

# PARADISE

# IN A PAR



BY DON MURET

**O**VER THE PAST decade, big league teams have become more aggressive and creative in booking nontraditional sports events to fill stadiums and generate incremental revenue. The X Games, the Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic, the U.S. Women's Open bowling tournament and Fenway Park's Big Air snowboarding and ski jumping competition are just a few examples.

In South Florida, the Miami Dolphins are ready for the next step: For

the first time in sports, professional tennis is taking over an NFL venue.

The Dolphins' 65,000-seat Hard Rock Stadium and a portion of the vast parking lots surrounding the building have been transformed into a sports and cultural oasis for the Miami Open tournament.

The open was launched in 1985 and is among the few combined events on the men's and women's tour calendars. It moves this year to the stadium after the team signed a 30-year deal with event producer

# KING LOT



AND INSIDE AN  
NFL VENUE,  
AS **THE  
MIAMI  
OPEN**  
MAKES ITS  
DEBUT AT HARD  
ROCK STADIUM

COURTESY HARD ROCK STADIUM

At Hard Rock Stadium, the Miami Open extends to 30 combined competition and practice courts outside the NFL facility.

IMG to host the tournament. This year's dates are March 18-31.

The conversion has been quite a journey for the Dolphins and their event partners, including architect Rossetti, general contractor Moss Construction, concessionaire Centerplate and Seating Solutions, the vendor supplying temporary seating for the tournament.

"It's been fun and nerve-wracking at times," said Todd Staley, the Dolphins' vice president of stadium construction. "There is no template

you can compare it to. It's taken huge teamwork from everybody to put it together."

Dolphins owner Stephen Ross committed to relocating the tournament to Hard Rock Stadium after a dispute over expanding facilities at Crandon Park, where the event was held for more than 30 years, resulted in IMG searching for a new site.

"Steve wanted to make sure it didn't leave Miami," said Matt Ros-



**The 13,800-seat center court inside Hard Rock Stadium was nearing completion in mid-February for the March 18-31 event.**

setti, CEO of Rossetti, the Detroit architect designing the conversion. “They were looking for other cities outside Florida. He saved the tournament.”

#### **A NEW CONCERT VENUE**

Ross privately financed the \$60 million in upgrades tied to the tennis retrofit, which comes after the stadium itself underwent a multiyear, \$600 million renovation. The retrofit includes a 13,800-seat center court inside Hard Rock’s seating bowl and an impressive mix of premium seat options.

Outside the stadium there’s a combination of 30 compe-

tion and practice courts. Portable seating structures will be removed after the tournament, but the courts outside the stadium remain in place permanently.

The Dolphins don’t have specific plans in place for most of the courts after the tournament, with the exception of the 5,191-seat Grandstand Stadium, which can be converted into a small concert venue. The Dolphins own the court and can store it to make way for a live music production, Staley said.

The campus next to the stadium has multiple hospitality areas, extensive landscaping and fountains, “Spanish Steps” to get an elevated view of the action, plus a large



videoboard attached to the exterior south wall. Kiki on the Rooftop, a spin on Kiki on the River, a popular Greek restaurant in Miami; the Stella Artois-sponsored beer garden, a two-level space; and Bourbon Steak by Michael Mina (which has a year-round restaurant at Levi's Stadium) are among the open's food and drink destinations.

Kiki on the Rooftop sits on top of a food and retail building, next to the Spanish Steps. A nearby olive garden is equipped with strings of lights and picnic tables. Centerplate executive chef Dayanny De La Cruz, whose experience includes the U.S. Open tennis tournament in Flushing

Meadows, heads the Miami Open culinary program.

The goal was to create an experience on par with the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in California, like the Miami Open a member of the high-level ATP Tour Masters 1000. At Hard Rock Stadium, it was a challenge after the event moved from its lush surroundings in Key Biscayne.

"The Miami Open was my first sports project in 1991," Rossetti said. "You're in the middle of this beautiful park with mangroves all around. People attending the event were used to this unreal level of vegetation and landscape. So, here we are, going to the harshest, opposite end of the spectrum by putting it on a sea of asphalt. The challenge was how to do this within Steve's budget. There are nine Masters Series (tournaments) around the globe and all have spent four to five times what he spent."

Another challenge was maximizing space without taking up a huge chunk of real estate, considering the Miami Open takes up the some of the most expensive parking spaces closest to the stadium.

"It had to really resonate with the tennis crowd because that's where the true fans gather," Rossetti said. "We had to create a spectacular atmosphere, yet keep in mind revenue for other events. It has to be used flexibly for football and concerts."

#### **HOLDING COURT IN AN NFL STADIUM**

Taking a look inside the stadium's center court, the portable seats for tennis blend seamlessly into the existing structure. Thousands of new teal-colored seats match the color of permanent seats. Workers began removing the grass field on Dec. 30 in the wee hours after the Orange Bowl. On Feb. 5, officially Day 25 of the tennis build, about half the temporary seats were installed. The confetti scrim backdrop covering the upper deck along the north, east and west sides was not yet installed and the asphalt court itself was still a work in progress.

The Dolphins, through Rossetti, hired tennis consultant David LaSota to ensure the stadium and secondary courts conform with U.S. Tennis Association standards. Staley said the project team also had to contend with a complicated system for pouring asphalt and give it 30 days to cure before the court was painted.

"The playing surface has to duplicate the outside courts," said Scott Suprina, CEO of Seating Solutions, which builds temporary seating for the U.S. Open, among other high-profile events. "It was one of the most difficult things we had to do. If you're on different levels of compaction, you'll get a different play. The ball will bounce quicker and move faster. It's got to be consistent."

The premium seating is at a higher level than other tennis events, officials said, due in part to the stadium upgrades completed a few years ago. All the suites and clubs have undergone renovations and the high-end finishes lend themselves to an international audience attending the Miami Open.

In the seating bowl, the living room boxes, which created buzz when they were built for the 2015 season and became a model for other NFL teams to duplicate, sell for \$70,000 for the tournament, said Jeremy Walls, the Dolphins' senior vice president and chief marketing officer.

The living room boxes, situated along the south side and end zones, are cushy recliners that come with counter space. In another first for the event, the Dolphins will add more cushy chairs behind the baselines and on an elevated platform along the south sideline, Walls said.

"A lot of people like to sit there," he said. "There's a big appetite for premium in tennis."

The 19 existing suites available for the Miami Open, situated midlevel along the south side, run \$300,000 to \$500,000,



The Miami Open's cabana suites serve as the next generation of pop-up premium products in sports and entertainment.



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and have the best view for tennis, Walls said.

Food and drink is included in suite packages depending on the product.

The next generation of pop-up suites, which the Dolphins are marketing as cabana suites, is what really stands out for the event. A joint effort between Rossetti, Seating Solutions and Ferrante Manufacturing in Detroit takes the concept to a higher level, complete with canvas drapery and wood flooring, beams and cabinetry.

The 13 portable units, installed midlevel on the north side, accommodate 24 people and sell for \$150,000 to \$200,000, Walls said.

## 'SALES ARE GOING WELL'

The Dolphins converted the preview center for stadium renovations inside Gate G on the stadium's south side into a showroom to sell premium seats for the tournament. There's a model of the retrofit and a sizzle video taking potential buyers through the event's history and its future at Hard Rock Stadium. It's similar to the marketing programs NFL teams roll out when they're selling premium seats for new facilities. In addition, a mockup of the pop-up suite sits on a club level in the stadium.

"Sales are going well," Walls said. "The way the stadium was built, we can sell through (the inventory) and add more if we want to. We're substantially ahead of last year's sales. The number of all-session tickets they ended up with last year at the start of the tournament — we passed that months ago."

The Miami Open historically draws about 300,000 in attendance. A majority of those fans come from Florida, most from Greater Miami, though at Hard Rock Stadium ticket sales have shifted toward more buyers from nearby Palm Beach and Broward County. There remains a heavy international contingent, though, many coming from Latin America and Europe, Walls said.

After the tournament, crews have 10 days to get the stadium ready for another huge production, the Rolling Stones concert April 20. Next year, with the facility playing host to the Super Bowl, the window gets tighter for the pre-event conversion, Staley said.

Over the next 12 months, the Dolphins will invest \$3 million to build a gondola attraction for both the Super Bowl and Miami Open. The team is also building a \$100 million practice facility next to the stadium, designed by Rossetti, that's expected to open by February 2021.

It's all part of the Dolphins' effort to market Hard Rock Stadium and the overall property as a year-round destination. Ross' commitment and vision made it all possible, said Tom Garfinkel, the Dolphins' vice chairman, president and CEO.

"They have the luxury of having 375 acres of parking," Rossetti said. "You either build your facility within a context, such as Ford Field in an urban, walkable area, or you do what the Dolphins did in the suburbs, build context around you. They're going to have people coming there virtually every week of the year to different events and will generate maximum revenue from that campus." ▣

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