

Trump Plaza Could Be Next Noted Fight Site To Take 10-Count

Written by Bernard Fernandez
Tuesday, 14 January 2014 16:49



In 1986, two years after the May 26, 1984, grand opening of the Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino in Atlantic City, N.J., the new senior vice president of the gleaming gambling palace was asked by a reporter to talk about himself and what he hoped to bring to his job.

“Stephen Hyde is not exciting,” said a confident but unassuming Hyde. “This facility is exciting.”

For a while, the 39-story Trump Plaza was exactly that, especially on big fight nights headlined by the most important and electrifying boxer on the planet, heavyweight champion Mike Tyson. Oh, sure, the last five of Tyson’s nine fights held in Atlantic City under the Trump organization’s banner were staged in the adjacent and more spacious Boardwalk Hall, but the sponsoring venue, whose substantial financial stake made it all possible, was Trump Plaza. When Iron Mike was blasting out opponents during the relatively brief AC phase of his career, the entire city was buzzing and, other than Boardwalk Hall itself, Trump Plaza was the most obvious beehive of activity.

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And the boxing spotlight that was so frequently focused on Atlantic City during that halcyon era never shone brighter than the night of June 27, 1988, when Tyson knocked out Michael Spinks just 91 seconds into the very first round. One-sided as it was, the matchup of unbeaten might not have come close to living up to the unprecedented prefight hype, but it was and still is the most important attraction of any sort brought to the seashore resort town.

“It was the biggest event in the world at the time,” Spinks’ manager, Butch Lewis, who died on July 23, 2011, recalled in 2009. “I’m talking the whole bleepin’ world. If there was a Superdome in Atlantic City, we could have filled that sucker up twice over. The demand for tickets was just crazy. (The announced attendance was a sold-out 21,785)

“People who couldn’t get into Boardwalk Hall were milling around outside and offering hundreds of dollars for ticket stubs to the people who were coming out after the fight ended. They were willing to pay good money for stubs! I never saw or heard anything like that before. But, in a way, I understood. They wanted to be able to go back to wherever they came from and tell their friends and co-workers, ‘See, I was there.’”

In addition to Tyson, Atlantic City, whose city fathers and business leaders were once audacious enough to proclaim it the “capital of boxing,” has hosted fights involving such luminaries as Evander Holyfield, George Foreman, Lennox Lewis, Thomas Hearns, Floyd Mayweather Jr., Roberto Duran, Sugar Ray Leonard, Bernard Hopkins, Roy Jones Jr., Pernell Whitaker and, of course, the late and beloved Arturo Gatti. But the quantity and quality of fight nights has dipped precipitously, for any number of reasons. From an astounding high of 145 cards staged in Atlantic City in 1985, rock-bottom was reached in 2009, when only five shows took place.

There are still world championship fights that find their way into Boardwalk Hall – ageless wonder Hopkins retained his IBF light heavyweight title by outpointing Karo Murat on Oct. 26 – but, for the most part, what passes as main-event fare in AC these days in runs more along the lines of the eight-round heavyweight pairing of Derric Rossy (28-7, 14 KOs) and Joey Dawejeko (8-3-2, 3 KOs) Saturday night at the Golden Nugget. It might turn out to be an entertaining evening of fisticuffs, but Tyson-Spinks it ain’t.

Now, it seems, that once-gleaming representation of all the good things that were Atlantic City

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boxing could soon be relegated to the dusty pages of history, along with some of the big-name fighters who helped make that history. In a story that appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on Jan. 12, the continued downsizing of the town's casino industry (the Atlantic Club Casino Hotel closed on Jan. 13) was detailed, with the next round of eliminations likely to include the shuttering of Trump Plaza and, at least temporarily, that of the \$2.4 billion

Revel, which opened on April 2, 2012, and filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy just 10 months later.

"The only other casino (other than the Atlantic Club) that should close because it just adds no value is Trump Plaza," Alan R. Woinski, chief executive of Gaming USA Corp., an industry consultant in Paramus, N.J., is quoted in the article. Woinski also said he believed the financially stricken Revel – which staged its first, and possibly last, fight card this past Aug. 17, when England's Darren Barker wrested the IBF middleweight championship from Australia's Daniel Geale on a split decision – should cease operations for a year, for renovations that would include a drastic cutback in the number of its slot machines.

Gambling revenue is the engine that powers the train in casino cities like Atlantic City and Las Vegas, but the economic downturn has hit AC even harder than its Nevada counterpart, given the rise of casino competitors in neighboring states, particularly Pennsylvania. Trump Plaza's average win-per-day, per slot machine, was a feeble \$84 in November, compared with an average of \$213 for all Atlantic City casinos. The leader by a wide margin was the Borgata (which hasn't hosted a boxing card since 2007), with an average of \$374. The average for Pennsylvania's 12 casinos was \$238.

Perhaps Trump Plaza – whose physical plant has not aged well, despite having been in existence less than 30 years – would now be facing the axe in any case, but its quarter-century slide from the top of the fight game was speeded along by a tragic accident that ripped the heart out of Donald J. Trump's Atlantic City operation on several fronts.

The Trump boxing machine was still in nearly full throttle when three high-level executives – Hyde, Trump Taj Mahal president Mark Grossinger Etess and Trump Plaza senior vice president Jonathan Benanav – were among five persons killed in the crash of a company helicopter on Oct. 16, 1989, in the pine woodlands near Forked River, N.J. Of Etess and Hyde especially, Trump once had said that "Those two guys are my experts. With them, I don't need anybody else."

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Without Etes, Hyde and Benanav, the bottom line for the Trump organization turned from black to red and The Donald appeared to lose interest in luring big-ticket fighters to the boardwalk with hefty site fees. The Trump Taj Mahal retained most of the diminishing boxing business done by the company in Atlantic City, but the last fight of any real consequence there took place on June 29, 2002, when WBO heavyweight titlist Wladimir Klitschko stopped Ray Mercer in six rounds.

One veteran of the Trump boxing machine, Bernie Dillon, served as Trump Plaza's director of special projects until April 1991, when he left to become vice president of programming and administration for TVKO (which later was renamed HBO Pay-Per-View). At the time Dillon stressed that his departure should not be construed as a sign that Donald Trump, as many had speculated, was about to cut back on his commitment to world-class boxing. But by then the writing was already on the wall. A South Jersey native, Dillon has returned to his roots in various incarnations as a promoter (he co-promoted the Vinny Pazienza-Roberto Duran rematch in Boardwalk Hall on Jan. 14, 1995) and, most recently, as entertainment consultant at Revel. An optimistic Dillon said he envisioned Revel's 3,800-seat Ovation Hall as a frequent venue for boxing cards, but the arena was less than half-full for Geale-Barker, and there hasn't been another fight staged there before or since Dillon left his position.

What's curious is that, in the midst of so much apparent negativity, boxing enjoyed an impressive uptick in 2013. Showtime's deep-pocketed affiliation with Golden Boy has resulted in more and better fights on the premium-cable network, obliging industry leader HBO and its principal supplier of talent, Top Rank, to step up their game as well. Fans can, and should, feel good about that, even if some hoped-for matchups, like Mayweather-Manny Pacquiao, continue to be off the board because of those internecine squabbles.

Most buildings, and all fighters, aren't designed to last forever. Why should Trump Plaza, if indeed it has hosted its final fight and is soon to bid farewell to its slot machines and blackjack tables, be any different from other structures so many of us had come to consider as permanent staples of our memories? The Astrodome, hailed at its 1965 opening as the "Eighth Wonder of the World" and the site of the Muhammad Ali-Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams heavyweight championship fight of Nov. 11, 1966, is set for the wrecking ball. The Grand Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles is still there, but not in name as the property was purchased by a Korean-American church in June 2005. Philadelphia's venerable Blue Horizon hasn't staged a boxing match since super bantamweight Coy Evans' six-round decision over Barbaro Zepeda on June 4, 2010, and probably never will again now that the building –completed in 1865, and home to countless memorable ring wars since 1969 – is being converted into something that will be known as Hotel Blue. The Kronk Recreation Center in Detroit, where the late Emanuel Steward developed 30 world champions, has been vacant since its closing in 2006, and even in the best of times Manny correctly noted that it was "plain, stinky and funky," with tattered

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equipment, no showers and no locker rooms.

All of those places, though, were repositories of some of our favorite images of fights and fighters. But when something is gone, it's gone, and the passage of time has a way of scrubbing clean most vestiges of what used to be. Thirty or 40 years from now, fewer and fewer boxing buffs will readily recall the particulars of Tyson-Spinks, and fewer still will remember that officials at Trump Plaza – if it's still standing -- ponied up the then-record \$10 million site fee to make it happen where and when it did.

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ArneK. says:

This piece by my favorite Philadelphia sportswriter arrived almost simultaneous with the news that Atlantic City's Atlantic Club closed its doors (putting 1600 people out of work) and casino revenues there had reached their lowest point in 22 years.

The over-saturation of the market in the Northeast corridor (too many ways to bet and too many places to bet) is the main reason for the drop-off. And this development was inevitable. Casinos suck money from neighboring states, fostering the birth of new casinos rationalized as hoppers for stanching the cash drain. Threaten taxpayers with higher taxes if they fail to approve gambling initiatives and, voila, the opposition to casinos breaks down in a hurry.

Boxing in Las Vegas has held up pretty well, especially if one classifies boxing as a combat sport and puts MMA under the umbrella. But the Vegas club scene has deteriorated and there are signs that the mega-fights are headed to Macau, the former Portuguese colony off the coast of China. Casino revenues in Macau last year were seven times that of the Las Vegas Strip!

Casino owners were originally drawn to boxing because it was whale bait, meaning that it brought in high rollers. When Steve Wynn was asked how he could justify paying such a large site fee (reportedly \$10 million) to lure the Duran-Leonard rematch to his newly-opened Mirage, he said "my goodness, there's a fellow on property that can cover the entire nut (with a run of bad luck) in an hour."

That was back in 1989 when Macau had only one casino. The whales come primarily from countries in the Pacific Rim and now when they go gamble they tend to stay closer to home. Bob Arum has compared Macau with the Las Vegas of olden days when the entire focus of the bean-counters was on the casino pit and restaurants and night clubs were run as loss leaders.

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