council has been in touch with the arena management folks and definitely looking to do more things in the future with them.

“We look on the future of that arena as very good for us, especially for our hotels on the northern end of the county.”

_ Jack Wert, executive director, Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention & Visitors Bureau



“Germain Arena is obviously one of the diamonds in our own backyard. It is unique in the services it provides and is an incredible gathering place for all the segments of our society. It’s an economic engine: the dollars spent there circulate around our community and the surrounding five counties.”

_ Mike Reagen, president and CEO of the Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce



“It certainly has become an important part of the regional infrastructure for events and meeting planning and

entertainment venues. It does represent a location with activity that we have not seen before ... and has facilitated the ability to bring significant entertainment to the area. And it also makes a pretty good hurricane shelter. Pretty solid. It's a big hunk of concrete. Isn't it?"

_ Steve Tirey, executive director of the Chamber of Southwest Florida



"It brought a great venue for people to attend concerts, sporting events and everything in between. For Lee County especially, it has brought one of the major amateur tournaments and it's called NARCh (the North American Roller Hockey Championships) ... It comes to us during the offseason, during the summer and brings teams from around the world. So it very much helps our local economy."

"We are quite fortunate to have a facility like that and with a sports team there for all our residents and visitors to enjoy."

_ Nancy Hamilton, communications director for the Lee County Visitor & Convention Bureau



"Germain Arena has had a very positive impact with us because we have a great synergy between the two properties. During event nights, attendees, whether it's a concert or hockey game, will park here during the event and shop here or have dinner.

"It's a good venue to have in Southwest Florida. We opened a couple of weeks before they did ... before the arena and Miromar Outlets there was nothing at this interchange. ... I think it's brought a lot of commerce, existing development and future development to the area."

_ Jeff Staner, Miromar Outlets general manager since it opened in 1998



"It's very flexible in providing various entertainment options for the community, various concerts, and expos. That's a plus for the community."

_ Gary Jackson, director of FGCU's Regional Economic Research Institute and assistant professor of economics in the Lutgert College of Business



"I believe it's been underutilized. The capacity of the facility has so much to offer. I don't understand why we're not getting more of a variety of venue there. Different types of shows, performances, acts, expos. I don't know what's prohibiting that. I don't know if it's the rates they charge or the lack of exposure that Germain Arena has. I don't know who they offer it to.

"But that type of location and building has a lot to offer. Just last weekend, Sugarland performed at Lakes Park at \$35 a head in an open field. This is my personal observation. Coming from New York City and having been involved with events and planning events it's a shame this one is not used more.

"The one major negative factor of the facility is the highway access. Whenever there was an event there, the highway was backed up there for miles. The exit ramp is not able to handle the load. But then again, the frequency of use doesn't demand change.

"It appears we're out of the loop for promoters."

_ Armando Nargi, Lee County Chamber of Commerce president



"They use it for so many things that it's just a fantastic facility and so ideally located, halfway between Naples and Fort Myers. It's a perfect location."

_ Phil Wood, managing broker for John R. Wood Realtors in Naples



"Germain Arena is a wonderful asset for Southwest Florida. Not only does it provide a significant positive economic impact for the area, but also the arena provides our area with a more robust community by offering venues for cultural, civic and entertainment opportunities."

_ Tammie Nemecek, president and CEO, Economic Development Council of Collier County



Arena 10-year timeline

1997

Aug. 2: Craig Brush, of KTB Florida Sports Corp., announces he will bring an East Coast Hockey League team to a new arena at Corkscrew Road and Interstate 75 for the 1998-99 season.

Sept. 13: The East Coast Hockey League's board of governors approves Lee County as a location for an expansion franchise. The minor-league team was awarded to KTB Florida Sports Corp., which plans a 7,400-seat arena near I-75 and Corkscrew Road.

Nov. 17: Lee County commissioners grant the zoning to allow construction of the arena.

1998

April 14: Everblades President Craig Brush and Lee and Collier county officials wield ice picks to break into a block of ice at a "breaking the ice" ceremony north of Corkscrew Road for the new arena. Already around 2,000 season tickets are sold for the Florida Everblades season, which starts Oct. 15. Construction on the arena has been under way for a few months, but the arena hasn't been named yet.

Nov. 2: "Lord of the Dance" is the first performance at the arena.

Nov. 19: (Ten years ago today.) Traffic backs up on I-75 several miles in each direction, causing a 37-minute delay before the first-ever Everblades home game at then-Everblades Arena. A sellout crowd of 7,082 shows up to watch the Blades get their first home win, 4-1, over the Charlotte Checkers.

Dec. 5: The arena is opened up for the first public skate.

1999

Jan. 16: Tickets for Elton John's Feb. 26 performance sell out in 40 minutes, leaving thousands of dejected fans on the outside looking in.

Jan. 26: Bob Dylan and Brian Setzer become the first big-name acts to grace the arena stage.

April 11: The Everblades shut out the Birmingham Bulls 3-0 for their first playoff win at home in their first-ever playoff game.

May 7: Professional wrestling makes its debut at the arena when the WWF comes to town.

Aug. 26: Everblades Arena becomes TECO Arena, named for Tampa-based TECO People's Gas.

Sept. 6-15: The Carolina Hurricanes, NHL affiliate to the Everblades, opens training camp at then-TECO Arena, holding daily sessions from 10-11:30 a.m. and 1-2:30 p.m.

Sept. 11: A capacity crowd of 7,025 watches the NHL's Carolina Hurricanes beat the Tampa Bay Lightning in the arena's first major-league game.

Dec. 23: The Everblades hold their first-ever Teddy Bear Toss, in which fans throw stuffed animals onto the ice immediately after the Blades' first goal.

More than 2,800 stuffed animals are collected and donated to local underprivileged children.

Dec. 31: The circus helps ring in the new millennium with a week of performances.

2000

April 3: Before the Everblades game against the Baton Rouge Kingfish, the regular-season championship banner for the Brabham Cup is unfurled at then-TECO Arena.

April 9: KISS plays the arena as part of a farewell tour. Though the band eventually toured again, this was one of the last concerts with the original lineup.

April 29: The Florida SeaDragons play their first home game at then-TECO Arena in front of a United States Basketball League record crowd of 5,176.

The team folded in January 2003 after three seasons.

Sept. 20: A crowd of 6,064 comes to TECO to watch the NHL Florida Panthers beat the NHL Carolina Hurricanes.

Oct. 15: Then-TECO Arena hosts its first-ever NBA game, as the Miami Heat beat the New Jersey Nets 85-79 in a preseason match-up. The Heat return to TECO in 2001, 2002 and 2003 to face the Milwaukee Bucks, Minnesota Timberwolves and Atlanta Hawks.

Dec. 28: The first games of the now-annual Everblades College Classic (now called College Hockey Classic) are held at Germain Arena.

2001

April 15: The Florida Firecats lose their first-ever home game at then-TECO Arena 42-20, in front of an announced sellout crowd of 7,181. The Arena Football League 2 team plays in two ArenaCup championships in the next five years.

2002

Nov. 22: The Florida Gulf Coast University men's and women's basketball teams play their first-ever games at then-TECO Arena. The first home games for the FGCU men's and women's basketball teams at on-campus Alico Arena are held Dec. 2. Both teams begin competition in NCAA Division I in 2007.

2003

May: TECO Arena vice president and general manager Frank Lapsley resigns.

June: Steve St. John takes over as vice president of operations at TECO Arena.

Sept. 20: The last NHL preseason game is held at TECO between the Carolina Hurricanes and the Atlanta Thrashers. Carolina also holds camp at TECO for a few days, but hasn't been back since 2003.

2004

May 10: A then-record crowd of 7,444 watches the Everblades close out the American Conference Finals and reach its first Kelly Cup Finals with a 3-2 victory over the Reading Royals at then-TECO Arena. The game has been called the loudest sporting event ever at the arena. The Blades went on to lose to Idaho in five games in the Kelly Cup Finals.

June 1: TECO Arena becomes Germain Arena, after the Germain Motor Co., which has several automobile dealerships in the Naples area.

Aug. 28: The Florida Firecats win the arena's first championship 39-26 against the Peoria (Ill.) Pirates in af2's ArenaCup V at Germain Arena. A crowd of 6,491 attends.

Sept. 10: Members of AC/DC, the Who and other classic rock icons play a benefit concert for victims of Hurricane Charley. They'll come back the next year to aid survivors of Hurricane Wilma.

Sept. 27-28: After her initial show sells out in minutes, Cher adds a second night to her stop in Estero. It sells out, too.

Nov. 22: The Florida Flame win their first home game 106-102 at Germain Arena, in front of an announced crowd of 2,451. The NBA Development League team went on hiatus after the 2005-06 season due to difficulties in scheduling during the same season as the Everblades.

2005

May 13: The Blades return for back-to-back Kelly Cup Finals appearances with a 1-0 overtime win against the Charlotte Checkers in the conference finals at Germain Arena.

June 1: The Blades fall 4-1 to the Trenton Titans in Game 6 of the Kelly Cup Finals in front of a record Germain Arena crowd of 7,805.

2006

Sept. 22: Steve St. John resigns as vice president of operations.

Nov. 5: Toby Keith blends country, rock and patriotism in a show that works a sold-out house into a lather.

November: Matt Blacy takes over as the arena's vice president of operations.

2007

May 8: Germain Arena hosts its longest game ever, as the Blades fall to the Dayton Bombers 4-3 in triple overtime in the first game of the American Conference Finals at Germain Arena.

May 18: In a season of firsts, Germain Arena hosts its first Game 7, and the Blades fall 3-1 to Dayton to narrowly miss their third Kelly Cup Finals appearance in four years.

Nov. 11: Elton John pays a return visit to the arena. Traffic is so bad many fans miss the first 30 minutes of the concert.

2008

May 8: Kid Rock plays at Live X 8, the most enjoyable set so far from the masterminds of Beasley

Broadcasting's 99X.

July: Sammy Wallace takes over as vice president of operations.

Nov. 19: Wednesday marks 10 years since the first event at the arena.

_ Compiled by Angela Busch, Jonathan Foerster and Julio Ochoa.

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