

MSU Ice Hockey: New Beginnings

By Allison Ianni and Jessy Wise

When hockey started back up again in the 1950's, it did so with a new facility. Games would no longer depend on the weather. Games would not be cancelled as a result of the ice melting, or not being stable enough for games. The hockey team would have a new facility to play in-a new ice rink in Demonstration Hall. Originally used for basketball, riding shows, and other activities, Demonstration Hall would prove to be a very good home for the Michigan State College Hockey Team. The new arena would seat 4,000 spectators, and was

'rated as one of the finest ice plants in the country,' according to a booklet prepared before the 1950 season by then-Sports Information Director Fred W. Stabley. It was also one of the couple that could manufacture ice any time it liked, and boasted a playing surface that measured 200x87 feet (NHL regulation today is 200x85).¹

However, as great as Demonstration Hall was for the betterment of Michigan State Hockey, it was not without its limitations. For one, there were no locker rooms in Dem Hall. Both teams had to dress across the street in Jenison Field House, then walk back to Dem Hall where they could change into their skates in a small room before stepping onto the ice.² Granted, this did prove to be an advantage for the most part for the Spartans, because it had the potential to knock other teams off of their game, but nevertheless, it was still a large inconvenience. In addition to there being no locker rooms for the teams,

¹ Mike Prisuta, *Awe Inspiring: The Storied History of Spartan Hockey* (United States: Walsworth, 1997)

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² Prisuta, 15.

there were also no bathroom facilities for them as well. If a player really had to use the restroom, they had to take off their skates, and use the same men's room that the fans used. Granted, while the hockey team was trying to "find themselves" so to speak, it was not really a problem because the attendance at games was not overwhelming. However, as the popularity of the sport grew, it became more and more of a problem.³

Another rather large problem for the hockey team was that they did not have priority when it came to using the facility. The rink manager, was giving figure skating priority much too often when Bessone was trying to practice. He was often only given times like 9, 10, or 11 in the morning as practice options which created a large problem because practice then conflicted with player's class schedules. Eventually, Bessone went to then-Athletic Director, Ralph Young, to complain. Young had no idea that this was occurring and immediately put an end to the scheduling conflicts. From there on out, the hockey team practiced from three to six p.m. each and every day.⁴

Yet another problem with Dem Hall was that there was such thing as a "bad seat." Most sporting venues that exist today boast that there is not a bad seat in the house. However, this was not the case for Demonstration Hall. Seating in the ice arena was limited, for seats were only located in the end zones, and on one side of the ice. Only a few seats in the first few rows offered unobstructed views, and the majority of the seats had some type of impaired view whether it was one of the many support pillars, or by sharp angles. According to Bessone, "'We were the only rink that guaranteed you a lousy seat.'"⁵ Early on, when Michigan State Hockey was trying to find success, Dem Hall was not a bad venue, and these problems were tolerable. However, as the success of

³ Prisuta, 15.

⁴ Prisuta, 15.

⁵ Prisuta, 16.

the sport came, and more fans became interested and attended more games, it was clear that Demonstration Hall just would not suffice as an acceptable location for the games, and some type of change had to be made.

One of the major problems with Demonstration Hall, as mentioned earlier, was the fact that the hockey team was forced to share their facility with figure skating as well as public skate time. One of the first documents to be examined is a letter from the ice manager, W.H. Bainbridge, to Athletic Director, Clarence “Biggie” Munn in March of 1970 regarding the money losses occurring with the operation of the ice arena. The document describes the fact that labor costs were rising, so in order to make up for that, public skate prices would also have to be raised. The cost of skate rental would remain the same, but admission into the rink would ideally be raised by 25 cents for adults, faculty and staff, and children to boost revenue.⁶

Although it would seem, on the surface, that this document would be irrelevant to the facilitating of building a new arena, however, it does underline some very important revenue issues. Where was the university going to get the money to make the changes necessary to accommodate the growing sport? One of the large problems with the rink at Dem Hall was the fact that, as stated in this letter, the ice arena was experiencing yearly losses. If the arena was not making money, the university would have to look elsewhere to finance this new operation. What that operation would be though, was still up in the air.

It was, pretty much an accepted fact that in order to accommodate a successful hockey program, a while new ice arena would need to be built. But with the possibility of a new arena looming, where would ice skating fit into the schedule? It was definitely

⁶ “MSU Archives. “Biggie Munn Papers,” UA 17.75.

a concern for the ice skaters, which is demonstrated in a letter from “Biggie” Munn, University Athletic Director, to Frank Turks, President of the Lansing Skating Club in August of 1970. In his letter, Munn states that he will be meeting with Jack Breslin (University athletic administrator at that time) to discuss the role of the new rink. Munn also states that he is “in hopes that [they] will be able to more on getting a new one.”⁷ Here, from this letter, it can be observed that the ideal solution to the problem would be to build a completely new rink, where hockey can have their own facility, and the university can rent our times to other groups that may want to use it. This way, the university would be able to make money off of the groups that want to use it. For example, if the athletic department allowed the figure skaters, or the Lansing Skating Club to use the facility for free, as if they are entitled to use it, there would be some monetary repercussions. The people that run the arena have to be paid, as well as there being a lot of money needed to keep an ice rink running. Therefore, if the university was going to share the rink with other groups, it would need to find some way of generating all of the necessary funds to do so. Thus, the role of groups such as the Lansing Skating Club in the new arena would need to be evaluated. This was to be a facility for Michigan State Hockey as its number one priority, and all other groups would have to pay a certain price for the opportunity to use it.

In December 1970, a letter from “Biggie” Munn to Dr. Jack Fuzak confirmed that the number one priority at the point in time was the building of a new ice rink. It had been determined that the present rink (Demonstration Hall) is inadequate not only for hockey, but for all of the other groups that use it as well. It was conceptualized that the

⁷ “MSU Archives. “Biggie Munn Papers,” UA 17.75.

new facility would seat somewhere from 6,000 to 7,000 with locker rooms, hallways for concessions, and small office spaces. The greatest concern was that the rink would be built too small, which other newly built rinks around the country were facing. “Biggie” was seeking the Athletic Council’s approval for immediate planning and action for this new project. He was very excited to

...start moving on the project because of the poor facilities...the increased popularity of Hockey, and the increased demands on the money [they would earn]. [He believed] that Hockey will eventually be one of our top income sports.⁸

Munn truly believed that this new hockey arena could totally change the face of Michigan State athletics, and looking back on it, he was right. The new arena was finally going to be built, and it was just the change the Michigan State Hockey Program was looking for.

This new arena, Munn Ice Arena, was built in 1974. It seats 6,470 fans, and is acknowledged as one of the finest collegiate hockey facilities in the country.⁹ It is a facility that is constantly changing and being updated. For the 1999-2000 season, luxury boxes, club seating, and a new press box were all added to the facility, and for 2001-2002, new scoreboards and video boards were installed. The facility is a selling point for many recruits who come to campus. The building is still in great shape, and in a great location on campus. Munn has not had an available seat at a regular season game since 1985, and in 2007, was first in the CCHA, and fourth in the nation for attendance.¹⁰

Munn also addressed many of the problems with Demonstration Hall so that the same problems would not occur at Munn Ice Arena.

⁸ “MSU Archives. “Biggie Munn Papers,” UA 17.75.

⁹ Munn Ice Arena, *About the Munn*, <http://www.munnicearena.com/about.html> (March 15, 2008).

¹⁰ <http://www.munnicearena.com/about.html>

The upper spectator viewing area included excellent sight lines for all seating...the lower level contains service areas for building maintenance, as well as offices and quarters for varsity...and visiting teams. A training room, equipment room, study room, and players lounge are all located alongside the Spartan Hockey locker room.¹¹

What is probably the most important fact about Munn Ice Arena is that scheduling conflicts are avoided because it is strictly a hockey-only facility!

Michigan State Hockey has come a long way in the last 58 years, and much of that success can be attributed to the change in facilities. From not having locker rooms or bathroom facilities, to the team having a training room, equipment room, weight room, etc., the changes have only helped to make our teams that much more successful. In addition to helping our team to achieve success, the University has made even going to the games a much more enjoyable experience for the fans, and by increasing the amount of people that can actually sit in the stands with a good seat, they have been able to increase the fan base of hockey by making such a pleasant experience for all. The moving of hockey from Dem Hall was not only a necessary decision, but one that the hockey team and the athletic department has benefited from, and continues to benefit from each and every year.

¹¹ <http://www.munnicearena.com/about.html>