

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 fieldhouse: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's swimming, and wrestling. Today's installment features a history of the first two decades of men's swimming at Bloomsburg, notable swimmers and its winningest coach, and the first season held in Nelson Fieldhouse.

Men's swimming at Bloomsburg has enjoyed great success over the last decade, being one of the top two teams in the conference under coach Stu Marvin. As an athletic activity on campus, it has been around for 80 years, starting with the opening of the first pool in Centennial Gym in 1942. At that time, during the Second World War, the pool was not used for athletic competition but military training. Simulating being downed in the ocean, naval trainees, who



The Centennial Gym swimming pool, 1951

were based on campus in Navy Hall, would jump in and swim with their gear.

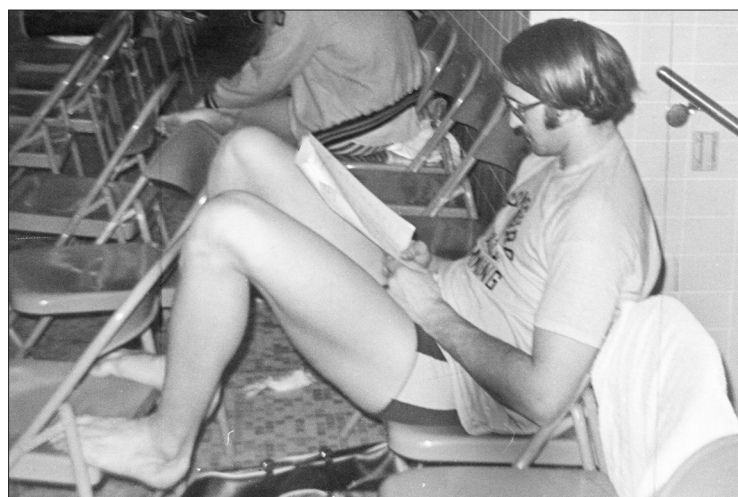
Following the war, the pool was solely used by men's and women's physical education classes until the 1959-60 school year. That was when the first varsity team in the sport began competition under assistant football coach Don Heilman, 30 years after the start of the second indoor sport, wrestling. The first team, which opened play on January 16, 1960, at Millersville, lost all six meets and Heilman soon left to become head football coach at Kutztown. The second season under Robert Zeigler was no better with an identical record.

A path to a successful program began in June 1961 with the hiring of Eli McLaughlin as an instructor in health and physical education. McLaughlin was a 1957 West Chester graduate and had taught for four years at Penncrest High

School in Delaware County. He coached on the school's football team and was slated to do the same at Bloomsburg, but had also spent eight years as a coach for private swimming clubs and served as a college swimming official. Based on this experience, he took over Bloomsburg's varsity team.

It was still slow going. The 1961-62 team defeated Morgan State for the first win in school history but still went 1-7. Then the following year on January 9, 1963, Millersville was downed for the first-ever conference victory. McLaughlin's first four teams went a combined 8-24, and then the years of experience and training paid off. The 1965-66 squad had an 8-4 record, matching the program's victory total for its first six seasons, and finished third in the state conference championship meet.

That year began a run of ten consecutive winning seasons in which the team posted a record of 89-39-2. During that decade the Huskies finished in fourth place in the state meet twice, seven times in third, and was the runner-up in 1968, losing to West Chester in the final event. Yet it was in individual play that the Bloomsburg swimmers excelled. Dave Gibas became the first All-American and national champion, in the 50 yard freestyle at the 1971 National As-



Dave Gibas, Bloomsburg's first All-American swimmer, taking a break between events, February 1973



Coach Eli McLaughlin (left) with his 1978 All-Americans (from left): Stu Marvin, Doug Thrane, Jim Balchunas, Wayne Richards, Steve Price, and Keith Torok.

sociation of Intercollegiate Athletics meet. He repeated as an All-American in 1972 and was a senior on the first men's swimming team to compete in the new fieldhouse.

The first meet in the new pool took place on December 6, 1972, against Monmouth College. Although a loss, the Huskies went on to win ten of their final 11 meets. It would

not be until 1975 that more Bloomsburg swimmers became All-Americans, this time at the NCAA Division II championships. The major contributor that year was Stu Marvin, who was awarded All-America status in three events.

While 1975 season ended the run of winning records and there would be just one more for the rest of the 1970s, a number of Huskies would become All-Americans. Wayne Richards was the first to accomplish that feat four years in a row, from 1976-79, winning the status six times in four different events. But Stu Marvin proved to be the team leader and in 1977 was once again a three-time All-American.

Then during the 1978 NCAA Division II championships, Marvin received the honor in five events, giving him 11 All-American honors for his career. In all Bloomsburg had 12 All-America awards that year and as a team finished 10th at the championships, the highest placement ever, and broke nine school records.

Eli McLaughlin concluded his career in 1985 with a record of 141-125-2 in 23 seasons. While there were no team titles, his swimmers enjoyed outstanding success in individual events and in relays, consistently breaking program records. Such a period of success would not return to Bloomsburg until the past decade under Stu Marvin.



Nelson Fieldhouse's first varsity men's swimming team, 1972-73. Kneeling, left to right: Stephan Coleman, Eric Cureton, Tim Sopko, Bill King, Joseph Hilgar, and Clair Hock. Standing, second row: Peter Richard, Jim Koehler, Doug Yocum, Bill Ewell, Richard Kozicki, Edward Grosik, Kirk Ohlinger, Peter Samsel, Jim Brown, Coach Jim Carlin, and Coach Eli McLaughlin. Third row: Dave Gibas, Jon Stoner, Garry Lausch, Conrad Auel, Jim Campbell, and David Lill.