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# THE POWER & THE GLORY

WRESTLEMANIA  
BODY-SLAMMS ITS  
WAY TO THE TOP

# BIG

At 35, **WRESTLEMANIA** is a stadium-worthy spectacle and more, WWE's version of the Super Bowl

WrestleMania 34 drew 78,133 fans to the Mercedes-Benz Superdome last year.



# TIME

BY DON MURET

ON MARCH 31, 1985, Madison Square Garden played host to the first WrestleMania, drawing a sellout crowd of 19,121. More than a million viewers watched it on closed circuit at arenas and theaters, producing what at the time was one of the industry's highest-grossing pay-per-view events.

Muhammad Ali served as guest referee for the headline match, a tag-team bout pitting Hulk Hogan and Mr. T against Paul Orndorff and "Rowdy" Roddy Piper. (Hogan/Mr. T won with an assist from Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka). Pop singer Cyndi Lauper, immersed in the wrestling culture through her music videos with grizzled grappler Captain Lou Albano, was among the ring competitors. Liberace added sparkle in his appearance with Radio City's Rockettes.

It was just the beginning of something big in the business of live entertainment and the family show category. Fast forward to 2019 and WWE's WrestleMania brand has reached global proportions. This year, the 35th edition returns to its birthplace in the New York/New Jersey market and expects to draw 160,000 people from

40 countries attending multiple events. Over the past four decades, it's expanded from a single-night spectacle to a week filled with events tied to the annual celebration of all things pro wrestling.

WrestleMania 35, set for April 7, takes center stage at MetLife Stadium in New Jersey for the second time in six years. In addition, WWE flagship brands Smackdown, Monday Night Raw and NXT Takeover, the circuit's development league, are booked at Barclays Center. The Brooklyn arena also hosts WWE's Hall of Fame induction dinner and ceremonies. Elsewhere in the borough, Axxess 2019, WWE's fan festival, sets up at the Brooklyn Pier 12 Cruise Terminal. Several charitable events are scheduled throughout the week in the region with wrestlers making hospital visits, among other appearances connected to social causes in the community.

"WrestleMania is the place where once a year everything taking place in the WWE universe converges in spectacular fashion," said John Saboro, WWE's execu-

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 32**



Grand entrance: Charlotte Flair, WWE legend Ric Flair's daughter.

PREVIOUS PAGES COURTESY SMG; LEFT COURTESY WWE

**METLIFE STADIUM CONGRATULATES WWE  
ON THE 35<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF WRESTLEMANIA!**



**SUNDAY, APRIL 7  
METLIFE STADIUM**



# CONGRATULATIONS WWE ON THE 35TH ANNIVERSARY OF WRESTLEMANIA!

WE ARE HONORED TO HOST PART OF THIS YEAR'S CELEBRATION

**APRIL 5-9, 2019**

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A BSE Global Venue

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

The host committee added a new piece to WrestleMania 34 with Champions Square, the outdoor plaza next to the Superdome that can accommodate 9,000 people with a stage for live music. SMG and Centerplate, the dome's food vendor, offset some of their expenses by selling food and drink at Champions Square while fans listened to local bands perform before WrestleMania.

"We sold them on the 'pregame activation' and their sponsors got exposure out there," Freeman said. "WWE's perspective was ... you've got the French Quarter, that's all the activation you need. There's some truth to that, but these fans arrive very early. We had great weather that day and they got another taste of New Orleans in Champions Square."

#### INCENTIVES PAY OFF

For WrestleMania, every deal is different, stadium managers said. Because it has turned into a high-profile enterprise generating tens of millions of dollars in tourism spending, WWE seeks incentives and financial support from the host committees with marketing assistance and expense waivers, Collins said.

Essentially, WrestleMania is staged "rent-free," similar to the Super Bowl, Freeman said. Last year in New Orleans, the host facility covered all event-day staffing costs and generated revenue through concessions and facility fees tied to its Ticketmaster agreement. Bottom line, SMG was able to pay for all of its operating expenses and make a "decent return," he said.

"The return on the arena events was marginal, but the income made off the stadium event made the entire week worthwhile," Freeman said. "It's one of those events like a Final Four or Super Bowl. You want to be able to do it on a regular basis because it has such a great economic impact on the city."

Allen Johnson, chief venues officer in Orlando, provided a peek into WrestleMania food and beverage revenue. For the 2017 event, the per cap was \$24.87 from attendance of 75,245 at Camping World Stadium. Doing the math, Levy, the stadium's concessionaire, generated \$1.87 million in income. The average spend was a few dollars higher than three college bowl games and on par with a Metallica concert, four events held at the stadium in 2017.

"You make a lot of money on the back end and keep your merchandise stands open after the event," Johnson said. "They come early when the doors open; they don't wait until five minutes before the event starts. It's an eclectic crowd. There is some drinking of alcohol but not as much compared with a classic rock show. It's a pay-per-view event, so there are not many breaks."



Every stage production is unique to the market. At MetLife Stadium in 2013, a giant replica of the Statue of Liberty towered over the ring, taller than the stadium walls, Mayne said. The walkway where wrestlers were introduced and paraded to the ring had replicas of the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge with a graphic treatment of downtown New York City.

The extravagant sets prompt a big chunk of WrestleMania ticket holders to come into the building early to see WWE's newest creation. It's "their Super Bowl" and they're excited to see how the event is going to be presented, said Paul Turner, the Dallas Cowboys' senior director of event operations.

For those attending WrestleMania 32 at the Cowboys' AT&T Stadium, the facility itself was a must-see attraction. Many patrons had not been inside and seen its signature center-hung videoboard since the venue opened seven years earlier as the next generation of NFL facilities. The early rush led to an operational adjustment on the fly, Turner said.

AT&T Stadium officials were prepared to apply wristbands to the 14,000 people with floor seats as a crowd control measure, and wristband stations were set up both inside and outside the venue. But so many individuals bypassed the process on the fan plaza as they made a beeline for the stadium doors that it resulted in congestion as fans lined up at wristband stations on the main concourse. Officials saw what was happening and stopped putting wristbands on those with floor tickets.

"They all wanted to see the building," Turner said. "We

**Seth Rollins catches some air during WrestleMania 34 last year.**



## HOW A 'NO' IN NOLA BECAME A BIG 'YES'

**THE STORY BEHIND** WrestleMania coming to the Mercedes-Benz Superdome starts at “no,” which is what the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation said after WWE contacted the group about bidding for the 2014 edition.

The foundation felt the wrestle-fest didn't fit its mission statement for bringing sports events to town, said Alan Freeman, SMG's general manager for the Superdome and Smoothie King Center, the NBA arena across the street.

The foundation did, however, put WWE in contact with Freeman, who put a host committee together and spearheaded the bid. It was successful in landing the event, WrestleMania 30, which grossed \$11 million in ticket sales with attendance of more than 75,000 at the Superdome.

“Our sports foundation didn't really understand and know much about it at the time,” said Doug Thornton, SMG executive vice president. “We had to sell them on the idea, and it was Alan who led the charge in putting that deal together.”

“Alan has a strong relationship with WWE, in particular John Saboor. Alan knew the strength of this event and felt because New Orleans was a strong destination and WrestleMania attracts people from all over the world, that it would be a popular location.”

WrestleMania 30 was such a huge success in New Orleans that WWE asked the city for a quick turnaround to submit a proposal for the 2018 event, which it won. Those numbers were even higher: WrestleMania 34 grossed \$14 million in ticket sales, and the attendance of 78,133 ranks sixth highest in event history. Enigma Research showed 77 percent of attendees came from outside the New Orleans region. —Don Muret

called that audible and it worked out great. There were no shenanigans. It was an example of one of those things where you prepare for the event, do your research and get ready to go and the situation may be a little bit different. You make those adjustments and do what's right for the fans.”

### FANS COME FROM EVERYWHERE

Underneath their menacing costumes, WrestleMania fans are some of the most well-behaved patrons in sports and entertainment, said Jim Mercurio, vice president of stadium operations and general manager for Levi's Stadium, host of WrestleMania 31.

They're certainly engaged — and some go as far as getting married: In Orlando, one couple tied the knot under a massive replica of a WWE championship belt on display at Lake Eola in the city's downtown district, Johnson said.

“They're really passionate and they've got their favorites, cheering for certain wrestlers and booing others,” Mayne said. “They're part of the entertainment, frankly.”

And they come from all over the world. WWE research shows that up to 20 percent of the total WrestleMania crowd is international, said Ron VanDeVeen, MetLife Stadium's president and CEO. The demographics have changed dramatically since VanDeVeen, as a college student, watched WrestleMania 2 on closed-cir-

cuit TV at the Springfield (Mass.) Civic Center.

“When they first told me that, I didn't believe it,” VanDeVeen said. “But I remember going down to Miami (for WrestleMania 28) and every single person I talked to was from another country ... England, Australia, China, Italy. It was unbelievable. These are really new dollars coming into the market. We learned that in Miami and saw it firsthand. That's when we really fell in love with it.”

The big question is whether the event could be headed overseas considering its large international fan base. The WWE Network, where WrestleMania is broadcast as pay-per-view, now extends to 180 countries, and major events have been held in Saudi Arabia, China and Australia, as well as SummerSlam 1992 at Wembley Stadium in London. To this point, no decisions have been made regarding potentially expanding WrestleMania abroad, Saboor said.

“We'll continue to discuss our long-term international strategies,” he said. “I wouldn't be surprised.”