

Auditorim Memories – The Barn

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – From the time it opened 50 years ago, Veterans Memorial Auditorium – a solid brown brick building on the north edge of downtown – has been affectionately known as "The Barn."

Alden Berkenpas still remembers walking into the cavernous auditorium as a junior at Sioux Center High School in 1955, the first year the boys state basketball tournament was played there.

"Coming from a farming community, you'd say, 'Boy, this sure would hold a lot of hay,'" Berkenpas said.

It has held hordes of fans – and memories – through decades of high school tournaments and now, the clock is ticking toward the final buzzer.

The state wrestling tournament, which moved to Vet's in 1970, will be held there for the final time this week. The girls and boys basketball tournaments next month also will be played there for the last time.

Next year, all three tournaments will move to the snazzy new Wells Fargo Arena, now being built just east of the auditorium.

"Vet's kind of has a special atmosphere," said Jeff Kerber, who won four state wrestling championships in the building while at Emmetsburg. "I think it's going to be awful hard to replace that."

The 1955 girls tournament was the first played in the building. Girls basketball was strictly a small-town activity at the time and the population of all 16 towns represented in the tournament could have fit in the 15,357-seat arena – with 1,746 seats left over.

"I guess the thing that struck us the most probably was the size of the floor," said Marcia Hintz, who as Marcia Robinson led underdog Goldfield to the first state title at Vet's. "Our gym was really little. It was in the American Legion Hall. It just seemed enormous when we looked at that floor."

One year, that floor was packed with teenagers dancing in their socks to the sounds of Bill Haley, Elvis and the Everly Brothers. A blizzard hit Des Moines during the 1959 girls state championship game and the Iowa State Patrol announced that no one would be allowed on the roads that night.

So thousands of fans stayed in the auditorium and – literally – danced the night away while disc jockey Frosty Mitchell played records.

"The kids wanted to rock all night long and their parents wanted to shut it off and curl up in the seats and sleep," Mitchell said.

Gladbrook beat Maynard West Central for the state championship that night, but the Gladbrook players missed out on the fun.

"Somehow, we got over to the Hotel Fort Des Moines," said Judy Wendel, a forward on that team. "A lot of parents, boyfriends and friends followed us and stayed in the lobby. They were all over the place."

Ames beat Iowa City for the first boys title at Veterans Auditorium after knocking off a Dubuque team led by a young coach named Johnny Orr. Sioux Center was eliminated in the first round by Davenport St. Ambrose, finding that what had worked in tiny northwest Iowa gyms wasn't as effective on a larger floor.

"We played a 1-2-2 zone and in those small gyms, you can keep people from penetrating pretty easily," said Gary Boeyink, then a senior at Sioux Center. "St. Ambrose had this little guard by the name of Duffy and he dribbled right through it. We were just absolutely dumbfounded."

Berkenpas later experienced the auditorium as the coach at Mapleton Maple Valley. His 1981 team, led by his son, Todd, finished second in Class 2A. In 1985, Maple Valley played the longest game in state tournament history, beating Northwood-Kensett 87-81 in six overtimes.

Palmer won three consecutive boys titles at Vet's during its state-record 102-game winning streak, which ended with a 60-56 loss to Keota in the 1989 state semifinals.

Dozens of players who sprinted up and down the auditorium's portable floor went on to college careers. Some made it to the NBA, including Fred Hoiberg of Ames, Raef LaFrentz of Monona MFL-Mar-Mac, Kirk Hinrich of Sioux City West, Matt Bullard of West Des Moines Valley and Nick Collison of Iowa Falls.

Some became pros in other sports. Harlan's Billy Cundiff is the Dallas Cowboys' placekicker. Indianola's Casey Blake plays for the Cleveland Indians.

The girls tournament also became a show at the auditorium, complete with a lavish production number the night of the championship game. And who can forget the big map of the state that hung on the east side with the blinking lights indicating the teams in the tournament, lights that went out when those teams lost? Or the foul indicator at the scorer's table that had six lights because six fouls were allowed in the 6-on-6 game?

"The thing that set Vet's apart for me was the horn," said Bud Legg, who coached girls and boys teams at the auditorium and is now with the ISHAA. "It didn't sound like anyplace else. It was like when you heard it, you knew you had arrived."

Jeanette Lietz, who came to the tournament in 1968, said it was nothing like the cozy gym she played in back home in Everly.

"Coming from a small rural community to a big town like Des Moines, it's a culture shock," said Lietz.

Then known as Jeanette Olson, she scored 76 points in a shootout with Union-Whitten's Denise Long, who scored 64. Union-Whitten won 113-107 in overtime, probably the best game ever in the six-player era.

"I thought it would never end," Lietz said.

So many memories, so few days left.

"It's kind of sad to think it's coming to an end in Vet's Auditorium," Lietz said. "But I'm sure people who play in the new place will have just as fond of memories as I have of Vet's."