

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 the story of one of the most memorable men's basketball teams to have played in Nelson Fieldhouse.

Big things were expected of the 1973-74 Bloomsburg men's basketball team, the first to play an entire season in Nelson Fieldhouse. The year before the Huskies had finished in a tie for second place in the Pennsylvania Conference's Eastern Division, two games behind Cheyney, which won its ninth consecutive division title. But this year Bloomsburg had an experienced roster, led by defending conference scoring champion John Willis, a 6' 8" center senior from Carbondale, who in 1972-73 set a school record which still stands of 389 rebounds. Joining him were fellow seniors Gary Choyka, Tony DaRe, and Joseph Kempiski. Youth was also going to play a role

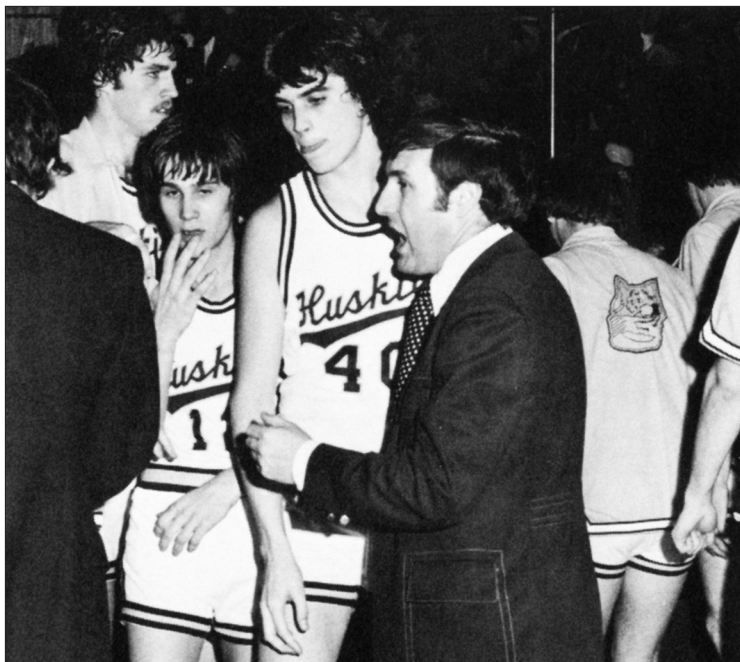
as well in the person of a 6' 5" freshman from New Cumberland, Jerry Radocha.

Head Coach Charles Chronister was enthusiastic about the players making up the roster, saying that Willis had a legitimate shot to be an All-American, Choyka had the knack for supplying quick offense off the bench, DaRe was an explosive offensive player, Kempiski the best defensive player on the squad, and Radocha had as much potential as any freshman at Bloomsburg ever had.

Although the season started with a five-point loss at Millersville, the team began almost immediately to play to its potential. By the end of December the Huskies boasted a record of 6-2, which included the championship of



The 1973-74 men's basketball team outside Nelson Fieldhouse, fall 1973. Front row, left to right: Mike Ognosky, Joe Kempiski, Bob Parambo, unknown, and Rich Yanni. Back row, left to right: Rich Evans, Jerry Radocha, Gary Tyler, Ron Keller, John Willis, Gary Choyka, Tony DaRe, and unknown.



Coach Chronister with Radocha (40) and Ognosky (12)

the Indiana (PA) Christmas Tree Classic. During the 76-40 demolition of Denison in the title game, Willis became just the fourth player in school history to reach 1,000 points.

Bloomsburg then split the next four contests to start the spring semester, losing 73-65 to Shippensburg at Nelson, what would prove to be the only home loss of the year. Then after two wins, a trip to their biggest rival Cheyney resulted in the worst defeat of the year by a count of 81-60.

Now 8-4, the Huskies were good but not playing their best. They changed that starting at Kutztown (a 103-76 win) and continued the rest of the regular season as they swept through their final 11 games. Only two were by less than ten points, with three of the games of special note. First, a week after beating Kutztown, Bloomsburg routed Millersville by 41, Willis totaling 21 points and a like number of rebounds, as the team made up for the opening loss.

Then, on February 20, the Cheyney Wolves were defeated 73-63, with Willis scoring 25 points and Mike Ognosky 15, including four goals from long range (before there were three-point shots) that put the Huskies in front. With the game not going his way in the second half, Cheyney head coach and future Hall-Famer John Chaney was ejected after two technical fouls, although he did congratulate Chronister before leaving the court. The win moved the Huskies into a first place tie and they would clinch the division title three days later over West Chester.

Bloomsburg closed the regular season with two non-conference games, the second with York College on February 26. In this contest Willis soared to heights that have not been seen either before or since, scoring a school record 48 points, on 17 baskets and 14 free throws, in a 115-70 win.

Although the conference title game was a letdown, a 79-69 loss at Indiana (PA), the Huskies' record of 19-5 still meant a trip to the postseason and the NCAA regional at Albright College in Reading.

After wins over Johns Hopkins and King's, the Huskies routed the host team 92-78. Radocha scored 20 in the opener with Willis ailing, but the center returned for the final two contests, putting in 58. They then moved on to Evansville, Indiana, and the NCAA Championships, one of the final eight teams in the country. But the magic ended against eventual champion Morgan State, led by future NBA star Marvin Webster. Willis finished his career with a school record 1455, breaking Bob Herzig's mark set nine years before, and as a team Bloomsburg had another school record with 22 victories.

Nelson Fieldhouse has seen other excellent men's basketball teams, including the first conference tournament championship in 1981 and a still-record 27 wins in 1988-89. But the first great season is always special and the 1973-74 squad provided Husky fans with a memorable year.



Jerry Radocha pulling down a rebound, with John Willis (left) and Gary Tyler (right) watching, during the 66-65 NCAA regional win over Kings, March 8, 1974.