

PHOTOS BY LAUREN PETRACCA/STAFF

Matthew Lish with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus juggles before opening night of the final tour at Bon Secours Wellness Arena on Thursday.

XTREME SPECTACLE MARKS FINAL CIRCUS

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Circus Xtreme is the theme for the final edition of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, and true to its title, they pulled out all the stops.

Thursday's opening night performance at Bon Secours Wellness Arena spotlighted feats of daring, like Nitro Nicole the 66-mph human cannonball, and moments of graceful beauty, with mermaid-costumed acrobats gracefully undulating from swings several feet in the air.

It was a bittersweet evening and a reminder of all the fun times I've spent at the circus, beginning when I was 8 years old, marveling at the working-without-a-net acrobats at the Charlotte Coliseum.

The first time I took my son Michael, now 16, to Ringling's circus, he was 2½. His memories include motorcycles racing around an iron sphere called the Globe of Death, and showers of confetti pouring down at the end of the show.



Bernadette Wood and her daughter, Fay, 3, take a ride on a swing during a Touch Tour "Behind the Scenes" event before opening night of the final tour of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus at Bon Secours Wellness Arena on Thursday.

This year's circus boasted neither of those things, but there were still enough attractions to keep both of us glued to the action on the arena floor for the entire two hours.

The show's opening sequence showcased clowns rappelling from the rafters down to an arena floor buzzing with acrobats and Mongolian strong men and first female ringmas-

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Kristen Michelle Wilson, ringmaster with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, talks to Emily Bailey, 9, about what it takes to be in the circus during a Touch Tour "Behind the Scenes" event at Bon Secours Wellness Arena on Thursday.

Circus

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ter Kristen Michelle Wilson singing the theme song while traveling the stage on a wheeled platform.

The iconic elephants are gone this year, and their place in the first-act spotlight was taken by camels parading around a circus ring.

Michael was impressed by Nitro Nicole, whose trip via cannon from one side of the arena to the other propels her at a force of 7 Gs, similar to what an F-16 pilot experiences in flight.

We both were captivated by animal trainer Taba Maluendo, who had a dozen Bengal tigers leaping and pawing as though they were oversized housecats.

But the finale, a cavalcade of athletes executing flips and bounces and synchronized leaps on a pair of trampolines separated by scaffolding, was a highlight for both of us. We watched in awe as they performed every bounce, right down to the hand motions, in perfect sync with the gymnast on the other side of the scaffolding.

As we sat in the car after the Greatest Show on Earth was over, Michael and I agreed that it was the end of an era.



Katie, a carpet python, becomes curious with the camera at Bon Secours Wellness Arena on Thursday.

And it's true; while there are other circuses out there, the Ringling name is one that feels synonymous with the circus. It's the circus that my parents took my siblings and me to see when we were kids, and it's the one I introduced to my son when he was still a toddler.

This final show may be Xtreme, but it feels like a fitting end to a 145-year tradition.

The Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus continues through Sunday. For more info, go to www.bonsecoursarena.com.