

No Glass on the Arena Floor

by Karl Taylor

My story begins during the latter half of the first day of setup—T-minus 72 hours from firing up. After spending the majority of the day unpacking kilns of every size and shape (Thank you, Paragon!) and arranging and rearranging the table layout, the volunteer staff and I were sitting back enjoying a beer when one of the security guards shouted down to us, “Hey, there is no glass allowed on the arena floor!” This caught us a little off guard. After all, wasn’t there 175 pounds of molten glass in the furnace 5 feet behind us? Or maybe he hadn’t noticed the two glory holes and the entire pallet of cullet. Or perhaps it was the simple fact that looming in the dwindling hours was what would become the world’s largest flame-off.

When people think about a flame-off, they tend to think about the night of the event, but they rarely think about what leads up to it—all of the planning, the countless hours of hooking up hardware, pressure-testing lines, and running around an unfamiliar city looking for parts. A long year of planning and a seventy-hour work week become eight hours of showtime that gets torn down the very next day!

For this event, like many others, the fuel behind the madness is the volunteer staff whose job it is to remain invisible while ensuring that everything goes silky smooth. The staff for this flame-off was truly great! Most of us met for the first time less than a week before the event, knowing no more about what we were getting into than a piece of hops or barley would know about the history of American microbrewing. I was truly impressed at how quickly we came together to work as a team toward this singular goal.

Arrival: Monday, T-minus 120 Hours

The seven-hour drive up to Las Vegas, Nevada, proved to be the calm before the storm. This would also prove to be the last chance I had to reflect on what was to come. After arriving and checking in, I got to spend the evening enjoying the dazzling lights and pulsating sounds that are the backdrop to so many Las Vegas memoirs. It was an enjoyable night and the last evening that I got a good night’s rest.

The top five ways you know you’re throwing a flame-off in Vegas:

- 5 You’re working with enough liquid oxygen and propane to launch the entire casino into orbit.
- 4 At the end of your second day, you know half of the employees at the nearest hardware store.
- 3 You have bought every brass nut, nipple, and ferrule within a twenty-mile radius.
- 2 You’re working with more dirty hose than Ron Jeremy—over 3,500 feet!
- 1 And the number one way you know you’re throwing a flame-off in Vegas:
1 There is no glass allowed on the arena floor!!



Set-up: Day 1, Tuesday, T-minus 96 hours

After waking up, the staff and I had our first meeting, during which Wil Menzies and Barry Lafler told us exactly how big a can of worms we had opened by signing on to the project. Then we went down to the arena for the first time. I felt truly insignificant as I entered the 4,400-seat arena.

The first day of setup felt a bit like Christmas as we unpacked all the new kilns, tools, and equipment we would be working with. After a long day of preparation, we called it quits. As we left the arena, I remember noticing that the stairs out of the arena had grown longer and taller somehow. Maybe my mind was just playing tricks on me.

Setup: Day 2, Wednesday, T-minus 72 hours

We began to run the lines, and as Murphy's Law always likes to remind us exactly how things can go wrong, we found ourselves a little short of hosing. Thus we began the first of the many tweaks required to get a system of this scale up and running. For the most part, we spent the day laying the system out, leaving a trail of carnage behind us. We had unfinished hose ends and manifold parts everywhere.

Just to give you an idea of the volume of gas we were set up to run, here are the basic specs of the system: twelve high-pressure dewars and two 120-gallon propane tanks, as well as several smaller bottles of propane and 6 vaporizers for the dewars (they prevent freezing of the dewar by drawing straight from liquid port). There were also a multitude of manifolds that could have run up to almost 100 torches; over 3,500 feet of hosing; a 175-pound pot furnace; and two glory holes. Now that is what I call raw power!

After a long, grueling day laying everything out, the staff hung around the arena, enjoyed some fantastic food and then called it quits for the day. On my way out, my worst fears were confirmed; the stairs out of the arena had grown and today seemed even longer still.



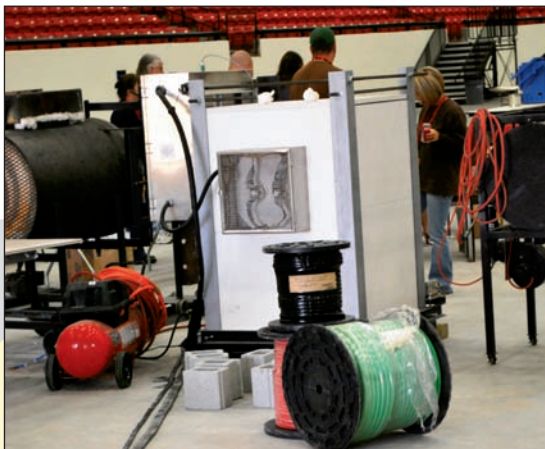
Setup: Day 3, Thursday T-minus 48 Hours

This morning I discovered that apparently there is a five in the morning, not just the evening, as my prior experiences implied. I'm not sure who came up with this idea, but when we meet, there will be words. The early start was due to the fact that a local news station had picked up the story, so they were conducting interviews for the morning show. The demonstrators were Wil Menzies, Barry Lafler, Lewis Wilson, Filip Vogelpohl, Josh Mazet, and Grant Menzies. For the next three hours, they put together a large space-themed sculpture, featuring many planetary marbles. Afterwards another news crew came in and did a short spot, so despite our early rise we were still getting a late start. We spent the rest of the day putting together hoses and attaching manifolds, as well as hunting down several missing fittings required to get it all up and running. We stopped a bit early to get ready for the VIP party, at which all the visiting artists met up to knock back a few and prepare themselves for what was to come.

Flame Off: Day 4, Friday, Start Time 6:30, T-minus 10 Hours

With the system nearly complete and the artists' equipment arriving, we began the process of hooking the artists into the system. This was a challenging part because no matter what leads the artists bring, you have to find a way to connect them into the system. This part was a mad dash for random small brass fittings and hosing and whatever it would take to get the job done, working against the clock to make certain that everything would be perfect for when the show began. Once we had everything hooked in, we still had to go through the process of pressure-testing hundreds of connections to ensure there were no leaks and tighten down whatever we needed to tighten. Then all we could do was to wait backstage with the competitors. In just minutes away, everyone would fire up and push our system to its very limits if they could. All the staff and I could do was to wait and see if it would hold. All our hard work was rewarded—and other than a few small kinks—repair a few torches, tweak the pressures—it all worked beautifully.





Flame Off: Day 5, Saturday, Start Time 6:30, T-minus 10 Hours

Can anyone say déjà vu? Vegas seems to play tricks on your mind. I could have sworn I set the artists up yesterday. Well, one more time can't be too bad. I mean, we already successfully ran the system once. All we have to do is change out the artists. What could go wrong? Hooking the artists in goes smoothly enough—too smoothly, maybe. Of course, the moment we start the evening's competition, we find Murphy and his law book waiting. A major propane glitch eats into the first hour of two of the teams' projects. After checking, rechecking, and triple-checking all of the lines, we could find no problem. Next we changed propane tanks, with no improvements, and even went as far as patching in a second tank, thus taking the regulator out of the equation. No matter what we tried, we were getting nowhere fast! We knew we had pressure in the lines, and we knew that some, but not all, of that pressure was reaching the competitors. We finally established—through the process of elimination—that the flashback arrestor itself was broken. We replaced it in the system, and everything worked just fine afterward. All of our hard work was brought to its knees by a single piece of brass! This experience left me humbled. At the end of the night as the last piece went into the kiln, I felt as though a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders. Could it finally be over? Only tomorrow would tell.

Break-down: Day 6

With the competition finished and the judges' votes being tallied, the crew found itself taking apart everything and packing it away. We were all moving slowly, and the coffee didn't seem strong enough anymore. It's been one long, great, yet tiring experience, one that I will never forget. I met a lot of new friends and got to know the friends I already had better. And I left with the knowledge that I had gotten to play a small role in helping with something truly larger than myself.

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Looking Back

With any event of this scale, the phrase "the show must go on" comes to mind. As a team, we knew that no matter what seemingly insurmountable obstacles confronted us, we either had to come up with a solution, design around the problem, or just keep our fingers crossed and hope for the best. In the days before the flame-off, I felt as if I were running one step ahead of a locomotive: you can't stop, just push on. This gives a kind of perspective to the whole thing.

The glass community has been growing, becoming more ambitious and impressive. We have truly hit the main stage with a live event in a 4,400-seat arena on Las Vegas Boulevard. All we can do now is to push on and remember what you do when a casino security guard tells you there is no glass allowed on the arena floor. You throw the biggest flame-off in the world to prove him wrong!

Fortunately, beyond our staff of volunteers we were also blessed with the guidance and leadership of two of the industry's greats, Wil Menzies and Barry Laffer, both of whom helped us to see the vision of the man who made this all possible, Tommy Licata. While I never had the opportunity to meet Tommy, I do feel blessed to have gotten the opportunity to take a small part in helping to make his dream of the world's largest flame-off come true.

I would like to take the time to thank all those who made this vision become a reality. This event was greater than I had ever expected. I would like to thank the masterminds of the event—Wil "Boxfan" Menzies, Barry Lafler, Jennifer Quaid, and Tommy Licata. A huge thank-you goes out to Patty Cerajewski, Lee Anne Short, and the rest of Las Vegas Management team. I would like to thank the volunteer staff: Scott Griffin, Calen Rivera, Brent Graber, Cisco Chaves, Jeff Zorn, Ben Burton, James "Lurch" Pieniaszek, Brent "Block" Smith, Grant "Midas" Menzies, Sean "Blade" Mueller, Brian Mortensen, David Sigler, Brett Van Raalte, "Otter," Niles Mahlman, Cindy Lemmo, Rashan Jones, Jeremy Guerrero, Cristina Cody, Aymie McKesson, Alex Smith, and Phat Jack and his crew, all of whom spent many sleepless nights dedicated to the conversion of one man's dream into a reality that the whole glass community could share. Thank you, as well, to the event's sponsors who gave us the resources from which to execute the impossible, especially those with whom I was fortunate to work closely: Craig Milliron from Arrow Springs (who supplied all our missing hardware); Jean Robichaud from Nortel Manufacturing (who, beyond supplying a cornucopia of hand torches, was always there looking for ways to help); and Scott from Paragon

(who graciously supplied the kilns, as well as operating them for the duration of the event); and all the other sponsors with whom I may not have worked directly but who contributed no less in terms of time and resources.



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