

LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

Ice Ice Baby

The World Figure Skating Championship Takes Over Downtown

By Ryan Vaillancourt
March 20, 2009



Bob Dunlop, director of events for U.S. Figure Skating, at a 200-foot-long practice rink temporarily installed in the Convention Center. The World Figure Skating Championship, which runs through March 29 at Staples Center, is estimated to be worth \$25 million to the local economy. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - What's freezing cold, prone to spandex and worth an estimated \$25 million to local businesses? It's the

International Skating Union World Figure Skating Championship, which takes place

throughout this week at Staples Center.

Only the Winter Olympics are considered a more important stage in the sport, and the World Championship takes on added significance this year as it will function as a qualifier for the 2010 winter games in Vancouver. During the competition that culminates on March 29, more than 225 skaters from 52 countries will converge on Downtown Los Angeles.

"The Olympics is always the pinnacle, but the World Championship is the biggest show in the world of figure skating in years when the Olympics are not happening," said Bob Dunlop, director of events for U.S. Figure

Skating, which is organizing the competition. "It signifies the best of the best for that particular year, and it's the same athletes that will compete against each other in the Olympics."

For Staples Center and L.A. Live owner Anschutz Entertainment Group, hosting the contest is somewhat of a coup, since the 99-year-old event has never come to Los Angeles. It jumps continents every year and lands in the U.S. about every six years, most recently in Washington, D.C., in 2003. This will mark only the second time the event has touched down in California; in 1992, Oakland played host.

The table was partially set for the event to come to Staples Center when

the venue hosted the U.S. National Championship in 2002, which showed the skating community that the city and venue are a good fit for such an event, said David Simon, president of the Los Angeles Sports Council, which coordinated the 2002 competition.

Ironically, perhaps the most important step in bringing the Worlds to Los Angeles was AEG's failed attempt to host the 2008 event at its O2 arena in London. Lee Zeidman, general manager of Staples Center and L.A. Live, said that although the International Skating Union instead awarded the competition to Gottenburg, Sweden, AEG used the opportunity to build the relationships necessary to be successful in this bid.

"When you talk about these kind of international competitions or events that have an impact not only nationally but worldwide, it's always been a goal of ours to attract these high-profile events," said Zeidman, who grouped the figure skating competition with other high-profile events

at Staples Center such as the Grammys and the 2000 Democratic National Convention.

When attendance, international audience and economic impact to Downtown and Los Angeles are taken into account, however, the figure skating Worlds may be more significant than the Grammys or the DNC. AEG estimates that, over the course of the event, which begins March 24, sponsorship deals, ticket and vendor sales and hotel room stays will provide an estimated \$25 million shot in the arm to the local economy.

"From the facility standpoint, we believe there's going to be a tremendous amount of upswing for merchandise, food and beverage, and we think it's going to be a tremendous boost for our tenants at L.A. Live," Zeidman said.

Olympic Preview

The annual World Figure Skating Championship brings in individuals, pairs and dance teams from around the globe. In addition to the skaters,

who include top athletes like Americans Evan Lysacek and Rachel Flatt, Mao Asada of Japan and Brian Joubert of France, approximately 800 media representatives will be on hand.

Because it is the year before the Olympics, the event will likely offer a preview to the top competitors in the Vancouver games, Dunlop said. But the Worlds is perhaps less important for individuals and more crucial on a team level, because a nation's overall performance determines how many athletes it can send to the Olympics, he said.

The event is so big that it actually exceeds Staples Center's capabilities: Organizers have worked with the adjacent Los Angeles Convention Center, where a regulation-sized practice rink was built so skaters can fine-tune their axels, salchows and lutzes before performing for the judges. It will be dismantled after the competition.

The 200-foot-long, 85-foot-wide temporary rink uses 28 miles of

tubing to circulate 3,000 gallons of coolant and is supported by a 300-ton chilling unit. It's quite the operation, but from AEG's perspective, bringing in practice ice was easy. Scheduling six consecutive days of figure skating during the latter half of the NBA and NHL seasons for the Lakers, Clippers and Kings was the hard part, Zeidman said.

With the level of competition as high as it gets in figure skating, the Worlds is also a major spectator event. Staples Center, which has a normal capacity of about 20,000, but will be pared down to 14,000 seats for the event to fit in extra media and "kiss and cry" areas, expects to sell out some of its 10 ticketed sessions, Zeidman said. Highlights include the Men's Short Program finals on March 25 and the Ladies Short Program finals on March 27. On March 29, there will be an all-day exhibition.

"Do I think we'll completely sell out?" Zeidman asked. "No, but do I think we'll sell out most? Yes. I'd say we're at about 95% of

our sales goals."

While the event is somewhat standardized, in Los Angeles there will be a few twists, including an elaborate opening night celebration, to be broadcast on NBC, said former figure skating champion Randy Gardner. A Los Angeles native, Gardner won the World Championship for pairs in 1979. He is also directing the opening night event.

"It used to be just 50 nations, 50 flags, a procession and the president of the ISU declares it open," Gardner said, noting that the event usually has a more elaborate closing ceremony. "But I switched it, because in Los Angeles, you can't open wimpy. You've got to open big."