“(The Superdome’s) part of me, it’s part of New Orleans and it’s part of Louisiana.”

BRIAN BROCATO, Dome’s director of operations and engineering

As its birthday arrives, the Dome can look back on many challenges overcome

BY TED LEWIS | tlewis@theadvocate.com

As the story goes, then-Gov. John McKeithen was uncharacteristically silent while he was considering businessman and sports visionary Dave Dixon’s proposal for a domed stadium in New Orleans. Then suddenly, McKeithen brought his fist down on his desk and thundered, “My God. That would be the greatest building in the history of mankind!” “We’ll build that sucker!” And so they did, although it would take a decade for the dream to come to fruition. Monday marks the 40th anniversary of the day in 1975 when the Superdome opened its doors, greeting the public attending an open house with message boards flashing “Welcome to the Future.” And to this day, the facility continues to evoke responses like McKeithen’s, even from someone who probably knows the place inside and out better than anyone else.

> See SUPERDOME, page 6A

TIMELINE: The New Orleans Superdome played host to myriad high-profile events through the years. 6A

MONDAY: The Dome will be a Louisiana landmark for decades to come. sports

TOP: The center crown of the stadium is under construction as Louisiana’s $129.5 million, 72,000-seat Superdome takes shape in New Orleans in November 1972.

Associated Press file photos
Pete Maravich of the New Orleans Jazz tries to get off a shot before the Saints lose to the Bengals 27-3 in the first college football game played in the Superdome.

Jazz, tries to get off a shot before the Saints lose to the Bengals 27-3 in the first college football game played in the Superdome.

Walter Violette/Advocate


SUGAR BOWL TIMELINE

1977: Saints lose to the Miss. Rebels 7-21 in the first game played in the Superdome.

1978: Saints lose to the Bengals 21-20 in the first regular-season NFL game played in the Superdome.


1977: Saints lose to Minnesota 28-21 in the first game played in the Superdome.

1980: Dome's director of operations, Mike Ditka, is carried off the field by Steve McMichael. left, and preservationists fight tooth and nail to retain the architecture that looks like the Superdome.

1983: Houston Astros and Minnesota Twins play first major league baseball game in the Superdome.

1985: Pete Maravich sets an American basketball record for most points scored in a game, a 13-7 loss to Houston.

1989: Frank Sinatra headlines Farm. JAN.

1990: Pete Maravich sets an American basketball record for most points scored in a game, a 13-7 loss to Houston.


1972: Saints lose to Minnesota 28-21 in the first game played in the Superdome.

1983: Houston Astros and Minnesota Twins play first major league baseball game in the Superdome.

1995: Pete Maravich sets an American basketball record for most points scored in a game, a 13-7 loss to Houston.

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In the 1960s, Poydras was a two-lane street lined by railroad tracks and warehouses in the area where the stadium later was built and by aging, nondescript storefronts closer to the Mississippi River.

Today, Poydras has equaled or surpassed Canal Street as the city's major commercial thoroughfare.

Imagine, then, if the original plans for the stadium had been carried out — a no-frills, 50,000-seat facility located either near the lakefront or in then-underdeveloped New Orleans East.

Or if Memphis, Birmingham, Nashville or Jacksonville — all cities in pursuit of NFL teams in the 1960s along with New Orleans — had built a Superdome-like stadium first?

Atlanta eventually got a domed stadium, but 20 years after New Orleans, and it took landing the 1996 Olympics to make that happen.

The Astrodome was made insignificant by the larger Superdome, and Houston didn't get a replacement for it until Reliant Stadium (now NRG Stadium) opened in 2002.

How different would the history of sports in America be without the Superdome?

How different would the history of New Orleans be?

"People love to come to New Orleans," Muniz said. "And the Superdome gave a lot of them reasons to do that.

"You can't give enough credit to Dixon, Gov. McKeithen, Buster Curtis and Arthur Davis (the stadium's architects) for their vision."

That vision included making the facility large enough and flexible enough that features that couldn't have been conceived of four decades ago — such as the bunker suites — became possible by converting areas designed for storage.

"We never felt like anything was impossible," said Danny Vincens, the Dome's operations and engineering director from its opening until 2008.

"When we had the premiere of 'The Hunchback of Notre Dame,' we found a way to hang 125,000 pounds from the roof.

"When we had the Republican convention, we had to deal with several networks instead of one. But we managed to make reality out of everybody's dream."

Maybe that's why 20 years ago, author Steve Blickstein wrote of the Superdome, "It is more than merely another stadium. It is the most usable 'people place' in the history of mankind."

"While that may be hyperbole of McKeithen-esque proportions, Blickstein was on target when he added, "The Superdome's flexibility has enabled it to become a home to the nation's biggest sports and entertainment spectacles while maintaining a schedule of day-to-day events."

And now, even though the smaller Smoothie King Center — in reality, the Superdome's annex — hosts events once held in the big room, the Morial Convention Center hosts the big conventions, Tulane has moved its football games to an on-campus stadium and regular-season high school games are a rarity, the Superdome still is in use 80 to 100 days a year.

"It's really the living room of New Orleans," said Doug Thornton, vice president of SMG, the Superdome's management company. "That's why we're so comfortable with it. We all have memories of something that happened there."

Especially the rebuilding and reopening.

"I reflect back all the time about what a miracle it was," Thornton said. "To think that the roof was destroyed, that we knew the storm was coming and then it rained on us hard."

Worse than Katrina?

"It wasn't so over-the-top after all. It wasn't so over-the-top after all."

"At least with Katrina, we knew the storm was coming and that we might have trouble. (The loss of lights) happened in the blink of an eye, but I am proud of the way we reacted and got the game back underway."

And so, no matter what the challenge — real or fictional — the Superdome has endured.

Ben Levy, the stadium's first executive director, would tell the story of how, during construction, when sunlight would come through the girders, he once looked to the heavens and shouted, "Go ahead, world! Top this!"

It hasn't happened yet.

Just maybe Gov. McKeithen wasn't so over-the-top after all.

The Mercedes-Benz Superdome is lit up in purple lights in honor of Essence Festival headliner Prince in New Orleans on July 3, 2014.

The Superdome also was the site of the start of construction by five years, to 1971, and cost overruns plus construction delays pushed the opening back a year.

Early problems with the quality of security, concessions and other services were a turnoff for visitors.

But the ill-prepared local, politically connected outfits were replaced with a first-of-its-kind private management system that is now the industry norm.

The Superdome also was the first stadium with midlevel suites. (The Astrodome's skyboxes were just that — glorified cubicles at the top of the stadium.)

It was also the first with TV replay projection (the gondola) as well as the first with special meeting room spaces (the quadrants).

The 5,000-vehicle parking garage (plus an additional 2,000 spaces in the new Orleans Center garage) meant that surface space, a rare commodity in the heart of a city, was saved.

That, in turn, meant the Smoothie King Center, which opened in 1998 as the New Orleans Arena, could be built next door to the Dome, giving the city a valuable synergy between its two major sports facilities.

The Mercedes-Benz Superdome (which it was renamed late in 2011) and the Smoothie King Center share personnel, portable equipment and even the same air-conditioning system, at a savings of several million dollars a year.

There have been less-serious challenges: the unfounded fear that seagulls would eat the polyurethane roof, a cinematic attack by killer bees ("The Savages Bees," the "Sharknado" of insect movies) and the real-life lights going out early in the second half of Super Bowl XLVII.

"It was a nightmare then, and