LOOKING FORWARD TO MORE HISTORY AT CONSOL ENERGY CENTER

By Ken Sawyer

I’ll never forget December 27, 2000, at Mellon Arena. It was the night the great Mario Lemieux returned to the Pittsburgh Penguins after a three-and-a-half year “retirement,” and the sense of anticipation was electric. It’s a rare moment when you know you are watching history being made.

And watch it we did—in a jammed-packed arena with a record local television audience of over 400,000 on FSN.

The magic of the night was not just that Lemieux was becoming the first NHL owner to play for his team—a historic feat in its own right. It was that one of the truly breathtaking players in hockey history was returning to his rightful place on the ice, unexpectedly, following a prolonged absence and while still in possession of his incomparable skills. To the surprise of almost no one, Mario recorded an assist 33 seconds into his first shift, and he finished that season—at age 35, and without the benefit of training camp—with 35 goals and 76 points in just 43 games.

When we move across the street to the new Consol Energy Center next season, and the old arena comes down to make way for new development, it’s one of the great memories that I’ll take with me. And that’s part of the everlasting charm of old sports facilities: even after they no longer exist, they remain entrenched in our memories because of the things we experienced while inside those walls.

Pittsburghers still cherish their memories of Forbes Field, Three Rivers Stadium, and Pitt Stadium. Pittsburghers of several generations will be able to feel the same way about a durable structure that began as the Civic Auditorium before becoming the Civic Arena for most of its existence, and then Mellon Arena.

It was home to classic sporting events: Stanley Cup Finals, the NHL All-Star game, the NCAA Basketball Tournament, championship boxing, the old Roundball Classics, and many of the greatest entertainers of the 20th century, from Elvis to the Beatles, Frank Sinatra, and Bruce Springsteen.

It was designed in the late 1950s, during the Eisenhower administration, and somehow—through ingenuity, creativity, numerous facelifts, flexibility, and just plain luck—endured as a major sports facility through the 2009-2010 NHL season, covering almost 50 years.

But as time marched on, as technology changed, as demands for media facilities and corporate entertainment and fan amenities...
grew, the old barn stretched the limits of its usefulness.

In 2008, the Penguins reached the Stanley Cup Finals for the first time in 16 years only to find that the requirements to host such a world-class event had changed dramatically since 1992. Instead of three television broadcasts, we had to find room for 10 international TV crews, expanded radio coverage, and for websites and bloggers as well as more than 200 traditional media from around the world. Additionally, space was needed for corporate entertainment, team operations, merchandise options, concessions, and customer service.

The bottom line is that the old Arena was built in a different time, for a different purpose. The original capacity was 11,000. The initial anchor tenant was the Civic Light Opera. Three Rivers Stadium existed for only 30 years, and some other sports facilities have been useful for 25 or less. It is a tribute to the folks who designed, built, and rehabbed the arena that it could continue to function for five decades, hosting games and concerts to the very end. But it is time to move on.

The Montreal Forum was known as the shrine of hockey, home to the fabled Montreal Canadiens and fraught with NHL history. Many old Montrealers shed a tear when the Canadiens moved a few blocks to a new arena, now called the Bell Centre, in 1996, and they wondered if attending a hockey game or another event would ever be the same. But sentiments changed quickly.

The Bell Centre has become a new mecca of hockey, and of Montreal entertainment, arguably the most exciting place to watch a game in the NHL. With modern seats, concourses, and amenities, including a state-of-the-art scoreboard and sound system, fans are served by one of the finest sports facilities in North America and—great memories aside—no one longs for the Forum any more.

We believe Pittsburgh fans will be similarly enamored with the new Consol Energy Center as soon as it opens its doors for the start of the 2010-11 NHL season. Spacious public areas will replace the crowded corridors of Mellon Arena; wider, more comfortable seats in all areas will replace those currently squeezed into the 1950s design; spectacular views of one of the most beautiful city skylines in America will be enjoyed from both upper and lower concourses; concession and merchandise options will be more plentiful and varied; and a dynamic HD scoreboard (the only true HD scoreboard in the NHL), two 32-inch-wide ribbon boards ringing the upper and lower bowls, and a 21st century sound system will transform the game experience from start to finish.

The Penguins organization spent countless hours visiting other cities and studying new arenas to prepare for our own project. While we were able to take an idea or two from each of them, we chose to focus on three as our models: the Xcel Energy Center in Saint Paul (Minnesota Wild), Nationwide Arena in Columbus (Columbus Blue Jackets), and the Jobing.com Arena in Glendale, Arizona (Phoenix Coyotes).

We were very impressed by the “open concourse” design of the Minnesota arena. Very simply, it means that, unlike Mellon Arena, fans in the public area will still be able to see the game action.
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We liked the new loge-box concept in Columbus, and are incorporating that into the Consol Energy Center. It is an alternative for companies who do not want to purchase a suite but want something more than just a handful of club seats. All 32 loge boxes—approximately eight seats each—and all 66 suites at the Consol Energy Center sold out more than a year before the opening of the new arena.

And we were pleasantly surprised by the presence of the “upper concourse” in the Phoenix arena. It gives the thousands of folks seated in the upper bowl a concourse of their own, thereby reducing traffic on both concourses and further enhancing the customer experience. The added advantage in our arena will be another spectacular view of the Pittsburgh skyline through the glass facade along Washington Place up to the intersection with Centre Avenue.

The Consol Energy Center will be a haven of new technology. Beyond the cutting-edge scoreboard and sound, the Yinz Cam developed by CMU will enable fans to view special camera angles of game action. For events other than hockey, the arena will have a remote-controlled curtain system that can reduce the size of the building to as little as 2,500 seats, and the lighting will be truly theatre-quality. Additionally, the lower bowl has been designed to be one of the largest in North America to bring as many fans as possible close to the concert stage.

As much as we will miss Mellon Arena, we know that once it is demolished, its 28-acre site will be the catalyst for tremendous urban renewal and a source of much-needed new revenues for the city. We envision that once it is built-out, this uptown site will add significantly to the number of in-town residents, create new jobs, and provide many new amenities for visitors and residents in the downtown corridor.

Moreover, we are pleased to be well on our way to becoming the first major sports facility in North America to earn a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Gold rating for green initiatives. LEED is the nationally accepted standard for the design, construction, and operation of green buildings, something Pittsburgh is known for. LEED ratings are based on a points system that measures such categories as energy and atmosphere, building materials and resources, water efficiency, indoor environmental quality, and innovation and design. This has been a goal of Penguins ownership and the Sports and Exhibition Authority since the start of this project.

We are confident that the Consol Energy Center will be a dynamic entertainment hub for the Pittsburgh region for decades to come, not only serving as the home of a National Hockey League team but also hosting concerts, family shows, skating exhibitions, religious shows, truck pulls, and a variety of other sporting events. As we salute the life of Mellon Arena and cherish its diverse stories, we also look forward to many new chapters of the region’s sports and entertainment history in the tremendous new facility being constructed across the street—and the revitalization of a once-vibrant area in the heart of the city.

Ken Sawyer is the CEO for the Pittsburgh Penguins.