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Lynyrd Skynyrd to rock Germain Arena

Germain Arena in Estero manages to keep itself occupied

By CHARLES RUNNELLS
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Skynyrd.

It's just one little word, but it's one that practically guarantees a big, enthusiastic audience (shouting "Free Bird," no doubt). And that's exactly what Germain Arena is counting on.

"I think a lot of people are excited," says Sammy Wallace, the arena's vice president of programming. "It's been four years since they've been here.

"And it's Skynyrd."

The esteemed Southern rockers are standouts in what's shaping to be the arena's busiest year ever. Tickets for the Oct. 22 show go on sale today.

By the end of 2009, Wallace estimates, the Estero arena will have brought in 120 days' worth of concerts, expos and other events. That's 25-30 more than last year - all despite the sluggish economy.

The arena's varied upcoming events include mega-selling Christian band Casting Crowns; the mixed-martial arts competition Art of Fighting 6; a "Big Boy Expo" full of race cars, boats and home theaters; a Disney ice-skating show; and a Beatles musical endorsed by former Beatle Pete Best. Plus Skynyrd, of course.

The idea is to offer something for everyone.

"We want to find as many different uses as we can (for the arena)," Wallace says. "There are a lot of different kinds of entertainment."

So why the push to bring in more shows?

The economy, of course.

While many venues have been cutting back, Germain Arena has been adding as many shows as possible. Most halls and smaller venues pay acts to come there, but it works the other way with Germain: The acts rent the space from them.

So the more acts, the more money - which in turn offsets a higher utility cost and ticket sales that are down about 15 percent (Germain officials wouldn't release specific sales figures).

"When the building is sitting unoccupied, we're not making any money," says Germain president Craig Brush. "We're spending money."

For most shows and concerts, the arena can hold between 4,000 and 6,500 people, depending on the size and configuration of the stage, Wallace says. Over the years, Germain has featured big acts as diverse as Elton John (twice), Tom Petty, Cirque du Soleil, The Blue Man Group, Cher and Brad Paisley.

It's a great place to hear bands and also play live music, says Jason Gardina, bass player for Vega Under Fire. In January, the Naples dance-rock band opened there for Panic at the Disco and New Found Glory at FGCU's Nest Fest.

The band had never played for that large of a crowd before, Gardina says. "It was awesome. There were thousands of people out there. The crowd was amazing.

"I'd never heard a sound like that before in my life. It was like waves crashing."

Gardina saw Coheed and Cambria at Germain Arena years ago, and he's considering going for Lynyrd Skynyrd, too.

The bands usually sound good there, he says. "The arena's not too big. No matter where you are in there, they sound great."

Germain managers want to follow the scheduling path set by Madison Square Garden in New York City. The Estero arena may never equal The Garden's prestige, but they can at least aim for its consistent calendar of shows.

"Madison Square Garden has 500 shows every year - two each day, in some cases," Brush says. "If we could do 150, we'd do it.

"We'd do 200 a year if we could."

The 11-year-old arena is also home to the Everblades, which holds games there about 40 days a year, Brush says.

Brush's goal is more shows, more people, and more money pouring into the Estero arena.

It certainly helps that he's got Wallace, who worked there for two years as a ticket manager before going to Bank Atlantic Center in Sunrise. He returned about a year ago as Germain's vice president of programming.

"Sammy is very aggressive, and he's very skilled at what he does," Brush says. "He definitely makes a difference."

You've got to get aggressive in Florida's increasingly competitive entertainment market, Wallace says. On any given show or concert tour, 12-14 similarly sized venues usually compete for the same three or four Florida shows (Those competing venues don't usually include The Phil or Mann Hall, Wallace says, since the Southwest Florida halls typically attract musicals, plays and other acts that don't fit an arena crowd).

"The industry is changing," Wallace says. "There really wasn't any choice but to change with it."

Southwest Florida entertainment junkies have already started reaping the benefits of that with recent shows such as Judas Priest, Disturbed and "Cirque du Soleil: Saltimbanco," which sold out 75-80-percent of its seven-show run. That makes it the arena's most successful extended-run show ever.

"If you find a show that people want to come to," Wallace says, "they'll come."

Success stories like that usually lead to bigger, better and more plentiful shows in the future, Wallace says. Tour groups see that the arena can pack the house, and they'll think about it again next tour.

Even apparent poor sellers like this season's New Kids on the Block - they filled only about 65 percent of the house - actually sold almost double what similarly sized markets did, Wallace says.

And he's working on more shows right now. Those include two unnamed "big country acts" and at least one "contemporary rock act" that he hasn't quite nailed down yet.

"We're burning up the phones," Wallace says. "We're trying to get more shows every day."

Additional Facts

Shows that never were: Here are acts that got away

By CHARLES RUNNELLS

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Sammy Wallace would love to see U2 rock Germain Arena.

He can dream, of course.

But Wallace is a reasonable man. Instead of daydreaming, he spends his work hours finding ways to bring other, less out-of-reach acts to the Estero venue.

The arena's vice president of programming works the phones, checks the Web sites and does everything else he can to bring in concerts and other big events.

Often he succeeds - such as when Elton John or Cirque du Soleil come there and break all sorts of sales records.

Other times?

Between economic worries and scheduling conflicts - plus the fact that about a dozen similarly sized Florida venues are often competing for the same three or four spare tour stops - many shows fall through the cracks and never make it there.

Here are three of the recent ones that got away:

- Don Henley: Wallace blames the loss of this planned March show on the dicey economy. Promoters and the arena just weren't sure the former Eagle would sell enough tickets.

- Journey: The arena wanted the 1980s pop-rock band for this September, but in the end the money equation didn't work out. Tickets simply cost too much, Wallace says, and they doubted enough people would shell out the money. "We couldn't get it to make economic sense."

- Lynyrd Skynyrd: The arena tried to get the rock band there in January, but Skynyrd's management eventually decided to skip any shows in Florida, Wallace says. The band features singer-guitarist Ricky Medlocke of Fort Myers.

Now, of course, Skynyrd is playing the arena this October. "Sometimes the fish swims back to the hook, I guess," Wallace says and smiles.

Two other big acts that haven't come there yet are ZZ Top and, surprisingly, AC/DC - despite the fact that bass player Cliff Williams also lives in Fort Myers.

Wallace hopes to make that happen one day.

"There are certain conditions, and if things work out right, even the big tours can come here," he says. "You never say never."

Upcoming shows at Germain Arena

- Saturday, "Blades Backyard BBQ," a free event featuring live local bands, prize giveaways, kids activities and hanging out with current and former Everblades hockey players;
- Sept. 10-13, "Disney on Ice: Worlds of Fantasy," an ice-skating show featuring characters from four Disney movies;
- Sept. 26-27, "The Big Boy Expo," a trade show full of cars, boats, home theaters and more;
- Oct. 2-3, "All You Need Is Love," a Beatles "musical biography" endorsed by former Beatle Pete Best (who will also be there for autographs with VIP ticket holders);
- Oct. 22, Lynyrd Skynyrd;
- Nov. 15, Christian band Casting Crowns
- Nov. 22, Art of Fighting 6;
- Dec. 21, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) returns to the arena;
- Jan. 7-10, Ringling Brothers Circus;
- Jan. 16, The World Famous Lipizzaner Stallions.

- For more information on these shows, call 948-7825 or go to germainarena.com
