



Brian Kanof / El Paso County Coliseum



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# Making memories for 75 years

## El Paso County Coliseum far from retirement as city's senior venue for entertainment, sports

Story by Lisa Kay Tate



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In just over a decade, El Pasoans have seen their entertainment and sports venues grow tremendously, from the opening of the restored Plaza Theatre in 2006 to the opening of the new Southwest University Park baseball stadium in 2014, as well as many smaller music venues like Tricky Falls or Lowbrow Palace. Now the city is in the middle of a major controversy over a proposed Downtown arena.

Before all of these, however, there was El Paso County Coliseum, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in May.

Dedicated May 21, 1942, the "Coliseum and Livestock Exposition Building" cost \$321,000. The El Paso Times called the facility "the largest and finest structure of its kind in the area of the Southwest," declaring it was "practically the same size as the one in Madison Square Garden."

"The massive concrete and steel Coliseum is now virtually complete," the Times enthusiastically reported. "Literally hundreds of flags, American and Texas, and plenty of bunting have been strung from the great steel network that supports the building's roof."

Texas Lt. Gov. H.L. Windfield, who dedicated the building along with County Judge Joseph McGill, called the Coliseum "a sound investment and monument to El Paso progressiveness."

The ceremony drew a capacity crowd of 7,000, and featured entertainment by Fort Bliss soldiers, the Texas College of Mines band, high school dance groups, Boy Scouts and other organizations.

Today, the Coliseum hosts more than 200 events annually, with an average of two million guests each year.

The Coliseum has hosted and still serves

as home for rodeo, boxing, wrestling and a variety of local sports teams. As a concert venue it has welcomed some of the most popular names in live music of all genres from Latin to heavy metal to country. Elvis Presley performed at the Coliseum more than once, and Selena sold out the venue in 1994. The list of performers continues to grow each year.

The Coliseum received a \$9.5 million renovation in 2004, with everything from new seating and parking, to improved air conditioning, restrooms and seating.

Nearly everyone who has lived in El Paso in the past seven decades has been to some event at the Coliseum, and even in its old age, it's still creating memories for years to come.

Brian Kennedy, CEO and president of the El Paso Sports Commission, which manages the Coliseum, noted that its location on Paisano in south-central El Paso makes it easily accessible for patrons from both El Paso and Juárez.

"Many people from Juárez don't want to travel too far into the United States, but when they go to events at the Coliseum, it is just to the right when they cross the border," Kennedy said.

While most people think of the Coliseum for sports and concerts, Kennedy noted that it also serves as a venue for charity giveaways, the El Paso County Fair and youth events such as Kids & Kows & More.

"People may come and see a hockey game at the Events Center, but what they might not see is the 20,000 kids who come skating every year for field trips. Some of these kids have never been ice skating or seen a real ice rink before."

He said these events are what help the

Coliseum be more than just a venue, but be part of the border region family.

"The Coliseum is El Paso," he said.

Kennedy said the addition of a Downtown arena shouldn't have any affect on the Coliseum as the building will continue to serve its purpose as what he calls a "feeder building," with a seating capacity of about 6,500, large enough to feel like a big event, but small enough so everyone can get a good view of the performer. Even the farthest seat in the Coliseum is less than 200 feet away from the artist on stage.

"What the Coliseum wants to do, and what this new building wants to do is so different," he explained, adding the Coliseum's size is perfect for artists who don't need the size of the Don Haskins Center or Sun Bowl.

Kennedy noted that Latin superstars Pitbull and Enrique Iglesias, who performed together at the Don Haskins Center, have each performed on their own at the Coliseum in the past.

The Coliseum still brings in performers who could easily fill larger venues, such as Gloria Trevi and Alejandra Guzman, who both toured there in the last month. He said the Coliseum has gained a reputation as a performer-friendly venue.

"We know we're not the biggest building or the newest building," he said, "but we're that building that 'gets things done' and is wonderful to play at."

Having a variety of venues, Kennedy said, is the sign of a city's progress.

"Grownup cities have options," he explained. "They can take a look at the acts and events coming, and be able to find what works best. Some work better in smaller arenas, and some in bigger arenas."

### Home for the home teams

The Coliseum was built to host "America's #1 Sport," rodeo, and the first event held in the building was El Paso Sheriff's Posse Rodeo in June 1942. The Coliseum is now managed by the private non-profit El Paso Sports Commission, whose mission is to "increase the influx of sports tourism dollars to the El Paso community through the creation of local tournaments, the enhancement of existing tournaments and by attracting regional, national and international events to the El Paso area."

Today the Coliseum, as well as its adjunct Hospitals of Providence Events Center, its judging arena and pavilion are home to at least five sports teams, not counting the many annual and traveling sports events, including professional boxing, wrestling and bull riding.

The Coliseum's main building hosts the city's newest professional sports team, El Paso Coyotes indoor soccer league, and its adjunct 1,000-seat El Paso Events Center is home ice to two championship hockey teams, El Paso Rhinos, and UTEP's Miner Hockey Club.

UTEP Hockey head coach Tom Herman said the Coliseum's event center is a great venue for hockey.

"It's loud," he said, "And makes for an intimate experience for the fans because they are so close to the ice."

The still young hockey club has already built a significant fan base, having won the Texas Collegiate Hockey Conference in just their second year as a team as well as making it into the regional finals.

Herman hopes to see even more fans