

20 Years Later, Sports Arena Still the ‘Center’ of Attention

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by Eldon Graham



The Wells Fargo Center opened for business on August 31, 1996 as the CoreStates Center in South Philadelphia. It is still in high demand, as shown by the recently held Democratic National Convention (above). It is the home of the Philadelphia Flyers, 76ers and Soul. Photo by Eldon Graham.

In August 1996, Bill Clinton was President, Ed Rendell was Mayor of Philadelphia, and cellphones were primarily used for calling people. And people had a new place to see concerts, sporting events and other entertainment in South Philadelphia.

Since opening its doors, the building first known as the CoreStates Center, now called the Wells Fargo Center, has been home to the Philadelphia Flyers, 76ers, Kixx, Soul and Wings, and has hosted major events such as the 2000 Republican National Convention, the 2002 NBA All-Star Weekend and, most recently, the 2016 Democratic National Convention.

On average, the building, which was built to replace the beloved but outdated Spectrum, can hold 19,600 for Flyers' hockey games and 21,000 for 76ers' basketball games. The arena carries a lot of history within its walls, as well. The WFC is the 12th-oldest arena used by an NBA team, it is also tied for the 10th-oldest current venue for a hockey team. From 1996 to 2016 a number of sporting events and live entertainment, have been experienced at the WFC. Some events were full of heartbreak and others of immense jubilation, but in the end it's the moments that were captured in the building that people, including John Page, president of the Wells Fargo Complex, remember and hold onto.

"It obviously has been a huge part of my life," Page said. "I've been in the business since 1991 and lived in Philadelphia since 1993, and I also met my wife here and had children here. So, it's meant a lot to me." Page sees the facility as more than a building; he sees it as family. "It's like a living, breathing entity – like a brother or sister. It serves the community as a whole."

Recounting some of his favorite events, Page fondly remembers the Flyers' two Stanley Cup Finals appearances in 1997 and 2010. "To watch the puck drop and the action that's experienced on the ice, that's amazing," he enthused.

Talking about things to come, he said, “I think the future looks very bright. I don’t see much changing. Our company, Comcast Spectacor, doesn’t want to change much. We want to keep the venue intact.” The changes that Page refers to include \$75 million in upgrades that will be spent over the next two summers.

This past summer, the organization spent \$18 million on upgrades to the center. They plan to install more technology, add digital displays, improve the concourse and upgrade the suites. Eighty suites have already been upgraded, with 40 more to go.



The Wells Fargo Center, located in the South Philadelphia Sports Complex along with Lincoln Financial Field, Citizens Bank Park, and Xfinity Live!. Photo by Eldon Graham.

This summer, those suites have been put to good use when hosting big events, like the Democratic National Convention. When asked about hosting another big event – the 2017 NFL Draft is rumored to be held Philadelphia next summer – Page said that it would be hard to host an event like that given the Flyers’ and Sixers’ schedules during that time.

The WFC is firmly entrenched in South Philadelphia, and Page knows that the community itself is a big part of that, “Many people who started with the [CoreStates Center] are still here,” he said. “A lot of these people have fond memories. We love it, they love it and they relate to the sports complex.”

One of those people who can relate is Philadelphia resident and Realtor, Barbara Capozzi. The Wells Fargo Center replaced the much-beloved Spectrum 20 years ago – it seems like just yesterday!” she exclaimed.

Capozzi also mentioned how the WFC is very cognizant of the people in the community and how communication is key to a healthy relationship. “Over the years, there have been very few issues with WFC and the neighbors, we have always been able to work through any and all issues in a quick, reasonable and responsible manner with Comcast, the ‘landlord’ and managing agent for the WFC. Comcast now sits on the Board of the SCSSD (Sports Complex Special Services District) so we, the community leaders, have easy access and an open dialogue with them in regards to any WFC issues.”

The Sports Complex Special Services District is a nonprofit corporation that serves approximately 9,000 residents living in 4,100 households surrounding the Sports Complex venues in South Philadelphia. The district’s three main objectives are to “Protect Community Interests,” “Improve Neighborhood Quality of Life” and “Promote Efficient Operation of Adjacent Sports Venues.”

Capozzi acknowledges how the district is an invaluable resource to the surrounding residents, saying, “The neighbors surrounding the WFC are a hearty sort, we bear the traffic congestion, bright lights, extra litter after events, etc., well because we have the SCSSD as our buffer. SCSSD works hard every day to mitigate any issues from the Complex. On any given weekend, our community can host over 150,000 fans to events.”

“WFC has been a successful engine to the local economy for 20 years, and we wish them the best possible future success,” she added. “We have peacefully co-existed and I can only assume we will

continue to do so. Xfinity Live was an expansion that has brought some issues, but again, we worked through them so there is minimal impact or disruption to the neighbors.”



PHILLY native musical group, Boyz II Men, performing its hit single, “Motown Philly” during the opening ceremony on the first day of the Democratic National Convention, hosted inside the Wells Fargo Center on July 25, 2016. Photo by Eldon Graham.

Philadelphia City Councilman Kenyatta Johnson also showed his appreciation for the WFC’s anniversary. “Congratulations to the Wells Fargo Center on its 20th Birthday,” Johnson said. The venue is a great addition to my district, and has been an asset this year in highlighting the best of Philadelphia by hosting the Democratic National Convention.”

Comcast Spectacor plans to commemorate the anniversary during a yearlong campaign with many elements including: hosting a community open house during a birthday party for fans, year-long social media campaigns to highlight the best and most memorable moments in the WFC’s history, special ticket offers for fans and more.

However, keeping everyone happy may not always be possible. In recent months the Wells Fargo Corporation has been passively clashing with one of its original full-time tenants. The financial institution chose not to become a business partner with the 76ers. Since then, the Philadelphia 76ers have stopped using the brand. None of the team’s staff or front-office employees will acknowledge or use the name “Wells Fargo.” The team has been referring the Wells Fargo Center as “the center” or “the arena where we play.” Nothing has happened in recent months to indicate anything will change before the beginning of the 2016-17 season.

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