



PHOTO: PRORODEO PHOTO/TOM DONOGHUE

The Thomas & Mack Center, located on the campus of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, is a state-of-the-art sports and entertainment facility completed in 1983. One of the West's premier facilities has hosted the National Finals Rodeo, championship boxing, superstar concerts, major industrial shows and a wide array of sporting events, from the 2007 NBA All-Star Game to Budweiser World Cup Horse Jumping.

Wrangler NFR Has Thrived in Vegas

By Neal Reid

A decision deemed by many at the time as wrong, a bad gamble or even foolish, has turned into one of the biggest payoffs in the history of ProRodeo.

In 1984, Shawn Davis — then the president of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association — cast the deciding vote to move the National Finals Rodeo from Oklahoma City to Las Vegas. It was a move steeped in controversy that resulted in a massive backlash from rodeo traditionalists and Oklahoma City loyalists, but one that continues to pay off to this day.

From the rodeo's first year in the "Entertainment Capital of the World," contestants saw a myriad of changes, including to their wallets. The total purse for the event nearly doubled,

jumping from \$901,550 in 1984 to \$1.79 million in 1985, and prize money has increased every year since, ballooning to \$6.125 million in 2012.

Skeptics everywhere questioned if the gamble would pay off.

"I was a little skeptical of it, but there was just so much more money to be won there, and that's what it's all about for a cowboy trying to make a living," said ProRodeo Hall of Famer Jake Barnes, who teamed with Clay O'Brien Cooper to win the team roping gold buckles that first year in Las Vegas. "Honestly, I don't know where rodeo would be today if it

hadn't moved to Vegas. Obviously, that was the right choice, but at the time, who knew it was going to turn out to be what it is today?"

Davis, who has served as the NFR's general manager since 1986, did.

"I thought Vegas was the right call from



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NATIONAL COWBOY MUSEUM

General Manager of the NFR Shawn Davis (center) greets Leslie Baker and JoDahl Creech, representing the National Cowboy Museum's Rodeo Historical Society, after their behind-the-scenes tour at NFR 2010.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF SOUTH POINT HOTEL, CASINO AND SPA

Trailers are lined up outside South Point Hotel, Casino and Spa in the heart of the southwest Las Vegas valley. A unique feature to this property is its Equestrian Center, one of the finest venues in the country.

the start," said Davis, who was inducted into the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's Rodeo Hall of Fame in 2011. "My opinion at that time was, if it was going to take off, Las Vegas was the place to do it because of the exposure it gets nationally and internationally. I always thought the rodeo would sell and we'd never scratched the surface of its abilities. So, I had a lot of confidence that, if we could present it right, it would sell, and it has."

In addition to prize money, the production of the rodeo received a facelift, continuing a trend began in its final years Oklahoma City of shaving hours off the event's overall running time.

"In the late 70s and early 80s, that rodeo was running almost four hours (long)," said Davis, a member of the inaugural ProRodeo Hall of Fame class in 1979. "That just wouldn't work in Las Vegas. So, we had to tighten up the production, which we were able to do."

It is now a streamlined production Davis meticulously monitors with his stopwatch

and time sheet from the stands, a two-hour rodeo full of spills, thrills, rock-n-roll and entertainment for everyone.

"Because of all the sponsor announcements, we have to organize it and choreograph it," said Davis, who won saddle bronc riding world titles in 1965, 1967 and 1968. "It's not just a rodeo like when we first went there. It's actually a choreographed production."

Naturally, the contestants have relished the added prize money, especially the team ropers, who began receiving equal money at the NFR in 1998.

"It was a gamble, but in business, sometimes that's what it takes to take things to a new level," said Barnes, a seven-time world champion. "Rodeo's at such a (high) level now, and that's why there are so many guys right now who are getting out there to compete and try to make the NFR to have the opportunity to win some big money."

The changes have created an event that's more marketable and appealing to the masses.

"When I was a kid watching it, they had a band in the background and the moat alongside the arena where the guys would come in and sit in the arena and watch," said three-time world champion steer wrestler Luke Branquinho, who competed in his first Wrangler NFR in 2001. "Now, there's more rock-n-roll music and a little younger crowd getting into it a little more, but they're not losing the older crowd either. I think it's become more dynamic, as far as that aspect of it."

The city of Las Vegas has evolved alongside the rodeo through the years, growing into one of the world's top vacation destinations. Fans have plenty to fill the other 22 hours of their day while the rodeo is not taking place.

"What's so neat about the NFR is that it's very seldom you get to stay in a city more

than a day," Barnes said. "It's nice for the cowboys, and they make you feel special there. People go there on vacation and are able to go to the casinos or the Cowboy Christmases, and there are just a lot of activities you can go do. There's just so much you can do in Vegas."

With more than 170,000 people filling the seats in the Thomas & Mack Center each year, the rodeo has become accustomed to sellouts, and tickets are extremely hard to come by. But since the city has truly become a "Cowboy Town" and embraced the rodeo and its fans with open arms in recent years, there are endless ways for fans to connect with the prestigious event.

"(The casinos) are starting to have after-parties every night and streaming the rodeo live on their TVs for people who can't get tickets, and I think that's been a big help as far as the fan base goes," Branquinho said. "You can still come enjoy a live NFR without actually being there, but still get to hang out with the



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF NATIONAL COWBOY MUSEUM

At the annual Cowboy Christmas Show, the Rodeo Historical Society hosts a booth to educate guests on the Society and the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.



PICTA PRORODEO PHOTO/MIKE COPEMAN

Wrangler National Finals Rodeo is a win-win-win. It means big money for the city and the contestants and exciting action for ticket holders like watching Luke Branquinho score a 3.3 in the fourth round at the 2012 NFR.

contestants throughout the week and get to interact with everybody.”

Davis has been encouraged by the city’s growing support of the rodeo.

“Even though we only seat around 17,500 at the event, there’s over 40 hotels

that show it live,” Davis said. “A lot of people go to Las Vegas to support rodeo. The corporate hotels have really gotten out and competed for the public interest to support the sport by getting the cowboys to their hotels.”

The addition of Wrangler as title sponsor in 2001 was a landmark deal that helped further elevate the 10-day event’s appeal and scope, and now the sport’s sponsors flood Las Vegas with signage and merchandise in order to engage the seemingly endless number of rodeo fans who flock to town.

“Oh, I think it’s amazing that all those people come out to watch the top 15, the best in the world, compete,” Branquinho said. “Whether they’re a fan of Luke Branquinho, Trevor Brazile, Cody Ohl or whoever, they’re fans of rodeo. To see that many fans of rodeo in

one place, it’s pretty amazing to me.”

One of the most appealing aspects is the high level of competition it provides fans and television audiences. That, at its base, has been a big part of the rodeo’s evolution.

“What makes it work is we’ve got the best contestants against the best livestock,” Davis said. “It’s always been about putting the best against the best and making sure all the focus was on them, and that’s the thing we’ve always maintained since I’ve been involved with the National Finals. I think that’s one reason for its success.”

The top contestants and animal athletes, combined with a top-notch production, huge paydays and the setting of arguably the world’s most desired playground. That’s not a bad scenario at all. ■

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PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BOYD GAMING CORPORATION

At the Gold Coast Hotel & Casino, world champion tie-down roper and all-around cowboy Joe Beaver, eight-time world champion bull rider and Rodeo Hall of Fame inductee Donnie Gay and TV Host Dan Miller present a rodeo wrap-up during “NFR Tonight.” The award-winning show features interviews with some of the most recognizable names in the world of professional rodeo.