

The Pre & The Post

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Thomas & Mack Center | Las Vegas, Nevada

Wrangler National Finals Rodeo

After a turbulent negotiation process ended successfully last year, the city of Las Vegas and organizers of the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo ensured that the world's richest rodeo will be in good and familiar hands for the foreseeable future.

The Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority and its event-hosting arm, Las Vegas Events, came to terms with the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association to keep the event in Las Vegas through 2024. Las Vegas Events will guarantee \$16.5 million annually in purse and sponsorship for the event. In addition, the Thomas & Mack Center will continue to host the rodeo for another 10 years. The Wrangler NFR moved from Oklahoma City to Las Vegas in 1985 and has called the 17,000-seat facility home from the beginning.

The event has sold out its last 280 performances, and in 2014 it set an attendance record of 177,565. This year's event will boast a record purse. "In our 30-year run in Las Vegas, the Thomas & Mack Center has been our only home," said Pat Christenson, president of Las Vegas Events. "There are no sightlines in sports as good as those in this arena. The major improvements they are making will greatly enhance the experience for our fans."

The arena, constructed in 1983, is in the final stages of a \$72 million renovation that includes increased ADA seating, the addition of new entry points and new seats. The event's fans can also take advantage of renovated restrooms and concession stands. The arena will have a new escalator, more concourse space and improved hospitality that includes ample meeting space and a 36,000-square-foot addition overlooking the Las Vegas Strip.

Wrangler NFR General Manager Shawn Davis is confident the rodeo is in the right place for the next decade.



"I'm very pleased with what we can do there at the Thomas & Mack with the upgrades. And the personnel there—you can't find anybody better to work with," said Davis, who is also a ProRodeo Hall of Famer and three-time world champion.

The Professional Bull Riders, however, will move the Built Ford Tough World Finals from the Thomas & Mack Center to the new Las Vegas Arena, an MGM-owned facility expected to open in 2016. Wrangler NFR organizers did not view the new 20,000-seat arena as a viable option because of the rodeo's need for acres of livestock pens and warm-up areas. "It would be tough logistically," Davis said of such a move. "When we first moved to the Thomas & Mack it was tough, but now we've got it to where it flows real well."



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—Pat Christenson
Las Vegas Events

The 10-day Wrangler event features the brightest stars of professional rodeo in seven events—bareback riding, steer wrestling, team roping, saddle bronc riding, tie-down roping,

barrel racing and bull riding. World title races will be greatly influenced by the large payout, which rose to \$10 million from \$6.375 million. Virtually any of the top 15 contestants in each event or 15 teams in team roping have a chance to win gold buckles now that the pot has grown.

The prize money bump was a major sticking point in the negotiations. But with the contracts in place for another 10 years, officials can focus on expanding fan-friendly options and ancillary events in the city. Fans have plenty to do to keep themselves busy before each night's performance, including the Cowboy Christmas Gift Show and Cowboy FanFest at the Las Vegas Convention Center. Virtually

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—Karl Stressman
Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association



every Western-themed item imaginable can be found there, and visitors are also treated to autograph sessions, concerts, a vintage Wild West town, food and celebrity appearances.

Watch parties have become all the rage at the more than 40 host hotels in Las Vegas, so fans who don't have tickets to each night's rodeo can still enjoy the event with friends. It is estimated that more than 100,000 people visit the city for the rodeo each December.

"It's a party atmosphere, so it bleeds over into the rodeo and back to the casinos," PRCA Commissioner Karl Stressman said. "Over the last year of the (contract) negotiations, people were pretty bold in speaking up and saying, 'Man, we can't leave Vegas because that's our party every year.' I think that speaks volumes about what that city actually has in the works." ■

—Neal Reid