

Husker's 'dark dungeon' torture chamber for foes

By Jim Rasmussen

When the Bob Devaney Sports Center opened its doors in 1976, it marked the end of an era in Nebraska basketball.

The Huskers left their old home, the Coliseum with its 8,500 wood bleacher seats, and moved into the Sports Center, with its 14,438 seats — many of them plush velvet chairs.

The Coliseum, which had been the home of Nebraska basketball since 1929, was relegated to a backup facility. The varsity volleyball team still plays its home games there, but other than that, the Coliseum is used mainly for intramural games and physical education classes.

Nebraska Coach Moe Iba played in the Coliseum during his days as an Oklahoma State cager and later coached in the Coliseum for several years as a Nebraska assistant. Iba talked recently about what it was like to play in the old building.

"I think the Coliseum was a very difficult place to play for the opposing team," Iba said. "The crowd was very close to the court and it was a very loud crowd. If you took the ball out on the sideline, you were standing right in the crowd."

Iba said he felt Nebraska lost some of the home-court edge it enjoyed in the Coliseum when the team moved to the Sports Center.

"The first two or three years in the new place, I thought we lost some home-court advantage," Iba said. "But since then, the crowd noise has picked up and with the bleachers pulled down, our crowd intimidation has really improved."

Bob Siegel, who starred for the Huskers from 1973-77, played in both places. Siegel is now an accounts marketing representative with IBM, and lives in Grand Island. He said he preferred playing in the Coliseum.

"The Coliseum had a gothic atmosphere that traditionally was hard for opponents to play in," Siegel said. "People called it 'the dark dungeon.' The dressing rooms were two stories

below the floor level. It's kind of hard to describe, but the Coliseum offered a player something the Sports Center didn't."

"The Sports Center had plush chairs, and the fans would sit back and not get involved as much," he said. "In the Coliseum, 8,500 people came to get involved. It wasn't a comfortable place, and the crowd really got involved and got behind you. On the floor it was very loud and the people sat within hair-pulling distance of the sidelines. It had an excellent floor and they turned the lights down so you couldn't see the crowd. I would have much rather ended my career there."

Nebraska assistant coach Tom Baack played his whole career in the Coliseum, from 1965 to '68. Baack said he enjoyed playing there, but that he prefers the Sports Center.

"The Coliseum was a great place to play," Baack said. "It had an excellent floor, and the enthusiasm was fantastic. The sideline was so close, and the fans were exceptionally rowdy. And with only 8,500 seats, the place was full very often."

Baack said the noise level in the Devaney Center isn't as high and that the atmosphere is typical of most new arenas. However, he said that the National Invitation Tournament games last year "showed that it can be a very difficult place for other teams to play."

"As a player, I'd rather play in the Sports Center," Baack said. "The convenience, the newness and the construction are great, and I think it's a better shooting facility than the Coliseum. You get a better view of the basket."

Iba said he thought that the new building was built mainly because of recruiting.

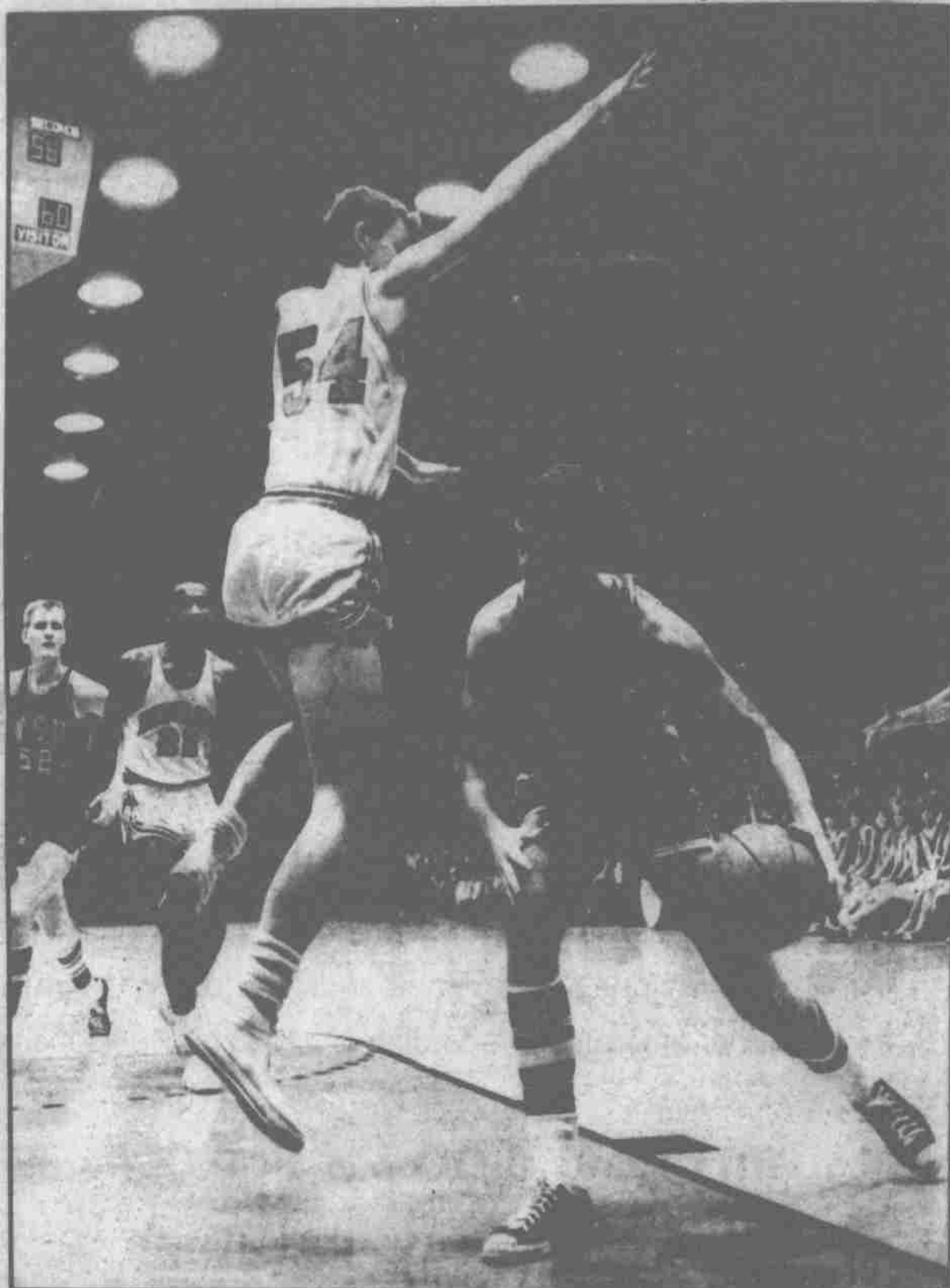
"There were a lot of new arenas going up and Nebraska wanted to keep up with the times," Iba said. "With the old building, we might have fallen behind other schools."

Siegel said he thought the Sports Center was built mainly for the fans.

"It's more comfortable and it's a better atmosphere to watch a ballgame in," Siegel said.



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Left: Nebraska's Stu Lantz (22) decides where to land during the 1966 red-white Nebraska basketball game. Nebraska assistant coach Tom Baack (32) trulls the play. Top right: Nebraska's Willie Campbell (34) and Frank Empkey (54) screen out Washington State players during a 1966 contest. The Huskers defeated the Cougars 80-78. Middle right: Nebraska's Empkey attempts to guard a Washington State player in the same 1966 game. Bottom right: The Coliseum in its 1983 state.