

THE BIG HOUSE???

Charley Heatly: The REAL STORY about "The Big House"

by Chris Wilfong

When talking about High School basketball in Oklahoma, most would be hard-pressed to not mention or talk about "The Big House" in the same conversation. Most would have a story to tell about when they played or coached there at one time or even how close they got to actually getting there. Most could tell stories of watching games there. Great games, Championships, incredible performances, all would be talked about. But no matter how many stories are told, it all comes back to one place ... "The Big House".

When putting this publication together, one question kept pressing in my mind: How did State Fair Arena/Jim Norick Arena get the name "The Big House"? I had heard myths and rumors but wasn't sure of the truth. So I did what any other person would do, I went to the internet.

In searching The Oklahoman archives, the first reference I could find was in a Thursday, March 9, 1978 article about the upcoming 1978 tournament by Lynn Garnand. He references The Big House as the "big house" so I knew that wasn't official enough because he didn't even capitalize the name! So I was sure that that had not been the first reference. So then I asked a few people, mostly coaches and finally I got a lead.

My wife asked Rocky Clarke, head girls basketball coach at Washington High School, and he immediately responded with "Joe Tunnel". When she told me, my reaction was "He's a football coach. It couldn't be him." I mean, The Big House is all about basketball, it couldn't have come from a football coach! He also suggested I talk to Charley Heatly from Lindsay. So, I called him up.

I've known Charley for a few years now. Many know him from his incredible coaching days at Lindsay, the state championships he has won and even his basketball camps he hosted for many years but for most, like me, he's known as the guy who has played the music at "The Big House" during the state tournament for many years.

I told him I would like to get together with him and talk about "The Big House". He said that would be great but he said most people want to know how "The Big House" got its name. I was going to wait and ask him when we met but I couldn't wait! I asked him to please tell me... here's the story he told me:

Joe Tunnel, the great high school football coach at Rush Springs, came to Lindsay to coach football but he also my assistant coach in girls basketball. He was at Lindsay for 13 years and we had a great relationship. Joe had a great memory and he was always coming up with sayings and nicknames. In 1968, we had won our area tournament and had qualified to go to the state tournament at State Fair Arena. When we got back to school that next week, I saw Coach Tunnel and the first thing he said to me was "Looks like you made it to the big house!" I had never heard it called that before but I said "Yeah, I guess we did." I started saying that with my team that year and we won state. But from that point on, when the playoffs would start I would say, "We are only so many games away from getting to go to 'The Big House' or only one more half until we make it to 'The Big House.'" I would write it up on the chalk board in our game situations and it was kind of a deal with us.



CHARLEY HEATLY - 1962

A couple of years later, a good friend of mine, Dick Noble, who was a sporting goods salesman in Lawton, came by the school to visit because we bought a lot of our sporting goods from him at the school. He told me that he had just gotten the rights, from the Activities Association, to sell the T-shirts at the state tournament. The previous agreement with former OU quarterback Steve Davis was over and he had the rights. One of the things I did a lot was come up with sayings or catch phrases that I would use with my team or at my camps. Dick asked me for a couple of those sayings so he could put them on the shirts. I gave him a couple then I told him to try this one. "You've made it to The Big House." Well, he did and that shirt was his best selling shirt, in fact he sold out of them. From that point on, he always had a Big House shirt and eventually the PA announcer at the arena would start calling it The Big House.

I've told this story many times. In fact, Ray Soldan, the great high school sports writer for The Oklahoman, came and sat down next to me when I was playing the music during the state tournament and asked me "How did the Big House name get started?" I told him the same story.

And there it was. I finally had the truth. Now, others may claim to have called it The Big House first but this story would be hard to dispute from two All-Time greats in Oklahoma high school sports coaching.

Truth is, I had Charley tell me the story twice. My wife and I went to visit Charley and his lovely wife, Sheneesta, at their home in

Lindsay. Charley told us story after story while Sheneesta filled in the details that Charley may have left out. He showed me his office with pictures of his teams, accomplishments and pictures from his camps years ago. My wife shared that she had attended his basketball camp when she was in high school because that was "the one must go to basketball camp." We even got out many of his old scrap books and looked through cutouts of newspaper articles he has kept over these many years. He also showed me the stacks of programs he had kept over the years from the times when he was in charge of putting those together. So many memories.

The last thing he showed me before we left was a check, which he still has, that he wrote to Reba McEntire, who was a basketball standout for Kiowa, for performing during his camps in the early 70's. What he doesn't tell a lot of people is he didn't pay her the first couple of years she performed because "I didn't think she was that good!"

Charley was hired in 1991 by Bill Self Sr. to play the music at The Big House because Self wanted to "Put a little jive in this thing!" Charley's wife Sheneesta talked about how boring things were at the games before her husband started playing music. Charley has retired from playing the tunes at The Big House, but if, during the regular season, you miss hearing "OKLAHOMA" played before a game is started, "Sweet Georgia Brown" or even "The Chicken Dance", you can look up the Lindsay Leopards home basketball schedule and attend a game. You will hear those great tunes played by Charley at the scores table.

My youngest daughter Melody has been the "ball girl" at The Big House for the past three years and she has grown to love Charley from those times. When I told her we were going to see Charley at the Lindsay game she responded as she always does "I just love him!" And of course, seeing the smile on her face and the "flapping of her wings" was truly priceless when "The Chicken



Dance" was played over the sound system.

BIO

Charley Heatly started coaching at Lindsay starting in 1959 before retiring from coaching in 1987 with a 669-161 W/L record and never had a losing record. He took his team to 17 state tournaments and five state championship games, winning two (1962 and 1968). Every girl that played for Coach Heatly had a chance to go to the state tournament.

He was one of the founding members of the Oklahoma High School Girls Coaches Association in 1963. After coaching, Charley took over as Athletic Director at Lindsay and retired in 1996. The annual basketball tournament in Lindsay is named "The Charles K. Heatly Classic" and the gym in Lindsay is named after him.

Charley is a charter member of the Oklahoma Girls Coaches Hall of Fame and in 1981 received the National Girls Basketball Coach of the Year Award by the National High School Coaches Association. He also is recipient of the 2005 Jostens-Berenson Service Award from the National Women's Basketball Coaches Association.



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