MINI GYM SERVED UP MAGICAL MOMENTS

Over 88 years, Loyola's small wonder was site of world records, hoop dreams

BY TONI GINNETI
tginetti@suntimes.com

She would be about history, from the time she dazzled the sports world with her arrival in 1923 to the decades she nurtured champions and confounded foes.

Her deep water pool was the only one in the Midwest, and it debuted with a Nov. 7, 1923, swimming exhibition of Olympic hopefuls — including future "Tarzan" star Johnny Weissmuller, who joined with three others in setting world records that night.

Later, the pool spawned the careers of nationally ranked collegiate water polo teams and the career of four-time All-American and Olympic water polo player Dan O'Connell.

The pool's unique depth meant swimmers could learn to be scuba divers — and instructor Ralph Erickson could become co-founder of the Professional Association of Diving Instructors in 1961.

Her offices were the backdrop for the signing of charters forming two collegiate conferences — the women's North Star Conference and the Midwestern City Conference, later known as the Midwestern Collegiate Conference, which became today's Horizon League.

An indoor track that helped train 1984 Olympic and indoor world mile record-holder Tom O'Hara was part of her bones. So was a volleyball venue that produced dozens of All-Americans and national collegiate championship teams.

The CYO and Golden Glove boxing matches were part of her glory.

But what Loyola's Alumni Gym was most about was basketball. And as her brick and mortar come down this month to make way for a new student union, basketball is what brings smiles to those who reminisce.

"The two games I think about most were in 1978 against Indiana State with Larry Bird on a Monday and then against Georgetown on Saturday in John Thompson's first year coaching," said Tom Hitch, senior associate athletic director and a Loyola staffer for 34 years.

"Both were nationally ranked, and we beat both of them. The place was so packed, people were standing on the court.

"I never saw so many Jesuits at a game," he said of the Georgetown meeting. "We were playing the flagship [of Jesuit colleges]. We beat them 68-65 [in overtime]."

"Thompson called [Alumni Gym] a 5th Street YMCA, and he said, 'I'm never coming back here. They still owe us a game.'"

Thompson exacted some revenge in 1985 when his Hoyas defeated the Ramblers in the Sweet 16 round of the NCAA tournament en route to their national title. But he wasn't the only opposing coach to curse the home-court advantage of the cozy second-floor gym that could hold no more than 2,000, many of whom often stood almost next to the players.

"I remember one of the players from Xavier couldn't make a move on the baseline because there were kids there," said senior associate athletic director Carolyn O'Connell, whose 31 years at the school are second only to Hitch. "He said they were the best sixth man in the country."
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Loyola students and fans storm the court after the Ramblers’ men’s volleyball team defeated defending national champion Penn State in 2009.

Jerry Harkness was the captain of the national championship team. His jumper with four seconds left sent the title game into overtime.

Tom O’Hara, who was a 1964 Olympian and indoor mile world-record holder, competed at Alumni Gym.

NOTABLE ALUMNI GYM MEMORIES

1923: Alumni Gym opens.
1962-63: Alumni Gym is the home of Loyola’s national champion men’s basketball team, the only Division I school in the state of Illinois to win the title.
1985: Michael Jordan films one of his first Nike Air Jordan commercials at Alumni Gym.
May 2002: Yao Ming holds his NBA tryout in Alumni Gym in front of a who’s who of NBA stars and executives.
Feb. 21, 2009: In front of a raucous crowd of 1,532, Loyola’s men’s volleyball team upsets then-No. 1 and defending national champion Penn State in five sets.
Nov. 6, 2010: Loyola defeats Robert Morris, 88-71, in an exhibition game.
April 27, 2011: The men’s volleyball team defeats Quincy in the final athletic contest at Alumni Gym.
May 7, 2011: A “Final Farewell to Alumni Gym” event is held for fans, alumni, former student-athletes and staff.

basketball championship team trained and triumphed. The 1963 Ramblers were 17-0 at home and 29-2 overall en route to the title. The Ramblers compiled an Alumni Gym record of 484-136

in May 2002, hundreds of NBA officials, coaches and scouts came to watch the first NBA tryout of Yao Ming, the first Chinese player to come to the United States.

“They were going to have it in New York, but they decided instead on Chicago,” Hitcho said. “The Gentile Center [Loyola’s current arena] was already booked, so we suggested Alumni Gym. There were so many satellite trucks and NBA people here.”

Pro teams were regular visitors too, using Alumni Gym and DePaul’s old Alumni Hall to practice before playing the Bulls.

“IT started because LaRue Martin [Loyola’s all-time leading rebounder] was playing for Portland [he was the Trail Blazers’ first-round pick in 1972], so they’d come here,” Hitcho said. “I remember when the Lakers came here once, their bus was arriving just as classes were getting out.

Magic Johnson and Kareem [Abdul-Jabbar] were getting off the bus, and the kids just mobbed them.

“Every player always talked about how great the floor was.”

“We went through two renovations of Alumni Gym, but both times, they never did anything to the floor. It was sacred ground.”

It was in Alumni Gym, of course, that the state’s only NCAA