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Game over for Victory Stadium

As the wrecking ball got started, some gathered to watch, reminisce or just cry.

By Todd Jackson



Josh Meltzer / The Roanoke Times

Angel Hernandez sprays water to keep the dust down while a wrecking ball works to break up and demolish Victory Stadium on Monday.

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Monday morning came dark, wet and final for Victory Stadium.

After more than a decade of public back-and-forth, political changes of mind and highly charged hostilities, the demolition of the 64-year-old Roanoke icon -- or eyesore -- has proceeded as swiftly as the river has flowed beside it in recent weeks -- courtesy of the May 2 election that sealed its fate.

A rainstorm and minor flooding around the stadium did not delay its date with a wrecking ball early Monday.

A raingear-clad heavy-machine operator for S.B. Cox Inc. -- the Richmond-based demolition contractor -- walked to a crane shortly before 8 a.m. and climbed inside.

A few minutes later, he dropped a 4,400-pound cast-iron ball on a portion of the stadium's east stands. It hit with a thud; a stream of concrete bits poured to the ground below.

Several times the wrecking ball slammed into the stadium's solid, steel-reinforced concrete structure and bounced off, barely making a dent.

But the ball kept pounding away, and with the help of a front loader and other heavy machinery, about half of the east stands had been turned into rubble by late Monday.

The rain, which held off for most of the day and then began again late in the afternoon, actually helped to keep the dust down.

But tearing down a 26,000-seat stadium still makes quite a mess, and the demolition -- to be watched blow by blow for the next several

days -- brought much comment about the stadium's sturdiness and how well it has served the city.

Dick Hylton said his late father, Bill, was the superintendent for the construction of the east stands in the early 1940s.

"Papa, you built it well," he said to himself at one point.

Hylton, who lives in Roanoke County, said his father once told him a story about how men were dangled off the top of the stadium stands by their ankles during construction so they could fasten bolts on the outer walls.

Roy Bedwell, a Roanoke firefighter, watched the wrecking ball tangle with the stadium a few times and said, "It's a monster.

"Three thousand years from now you could pull back the weeds and that stadium would still be sitting here -- like that Inca and the Mayan stuff."

Bedwell also recorded a song Monday that he titled "The Day They Tore Ol' Victory Down." The song is accessible at www.roanoke.com.

As Monday progressed, hundreds of people trekked to the stadium to watch the destruction.

Opinions about Victory's end were mixed, as they've been ever since city leaders started debating the building's fate more than a decade ago.

For some, it was like a funeral or a wake.

Eve Pauley of Roanoke wept as she watched parts of the stadium slam to the ground.

"I just wish we could have done something to save this," she said, recalling her time as a William Fleming student and watching football players such as NFL running back Lee Suggs play in the stadium.

Chuck Jones, who said he participated in high school meets on Victory Stadium's track in the 1980s, took pictures of the site just before and just after the demolition began.

A William Fleming graduate, Jones said he couldn't believe how long it took for the city to make a stadium decision. He said he's glad Fleming is set to get its own campus stadium, but believes Victory was in solid shape and could have been saved. He chuckled at the dreary weather.

"They couldn't have picked a better day for this," he said.

But others, while respectful of the stadium's place in city history, said they're glad city leaders finally made a decision and stuck with it.

Roanokers Jean Powell and her son Michael, 10, stopped by to watch the demolition early Monday morning. Michael said watching the big machines smash such a large structure was "cool."

Jean Powell said change is good for any city.

Several stadium supporters vowed to try to make Victory's demise into Roanoke's version of a never-to-be-forgotten, "Remember the Alamo" political battle cry.

But Oliver Stein, a World War II veteran, said grudges shouldn't be held.

A former combat photographer, he was taking pictures of the stadium's demolition Monday afternoon. Stein said he would have liked for Victory to stay, but added: "That's why we vote. We elected council. It makes a decision. We live with it.

"And I'm OK with that," Stein said.

Calleigh Lucas, 9, added even more perspective to the day.

Her dad, Mark, took her and her sister to watch the stadium demolition.

Calleigh said that regardless of opinions on the stadium's fate, watching Monday's scene was "a once-in-a-lifetime event. You should see it."
