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PBR, rodeos, dirt shows report strong fan loyalty, rising numbers



IT'S NOT ALL POLITICS IN THE VIRGINIAS AND D.C.
 SILVER SPOON WINNERS LIVE TO SERVE
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PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS/GETTY IMAGES



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ON THE COVER

Two-time Professional Bull Riders (PBR) World Champion J.B. Mauney shows off some air time at PBR's 'Built Ford Tough Series' event at Wells Fargo Arena, Des Moines, Iowa, where the Top 35 bull riders in America competed in two-days of action.

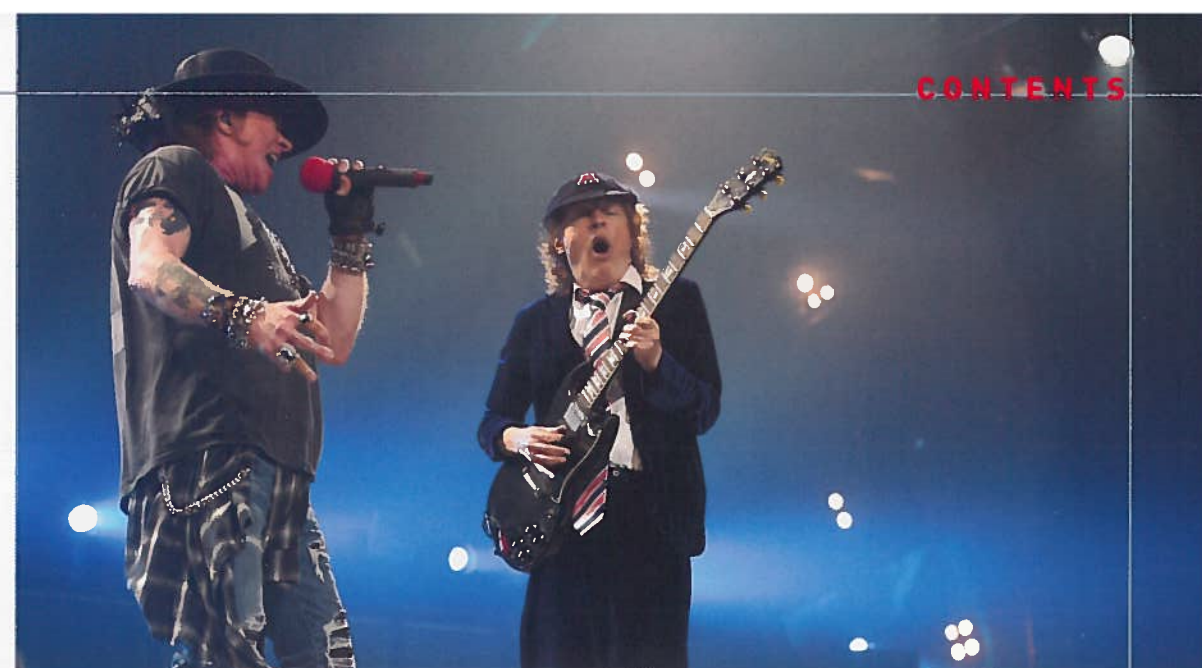
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HAPPENING SOON >> FutureTix Ticketing Symposium, Treasure Island Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas, Nov. 14-15 >> IAFE Convention, Paris Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas >> XLIVE 2016, The New Tropicana Double Tree, Las Vegas, Dec. 5-7.



Williamson County Expo Center, Taylor, Texas, opened this year.

HYBRIDS BRING YEAR-ROUND USE

Whether you're parking your horse or your car, new fairgrounds construction stresses flexible use

by LINDA DECKARD

The new venue at the Royal Easter Showgrounds, Sydney, Australia will be multistory and multiuse, parking cars in the off-season and featuring agricultural and animal exhibits during the fair.

Charlie Smith, Populous, the guru of fair-

grounds construction, said the hybrid arena has evolved, good to go for clean as well as not-so-clean events. Fairs are no longer looking at multiple outbuildings that house goats or chickens or pigs during the fair and are nothing but storage during the off-season. And rough surface concrete floors that retain animal smells are off the drawing board.

Instead, new buildings are designed with high steel, up to 28 feet, and wide column spacing, if not clear span, and appropriate utilities in the floor. And, of course, they are all equipped with WiFi.

"It's not more expensive, you just have to plan ahead – know what you're doing for the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10 →

HYBRIDS BRING... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

future and design accordingly,” Smith said, adding that usually means larger buildings that allow for year-round trade and consumer shows.

Lesa Williams, SMG’s National Equestrian director, agreed. “Fairgrounds are changing. For so long, it was grassroots, pop up every year and then go dormant. Now, they have to be 12-months-a-year venues. Meadow Event Park (State Fair of Virginia) started with four outdoor rings and small, temporary barns and realized year-round is important as the fair. Now they have full covered arenas and additional barns.”

“We have the same conversation with our nonprofits in the equestrian world,” she said. “The county wants to see a venue that doesn’t just have subsidy after subsidy, but nonprofits want to use it for free. They have to meet in the middle. Everyone has to look at the economics.”

Justin Gregory, manager at Kansas Expocenter, Topeka, sent Williams a recap that said since 2013, they brought in 35 additional event days, 2,400 stall nights and over \$4 million in economic impact for Topeka. “Expansions are expensive,” said Williams. “A new stall barn is \$125,000 for a basic building. But if you’re going from a two-day horse shows to four-day horse shows, there is a return on investment.”

To that end, the Oklahoma State Fair, Oklahoma City, is building a new \$80 million arena to replace its 50-year-old Jim Norick Arena that will set a new standard in flexibility, said Todd Gralla, Populous. Not only will it have an open concourse design, but the upper concourse will have retractable seats, folding back to the outside wall on both sides, allowing management to repurpose that space for VIP seating or sponsor exhibits or even trade shows. “You could hoist a tractor up there if you wanted to,” Gralla said.

Gralla said they started developing the concept last fall and the city gave them the design and construction services contracts this month. Unlike the Norick, which has been the main arena on campus, all the services will be inside the building, at the ends of the upper

concourse, exposed to the bowl. He likened the diversity of the seating product as a scaled-down version of National Basketball Association-ready arenas like KFC Yum! Center, Louisville, Ky., and Sprint Center in Kansas City, Mo.

“If you’re doing a horse show, you may only need 3,000 seats,” Gralla said. “But for a concert or PBR (Professional Bull Riding), you need to maximize seating. We will have the ability to maximize seating or use the upper deck as VIP vendor space. We can push back the upper seating and set up living room/lounge environments overlooking the arena. It has an enormous amount of flexibility.”

The design was based on a 50-year history of the types, needs and demographics of events booked in the main arena, Gralla noted. They then took it further, brainstorming “what kind of product do we think we can sell.” Very large professional arenas curtain off the upper deck, but it’s still there, costing money, he noted. This way, that unneeded seating space can be utilized to actually produce revenue. “It will evolve, but this concept is really solid for the market and the venue,” Gralla said, adding it’s an interesting approach for small arenas.

“The bulk of its days are dirt, but that doesn’t mean we won’t have a permanent floor. And we will build out seating with risers in front of the arena wall. In dirty arenas, that’s difficult,” Gralla added.

THE ECONOMICS OF EXPANSION

Smith’s biggest project right now is at the New York State Fair, Syracuse, where they are moving into Phase II of the master plan. “After we did Phase I — the new entrance, a midway for Wade Shows, an RV area and other improvements to the site — attendance was up 23 percent. All of a sudden the governor is in love with the fair again and wants to know what to put in his budget this year,” Smith said.

As per the trend, the most significant element will probably be a hybrid multipurpose building, clean or not so clean, horse show or exhibition, to facilitate maximum use. The preliminary plan also calls for improvements

to the equestrian area and probably a new 4H/FFA complex and other new amenities.

Citing several other projects underway, Smith said “this will be one of the biggest years we’ve ever had in the history of the firm. Fairs are being appreciated more as economic generators in communities because of year-round usage. It’s not a seven-day event; it’s an exhibition park and it’s being used more. I tell fair boards your manager can’t do the best job possible until he gets the buildings he needs to lease.”

TEAR THE FENCES DOWN

Per construction in the arena and stadium worlds, fairs are becoming destinations, Smith continued. “I’m using the term ‘tear the fences down.’ The integration and connectivity now of the fair with their communities is much better. They are used almost like community parks now; green space where people walk their dogs.”

The Canadian National Exhibition grounds are seen as the Central Park of Toronto, Smith said. The National Western in Denver has a new master plan that will allow for more community interaction and public participation. There’s not a rusty barbed wire fence around the property anymore.

The other issue in fair construction is “verticality.” The Sydney showgrounds is an example of being landlocked. If you can’t go out, you go up, Smith said. “We will see multi-level livestock buildings and expo halls in the future because you can’t manufacture property. The hybrid venue planned in Sydney is multistory and will be used for livestock during the fair and will be a parking garage after the show.”

Brisbane (Australia) Showgrounds is hoping to do the same thing, Smith said. Located in a super-urban space next to a hospital, it will have a seven-story horse facility and it will be parking as well during the off-season. They are going for funding now to expand and plans include a 20-story condominium tower attached to the fairgrounds. “It’s two years away at least before they get final approval and funding,” Smith said.

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HYBRIDS BRING... CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

On Oct. 25, the American Royal, Kansas City, Mo. announced it is moving to Kansas City, Kansas. The governor of Kansas funded \$70 million in STAR bonds and they've raised additional private capital.

They are moving because Kansas City, Mo., wants to do something else with Kemper Arena rather than ag-related facilities, and because there are structural issues with the building, Smith said. The state of Kansas, on the other hand, wanted them to be part of a destination development that includes Kansas Speedway, Cabelas and apartments.

Last year, the Agricultural and Commercial Society of Zambia, in the capital city of Lusaka, started talking about a new multipurpose expo hall, Smith continued. Like some fairs in the U.S., they are operating with a lot of little buildings that can't be used on a year-round basis. The trend to go year-round is worldwide.

EDUCATION'S ROLE

Gralla was most impressed with another area of equestrian center construction – educational. Populous is working with several agricultural colleges, particularly Cal Poly in San Luis

Obispo, Calif.

“They hired us to do a master plan to redevelop the entire equestrian campus, which is part of the main campus, which is a little bit unusual; it's usually a satellite campus,” Gralla said.

Cal Poly is looking at a new kind of arena for training and education, a stallion barn with research lab, and a foaling barn for their big breeding program there.

There will be a big covered pavilion for polo events and an ag center that can be used for animal exhibits or for vineyard shows, big dinners and other events related to the farm product produced there.

“They have a new meat lab where they produce a lot of their own product, so they want to do events that revolve around the products they produce on campus,” Gralla said. There will be a lot of flat floor events as well as polo horse shows, even a little rodeo stuff. It will have a 4,000-6,000-seat capacity, half fixed seating deck, half retractable.

They will start construction on phase I, a covered arena and horse barns, the first of June. The pricetag is around \$9 million.

West Virginia University, Morgantown, is ready to start construction in December on equestrian science-related academic facilities,

teaching arenas, labs and classroom spaces in the horse barn. Those facilities are also for team-related use, Gralla said. The venues are on the more typical remote campus site.

“There is a huge growth in equine science,” Gralla continued. “Fifteen years ago, a private farm owner didn't think twice about hiring farm managers or trainers that had a degree; they didn't exist. Now it's kind of expected in the horse industry that people you hire actually have a college education related to business or preproduction science or farm management.”

While a lot of academics are going virtual, that's just not possible in livestock and agriculture related sciences. “There's no virtual horse for that curriculum. And the more students you have, the more horse and facilities you have to have. It's a strong industry that's solid. It's hands on. The classroom is the horse barn and the breeding shed,” Gralla noted.

In the equestrian centers and fairgrounds world, the key today is educating the public and the pros. Growth is the trend.

Interviewed for this story: **Charlie Smith**, (865) 694-5486; **Todd Gralla**, (405) 532-3521; **Leslie Williams**, (804) 385-7283

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