

Shea Goodbye

Before the New York Mets' famous field closes its doors after 44 seasons of baseball, we look back at the three monumental WWE Supercards it hosted...and how the shows changed the face of sports-entertainment as we know it!

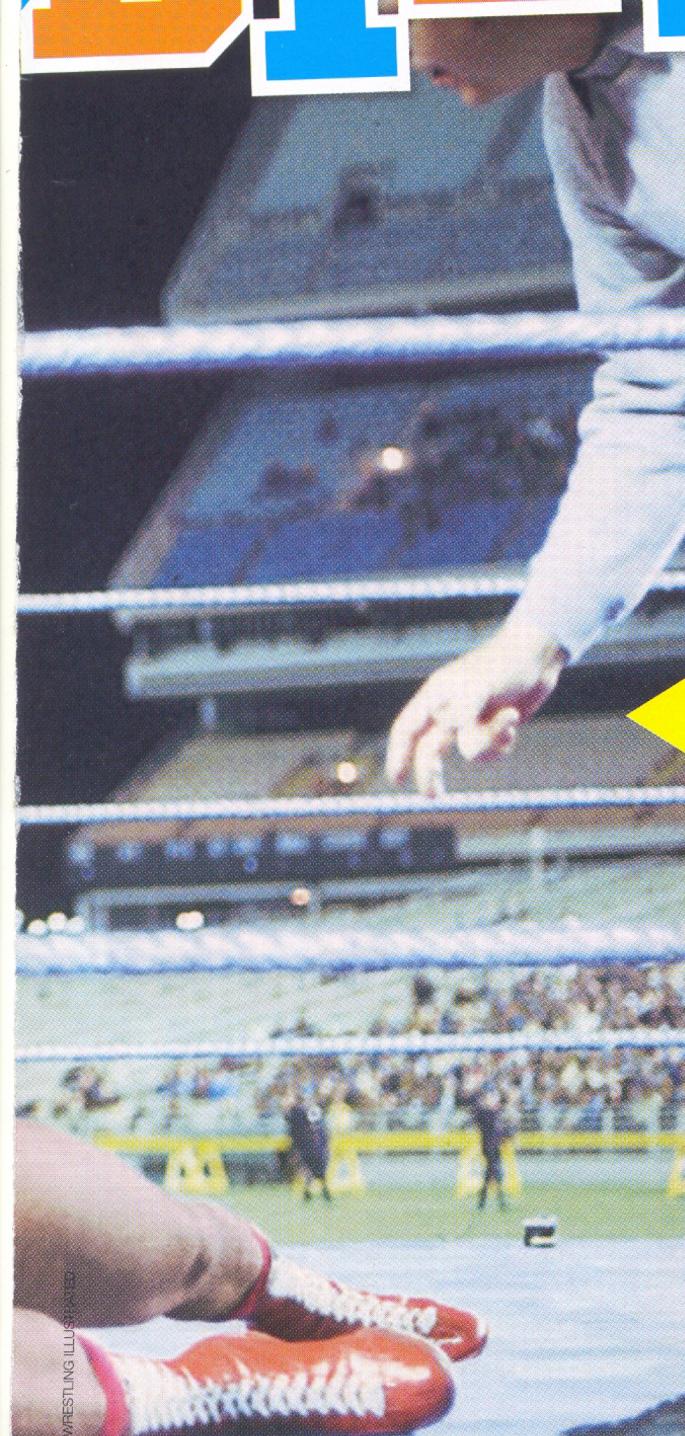
By John Mihaly



BRUNO SAMMARTINO vs. PEDRO MORALES

Shea Stadium, Flushing, NY
Sept. 30, 1972

BYE!



SAMMARTINO: COURTESY PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED

Just how large were WWE's three Supercards, contested at Shea Stadium in 1972, 1976 and 1980?

"They were incredibly ambitious," says ring announcer and WWE historian Howard Finkel. "I can't recall our organization doing anything with the magnitude of Shea Stadium back then. Those 'Showdowns at Shea' were WWE's crown jewel because they put the white-hot spotlight on sports-entertainment in the biggest city of them all, New York."

Attendance jumped exponentially with each show, setting new records along the way. "Shea once held the largest outdoor crowd ever for a wrestling match," says Bob Mandt, former Vice President of Shea Stadium Operations. Those records were finally broken at The Big Event in Toronto's Exhibition Stadium.

Although Madison Square Garden has always been WWE's spiritual stomping ground, the 20,000-seat venue simply couldn't realize organizers' vision for a staggeringly larger event at that time. Why they chose Shea and not, say, the storied Yankee Stadium has remained a mystery, until now. "Actually, we tried to get Yankee Stadium, but Vincent J. McMahon just couldn't," says former World and Intercontinental Champion Pedro Morales. "So we went to Shea."

What follows is a snapshot of Shea's most historic matches. And yes, you should care. These matches are the building blocks of many of the things you see on TV today. They were precursors to *WrestleMania*, the largest event in sports-entertainment. Start educating yourself, superfan.

75-MINUTE MARATHON

SEPTEMBER 30, 1972

Before The Rock faced Stone Cold Steve Austin, and before the Ultimate Warrior stared down Hulk Hogan, Pedro Morales and Bruno Sammartino proved that you could have two fan favorites lock horns and still make the match an enormous success. "It was a different ballgame for me," Morales says. "We were both used to having crowd support, but this time the crowd was split down the middle."

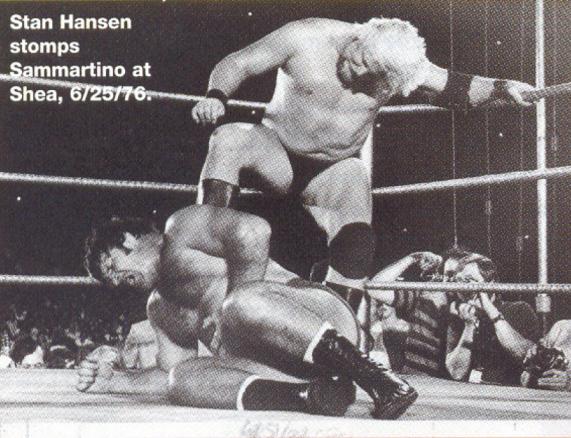
Fans had trouble choosing sides because neither grappler had done anything particularly vile. Weeks earlier, Bruno and Pedro had tagged against Mr. Fuji and Tanaka on TV. When Fuji tossed salt in Pedro's eyes, Pedro began blindly throwing punches. One landed on his partner, which prompted Bruno to fight back. More blows were exchanged, leading the Superstars on a collision course to Shea Stadium.

"Weeks before the match, Bruno asked me if I was getting in shape

because he wanted to wrestle for two hours, not one," Morales says. "So I started running at the YMCA. I ran with three pounds on each leg for five weeks. I think that got me ready for the big match." It was a good thing Morales pushed his body to the limits; the match carried on for a grueling 75 minutes, or 15 minutes longer than the modern-day Iron Man match. Ultimately, the contest ended in a draw, and Bruno and Pedro buried the proverbial hatchet.

"A couple of days after the match, I was back in the YMCA taking a steam bath. A guy asked me how the big match went," says Morales. "So I told him that Sammartino had me in so many positions, the next time I make love to a woman she's going to think I was the greatest lover in the world."

Despite the match's success, a rematch was never scheduled. Why? Finkel posits, "How do you top wrestling in Shea Stadium? How could you try to replicate the success of the first one?" Point taken.



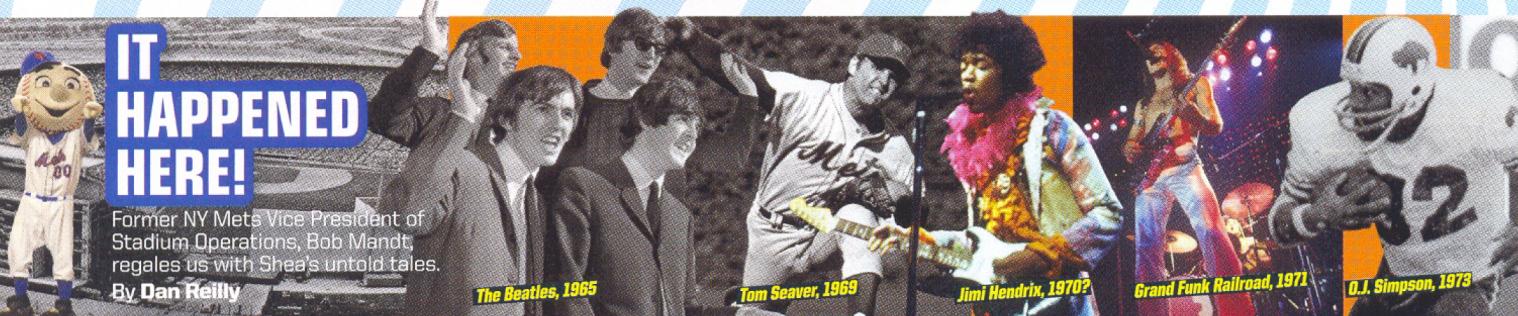
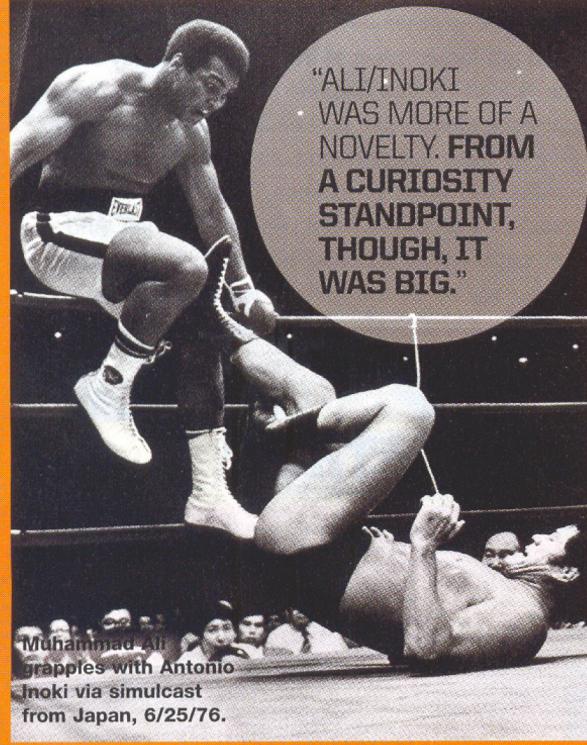
NO TICKET, NO PROBLEM!

JUNE 25, 1976

"I witnessed this card on closed circuit television at the New Haven Coliseum," Finkel says. Before the introduction of pay-per-view, fans watched boxing and wrestling events televised inside stadiums. "Evel Knievel had his jump over the Snake River Canyon on closed circuit TV. There was certainly a novelty to it."

CALL IT A COMEBACK

Prior to Shea, hated Texan Stan Hansen cracked several of Bruno Sammartino's vertebrae. As a result, Bruno was forced to cancel a bout at the Garden. "That's what led to our match at Shea. There was some serious heat, and I had to deal with it on an enormous scale," Hansen says. The match served as Sammartino's big comeback. Hansen recalls emerging through the dugouts, with the ring set up above the pitching mound. "There were so many people in the crowd who weren't your average wrestling fans. Some were dressed up. And women wore mink coats," Hansen says. "These finely dressed folks sat there through most of the matches and then, when Bruno came out, they all went crazy."



MOVING IN

Shea officially opened on April 17, 1964. Mandt and his colleagues moved into their offices in December 1963. "We were in an unfinished building," Mandt says. "There were holes where the pipes were meant to go and we had portable heaters. We were considered the shock troops."

BEATLEMANIA

When The Beatles played Shea on August 15, 1965, it was the first-ever major outdoor stadium concert. "These young girls were in a frenzy, jumping over the rails to get to the stage. After the show, the nurse there said they were shipping them off to the hospital because of mild hysteria," Mandt says.

WORST TO FIRST

After seven years of lousy finishes, the New York Mets, led by pitcher Tom Seaver, finally turned it around in 1969, winning the World Series over heavily favored Baltimore. "That was the best," says Mandt. "You're getting kidded by your friends, and all of a sudden you go from the depths to the heights," Mandt says.

HENDRIX MYSTERY SOLVED

In 1970, Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary held the Festival for Peace, an all-day concert featuring acts such as Paul Simon and Janis Joplin. To this day, many accounts say Jimi Hendrix appeared on the ticket. According to Mandt, who recently confirmed the info with Yarrow's camp, Hendrix did not perform.

GRAND FUNK SELL OUT

Although The Beatles set the original attendance record by selling out Shea, Grand Funk Railroad set a record of their own in 1971 by selling out the stadium's 55,000 seats in just 72 hours. Following the opening act, Humble Pie, featuring a young Peter Frampton, the Funk hit the stage with a 50-man karate team!

JUICE RUNS LOOSE

During a snowy game versus the New York Jets in 1973, Buffalo Bills running back O.J. Simpson picked up 200 yards, making him the first NFL player to rush for more than 2,000 yards in a season. Although impressive, we still think his notorious evasion of prison remains his longest run of all.

THREE TITLES, ONE MATCH

AUGUST 9, 1980

The event was Pedro Morales' second Shea contest, and this time it saw him teaming with Bob Backlund. "I was Intercontinental Champion, and Backlund was World Champion," says Morales. "We beat the Tag Team Champions, the Samoans. That was the first time that I can remember all three titles being involved in the same match. It was a best two-out-of-three falls match, but we won it in two, which was fantastic." Despite the victory, Morales and Backlund were forced to relinquish the newly won Tag titles; according to the rules at that time, their status as titleholders disqualified them.

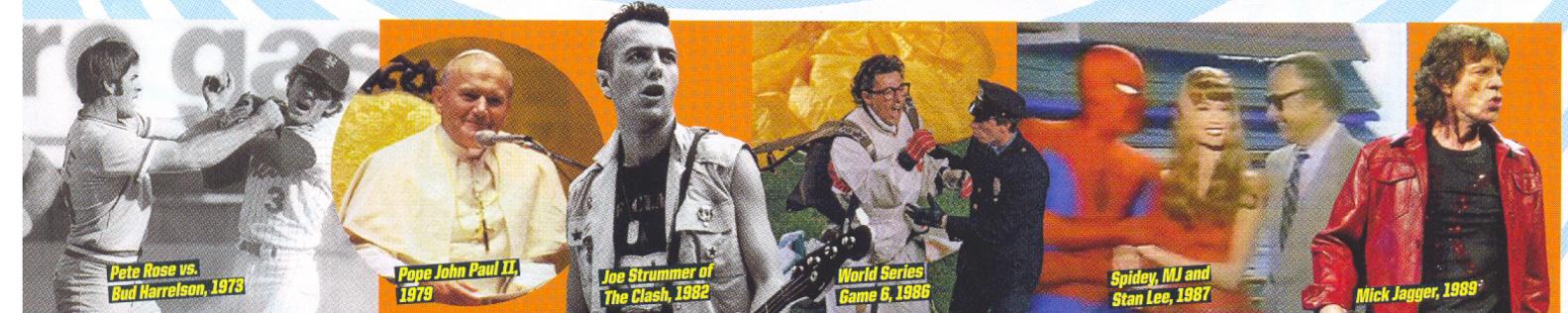
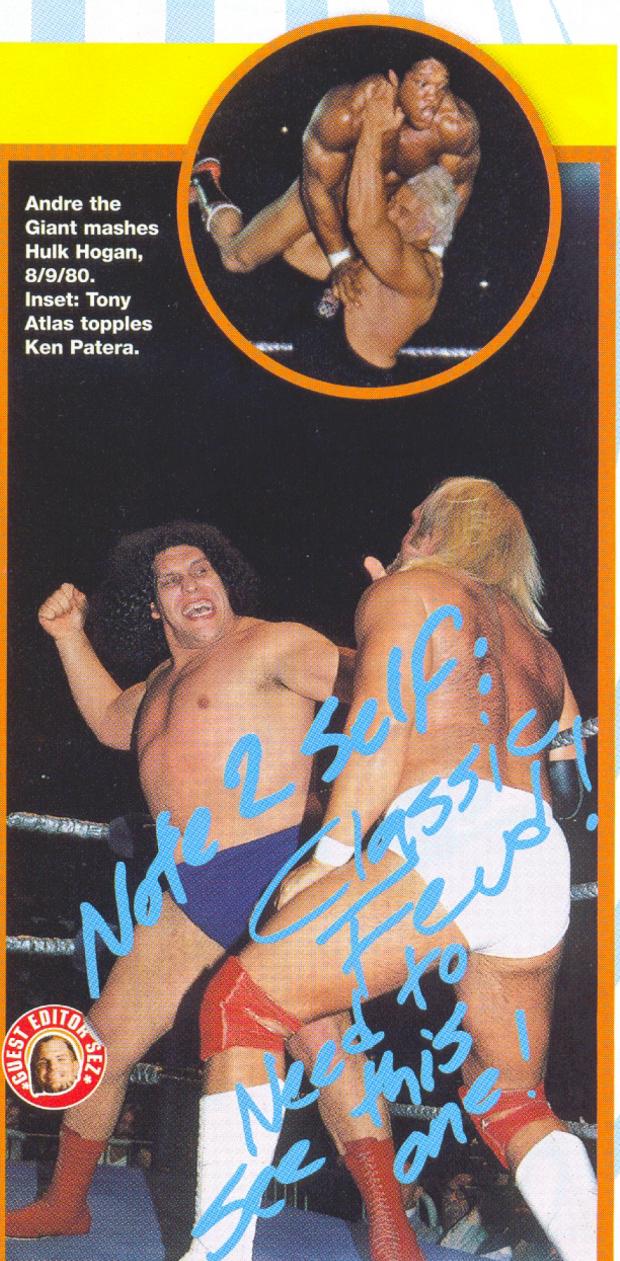
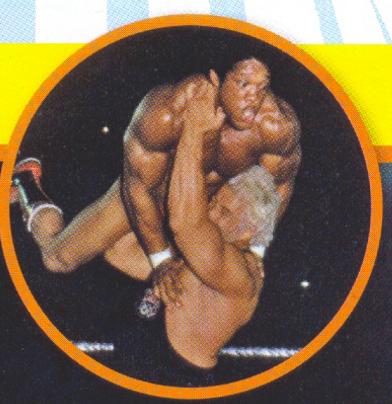
THE OLYMPIAN AND MR. U.S.A.

When Tony Atlas stepped into the ring against Intercontinental Champion Ken Patera, it was the battle of the Weightlifter vs. the Bodybuilder. "I do remember that I pressed Ken Patera," Atlas says. "At that time he was probably about 300 pounds, but when I pressed him, he felt like a feather. It was like we were floating on air." Atlas attributes this sudden burst of Herculean strength to pure

adrenaline. "Five minutes before the match you could hear rumbling, like the building was starting to shake. We didn't have the music and introductions like they have today. The people were our pyro. Even if they were in the farthest seats it was as though you could reach out and touch the fans."

THE GIANT AND THE HULK

Many consider The Hulkster and The Giant's match at *WrestleMania III* the greatest of all time. Few realize that they actually faced off on the infield of Shea seven years prior. "We were watching that match and hoping Hogan didn't piss off Andre, because it'd be a real short match if he did. The thing about Andre was, if he loved you, he loved you. But boy, if you ever got him mad, the match was over," says Atlas, adding, "He had the power of 10 guys. Wrestling him was like wrestling a tree. He would move when he wanted to move, and stay still when he wanted to stay still." Hogan lost this match, but he would avenge it years later at the Pontiac Silverdome at *WMIII*, a spectacular that might not have been if not for WWE's successes at Shea. We'll miss ya.



BUDDY BRAWL

During Game 3 of the 1973 NLCS between the Mets and the Reds, WWE Hall of Famer Pete Rose incited a brawl by throwing punches at New York's shortstop Bud Harrelson after a hard slide. "I have a picture of that moment signed by Pete Rose himself that reads, 'He won the game, I won the fight!'"

PONTIFF ENDS RAIN DELAY

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TICKET CLASH RIOT!

On October 12, 1982, The Clash and The Who played the first of two concerts, selling nearly 70,000 tickets. Unfortunately, not all of them were legit—which led to a near-riot. "We had space for 12,000 on the press level, and all of a sudden I see two legs coming down," says Mandt. "The counterfeit tickets were smeared blue. The next day we discovered about 2,000 of them."

GAME 6

In 1986, the Mets won the World Series, defeating the Red Sox. In the middle of Game 6—memorable for Bill Buckner's error—a man parachuted into the stadium. "I was on the press level, and all of a sudden I see two legs coming down," says Mandt. "The crowd loved it. Ron Darling gave him a high five."

WEBHEAD'S WEDDING

To commemorate their 1987 nuptials, Marvel Comics' famous web-slinger tied the knot in a live-action ceremony at Shea. "Spider-Man married his girlfriend, Mary Jane. He showed up in costume," Mandt says. "That was also Rusty Staub Day. So all of the players came out wearing bright red wigs."

STONES IN THE GRASS

The Rolling Stones played six shows in 1989, but not without doing damage. "You can't put on a baseball game with holes all over the place. You're supposed to be putting out a championship field," Mandt says. "All that weight is going to have an effect on the grass. Usually, it's the promoter's duty to restore the field."