I like window seats, and when I fly into Pittsburgh, I look for one landmark. If it’s clear and sunny, the Civic Arena gleams to me, as it has for half a century, like an old friend with a great smile. But before too long, the iconic arena dome will be no more. And for anyone who has become familiar with seeing it, things won’t be quite the same.

I worked three stretches covering 20 years at the Civic Arena/Mellon Arena. In the late 1960s and early ’70s, while I was matriculating across the way at Duquesne University, I was an usher always in trouble for having my hair too long. For ten years in the 1980s I served as Vice President of Marketing and then Arena Director—that was during the DeBartolo era. For four years around the start of this century, I was a tenant of the building while president of Lemieux Group, the operating company of the Pittsburgh Penguins.

The Civic Arena opened in 1961 and soon after I had my first visit there: my older brother Tim took me to see the Harlem Globetrotters. The Globetrotters played a team of local college players that night and the game was more competitive than it was funny. Later, I would be dragged to Pittsburgh Hornets hockey games by neighbors (I preferred minor league sports). My first concert was called a “Shower of Stars,” a very eclectic show with acts like Paul Revere and The Raiders, We Five, Simon and Garfunkel, and maybe The Temptations too.

My ushering job started in 1968 but I worked a lot more than just the poorly attended Penguins and Condors games. I also helped a lot as a stagehand and sometimes the overnight cleaning crew would be short so at the usher lineup they’d ask if anyone wanted to stay over. Being a college kid paying his own way, I’d often say OK. The opportunity came often; in those days the Arena might operate 200 days a year. When we’d get a break at 3:00 a.m., we’d pile into someone’s car and go to Primanti Brothers. I mean the original three brothers, cantankerous guys who really had a heart of gold. Cold milk in real glasses and the same sandwiches of today. Lots of cops working the graveyard shift. It was the safest spot in Pittsburgh.

In the ’80s we watched the emergence of Mario Lemieux. We also had the indoor Spirit and the Arena Football Gladiators. It was the age of Arena Rock, before “sheds” in the sticks took the music away. We could do 40 concerts a year in that era. Alas, I departed in 1990 to open one of those sheds—Star Lake Amphitheater—and the Pens promptly won two Stanley Cups.

I probably spent a couple thousand nights at the Arena in every conceivable capacity. Nowadays I see a memory in every nook and cranny. I see the past everywhere. The Arena will celebrate its 50th anniversary year next year. That’s unheard of in our generation where the life expectancy of a sports venue might be 25 years at most.

Ironically, it might have been a boondoggle that actually kept the Arena going so long. A donation of $1 million on behalf of the Civic Light Opera was made to the construction of...
the Arena if the roof could be made to open. Ultimately, it took $8 million of the roughly $22 million to construct the roof for that Arena. Yes, we had a roof that opened: trouble was the night air came in and the sound went out! It was sound woes that forced the CLO and Symphony out, not to mention a gust here or there. I remember ushering one night when the famed Arthur Fieldler was conducting the Symphony Pops. The sheet music got swept up in a summer gust in a scene right out of the Marx Brothers.

However, it was that roof opening capability that allowed cranes to come over the top to install corporate boxes, new balconies, and a new state-of-the-art scoreboard. Without the “can opener effect” we’d already be talking about that Arena in the past tense.

I saw a lot of crazy and wonderful scenes in my five decades of involvement, a full 20 as an employee of some sort. Not all of them I can mention, at least in polite conversation, but here are some favorite moments from someone who was there, sometimes much too much….

**Best Hockey Players**

*HOME GUY* is Mario Lemieux, the single most important athlete in Pittsburgh history. If not for Mario, it’s somebody else’s team a couple times now. Addicted Penguins fans will remember the season that General Manager Eddie Johnston sent hot goaltending prospect Roberto Romano to the minors and traded for Vince Tremblay from Toronto. The Pens barely finished last in a dead heat, deadbeat race with New Jersey and that’s how we got Mario. A few years later the NHL switched to the lottery system for teams missing the playoffs. Ironically the Pens would benefit from the lottery when they got Sidney Crosby in the draft.

*VISITOR* is Bobby Orr of the Boston Bruins, circa late ’60s, early ’70s. He changed the game. End-to-end rushes brought people out of their seats, took your breath away. Defensemen didn’t do that before Orr.

My greatest hockey moment was the New Year’s Eve afternoon game when Mario scored every way you could (full strength, power play, short hand, penalty shot, and empty net … although I believe the last one was slightly after the buzzer).

**Best Basketball Players**

I will go with John Brisker of the Pittsburgh ABA team, the Condors as my HOME GUY. The grace and power he exhibited was a marvel during those lonely nights at the Arena, with so few fans that ushers knew them all personally. The team was named after a near extinct bird and that was appropriate. The Condors team that came later vaporized too. *VISITOR* is Julius Erving, “Dr. J” and not because he had a lead role in The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh. It was while he played for the Virginia Cavaliers of the ABA.

**Best Other Sports Moments**

For BOXING it would be Heavyweight Champ Larry Holmes the night he was fighting a breather with Renaldo Snipes for an ABC bout. At the precise moment Snipes knocked down Holmes for the first time in his career, I turned to see the cigar drop out of Don King’s mouth and the man turn pale.

I spent two weeks with King promoting the fight. One day he says to meet him in his hotel room. He answers the door and I don’t recognize him. He hadn’t tossed his hair up and he looked like an average guy. I picked him up to take him to appearances and my car was full of youth soccer balls and he said, “Son, rent a nice car. I can’t be seen like this.”

**Best People**

One of my all-time favorite people was John Denver. I marveled at John’s career but in my job we ran into a problem. In the middle 1980s we booked John for an early December show at the Arena. I asked his manager if given that time of year whether John would do any Christmas songs. He said he’d probably throw one or two in the mix. I worked a big promotion with KDKA Radio and I got carried away. When the opening sales came in, it was projecting to do twice the attendance. In fact, we had to move from the cut-down Arena configuration (using curtains) to full Arena. I called the manager and confessed that maybe I had been a little aggressive in the marketing. He asked and I sent him the radio spot. After hearing it, he called from California and he said, “Tom, you just turned this into the John Denver Christmas Show.” When the date came, John was rehearsing all kinds of Christmas songs. I apologized to him. He said, “You may be onto something.” Next year there was full-fledged John Denver Christmas Show. We crossed paths at other venues but we always talked about that Christmas show at the Arena.

For WRESTLING, I recall a couple of crazy things. We had a run of eight or nine months consecutively in the ’80s when someone died
A Roller Derby at the Civic Arena competition between the Bay Bombers from San Francisco and the International Roller Derby League All-Stars on the 1968 National Winter Road Tour.

L&A, H.J. Heinz Company Collection, Box 86, Folder 3.

A swimming and diving exhibition at the newly constructed Arena.

L&A, ACCD Collection, Box 1, Folder 17.
at the matches, usually older folks going out in a blaze of heart attacks. I remember one night as an usher breaking up a fight between a lady on crutches and a man in a wheel chair. Talk about passion! I was standing by the Gate 2 players entrance one night when a telegram came in for Bruno Sammartino. I volunteered to take it back to the locker room. There's Bruno, with his arch nemesis Cowboy Bill Watts, smoking long cigars and playing cards. Thirty minutes later 15,000 fans were screaming for blood as these two "enemies" faced off in the ring.

It's tough to pick a favorite among the many CONCERTS, so here's a potpourri of moments: THE ROLLING STONES playing the summer stage in the '60s and Mick Jagger throwing down the microphone on the first song because he was badly shocked…. JANICE JOPLIN f-bombing Arena manager Charlie Strong from the stage when he turned the lights on mid-performance because the crowd was acting up. (Charlie would walk around the Arena telling people to put their cigarettes out all the while smoking a stogie.)… THE DOORS going onstage without introduction because Jim Morrison had been arrested earlier in the tour for a lewd onstage act in Florida…. The last New Year's Eve show for ELVIS and the plaque we placed for his fan club citing that several years later…. LAWRENCE WELK napping in the first aid room the day of his show…. The GRATEFUL DEAD Easter Weekend riot that ended up on CNN…. The endless and priceless BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN shows…. The many Skyline shows when the roof opened (JIMMY BUFFETT), when it was reluctantly opened (JAMES TAYLOR on a windy night where the engineer had to be locked in his room) and when it didn't open (DAN FOGELBERG) because it didn't work…. On November 6, 1981, undefeated boxers Larry Holmes and Renaldo Snipes battled for the world heavyweight championship. Holmes emerged victorious in the 11th round.

Tom Rooney.
MICHAEL JACKSON and his three straight nights on his only Pittsburgh appearance…. FRANK SINATRA asking me about my uncle ART ROONEY (Steelers Founder) and lamenting the closed steel mills on his limo drive from Allegheny County Airport…. DIANA ROSS chewing us out about her dressing room and then making us wait an hour after the show while she had secretly left immediately afterward through another door…. A sloppy 20th ANNIVERSARY WOODSTOCK REUNION where neither the bands nor the crowd wanted to show…. CHICAGO stopping mid-song through “Saturday, In The Park” to see the skyline when we opened the roof…. 

There was a movement in the late ’80s to declare the Arena a historic landmark. My boss then, Paul Martha, fought it because he knew any improvements we wanted to do would have to go through too many filters. And even though I’ll be among many who will miss it, progress has a price worth paying.

It’s been a great run for the Civic Arena. Only one last thing I’d like to see. The Pens won all three of their Stanley Cups on the road. How about one more, right there on Center Avenue? If celebrating fans tear down the walls, all that steel would be the biggest recycling project in history.

Tom Rooney is president of The Rooney Sports & Entertainment Group LLC that does venue and special event development and live concerts around the country. He is a Pittsburgh native and has worked for 35 years in sports and entertainment. He has unique kinship with the Civic/Mellon Arena, having worked there from the bottom rung as usher to the top rung as Arena director. He is collecting stories about the Arena and invites others to add their memories.
A proposed reuse for the arena.

1. Arena Park
2. Wiley Greenway/Steps (pedestrian way)
3. Lemieux Place (retail/entertainment)
4. Residential Expansion (parking below)
5. Mixed Use Office (35k floorplates)
6. Crosstown Park Cover
7. Consol Arena Garden Passage
8. Washington Plaza
9. Freedom Corner
10. Crawford Square
11. Connelly Green Innovators Campus
12. Wiley Middle Hill
13. Hill House
14. New Supermarket
15. New Granada
16. New Y
17. New Library

Architects James Mitchell and Dahlen Ritchey look over an early model of the Arena.

Robert Shaw Pfaffmann collection.

Arena reuse concept as mixed-use civic space with sports-themed uses and urban renewal history interpretive walk and park. Red massing represents areas of new construction (hotel/residential/commercial). Dome is shown with roof in open position, but could be closed as needed.