



Sports & Sights / Big-League Teams Take Long Look at Las Vegas

By Dan Schlossberg

In Las Vegas, the biggest sport is still gambling. But the plethora of roulette wheels, blackjack tables, and digital slot machines could soon have competition.

Big-league sports venues are galloping into town with all the determination of a wagon train chased by Indians.

Major-league baseball has already played six "official" games in Sin City – when the 1996 Oakland Athletics needed a close-to-home substitute when repair work on their home park took longer than expected. No other major-league opener had ever been played in a minor-league park.

Cashman Field, normally used by the Triple-A affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays, has also hosted a myriad of exhibition games – most recently a two-game set between the Chicago Cubs and Chicago White Sox on March 4-5, 2009. The same two teams once packed a record 15,025 into a field with a capacity of 9,334 – no mean feat.

The stadium, part of a larger Cashman Center that includes a large theater, two exhibit halls, and 16 meeting rooms, first hosted a game on April 1, 1983, when the San Diego Padres played the Seattle Mariners, but was always considered too small to accommodate a big-league tenant.

In addition, Major League Baseball officials were so adamant about keeping gambling out of their game that they effectively succeeded in keeping their game away from the nation's gambling hub. Until now.

The Baseball Winter Meetings, a media circus involving players, managers, and executives from both the majors and minors, came to Las Vegas for the first time in 2008, enjoyed a stay split between the Bellagio and the Las Vegas Hilton, and seemingly softened their opposition to future franchise relocation to the glittering gambling mecca.

Both the Montreal Expos (now Washington Nationals) and Florida Marlins have eyed the city and might have been seduced with the promise of a newer and larger ballpark.

Completion of a new arena next year may coax the NHL and NBA to place franchises in town before baseball acts. Major League Soccer is considering the creation of a Las Vegas expansion team and two incumbent minor-league teams (the Las Vegas 51s of the Pacific Coast League and the Las Vegas Wranglers of the East Coast Hockey League) have done well. The city has also hosted teams from the Canadian Football League, Arena Football League, and XFL plus such special events as the 2007 NBA All-Star Game, the NASCAR Sprint Cup series, the NBA Summer League, and the training camp of the 2008 USA Olympic basketball team.

Always known as a great place to horse around, Las Vegas has hosted the National Finals Rodeo every year since 1985. It drew so many fans last December that delegates to the Baseball Winter Meetings had to scramble for accommodations – even though the Las Vegas Hilton, adjacent to the convention center, has more than 3,000 rooms.

College sports is also more than a blip on the local radar. The University of Nevada -Las Vegas (UNLV), a member of the Mountain West Conference, competes in NCAA Division I men's and women's sports while the College of Southern Nevada has excelled in community college baseball.

Beyond gambling, the biggest obstacle to bringing big-time sports to Las Vegas is the scorching summer climate. Daytime temperatures top triple digits in July and August while the corresponding humidity is so low (often below 10%) that dehydration is a potential problem. But rainouts aren't, although there are occasional summer thunderstorms. Average annual precipitation is only four-and-a-half inches, most of it coming during the winter.

Once a rest stop for pioneers in covered wagons, Las Vegas has also been a railroad town and a staging point for area mines. But the 1931 legalization of gambling, the 1936 completion of Hoover Dam, and the advent of air-conditioning converted the dusty desert town from a sleepy backwater into a city that never sleeps.

It certainly has enough lights: the city is so well-illuminated that it is often identified by orbiting astronauts as the brightest spot on the planet.

Unlike Phoenix, where participation and spectator sports rule, Las Vegas revolves around gambling – with each casino-resort betting its added attractions can lure customers to the slots and blackjack tables. The Mirage was the first of the megacasinos, in 1989, but the building boom never stopped.

The biggest and best are located on or near the Las Vegas Strip, a four-mile stretch that runs along Las

Vegas Boulevard and is actually located in Paradise, Nevada. Virtually all feature themes (i.e. Paris, The Venetian, Excalibur, and the pyramid-shaped Luxor); a myriad of restaurants; and headline entertainment, from Bette Midler to Barry Manilow, but also include such specialty acts as impressionist Danny Gans and comic Rita Rudner. There's often something extra, such as the lion habitat at the MGM Grand, the roller-coaster at New York, New York, or the rejuvenated Volcano at The Mirage.

The list of free attractions is long: pirates do battle at TI (formerly Treasure Island), wild animals have their own habitat at the Flamingo, and fountains erupt on schedule at both Bellagio and Caesar's Palace. Also free is the high-energy sky show at the Rio, the elaborate floral conservatory at the Bellagio, the tram ride that links Excalibur and Mandalay Bay, and a twilight stroll among the shops that line the man-made canals inside The Venetian (gondola rides cost extra).

The Fremont Street Experience, a nightly multi-media show under a \$70 million light canopy, lures visitors downtown, where the casinos are older, smaller, and often less expensive.

Also not to be missed in Las Vegas are the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Natural History and the Atomic Testing Museum, a four-year-old Smithsonian offshoot that features a "Ground Zero Theater," which simulates for spectators an atmospheric test of a nuclear bomb. The Nevada Test Site, in the desert north of Las Vegas, went into service early in 1951.

Getting around is easy – especially on the Strip. The sleek and silent Las Vegas Monorail covers the whole four miles in 15 minutes – a feat impossible by car – and runs frequently, with stops at multiple casino hotels as well as the enormous convention center, adjacent to the Las Vegas Hilton.

Pink jeeps also populate the Las Vegas roadways: Pink Jeep Tours, founded in Sedona in 1960 but expanded to Las Vegas in 2001, run full-day and half-day tours to Hoover Dam, the Grand Canyon, Zion National Park, Death Valley, and the nearby Valley of Fire, a state park with unusually photogenic rock formations.

The company operates 20 Tour Trekkers, high-end, all-terrain vehicles that hold 10 passengers, and does hotel pick-ups, and even offers a 10-hour combination tour that includes Hoover Dam and the Grand Canyon – using a helicopter and pontoon boat ride to complete the journey.

Cars can drive across the top of Hoover Dam, less than an hour from Las Vegas on U.S. 93. The narrow two-lane approach has several sharp turns and falls victim to occasional rock slides. Halfway across, both states and time zones change, with Nevada on Pacific Time and Arizona on Mountain Time (the times are identical in summer because Arizona does not observe Daylight Savings Time).

Because bus and truck traffic across the dam is restricted by security concerns, some of it must head south to cross the Colorado near Laughlin, NV. That will change next year, when the Hoover Dam Bypass – 1500 feet downstream – is completed.

Las Vegas Helicopters also provides aerial sightseeing, landing in the Grand Canyon for a scenic lunch along the Colorado River.

For most visitors, however, the greatest sites are the world of neon that explodes at night. From the Eiffel Tower to the Statue of Liberty, Las Vegas is a dream world – and has the potential to make some dreams come true.

Widely known as Sin City for its topless pools and risqué shows, Las Vegas is also known as the Entertainment Capital of the World, the Capitol of Second Chances, and "Lost Wages."

Just ask anyone flying out of McCarran International, the city's fast-growing airport.

The smart ones will be on discount carriers like JetBlue, which links Las Vegas to New York's JFK in under five hours.

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