



STAFF PHOTOS / E. SKYLAR LITHELAND

One local circus not complaining is Sailor Circus, whose performers entertain on the opening night of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

## Can this be a three-circus town?

*Ringling's return fails to thrill its smaller rivals*

By DOUG SWORD

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SARASOTA -- It has been 48 years since The Greatest Show on Earth last performed in Sarasota, and some of the not-for-profit circuses that filled the vacuum are less than thrilled by the return of the industry's 800-pound gorilla.

Showfolks of Sarasota was irked when -- two days before its Dec. 9 charity performance -- the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus rolled out a big ad campaign for its show.

And Circus Sarasota complains that its attendance during 3 1/2 weeks of shows in February will suffer because Ringling scheduled its six-day stay in the middle of the season.

Both Showfolks of Sarasota and Circus Sarasota rely on winter performances to fund year-round activities in a town with a rich circus heritage.

"It's the big bully syndrome," said Pedro Reis, co-founder of Circus Sarasota.

A Ringling spokeswoman called it "surprising" that the company's return to Sarasota is stirring up bad feelings.

Amy McWethy noted that Ringling could have prevented the Showfolks circus from performing since a clause in its contract with the Fairgrounds bars other circuses from performing there 60 days before and 60 days after the Ringling stay. Ringling waived the clause to allow the Showfolks performance.

Reis, of Circus Sarasota, worries that his forced move this year from the Fairgrounds to a temporary location on 12th Street, combined with Ringling's shows occurring just two weeks before Circus Sarasota's annual stint, will mean his circus won't be able to match last year's 35,000 in attendance.

At Showfolks, officials wonder why Ringling started advertising for its Jan. 16 opening on Dec. 7, two days before the local club's annual scholarship performance at Robarts Arena. Showfolks supporters also question why the group was limited to one show on Dec. 9 instead of the usual two performances.

The color Ringling newspaper ad appeared the same day as a black-and-white Showfolks ad, and drew comments and theories on a popular circus blog. The man who runs the blog, Buckles Woodcock, titled the piece about the timing of the ads: "No More Mr. Nice Guy."

"It does irritate," says Showfolks President Jenny Wallenda Anderson, whose tightrope-walking father, Karl Wallenda, was known worldwide as The Great Wallenda. "But what you going to do? That's the way it is."

And business was off. "We didn't do real good, but we did OK," she said.

Lee Stevens, another Showfolks member and the manager of a former Ringling act, Lee Stevens African Baboons, said he believed Ringling officials just made a mistake.

"They didn't do that ad to destroy Showfolks," he said. "I choose not to believe that."

The allegations are unfair, says Fairgrounds General Manager Steve Bell.

Ringling had nothing to do with Showfolks not being allowed two performances Dec. 9, he said.

"This year they only had one show because I had a boxing match the night before and couldn't turn the building in time."

Bell told Wallenda that Showfolks could hold three performances next year. But the Fairgrounds manager was angry at the group's complaints. He noted that they don't have a contract yet and said, "They're pooping in their own mess kit."

The criticisms didn't deter Ringling spokeswoman McWethy from talking about her company's long history with the city. "We are proud to come back to Sarasota," she said.

Besides okaying Showfolks to perform at the Fairgrounds, McWethy noted that Ringling is working with another not-for-profit, the Police Athletic League's Sailor Circus, throughout the week.

Gossip among circus folk is at a high as Ringling returns, said Lt. Keith Muncy, director of the Sailor Circus, a local show featuring school-aged children.

While respecting what Reis and Showfolks have done for the community, Muncy noted that Ringling is allowing Sailor Circus unicyclists and jugglers to meet-and-greet at the six-day Fairgrounds event and is making a financial donation to the not-for-profit.

"Circus is a good part of Sarasota," Muncy said. "It's a unique, cool thing that we've got to be proud of. Hopefully everyone can work their schedules out."

Sailor Circus drew a record 6,400 to its five holiday performances, even though Ringling was advertising its shows and Circus Sarasota started its advertising early this year, Muncy said.

But Reis doesn't think more circuses will mean anything other than lower attendance.

"There's absolutely no need for them to open two weeks prior to our opening," he said. "It hurts."

Reis has been upset with the Fairgrounds since being told early last year that he could no longer use a 5.5-acre tract on Tuttle to host his circus.

He was told that neighboring tenants complained about overflow parking during the circus, although, when interviewed, neighbors denied making complaints and described Circus Sarasota as a good

neighbor. The Fairgrounds also said it could get much higher rents for the land than what Reis paid.

Circus Sarasota found a site owned by the city for its 29 shows that begin Feb. 2 and span 3-1/2 weeks, but that is a temporary solution.

Sarasota hopes to build a new ballpark for the Cincinnati Reds on that land, although the city has run into delays in securing the necessary \$54 million in funding.

Reis suspected that he got caught in a crossfire between the county -- which originally wanted to build the Reds stadium at the Fairgrounds -- and fair officials, who resisted the idea in favor of their own plan, which included once again making Sarasota Ringling's winter headquarters.

The county plan called for a permanent site for homegrown Circus Sarasota along with a headquarters building.

The attempt to get Ringling back had nothing to do with Circus Sarasota's move, Bell said.

Reis "was told two years ago" that he needed to move, Bell said, "before the Ringling deal. I have documentation of the whole thing."