

60 YEARS OF TOLEDO SPORTS ARENA 1947-2007

QUIRKY TIMES AT THE ARENA

Dr. Graham versus the bear ... and more

Originally published in *The Blade* on Sunday, July 22, 2007

BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

There will be many things to miss about the Toledo Sports Arena: The big-name rock concerts. The intense hockey games.

And, for Joe Prephan, the mud wrestling.

Years ago, a young Prephan and a friend took on a team of mud-wrestling women called the Chicago Knockers.

"We were a little inebriated that Friday night so they pretty much whooped on us, and that was kind of embarrassing," he said. "But not so much as Sunday."

On Sunday, Prephan, who was the arena's concessions manager at the time and later became director of operations, went a step further.

"The girls, eventually after an hour or so, talked me into also putting on a pink one-piece woman's bathing suit," the 48-year-old from West Toledo said. "At the end of the second round, [one] woman lifts me over her head, or actually kind of onto her shoulders, does an airplane spin with me — and I'm probably 220 [pounds] at this time — and throws me down into the mud."

You never knew what you were going to get when you stepped into the Sports Arena. Many people fondly recall the ice shows and the circuses that took place there over the years, but other events definitely were on the quirkiest side of things.

Former general manager Andy Mulligan once said, "Everything has been held here except a national convention of hoboes."

There was the 1949 Aqua Parade, for which the arena was filled with a gigantic swimming pool, and the annual piano festival, billed as the greatest gathering of organs and pianos, with hundreds of students sitting down simultaneously for mass recitals.

Once, a famous cowboy showed up so drunk he couldn't get on a horse for a Wild West show. He had to be tied on and led around the arena one time, thereby bringing his performance to a close.

Then there were the male revue acts. Gary Wyse, the arena's general manager for the last 22 years, remembers two that took place there in the late '80s. One involving the famous Chippendales drew a crowd of 1,500, he said.

"The female attendees had a lot of fun," he said, adding that they weren't the only ones. "The off-duty police who were working the event got a lot of phone numbers that night."

True to its name, the Sports Arena played host to all kinds of athletics, not just the hockey with which it became synonymous. There was lacrosse, roller derbies, ice skating, boxing, wrestling, Toughman contests, and more.

The Toledo Pride, a professional indoor soccer team, took up residence there in the '80s, and before that there was the Toledo Jeeps of the National Basketball League in the late '40s.

It wasn't always easy to transition between sports. At the time of the Jeeps' first game, the arena had no



Dr. Jerry Graham during his wrestling days.

experience in removing ice from the floor so that a basketball court could be put down. After hours of pounding away at the ice with sledges to try and break it up for removal, the game ultimately had to be postponed until the ice melted.

When the Coors Light Motor Spectacular came to town in 1987, it required 100 dump truck loads of dirt and 10,000 gallons of water to be mixed in a 100-foot-long pit so that vehicles with names like “Time Traveler” could run through a mud course.



Jerry Jaffe, who used to wrestle professionally under the name of Dr. Jerry Graham, once battled a bear at the arena. (THE BLADE/ANDY MORRISON)

The American Bowling Congress tournament was held at the Sports Arena in 1960, requiring the facility to install 36 lanes. There were some necessary decorative touches too, which cost \$10,000.

“We’ve even brought in color experts to make sure everything matches, right down to the softest combinations for the bowlers’ eyes,” Jay Batchelor, tournament manager, explained at the time.

And, of course, there was the time they brought in a 700-pound bear for a wrestling match.

Jerry Jaffe, 60, a former professional wrestler who lives in Sylvania, vividly remembers meeting his opponent that day: a Coke-guzzling black bear with no wrestling training. He walked around with the bear on a leash before the match to get to know him.

“They did have a muzzle on, but they didn’t have anything on his claws,” Jaffe said.

The match lasted maybe five minutes and left Jaffe with a host of scratches. He’d go behind the bear, which would reach back and throw the wrestler over its shoulder.

“I think that he just rolled on me and the referee declared him the winner,” he said. “He was the winner, I’ll concede that.”

Jaffe, who was in his mid-20s at the time, later gained fame as Dr. Jerry Graham, the wrestler who boasted of having four PhDs, eight master’s degrees, 16 bachelor degrees, and 19 associate degrees. But how smart was he at this point in his career?

“Two nights later in Detroit, I wrestled him again.”

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)