

50 Years of Nelson Fieldhouse

Robert Dunkelberger, 2005H and Ed Coar, 1978



Throughout the 2022-23 basketball season, program inserts for each conference game will mark the 50th anniversary of the opening of the E. H. Nelson Fieldhouse. These inserts will feature various aspects of the histories of the five longest running sports housed by the field house: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's swimming, and wrestling. Today's installment features a biography of Elna H. Nelson and the fieldhouse, and a summary of the first varsity sporting event held in the building.



Elna Harrison Nelson was born November 5, 1888, in Dyberry Township, Wayne County, and enrolled in the teacher education program at the Bloomsburg State Normal School (BSNS). Graduating in 1911, Nelson continued his education at the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and later New York University, where he earned his Ph.D. in 1932.

Nelson's teaching career began in the one room schools of Wayne County, followed by stops at the Dickinson Seminary in Williamsport (now Lycoming College), Highland Park High School and Junior College in Michigan, and Bethlehem Public Schools in Pennsylvania. In 1924 he returned to BSNS, which three years later became the Bloomsburg State Teachers' College (BSTC), as director of health education, and in 1925 was named the first Director of Athletics.

In addition to his administrative role, Nelson's love of athletics also led him into coaching, and for eight seasons from 1934-41 was in charge of his favorite sport, baseball. Blessed with excellent players, including future major leaguer Danny Litwhiler, he led the Huskies to a record of 55-29, a .655 winning percentage, including a perfect 12-0 record in 1935.

During the Second World War, Nelson was also director of physical and military training of the V-12 Navy Officers' training program at the college. He left Bloomsburg in 1945 when he was appointed Chief of Health and Physical Education in the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, retiring two years later. Nelson remained active with his alma mater, serving as president of the BSTC Alumni Association beginning in 1945 and continuing until his death on June 5, 1961, at age 72.

Basketball began at BSNS on December 13, 1894, less than one year after the opening of the new gymnasium attached to the main dormitory. The gym continued to be the team's home court until the opening of Centennial Gymnasium, which was inaugurated on February 27, 1942, with a 44-40 win over West Chester. This would be the new home for the Huskies for the next 30 seasons, although in the mid-1960s planning had already begun for a fieldhouse that was to be built on the upper campus, formerly a golf course. Ground was broken in 1970 and construction completed late in the summer of 1972.

The first scheduled intercollegiate athletic event for Bloomsburg State College in the new building was a varsity basketball game to be played on December 2, 1972. It was to be christened against West Chester, just as Centennial had been opened 30 years before.

The head coach for the Huskies was Charles Chronister, starting the second season of what would be a 31-year tenure. In his first year Bloomsburg posted a record of 18-7 and a solid line-up was back for the 1972-73 season.



A Husky fast break during the first game in Nelson.

Starting for the Huskies were: Tony DaRe (junior guard), Joe Krempski (junior forward), Captain Art "Artie" Luptowski (senior guard), Gary Tyler (sophomore forward), and John Willis (junior center). Luptowski was known as the Huskies "playmaker" during his years on the team and John Willis would eventually break a number of Bloomsburg scoring records, including most points in a game and career. Other players seeing action in the inaugural game were Gary Choyka, Gary Beatty, Richard Grace, Ron Keller, John Kesseg, Mike Ognosky, and Joe Woods.

Chronister had an excellent team this year and the Rams never had a chance. The Huskies jumped out to leads of 10-0, 20-6, led by 17 at the half, and coasted to the victory. The team exhibited deadly shooting from the field and foul line (11-11), dominated the backboards, and had a tenacious defense, on the way to a 79-51 victory. Willis led Bloomsburg with 19 points and 15 rebounds, with DaRe putting in 16 and eight of his teammates also on the scoreboard. A packed fieldhouse had a full evening, having enjoyed a preliminary game between the Husky Freshman and former players, the leading freshman scorer was Terry Zeigler with 22 points.



Less than five minutes to go!

The first season for the Huskies in Nelson Fieldhouse was a memorable one, the team finishing with a record of 19-5, plus one win at the University of the Virgin Islands played under international rules. Chronister was named Pennsylvania Conference Coach of the Year, and Willis (who scored a school record 505 points) and Luptowski named to the conference All-East first team and the National Association of Inter-collegiate Athletics (NAIA) District 19 all-star team. The 1972-73 season proved to be just the first of many fine seasons the men's basketball team has enjoyed in Nelson over the past 50 years.



Nelson Fieldhouse's first varsity men's basketball team, 1972-73. Left to right, kneeling: Coach Mike Herbert, Head Coach Charles Chronister, and Coach Burt Reese. Left to right, standing: Art Luptowski, Mike Ognosky, Joe Kempski, Dick Grace, John Kesseg, John Willis, Gary Beatty, Gary Tyler, Ron Keller, Gary Choyka, Joe Woods, and Tony DaRe.