

Vancouver's LEGACY of Recreation Facilities

by Vince Kreiser

During the last century Vancouver has been blessed with many excellent recreation facilities. People from all over the province have had the chance to use these facilities as participants or spectators. This article will take a look at six of these facilities and try to capture briefly, the spirit of each one.

- Exhibition Park Horse Racing Track
- Denman Arena
- Orpheum Theatre
- Nat Bailey Stadium
- Empire Pool, and
- The Pacific Coliseum

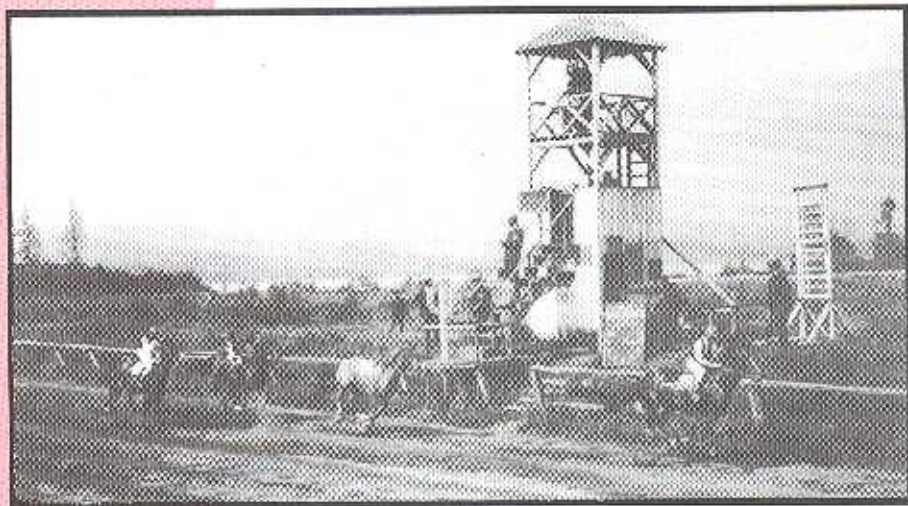
Exhibition Park

Horse racing at Exhibition Park has been around since the 1890's. To get to the track in the early days you had a choice of taking a boat to what is now New Brighton Park, or going by street car before walking through a heavy forest. A convenient 'watering hole' along the walk however, took some of the pain away for the racing fans.

Other race tracks such as Brighthouse Park on Lulu Island built in 1911, and Lansdowne Park (site of today's shopping centre) in Richmond, which was opened in 1921 had much better racing surfaces, but people had difficulty getting to them. Exhibition Park, with its shifting foundations, and cramped quarters, attracted the crowds and eventually took over as 'the' track at which to be. In 1960 Lansdowne Park was closed and its racing dates were merged with those at Exhibition Park.

Improvements to the park have continued over the years. A new grandstand was built in 1965, and lights for the track were installed in 1968. A further extension to the grandstand was made in 1976.

Questions about future expansions to Exhibition Park remain unanswered. Do they expand the existing track to one mile, or move everything to a location like Colony Farms in Coquitlam? The answer to this particular riddle as well as the future of the entire PNE grounds may still be a few years away.



Horse Racing in the early days of Hastings (now Exhibition) Park. Note the one horse without a rider. Photo, Vancouver Public Library.

Denman Arena

The Denman Arena, built by Lester and Frank Patrick, opened for business in 1911. It is hard to imagine, driving by the site at Denman and Georgia Streets in Vancouver today, that a 10,500 seat arena once stood there. By its seating capacity it was the biggest building of its kind until the Montreal Forum was built in 1926.

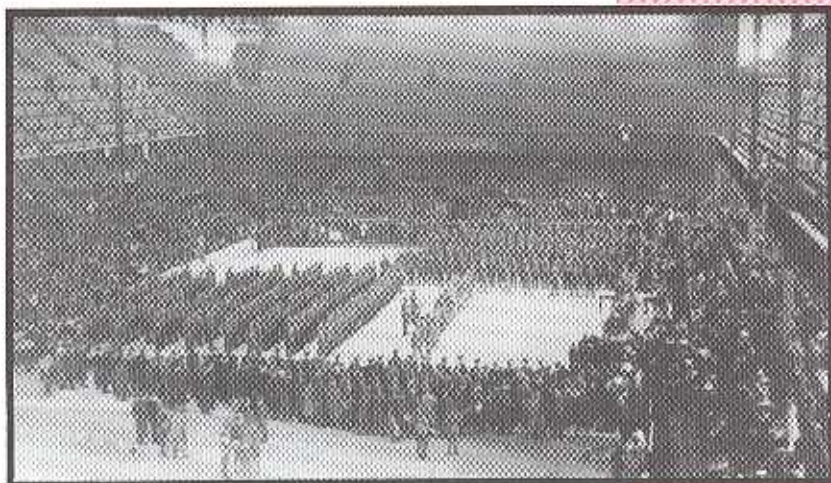
During its nearly 25 years of service, the Arena played host to a wide variety of events. These included boxing, wrestling, curling, bike racing, lacrosse, tennis and many stars from show business. There was even a swimming pool in the basement.

None of the events, however, were as famous as the ice hockey games played there. The first professional game ever played in the Arena was on January 5, 1912 and was a contest between the Vancouver Millionaires and the New Westminster Royals. (Vancouver won 8-3!)

During the 1914-15 season Vancouver beat the Ottawa Senators in the final of the Stanley Cup. It was the era of Fred (Cyclone) Taylor and even then, hockey fans were warned to be on the lookout for ticket scalpers. This concern was unfounded, however, as crowd sizes did not meet the high expectations.

The end for the wood and brick arena came short-

An inside look at the Arena with a military parade underway. Vancouver City Archives, photo.



ly after 3:00 am on August 20, 1936. Three hours after a large crowd had watched a boxing card, flames of unknown origin destroyed the building. Newspapers of the day featured photos and reports of the spectacular fire which threatened the downtown waterfront. Although discussion took place on the subject, the facility was never re-built.

Empire Pool

This open-air swimming pool was completed in 1954 to provide for the swimming and diving events of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games. The six lane facility which is 165 feet long and 50 feet wide was a gift from the British Empire and Commonwealth Games Canada (1954) Society.

Bleachers were installed to seat approximately 7,000 spectators. After the games were over 3,000 of these seats were moved to the old U.B.C. Stadium, and the remainder dispersed to different locations around the campus. A diving tower which accommodates 5 and 10 meter events was installed for the games and is still in use today.

In September of 1978 a new indoor aquatic facility was added to the existing pool. Funding for the project came from the Alma Mater Society, the Board of Governors, the Federal and Provincial Governments, U.B.C. Alumni Association, Foundations, as

Empire Pool as it looked for the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in 1954. Photo, B.C. Sports Hall of Fame and Museum.



well as donations from faculty and staff on campus and the citizens of B.C. In 1984-85 a \$1 million renovation of the complex took place to bring it up to the fine standard we see today.

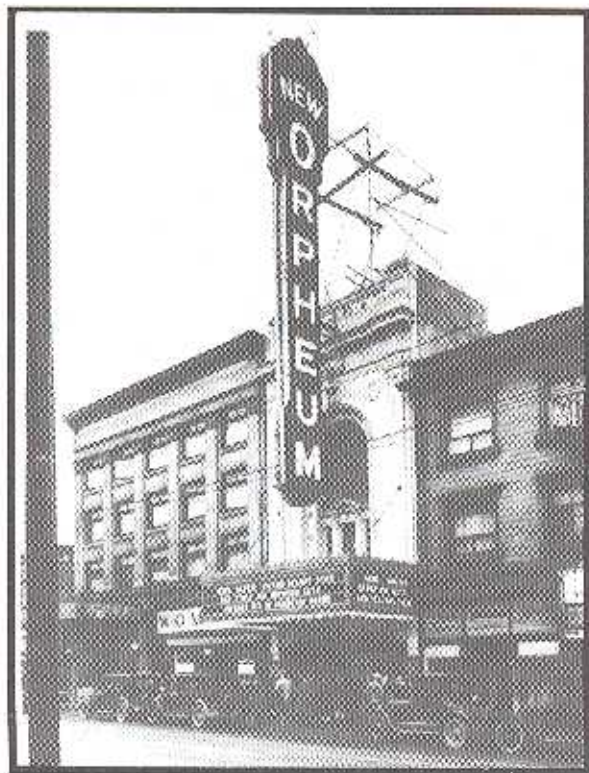
Other facilities used for the 1954 games were: Empire Stadium - track and field, Vedder Canal near Chilliwack - rowing, Empire Oval in China Creek Park - cycling, PNE Forum - boxing, PNE Gardens - weight lifting, Kerrisdale Arena - wrestling, Lord Byng High School - fencing, West Point Grey Club and New Westminster Club - bowling. Athletes' Village was on the U.B.C. Campus.

Orpheum Theatre

The Orpheum Theatre opened in November of 1927 as a home for vaudeville and movies. It is difficult to describe the interior of the theatre in this short space, but a quick tour by readers themselves will reveal beautiful, ornate surroundings.

Over the years millions of visitors have been entertained by movies and live performances. Ballet, opera, drama, music, along with stars of stage, screen and radio have graced the Orpheum's stage. Ivan Ackery, probably the facility's most popular manager, had a flair for marketing the various events booked there. From ensuring the movie usherettes' uniforms were smart and correct, to parking a car in his lobby to promote the movie "Plymouth Adventure", to parading a cow down Granville street complete with billboards, he knew what it took to bring the crowds in.

In 1973 the Orpheum was almost lost. The owner, Famous Players Canada Limited wanted to gut the interior and convert it to six mini-theatres. Public response to this move was swift, and they demanded that the building be saved. The owner offered to sell the Orpheum to the city, and the Council, under the leadership of Mayor Art Phillips, completed the deal.



The Orpheum Theatre as it looked shortly after opening in November of 1927. Photo, Vancouver Public Library.

Capilano Stadium (now Nat Bailey) home for opening game of Pacific Coast League April 27, 1956. Photo, B.C. Sports Hall of Fame & Museum.

After much fundraising work, renovations to the theatre began in 1975. Italian-trained craftsmen were brought in to match and repair the existing decor. The original decorator for the Orpheum, 81 year old Tony Heinsbergen was hired to paint a mural for the dome. The 2,794 seats were re-upholstered and new carpet was laid. Some controversy was stirred however during these and other renovations as original sight lines, accents and trims were lost in the process.

In the summer of 1983 an extension was made to the foyer on Smithe Street. This has been a welcome addition as more room is available to patrons of groups such as the Vancouver symphony.

The Orpheum is currently under the management of Vancouver Civic Theatres, and will hopefully continue to serve future generations of this community in its concert hall capacity.

Nat Bailey Stadium

In 1946 the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Sick's Capilano Brewing Company initially agreed that Riley Park would be used by the company to construct a baseball stadium. Deciding that this park was too small, the company instead chose to buy property immediately west of Riley Park from the C.P.R. After purchasing the land, they turned it over to the Board and leased the site back for stadium purposes.

The stadium was built in 1951 to house the Vancouver Capilanos of the now defunct Western International League. Originally named Capilano

Stadium, it had 9,200 seats and was modelled after the larger Sick's Stadium in Seattle.

In 1956 Nat Bailey (of White Spot Restaurants' fame) bought the Triple A Oakland Oaks and moved them to Vancouver. Renamed the Vancouver Mounties, they played in the Pacific Coast League until 1962. Re-born again in 1965, they continued to play until 1969 when they folded for good.

The stadium sat unused for a number of years. The wooden bleachers which lined both sides of the field rotted, and had to be torn down. This is rather ironic as only a couple of years ago the current team fought unsuccessfully to add seats to the stadium.

The Vancouver Canadians ball club was established in 1978. This was the same year that the stadium was re-named to honour Nat Bailey. The Canadians have since been a hit with Vancouver baseball fans. Anyone who has watched a game at the stadium on a long summer's evening knows how relaxing it really is (who cares what the score is!). Talk of major league baseball expansion is around us, but I think Canadians' games at Nat Bailey will be here for a few more years yet.



Pacific Coliseum

Construction of this six million dollar facility began in 1966. With funding secured from the Federal, Provincial and Civic Governments the Pacific National Exhibition completed plans to build this major sports' arena at Exhibition Park.

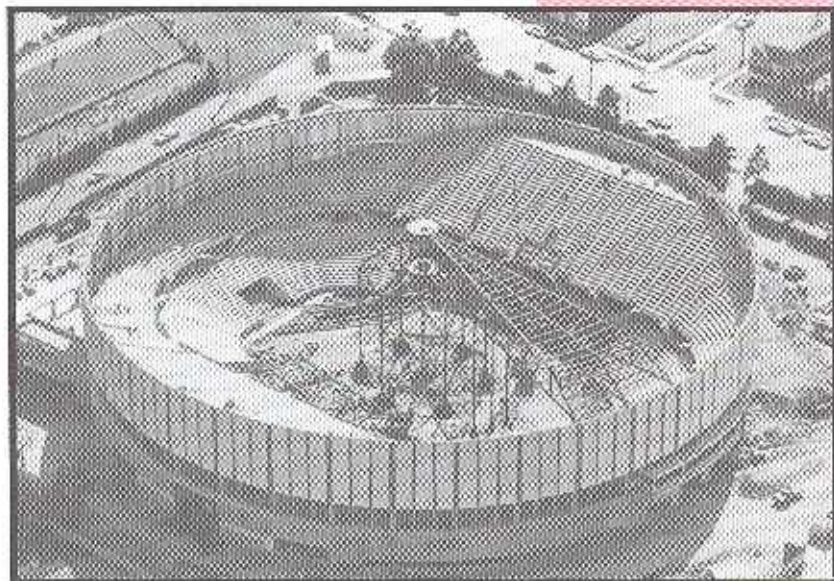
A brochure printed for the opening of the Coliseum listed some interesting construction facts: 75,000 tons of earth had been excavated, 12,000 cubic yards of concrete and 1,500 tons of reinforcing steel had been used. Almost ten miles of pipe had been laid for ice-making purposes, and there is enough electrical power on site to service 350 homes. By September of 1967 the 1,200 ton steel girded roof had been completed.

The January 8, 1968 opening of the Coliseum was marked by an Oldtimers' hockey game featuring former N.H.L. greats. The Vancouver Canucks started

their first N.H.L. season in the fall of 1970 with players such as Orland Kurtenbach, Barry Wilkins, Charlie Hodge, Andre Boudrais, and even today's Canucks' General Manager, Pat Quinn.

Vancouver and B.C. were turned on by "White Towel Power" in 1982 as the Canucks went to the Stanley Cup final. They were hailed as heroes even though they lost the final in four straight to the New York Islanders.

The roof going on during the construction of the Pacific Coliseum. Vancouver City Archives, photo.



The 15,758 seat Coliseum has played host to varied other events — from the La Scala Opera, Hulk Hogan and indoor track and field meets, to Phil Collins and the Rolling Stones, the Coliseum has proven to be a versatile and able entertainment centre.

Talk lately has centered on the Vancouver Canucks wanting to move out and build their own arena. As the former Assistant Manager of the Coliseum, I feel this facility has many more years of service left. Perhaps with some renovations (sky boxes, restaurants, additional seating, etc) and a re-negotiated contract with the PNE, the Canucks will remain in their one and only home.

Acknowledgements

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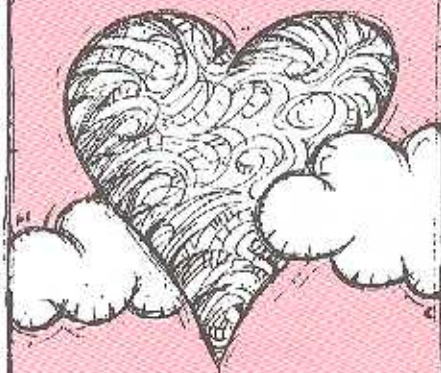
Denny Boyd (Vancouver Sun), Archie McDonald (Vancouver Sun), Clancy Loranger (Vancouver Province - retired), Norm Jewison (Vancouver Canucks), Dick Phillips (Vancouver Canadians), Marvin Entz (Orpheum Theatre Heritage), Pat Armstrong and the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame and Museum, Victoria Blinkhorn and the Vancouver City Archives, The Vancouver Public Library Historical Photos Section, and Jim Bremner, Jack Pomfret, Bob Osborne, and Bus Phillips (Empire Pool Information).

For those interested in further information, footnotes and bibliography available upon request. Phone 324-5276. ▼



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