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ERWIN CENTER

From Abe Lemons to Shaq to the Austin Wranglers, the Erwin Center has showcased sports

Thirty years of thrills for Austin's top sports venue



By John Maher AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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The Erwin Center, which recently turned 30, has been Austin's big top for everything from the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus to a parade of performing artists.

By the center's estimation, more than 24 million people have passed through its turnstiles at some 6,000 events. But while the Erwin Center has been a true multipurpose building, sports — particularly basketball — have been a vital part of the center's busy schedule.



Sung Park AMERICAN-STATESMAN (enlarge photo)

In 2002, the UT women's basketball team defeated Tennessee 63-62 at the Erwin Center as their coaches, Texas coach Jody Conradt and Tennessee coach Pat Summitt, were both closing fast on the 800-win milestone.



Indeed, the Erwin Center was conceived with the goal of finally taking Texas basketball into the big time.

The 1974 men's basketball media guide, which featured an artist's rendering of the proposed building on the back cover, explained, "Twenty-five years ago, people talked of making a basketball palace at the University of Texas which would be second to none in the nation. For 25 years the dream remained dormant."

Anticipation was such that the next year, the same drawing was used for the media guide? this time on the front cover. And the following year, some girders at the construction site made the front cover.

On Nov. 29, 1977, the center was finally ready for some hoops. Although Abe Lemons' team beat Oklahoma 83-76 that night, it was Jody Conradt's team that broke in the floor with a win over Temple Junior College. Temple's Ewella Munn, however, scored the first basket in the building's history.

"It was a baseline jumper from the right side. I took it right to 'em," said Munn, now a middle school physical education teacher in El Paso.

The Erwin Center has been providing thrills ever since.

First loss

Feb. 1, 1979

Arkansas 68, Texas 58

After nearly two seasons, the Texas men still were undefeated in the Erwin Center when Eddie Sutton brought his Arkansas team to town. The most heated moment came when Sutton complained to Texas guard Johnny Moore about a pick.

Coach Abe Lemons charged toward Sutton, threatening to rip his "Sunday suit" for berating one of his Texas players.

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[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

On Feb. 28 Kevin Durant played his last home game as a Longhorn in The Drum. He and his burnt orange crew defeated Texas A&M in a double overtime tooth-and-nail battle with Acie Law.

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Answered prayer

March 14, 1981

Arkansas 74, Louisville 73

In a second round shootout at the NCAA Midwest Regional, defending NCAA champion Louisville and Arkansas were playing for a spot in the Sweet 16.

With five seconds left, Arkansas trailed 73-72. Razorbacks guard Darrell Walker threw the inbounds pass to U.S. Reed, who began dribbling up the court, weaving through a pair of backpedaling Louisville defenders. With the clock almost down to its last tick, Reed jumped at midcourt, threw up a running one-hander and then, 49 feet later, had it rip through the net for the game winner.

It was the first time the Erwin Center hosted the men's tournament, but it would not be the last.

Perfect setup

March 22, 1986

Texas 66, Mississippi 63

Heading into the Mideast Regional final, undefeated Texas looked every inch the No. 1 women's team in the nation. The only problem was that Texas had finished No. 1 in the country the previous two seasons and had not made it out of the regional in either year.

Mississippi had its own money player in Jennifer Gillom, who scored 25 points, but as some of the Texas veterans struggled, sophomore Beverly Williams responded with a then career-high 20 points.

"That Ole Miss game was so tense that it didn't even feel like a win," Texas' Fran Harris later said.

With the pressure released, Texas roared through its two Final Four games to become the first unbeaten NCAA champion.

An empire strikes back

March 27, 1987

Louisiana Tech 79, Texas 75

The UT women were poised to defeat nemesis Louisiana Tech in the first game of the Final Four, in front of the Erwin Center's first sellout crowd for women's basketball.

Then Louisiana Tech defensive ace Teresa Weatherspoon crouched down, slapped her palms on the court and stole the ball from Beverly Williams. Louisiana Tech went on to stun the defending national champions and No. 1-ranked Longhorns on their home floor.

Big Shaq attack

March 11, 1989: San Antonio Cole 66, Clarksville 60

As hard as it is to believe now, San Antonio Cole's seven-footer, Shaquille O'Neal, was almost unknown in the high school recruiting world. O'Neal's father was in the military and Shaq was in Europe when Louisiana State coach Dale Brown first saw him. O'Neal came to San Antonio in 1987. Cole was a small Class 3A school and never played before many fans. In his junior season, O'Neal and Cole were stopped short of the state tournament by Liberty Hill in their only loss of the season. Finally, in his senior year, O'Neal had a big audience and didn't disappoint.

Strollin' Nolan

Feb. 4, 1990

Arkansas 103 Texas 96

Disgusted with the officiating, Arkansas coach Nolan Richardson left the bench and went to the locker room while the Longhorns-Razorbacks game was still in progress. Then Lee Mayberry hit a 28-foot three-pointer to send the game into overtime, prompting Richardson to return to the floor.

"The place went bonkers. That's about as excited as we want fans to get," recalled John Graham, the Erwin Center's director.

Oklahoma outfoxed

March 17, 1990

North Carolina 79 Oklahoma 77

Billy Tubbs' Oklahoma squad entered the Midwest Regional as the country's No. 1 team. North Carolina was about as down as North Carolina ever gets, in the regional's eighth seed after having lost four of six games. But Dean Smith's team still had an NBA talent in Rick Fox, who scored 21 points and hit a banker

near the buzzer to secure the upset.

Streak buster

March 1, 1991

Victoria 38, Duncanville 36

Scoring was spare, drama was not. Sandra Meadows' Duncanville girls team was not only the three-time defending 5A champions, it had won a staggering 134 straight games entering the semifinal with Victoria.

Although Victoria had its own coaching legend in Jan Lahodny, it was not one of her strongest teams, finishing second in district with a 26-11 record. Yet Duncanville couldn't shake Victoria and was down by two points when Connie Perryman's final three-point attempt hit off the backboard, headed into the basket and rimmed out. The game remains one of the biggest upsets in girls UIL state basketball tournament history. It was the high point for Victoria, which lost to Amarillo Tascosa in the title game.

Time stands still

Dec. 21, 1993

Texas 93, Utah 91 (2 OT)

With 0.2 seconds left on the clock, Texas' Tommy Penders heaved a full-court pass to Tremaine Wingfield, who hit an 18-foot jumper to send the game into overtime. In the second overtime, the pair teamed up on the same play, although they had a lot more time to work with, 1.4 seconds.

"The first time, I was shocked," Wingfield said. "I felt good about the shot, but I did not think it was going to go in. (The second jumper) felt good on the release, and luckily I shot it hard enough for it go off the glass."

Don't get a T.O., baby

March 19, 1995: Arkansas 96, Syracuse 94 (OT)

Defending national champion Arkansas seemed to have one last chance to stave off elimination in the second round of the Midwest Regional. Down 82-81 with 6.3 seconds left, the Razorbacks put the ball into play only to have Syracuse's Lucious Jackson make a diving steal.

Arkansas players quickly swarmed him to try to force a jump ball, although the possession arrow was in Syracuse's favor. But Syracuse's Lawrence Moten had called time out, one that his team didn't have.

Courtesy of that technical foul, Scotty Thurman hit one of two free throws, sending the game into overtime, where Arkansas was able to escape with a win.

Boxing after dark

Feb. 23, 2001

El Matador vs. Tom Johnson

The Erwin Center, more than 23 years old at this point, had never hosted a professional boxing event. The special occasion was the return to the ring of local favorite Jesus "El Matador" Chavez, who'd been deported to Mexico in 1997.

Chavez easily won his fight against Tom "Boom Boom" Johnson, but he wasn't the only boxer who showed promise that night. On the undercard were two fighters — Cory Spinks and Miguel Cotto — who would become welterweight champions.

Cotto, who's still undefeated, made his professional debut that day as did a huge crowd favorite, beer, which was sold for the first time at an Erwin Center sporting event.

ESPY nomination

March 9, 2002: San Antonio Jay 54, Dallas Kimball 53

It looked like favored Dallas Kimball, led by future Texas A&M star Acie Law, was about to claim the UIL Class 5A state championship. With only a few seconds left, Kimball had the ball and was at the free throw line. Even when the free throw was missed, Kimball grabbed the rebound. That's when Jay point guard Chris Ross stole the ball, raced to halfcourt, jumped, double clutched, fell down — and hit the game-winning three-pointer.

The play not only earned him the game's MVP award, but also an ESPY nomination for the most spectacular play of the year, an award that Derek Jeter later captured.

Clash of the titans

Dec. 21, 2002

Texas 63, Tennessee 62

Both Tennessee's Pat Summitt and Texas' Jody Conradt were closing fast on 800 career wins when the teams met in Austin. Tennessee was ranked No. 4, but No. 22 Texas took a stunning lead when freshman Nina Norman broke a 60-60 tie by hitting a three-pointer with one second left. The Longhorns were slapped with a technical foul for their celebration, but Tennessee's two free throws weren't enough. Texas went on to reach the Final Four for the first time since 1987.

Wranglers debut

Feb. 22, 2004

Austin 56, Tampa Bay 48

OK, so almost every Arena Football League game is high scoring and close. But this was the first football game in the Erwin Center's history and getting the arena ready for the quirky sport was no small achievement.

Upon further review ...

March 27, 2005: Michigan State 94, Kentucky 88 (2 OT)

With a spot in the Final Four at stake, Kentucky's Patrick Sparks hit a three-pointer to tie the game. Or did he?

Not one, not two, but more than seven minutes passed as officials reviewed replays to see whether Sparks' foot had touched the three-point line. The eventual ruling that he hadn't — which sent the game into overtime — appeared to swing momentum to Kentucky. Yet Michigan State hung on in the first overtime and pulled away in the second.

Graham said it's as good a basketball game as the Erwin Center has seen.

The short hello

Feb. 28, 2007

Texas 98, Texas A&M 96 (2 OT)

Although Kevin Durant was only a freshman, his last home game at Texas came against Acie Law and No. 7 Texas A&M. Law forced both overtimes by nailing three-pointers, but Durant had 30 points and 16 rebounds to leave the Erwin Center as a winner.

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