

NASHVILLE'S BIG BANG THEORY



NEARLY 30 YEARS AGO, A YOUNG, FIRST-TIME MAYOR STRUGGLED TO CONVINCE HIS CONSTITUENTS THAT NASHVILLE'S ECONOMY AND CULTURE WOULD BLOSSOM IF THE CITY DEVELOPED NEW LIVE VENUES FOR SPORTS AND MUSIC. FORMER MAYOR AND TENNESSEE GOVERNOR PHIL BREDESEN AND NASHVILLE SPORTS LEADERS LOOK BACK AT THE SUCCESS OF THE BRIDGESTONE ARENA AND NISSAN STADIUM AS THE CITY BUILDS ITS THIRD MAJOR SPORTS VENUE.

BY SARAH GRANT





Tennessee Titans vs. St. Louis Rams in a preseason game at Nissan Stadium, August 2015

Nissan Stadium



Eric Church performs at Nissan Stadium during the 2016 CMA Fest.

NASHVILLE'S SPORTS TRANSFORMATION BEGAN IN 1999.

Before then, the city had mainly been known for its country music. But that year, two professional sports teams came to town to play in two new arenas, broadening the city's identity for locals and visitors alike.

First, in 1998 the Nashville Predators moved into Nashville Arena (now the Bridgestone Arena, and recently named Arena of the Year by Pollstar magazine). Almost instantly, the arrival of the National Hockey League team drove economic development and foot traffic to the long-abandoned Lower Broadway area.

The same year, the National Football League's Houston Oilers were triumphantly reborn as the Tennessee Titans after the team spent two challenging years in temporary stadiums during the transition. When the Titans moved into what was then known as Adelphia Coliseum [it became Nissan Stadium in 2015], their glorious first season took them to the Super Bowl.

They lost, 23-16, to the Rams, but still—it was an auspicious beginning.

In 2019, Nashville sports will continue its expansion with a third stadium, after the city was awarded one of four Major League Soccer teams.

None of this would have happened as it did without the vision of former mayor, then governor, Phil Bredesen, whose persistence produced new homes for entrepreneurship and athletics in Nashville. Bredesen, a New York-raised physics major from Harvard, had seen neither Nashville nor the inside of a sports arena before he moved south as a newlywed in 1975. But he'd get to know the city well—his wife, Andrea Conte, worked at the Hospital Corporation of America, while Bredesen founded insurance company HealthAmerica—before winning his first election there, as mayor, in 1991.

Today, Bredesen remembers the unlikely way he and Nashville's business community helped transform Nashville into a city where great music and great sports not only coexist, but also intermingle.

Worth asked Bredesen, Predators chief executive Sean Henry and MLS billionaire philanthropist John Ingram, along with *Houston Chronicle* journalist John McClain, former Titans running back Eddie George and current Predators goaltender Pekka Rinne, to share their recollections about the making of a great sports town.

» PHIL BREDESEN: I was cut from a very different cloth than any of the city's previous mayors from so-called east Nashville—old, political families. I wasn't from Nashville, let alone that side of town. But at the time people were just looking for something different. And one of the things I really wanted to do was to get downtown working again.

» SEAN HENRY: Nashville is a very pro-business city because of the vision Mayor Bredesen had over 20 years ago. He wanted to change Nashville with what he used to call "civic furniture."

» BREDESEN: You need to have the "furniture": You need to have the sports teams, the museums, the libraries. All that kind of stuff that brings people



Tennessee Titans vs. Minnesota Vikings, September 2016

together. Having moved to Nashville from London [where he'd been working], one of the things that I found interesting was that in Nashville, social life was much more directed around going to someone's home than a public space. Now, we call ourselves Music City, but back then, you needed to go 15 miles outside downtown Nashville to see a concert. The idea was to build an arena which would be usable for sports, but since we didn't have any teams, its initial focus was going to be concerts. It was not easy. We did a poll at the time and found that all of 17 percent of people in Nashville thought this was a good idea.

I prepared a little term sheet that got passed around to professional sports teams. And eventually, it fell into the hands of one Bud Adams, down in Texas, who owned the Oilers.

JOHN McCRAIN: The Houston Astrodome was a dump. When it was built, it was the eighth wonder of the world, but it had fallen into disrepair. So when the Los Angeles Rams moved to St. Louis around 1994, and Bud Adams saw the sweetheart deal

the Rams were getting, he told his executive vice president Mike McClure to find a deal like that. But [Adams'] timing was awful. Bud was trying to get money for a new stadium when his team was the worst in the league. In 1994, the Oilers were terrible, because free agency began, the salary cap began, and they lost or traded all their top players. The Oilers went from 12-4 to 2-14.

BREDESEN: Bud and I were very different people. He really was this eccentric billionaire [Adams died in 2013] and I'm this physics guy. But we got along very well. The relationship we developed was an important feature of putting the whole thing together. And I have to be unique in that I recruited an NFL team and an NHL team to the city having never been to a football game or a hockey game in my life.

McCRAIN: Bredesen didn't know if a football had feathers or air. But he knew that an NFL franchise would change the way Nashville was perceived.

BREDESEN: The NFL was a considerably bigger lift than the NHL. But of course, we didn't have a stadium.

Bud came down here. We met one afternoon and talked about collecting Western art, which we both enjoyed. He signed the negotiation agreement within a day. I told a group of businessmen to come to the Wildhorse Saloon downtown because "the owner of the Houston Oilers wants to talk about his plan to relocate the team." They all thought I'd been drinking.

McCRAIN: Nobody thought Bud would leave Houston. But Nashville did everything they wanted. And Bud made a big show of going up there, hoping that people in Houston would say, "Okay, we'll help you get \$180 million in public money." Instead, it worked the opposite. People were angry.

EDDIE GEORGE: I played one year in Houston before we moved. It certainly didn't feel like I was in the NFL—it felt like I was on the outside, looking in. We didn't have the support that we once had because we were leaving, and the fans that did show up were pretty much cheering against us. We moved from Houston to Memphis in '97, hoping that things would get better. They didn't.



Nashville Predators vs.
the Anaheim Ducks, May 2017

» **McCLAIN:** The Oilers' first year in Memphis was a disaster. Nobody wanted them. [Former Titans VP] Don MacLachlan said that once, somebody accidentally left a big old box of tickets outside the Liberty Bowl in Memphis all night. Nobody touched them. The team practiced on a field behind a doctors' office building on the west side of Nashville. When the grass started to die, they would have to do Saturday walk-throughs in the small parking lot next door.

» **GEORGE:** There was one particular week we played the Minnesota Vikings after Nashville had one of the worst ice storms in history. The field was so bad and the parking lot was so bad that we couldn't practice the entire week.

» **McCLAIN:** You couldn't have had a worse situation for coaching. There was turmoil everywhere around them when they practiced, when they played. But the team kind of bonded over it. And then when they came out of that and got their new stadium, it was like they came out as one.

» **BREDESEN:** Frankly, not having been a sports fan or knowing that much about sports helped me. Because

whether or not people agreed, they thought, "He's not doing this because of some fantasy about sitting on the sidelines with the players. He must think it's the right thing for the city."

» **GEORGE:** When we walked into Adelphia Coliseum for the first time, it was Saturday after practice. The grass was crisp, cut. I remember taking off my sandals and just walking barefoot around the entire field. It felt like home. There were a lot of firsts in that stadium. We didn't lose a single home game until 1999. We were so loud there because they were pumping sound through the bleachers. It created an energy and set the standard for what it is to be a Titan. Every single time I'm in the stadium, I think back to how things were and where things can go.

» **BREDESEN:** The opportunity came to look at an NHL expansion team. It got off to a little bit of a rocky start, because it was just not that well known—hockey in Nashville?

» **PEKKA RINNE:** To be honest, I didn't think about fans not knowing

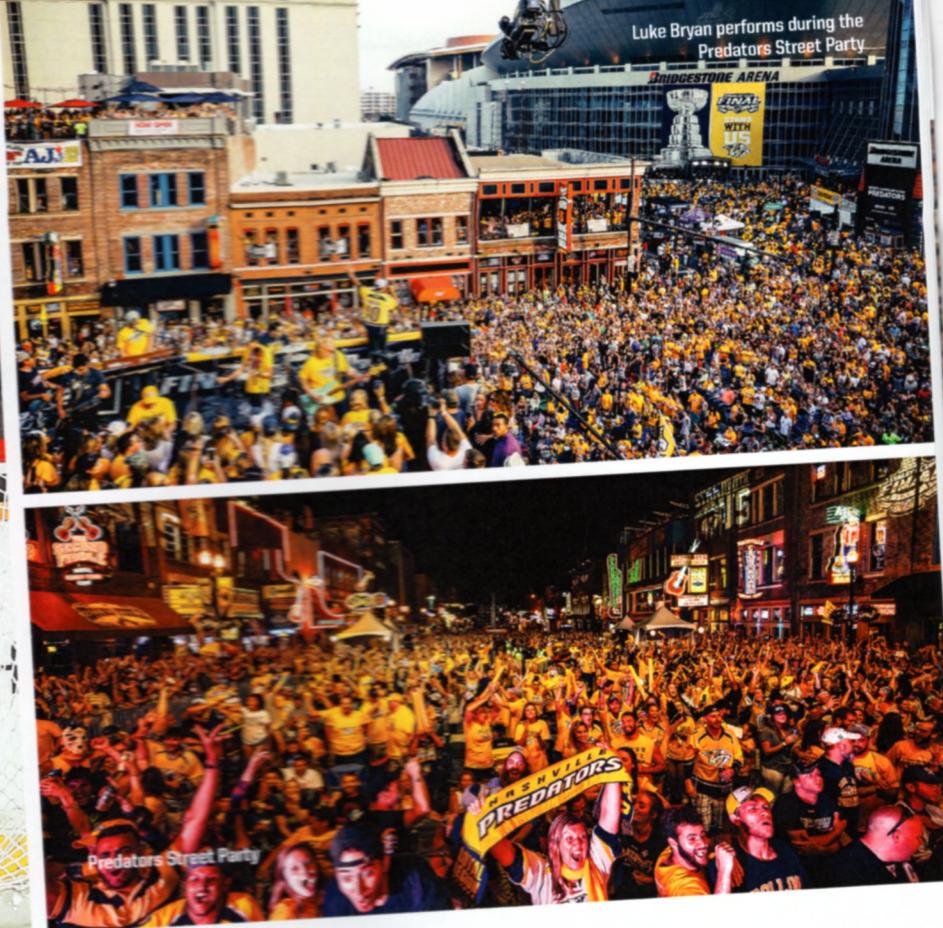
hockey that much. I was just fighting for my spot and wanted to stay in Nashville.

» **HENRY:** By 2009, when I was still with the Tampa Bay Lightning, a Toronto billionaire put in a bid to buy the Nashville Predators.

» **BREDESEN:** There was a real effort to not lose the Preds. I thought it would be a big hit to the confidence of Nashville.

» **HENRY:** What I love about the Preds is that we have a chairman and an ownership group that bought the team to keep it here. Nashville had this local group of business guys, all day-one season-ticket holders, working with incoming mayor Karl Dean to figure out how to secure the team. When people feel this bigger mission, it's special.

» **BREDESEN:** My wife, Andrea Conte, may be the Preds' biggest fan. If you had told me in, say, 1995 that my wife was going to be a major fan of any major league sports team, I would've said you were totally crazy. But she's been deeply involved—she goes to a lot more games than I do. And when they were looking at leaving, she was one of the ones who was really out there



leading the charge to keep them. And, actually, that whole process is what led to the new ownership group and all the stuff that really made things work.

» HENRY: When the ownership change happened and [owner] Tom Cigarran agreed to become the chairman, that was really the tidal change. It was, "We're not just gonna be a team in the NHL; we're not just gonna be an arena that books a couple of shows." There's no reason that we aren't the best building in America, and there's no reason we aren't a contender for the Stanley Cup every year.

» RINNE: The biggest thing I remember, coming from Finland, was that the people in Nashville were so social and nice. I was nervous coming over, so that was a pleasant surprise.

» HENRY: As a business, one thing that's pretty neat is that on a long day, you have a couple hundred people waiting to get in the building, excited and happy. I always tell people—if you go to the doors right when we open, stress just melts away. Deliver a signed puck to a kid who's at his first game? You walk away feeling better than he does.

» GEORGE: We're in a time where [Nashville] wants a championship. And now with three professional sports teams, [Nashville] is going to be on fire. They're hungry here.

» INGRAM: We are in the early stages of professional soccer in this country. Over the next generation, it has the chance to be the biggest professional sport in the United States. Nashville isn't as big as some of the other cities interested in Major League Soccer, but we're bigger and better in areas that count—growth in millennials, a large foreign-born population—things that are important to having a sustainable soccer base. And so, you know, they decided to go for it.

» BREDESEN: My advice to them was when you decide on the right course of action, do it and don't get overly political about the decision-making. Then, in the end, a) you get it done, and, b) people will come along just fine.

» INGRAM: I'm 56 years old and trying to be intentional about what I do with the rest of my life. I want to do things for which I have a passion. And I love this city. It would've been a

heck of a lot easier if my only interest was getting involved with professional sports. There are a lot of easier ways to do that than participate in a really hard-fought expansion process. But I really wanted to do this in Nashville, and I wanted to do it with Nashville and for Nashville. And when I was thinking about that, my response was not only, I need to do this, it was, "I'm gonna regret not trying to do it."

» BREDESEN: I'll be honest—even today when I go downtown on a Friday or Saturday night, and there's concerts at the [Schermerhorn] Symphony Center that weren't there before, something going on at the arena that wasn't there, something going at the Country Music Hall of Fame that wasn't there....it feels really good. The first event I attended in the Bridgestone Arena was a Christmas concert with Vince Gill and Amy Grant. Andrea and I went into the new building, and when we walked out that night, snow was falling. It was Christmastime, and there were all these lights downtown, all these people downtown.... That was one of the great moments of my life. •