

Sports set for a rebirth in Atlantic City

NICHOLAS HUBA Staff Writer

ATLANTIC CITY — For the last five years, sporting events in the resort have been an afterthought, but that all appears to be changing.

Since the start of the year Casino Reinvestment Development Authority announced several sporting events for Boardwalk Hall including the Ultimate Fighting Championship, the Professional Bull Riders tour, Division I men's college basketball and a Bear Grylls survival challenge.

The events join the Red Bull RallyCross, the Atlantic City Triathlon, and a long-drive competition on the growing list of sporting events that will soon be part of the resort's calendar.

While the city's financial meltdown has been well-documented, the loss of its sporting identities is less well-known. But just as surely as some casinos were forced to close, so too did some of the city's sporting culture. Boxing, which once was a huge part of the city's fabric, has become virtually nonexistent, although Saturday nights fight card at the Showboat Atlantic City signals a slight rebound.

Following the loss of the Atlantic 10 Basketball tournament in 2012, sports events in the city all but vanished. But now as the city appears to be turning the corner, sporting events are returning to the resort as it looks to diversify its non-casino related entertainment offerings.

"It's been a void," said Jeff Vasser, former president of the convention and visitors authority in the city from 2002 through 2013. "It's very important for a variety of reasons, including its good branding for the city. It drives hotel rooms in the city."

The list of sporting events in the resort could continue to grow as Boardwalk Hall is one of four finalists to host the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference, or MAAC, men's and women's basketball tournaments starting in 2020. The other finalists are the Webster Bank Arena in Bridgeport, Connecticut; the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island, New York; and the Times Union Center in Albany, New York.

Rich Ensor, commissioner of the MAAC, said a decision on the future of the tournament will be made on June 1. For the last two decades, the tournament has been held at The Times Union Center

The tournament could bring more than \$3.7 million in customer spending to the resort, according to a report issued by the conference this year.

"We have a history of trying to move it around," Ensor said. "When I visited Boardwalk Hall during the A-10 Tournament, I was really impressed. Everything fit what we are looking for and it's easy to get to."

The MAAC consists of 11 schools — Monmouth, Rider and Saint Peter's University in New Jersey; Siena, Iona College, Niagara University, Manhattan College, Canisius College and Marist College in New York; Fairfield University and Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

For the last couple of years, the only signs of sports in the resort has been the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association individual high school wrestling tournament has been held at Boardwalk Hall during the first weekend of March.

"It was a different era before," Vasser said of the lack of sporting events over the last five years. "Now I think casinos are more interested in non-gaming events. It's a different era. It's a different world."

College basketball is the perfect sporting event for the resort, Vasser said.

"The reason was it all happened during the off season," Vasser said. "It fits our profile, and during the A-10 tournament the event went from Tuesday to Saturday, so it was during an off time and most of the people left on Saturday after the final."

In addition to the college basketball, boxing, once a staple of the city's sporting scene, and mixed martial arts are returning to the resort.

"I'm very optimistic about the future of those sports in Atlantic City," New Jersey Athletic Control Board Commissioner Larry Hazzard said recently. "It's great news to hear those two properties are reopening. I'm hoping this will convince some boxing and MMA promoters to come back to town."

Ultimate Fighting Championship's Fight Night will return to Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall on April 21, under the terms of an agreement with IMG.

UFC Fight Night will be nationally televised on Fox Sports 1. The bouts will be announced at a later date. Tickets will go on sale Friday, March 2.

This marks the first UFC event at Boardwalk Hall since June of 2005 (UFC 53: Heavy Hitters) and the first in Atlantic City since July 2014 (UFC Fight Night: Cerrone vs. Miller at the former Revel.)

"UFC is a global powerhouse, and we proudly welcome them to Historic Boardwalk Hall for one of their limited number of events this year worldwide," CRDA Chairman Bob Mulcahy said in the statement. "This marks the fourth blue-chip event in our 2018 alliance with IMG, which is building steam and impact throughout Atlantic City's tourism, event and sports sector."

Chris Howard, Executive Director of the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority, said the agency has been focusing on off season events, rather than summer events.

"There are a lot of people in town during the summer," Howard said. "We need to be filling those rooms during the offseason and make an impact."