Men's Basketball from Ahearn Field House to "Octagon of Doom!"

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With the recent success of the men's basketball team in Bramlage Coliseum, now known as the "Octagon of Doom," K-State fans forget or don't realize that Bramlage hasn't always been a deafening and intimidating place for visiting teams. In fact, the opening of the new basketball facility in 1988 and leaving Ahearn Field House, the Wildcat's home for over 35 years, was not without controversy, controversy that has lingered to this day among many long time members of the K-State faithful and others aware of Bramlage's history.

From the time the Cats beat Utah State in the first game played in Ahearn Field House on December 9, 1950, the structure has remained an icon for K-State basketball, the place that coaches of opposing teams called the loudest and most difficult place to play in the country. Leaving the cramped and antiquated Nichols Gym for a modern facility like Ahearn was a "dream comes true" for Wildcats fans: after all, Coach Jack Gardner had taken the Wildcats from Nichols to the final four in the 1948 NCAA tournament before losing. Because of overcrowded conditions the rafters of Nichols became a place for fans to watch games rather than a location to hang retired jerseys of outstanding players. When completed, Ahearn was one of the largest and most envied college basketball arenas in the country (Allen Field House opened at the University of Kansas in 1955). After arriving in Ahearn, the Wildcats sent 17 more teams to the NCAA tournament, 3 made final four appearances (1951, 1958, and 1964).

During the 1970s athletic departments around the country started "keeping up with the Jones' " by constructing new basketball palaces for their programs in order to entice big time recruits and
accommodate more fans (and generate more revenue!). K-State jumped on the band wagon and planning for a new field house moved forward in the 1980s. However, the decision did not come without considerable differences of opinion among Wildcat followers. The months before construction on Bramlage began was a difficult period, one reason being the plans for the proposed 16,000 seat building failed to materialize when bids from construction firms came in way over cost. As a result, the design was scaled back to a 13,500 seat arena to come in line with the funds allocated for the new facility. Finding additional appropriations to allow the construction of a larger field house did not appear to be popular with those holding the purse strings at the time in part because not only would the arena be expensive, it was envisioned that a larger field house could create empty seats because of the estimated fan base in Kansas. The average attendance per game in Ahearn the last five years the team played there was approximately 8,600! For Ahearn proponents, renovating and remodeling the "old barn" into a larger and modern facility was ruled out because it was reported that the structure would not allow physical changes regardless of the cost. Originally accommodating 14,000 fans, in time seating was reduced to 11,700 when space had to be eliminated to satisfy modern safety codes. The ground breaking for Bramlage took place on October 16, 1986 and the first game was played on November 26, 1988 when the Wildcats defeated Purdue coached by Gene Keady who graduated from K-State in 1958! There were, and remain, many unhappy campers regarding the abandonment of Ahearn, including those who wanted the new facility to hold more fans to watch successful teams in the future (fast forward to 2010, "what were they thinking?").

Unlike the Wildcat fans that followed their team from Nichols Gym to Ahearn Field House, the disappointment of Ahearn fans in Bramlage, as well as from fans that were not aware of the Ahearn tradition, intensified among many backers because the Wildcats failed to win big not too long after they arrived in their new home for the 1988-1989 season. While Coach Lon Kruger took the Wildcats to the NCAA tournament in 1989 and 1990 (with
modest 19-11 and 17-15 records!), they lost in the first round on both trips. Ironically, Kruger’s two teams in Ahearn, the last to play in the old field house, had records of 20-11 (1986-1987) and 25-9 (1987-1988) and advanced to the NCAA tournament. Ahearn's last team went to the "Elite 8" before losing to (drum roll, please!) the Kansas Jayhawks who went on to win the national championship! Once in Bramlage, the atmosphere and home court advantage left much to be desired; more often than not the Cats played to modest crowds over the years. After the first two seasons when attendance averaged over 12,000, the turn out slipped to an average of 7,742 by the 2005-2006 season. Although the record in Bramlage for the first 21 seasons was 245 wins with 88 losses (as critics of the Wildcats' schedule are quick to point out, each year many of the victories came against Division II schools or lower echelon Division I programs prior to the start of Big 12 play, and were not crowd pleasers), the Big 12 record at home stood at a less than impressive 91-70, or .565%. It can be surmised that the environment that existed between Coach Lon Kruger's last season in Bramlage, 1989-1990, and when Bob Huggins arrived for the 2006-2007 campaign, was not conducive to attracting prize recruits to the prairie in large numbers, or sustaining a high level of excitement among fans when compared to the atmosphere in Bramlage the last few years.

Before last season when the Wildcats under Frank Martin beat the University of Southern California in the first round of the NCAA tournament, only four other teams had participated in the tourney during the 21 seasons the Cats played in Bramlage, including Kruger’s first two teams in the Coliseum; all failed to win their first round games. It had been 12 years since the Cats' last appearance in the "Big Dance"! And, K-State has yet to win a conference championship in Bramlage after winning 19 titles in Ahearn and Nichols. Although the jerseys of 10 former players have been retired in the rafters of Bramlage, none of them played in the facility.

While not the focus of this "Keepsake," it should be noted that the women's basketball teams have enjoyed success in Ahearn and Bramlage. The Wildcats were Big 12 champions in 2004 and 2008, and in 2007 won the National Invitational Tournament (NIT) before boisterous sellout crowds in Bramlage, crowds that definitely doomed the visiting teams. All-Americans Nichole Ohlde, Kendra Wecker, and Shalee Lehning, whose jerseys hang in Bramlage, excited large crowds during their years at K-State.

Although the men’s program has experienced some success in Bramlage, and there have been quality coaches and exciting players for fans to enjoy (and it is usually difficult for visiting teams to win on the road, including at K-State), it is easy to ascertain that until the last few seasons Bramlage was not the "Octagon of Doom" that fits the definition that has been created recently. Building on the excitement that coach Bob Huggins brought to Bramlage in 2006-2007, and that al-
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American Michael Beasley and first year coach Frank Martin created the next year, the 2009-2010 season with Martin's passion, fans who have adopted favorite players such as Jacob Pullen with his "fear the beard" moniker, and a sea of intimidating signs in the raucous crowd to welcome opposing teams, Bramlage has been able to shed its personality as an all too often sterile and emotionless place to play, at least for now.

In January 2010, after a victory in Bramlage over number one ranked Texas that was televised nationally on ESPN's "Big Monday" time slot, the Wildcats fell to Oklahoma State and the University of Kansas in the Coliseum. On January 30, ESPN showcased the K-State/KU game where announcers broadcast its "Game Day" coverage. Over 8,000 fans camped out early to gain priority seating in the stands for national exposure on television. Their energy and noise did not disappoint the "Game Day" announcers and TV audience! That evening the Wildcats battled the number two ranked Jayhawks as ESPN's nationally televised game, one that was played in front of a wild capacity crowd of 12,528 people. However, for the 21st time in their last 22 meetings in the Coliseum, the Jayhawks prevailed, winning in overtime. The loss dropped the Wildcats to a record of 4-3 in the league, giving the Jayhawks control of the conference race and damaging the Cat's chances of winning the Big 12 title. And, the Jayhawks moved to number one in the national rankings the following Monday.

Time will tell if the Wildcats are to remain successful and continue to play in front of fanatic fans that fill Bramlage to capacity using the "Octagon of Doom" to intimidate their opponents; or if the slogan that resonates today will be allowed to drift to the rafters as a memory only to be brought out on occasion for games against the Jayhawks in front of crowds who don't understand its origin or true significance. "Every Man a Wildcat" hopes the "doom" that is featured this season in Bramlage Coliseum becomes a tradition that hasn't existed since basketball moved there from Ahearn Field House.

Author's note: the author attended men's basketball games in Ahearn Field House, including the grand finale, and has gone to numerous games in Bramlage since it opened.

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Sources: Media guides for men's and women's basketball, K-State Department of Intercollegiate Athletics web pages; University Archives Vertical Files containing newspaper articles and other items documenting K-State's basketball teams; University Archives Photograph Collection; photographs of "Octagon of Doom" scenes in Bramlage courtesy of Carolyn Hodgson; cutout of Michael Beasley courtesy of Mary Radnor; Frank Martin card courtesy of Debbie Wasinger.