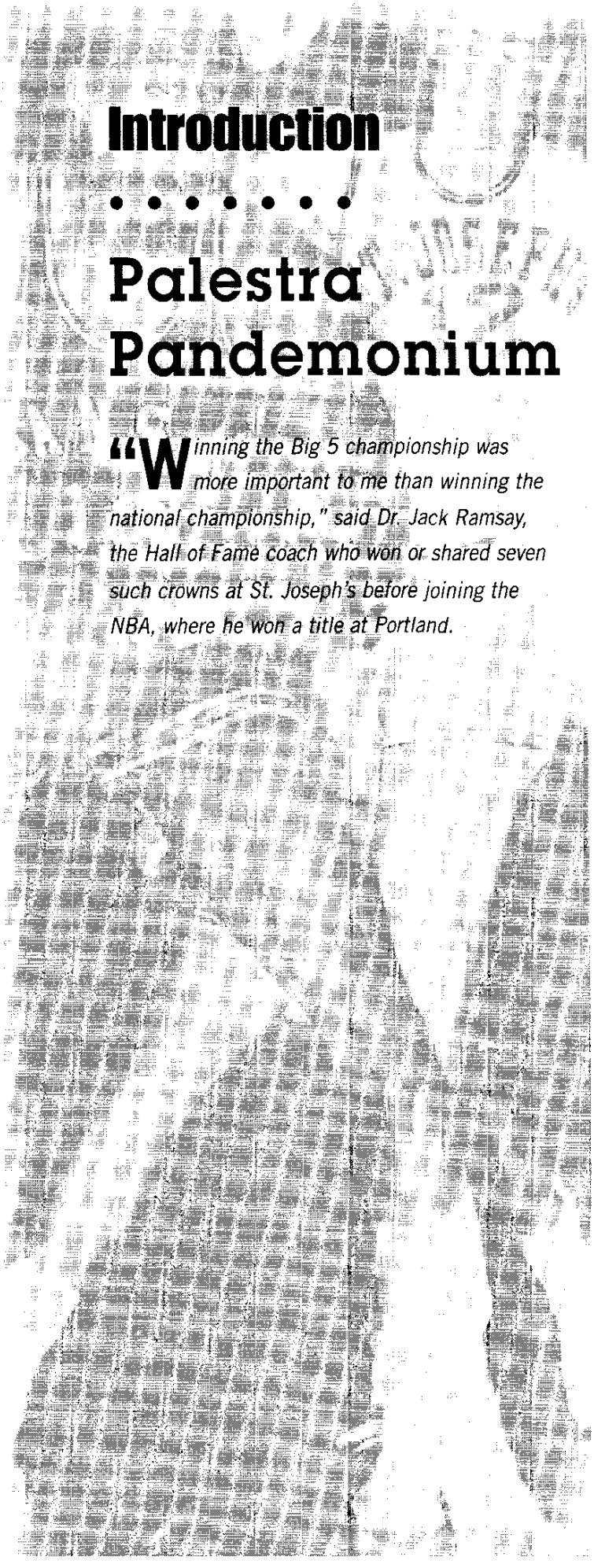


Introduction

Palestra Pandemonium

"Winning the Big 5 championship was more important to me than winning the national championship," said Dr. Jack Ramsay, the Hall of Fame coach who won or shared seven such crowns at St. Joseph's before joining the NBA, where he won a title at Portland.

For more than three decades, Philadelphia's Big 5—La Salle, Pennsylvania, St. Joseph's, Temple, and Villanova—waged college basketball's biggest, most envied, unique, and frenetic, intracity rivalry. No other city in the nation ever had as many major universities competing so feverishly for such a coveted title as did the City of Brotherly Love from 1955 to 1991.

The Big 5 was housed at the Palestra, a venerable red brick building on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. That building hosted more fans at more games over more seasons than any other college arena in history. This musty, high-ceilinged, 75-year-old arena is still regarded by many people as the best basketball facility in the country.

"The Palestra is to college basketball what Fenway Park and Wrigley Field are to baseball," wrote John Feinstein in his book, *A Season Inside*. "It is a place where you *feel* the game from the moment you step inside."

When Jim Boyle, the former St. Joseph's coach, became Paul Westhead's assistant in Denver, the first person to approach him was one of the Nuggets' players. "He walked up and said, 'Coach, I'm Walter Davis and I'm pleased to meet you, sir,'" Boyle recalled. "Then he said, 'Is it true you that played ball in the Philadelphia Big 5?' I said, 'Yes, I did.' He said, 'Man, I've heard so much about that league!' Here was Walter Davis, a great small-forward from North Carolina and the ACC who played in that year's NBA All Star game, in awe about the Big 5. I'll never forget that. When he said that I was just filled with pride."

It wasn't just the frenzied battles on the court that made the Big 5 unique. The camaraderie between the coaches has never been duplicated. Big 5 coaches honored unwritten agreements not to send game films or scouting reports on their city rivals to out-of-town opponents. Athletic directors wouldn't schedule home games that conflicted with a Big 5 doubleheader at the Palestra. Players would never think of transferring from one Big 5 school to another.

Every Big 5 team has been nationally ranked and has gone to the NCAA Final Four at least once. La Salle won the NCAA championship in 1954, two years before the Big 5 officially started, and Villanova captured the title in 1985 in perhaps the greatest tournament upset in history. Temple won the National Invitation Tournament in 1969 and was nationally-ranked No. 1 for part of the 1987–88 season—the only Big 5 team ever to reach the top spot. Only once in all the years that the teams played under one roof at the Palestra did none of the Big 5 schools fail to make it to a post-season tournament. That was in 1975–76, and it was the only time that the Big 5 schools finished collectively under .500. On the other hand, four of the Big 5 schools

have reached post-season tournaments in the same year eight times.

Traditional rivalries like Army–Navy or Harvard–Yale had nothing on the Big 5's fierce battles fought before screaming fans, amidst the colorful streamers, fanatic mascots, often-raunchy rollouts, banging drums, and blaring bands. These games were often decided by a last-second buzzer-beater fired by some obscure walk-on, whose shot sent the Palestra into tumultuous bedlam and gave the winning team's alumni and students bragging rights for another year.

"If you won at the Palestra in the winter, you could talk all summer on the playgrounds," explained Penn coach Fran Dunphy, who played at La Salle. "The Big 5 was part of the fabric of the life in Philadelphia; there's no other way to describe it," said St. Joseph's athletic director Don DiJulia. "The Big 5 intensity level was equal to professional playoff games," added Cliff Anderson, the great Hawks center, who went on to play for four years in the NBA and ABA. "Right down to the last guy on the bench, your heart was in your throat, you were sweating, you couldn't sleep the night before."

"The Big 5 went beyond basketball," said Dan Baker, who served as its executive director for 15 years. "It was a social thing, a source of civic pride. The Big 5 led the way, even before the Civil Rights Movement and other attempts for equality. It was an exclusive club that was open to everybody—black, white, Catholic, Protestant, Jew. People accepted one another. If you loved college basketball you were welcome to be part of it. I don't think some people understand the ramifications of what this tradition meant to the city." The Big 5 took great pride in being a champion of racial harmony long before it became fashionable at many other institutions. George Raveling revolutionized the recruiting landscape for minorities and helped change forever the face of college basketball when he was an assistant coach at Villanova.

Frequently these Big 5 battles, waged between institutions located within a radius of only 17 miles, were renewals of some of the intense rivalries that characterized many of the local Catholic and Public League high school games. Maybe it would be a couple of ex-high school teammates from South Philly facing each other in the Temple–La Salle game or kids from West Philly and the Northeast teaming up to beat their former CYO buddies in the Penn–St. Joe's game. During the summer they would go at it again in pickup games at the Palestra, on the playgrounds, or down at the South Jersey shore.

Certainly no other five-team conference in the universe can match the Big 5's legacy of coaches and players who have found success in the pros. Some of them, like Jack Ramsay (St. Joseph's/Portland), Chuck Daly (Penn/Detroit), and Paul Westhead (La Salle/Los Angeles Lakers), won NBA championships as head coaches. Others, such as Penn's Jack McCloskey of the Detroit Pistons and Penn's Bob Weinhauer of the Houston Rockets, won as general managers. Four of the five men coaching Big 5 teams in 1973–74 (Temple's Don Casey, St. Joseph's Jack McKinney, Daly, and Westhead) went on to the NBA, and the fifth—Villanova's Rollie Massimino—turned down an offer to coach the New Jersey Nets. Both Villanova's Jack Kraft and Temple's John Chaney have been named college basketball's National Coach of the Year.

And then, of course, there are the players. "The Palestra was one of the places you had to play to become All-America," recalled Raveling, who later coached at Iowa, Washington State, and Southern California. Naismith Hall of Famers like Elgin Baylor, Dave Bing, Bill Bradley, Julius Erving, Jerry Lucas, Pete Maravich, Calvin Murphy, Wes Unseld, and Lenny Wilkens played against the Big 5. The 1957–58 Palestra All Opponent team, in fact, included three of the game's all-time greats—Oscar Robertson, Jerry West, and Wilt Chamberlain.

More than a hundred players from Big 5 schools have been good enough to play professionally in the NBA, ABA, or internationally, and more than a dozen of them were first-round draft choices. La Salle's Michael Brooks and Lionel Simmons were National Players of the Year. La Salle's Ken Durrett, St. Joseph's Matt Guokas, Temple's Mark Macon and Guy Rodgers, and Villanova's Howard Porter were consensus All-Americas. Villanova's Ed Pinckney and Howard Porter and Temple's Hal Lear were named Most Outstanding Players of the NCAA Final Four.

Each Big 5 school produced its share of legendary backcourt combinations. So many of them received national acclaim, in fact, that the term "Philadelphia guard" has long been synonymous with backcourt excellence. Fans everywhere have vivid memories of such intelligent floor generals as Temple's Hal Lear and Guy Rodgers; Bobby McNeill and Joe Gallo of St. Joseph's; Pennsylvania's Steve Bilsky and Dave Wohl; La Salle's Bernie Williams and Roland "Fatty" Taylor, and Villanova's Wali Jones and Billy Melchionni.

A few years ago, the Philadelphia Sportswriters Association honored Guy Rodgers, perhaps the greatest guard not in the Naismith Basketball Hall of Fame, with its Living Legend award. Associated Press sportswriter Jack Scheuer, who played independent basketball with Rodgers on the Philadelphia playgrounds in the 1950s, introduced him as the "classic Philadelphia guard." The next day, Scheuer's telephone rang. "I just want to tell you that was the greatest compliment I ever received," said Rodgers, who had recently retired after a 12-year career in the NBA.

"What people forget is that the Big 5 wasn't just guys going at a hundred miles an hour, frenetic games, and last minute shots," said Bilsky, who is now Penn's athletic director. "It was also real quality basketball being played by real quality players. From Guy Rodgers right on down through the years, there was just some great talent out there."

The Big 5 is also the story of the unsung heroes who provided some of the most thrilling moments in city series history. It's about the infamous Emma Square, comical characters like Yo Yo, and unforgettable events like the "Bomb Scare." It's also about class and sportsmanship. Like the time Howard Porter quickly came to the aid of Penn's Corky Calhoun, who was being taunted by a Villanova fan at the Philadelphia airport after the previously unbeaten Quakers' shocking loss to the Wildcats in the '71 NCAA Eastern Regionals. Or the time that Porter went out of his way to protect the drummer of bitter archrival St. Joseph's, who was being threatened by fans in Kansas.

Quite a few Big 5 players, such as Penn's Rhodes Scholar John Wideman, excelled in the classroom as well. Seven of them were named Academic All-Americas: Tony DiLeo, Jack Hurd, and Tim Legler, of La Salle; Bob Morse of Penn; and Tom Ingelsby, John Pinone, and Harold Jensen, of Villanova. Hurd, Morse, and Pinone were selected as NCAA Graduate Scholars, as was Charles McKenna of St. Joseph's.

Just about every great coach faced a Big 5 team at one time or another—Lou Carnesecca of St. John's, Bobby Knight of Indiana, Al McGuire of Marquette, Frank McGuire of South Carolina, Adolph Rupp of Kentucky, Dean Smith of North Carolina, and John Wooden of UCLA, to name just a few. The late Jim Valvano, who won a NCAA title at North Carolina State, lost the first game ever played in La Salle's tiny Hayman Hall—an East Coast Conference playoff game—when he coached at Bucknell in 1974–75.

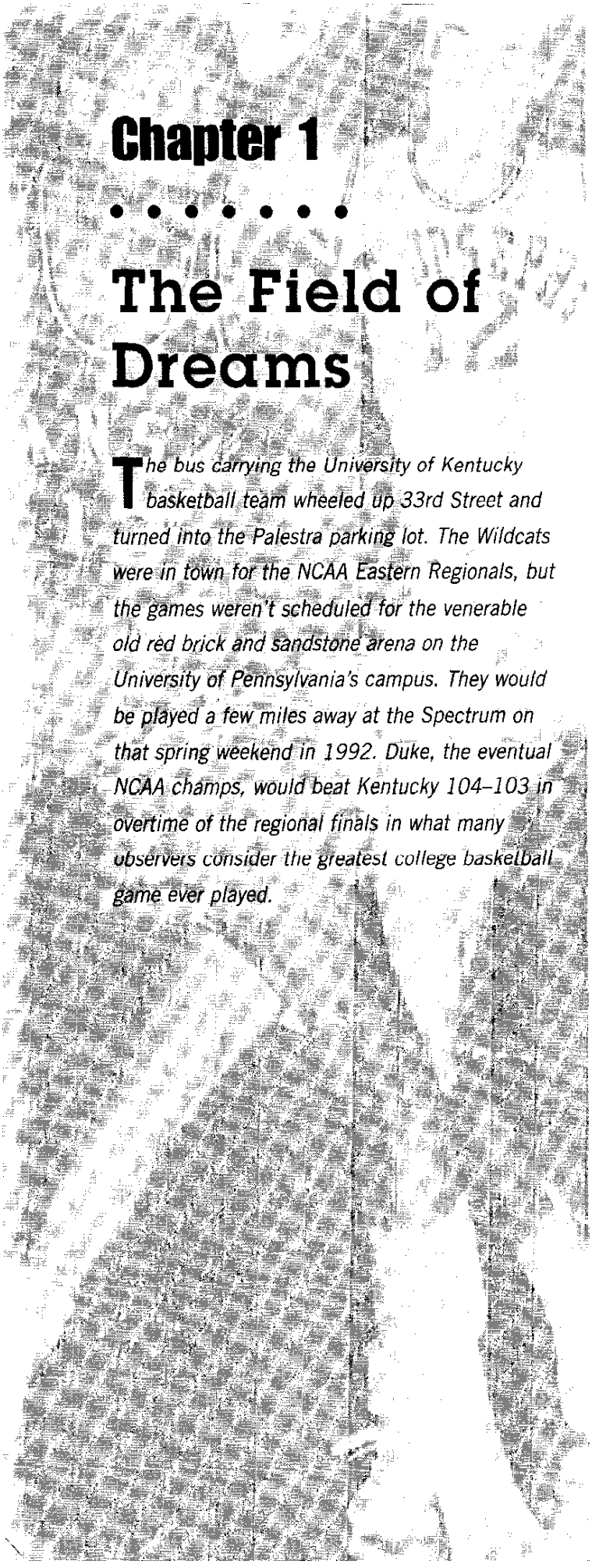
Before the Big 5 officially began its round-robin schedule in 1955–56, some of the teams wouldn't even play each other. Penn hadn't played Villanova since 1922, but the Quakers and Wildcats shared the Palestra for doubleheaders, often directly competing for attention with La Salle, Temple, or St. Joseph's, who might be appearing in doubleheaders down the street at Convention Hall. That meant fans would sometimes have to choose between watching Villanova's Paul Arizin or La Salle's Tom Gola, West Virginia's Hot Rod Hundley or Rio Grande's Bevo Francis.

"At the time it seemed like the perfect solution," recalled former Villanova athletic director Bud Dudley, who helped organize the Big 5. For the first 15 years, each school played at least ten games at the Palestra—four against each other and six against outside opponents in doubleheaders. All receipts for the season, including television and radio revenue, were split equally—not big money by today's standards, but a far cry from the $85 profit realized by La Salle, St. Joseph's, and Temple in their final year at Convention Hall.

Gradually, cracks began to appear in the united front of the Big 5. Coaches bickered. Scheduling conflicts became commonplace. Villanova joined the Big East Conference and reaped larger financial windfalls. Other schools like Temple also started looking for greener pastures. In 1986, some Big 5 games were moved to campus sites. By 1991, the round robin format was abolished and schools were only required to play two Big 5 opponents each year—none of them at the Palestra unless Penn was the host. The Big 5 had become an unfortunate victim of its success.

A few years ago, the Big 5 brought back Les Keiter, a local legend as its early radio and TV voice, to speak at a banquet. "I almost cried when I walked into the Palestra and saw how it's all deteriorated," recalled Keiter, who had become famous with his colorful descriptions of "Palestra pandemonium," "in again, out again, Finegan!," and "ring-tailed howitzers from the sky." "People told me, 'Les, you wouldn't even recognize the Big 5 now.'"

This is their unforgettable story: the coaches and players, the amazing characters, officials, and others vividly describing in their own words the intensity, the exhilaration, the emotion of 36 years of the most memorable and fascinating rivalries of the Big 5 city series, the likes of which we will never see again.



Chapter 1

The Field of Dreams

The bus carrying the University of Kentucky basketball team wheeled up 33rd Street and turned into the Palestra parking lot. The Wildcats were in town for the NCAA Eastern Regionals, but the games weren't scheduled for the venerable old red brick and sandstone arena on the University of Pennsylvania's campus. They would be played a few miles away at the Spectrum on that spring weekend in 1992. Duke, the eventual NCAA champs, would beat Kentucky 104–103 in overtime of the regional finals in what many observers consider the greatest college basketball game ever played.

"It didn't matter that the regionals weren't even being played there," recalled *New York Daily News* national sportswriter Dick Weiss, who was on the bus that day doing research for a book on Kentucky coach Rick Pitino. "Rick arranged to have a private workout at the Palestra because he understood how special the building was to the people in Philadelphia when he brought his UMass teams in to play against the Big 5. He wanted his kids to experience the building. I still remember him giving a five or ten minute lecture to his players on what this building meant to college basketball. I know he made an impression on them because they always talked about it afterwards.

"Pitino's talk meant so much to me," continued Weiss, who grew up watching games at the Palestra, took his wife, Joan, there on their first date, and still remembers every good seat he sat in before later covering the Big 5 for the *Philadelphia Daily News*. "It was just a rite of passage. It was a way of growing up. It looked like an old, beat-up gymnasium when you walked in, and when it filled up, it got hot and it got musty, but you could just feel the energy and electricity. I've been to Duke's Cameron, where it's probably as good as it gets, and I've been to the Pit in Albuquerque, the loudest place in college basketball, but the Palestra is still the best place to watch a game. I remember how exhilarating you would feel coming out of there after doubleheaders."

"I remember hearing about Frank McGuire bringing one of his South Carolina teams into the Palestra," said John Nash, the former Big 5 executive director who later became general manager of three different NBA teams. "Some of his players were accustomed to playing in some pretty big venues and started complaining about the locker room facilities. Frank called them together, sat them down, and started reciting the names of some of the all-time greats who had played there, including Wilt Chamberlain, Jerry West, and Oscar Robertson. Basically he said: 'If this locker room was good enough for them, it's good enough for you gentlemen.'"

"Guys coaching in the NBA today still tell me about going to the Palestra to watch Big 5 games," said Jack Ramsay, the former St. Joe's coach who is now an ESPN analyst. "I don't know how many of them would tell me how impressed they were with the whole atmosphere. They'd say, 'After practice we'd always jump in the car and drive down to the Palestra to see you guys play.'"

"I remember how great it was sitting in the Palestra locker room before going out for the game," said Bill Kelley, who played for Temple in the 1960s. "You could hardly hear Harry Litwack talk, the noise was so deafening. Your hands were slick with a little sweat, especially at the Big 5 games. I always led the team out on the floor

▲ The 1958 St. Joseph's–Temple game attracted 9,648 fans, the largest crowd ever to watch a Big 5 game at the Palestra. *(Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)*

because I was the smallest. It always felt great busting through that locker room door and seeing the crowd just rise up. It was so cozy, up-close, personal. Today, it's real lit up but in those days it was a little dim. I liked it better that way."

"I always tell people, whoever designed the Palestra was a genius," said former La Salle basketball coach Speedy Morris, who started taking his players to games when he was coaching CYO teams in the 1960s. "Back then I didn't have a lot of money and I wasn't yet coaching high school where I could call and get tickets. It was tough to scrimp but I made sure to get down there every Wednesday and Saturday night, traveling in my old beat-up car. I had so many bad cars back then, it was lucky that we made it. Sometimes it would take a while to get started or maybe we'd freeze because my heater wasn't working, but somehow we'd get there. I'd take a couple of kids at a time—guys who are surgeons and lawyers today—and I knew it was something they'd look forward to. My wife and I dated 14 years before we got married and lots of times she had to take a back seat because I was taking guys down to the Palestra. I was just a typical Philly guy who loved the Big 5."

"I've coached in the Atlantic Coast Conference and it was loud there, but nothing compared to the Palestra," said Jack McCloskey, who ran the Wake Forest program for a few years before going into the NBA. "The noise was electrifying. It seemed to echo off those walls and just reverberate throughout the whole place. I think that roar made it even more unique."

When McCloskey was coaching at Penn, he followed the same ritual every night after practice. "After they turned the lights out, there was still one emergency light shining up in the corner," he recalled. "As I was walking out of my dressing room, I'd walk across the floor, stop in the middle, and look around. And I would say, 'Geez, how lucky can a guy be to be coaching at a great university and to be in this fantastic basketball atmosphere.'"

"It was the Palestra that made the Big 5 so unique," said former Temple coach Don Casey. "Where else could you get that type of arrangement with everybody playing at one house? For a while it seemed like certain areas of the city gravitated toward St. Joe's, and others to La Salle. Villanova had its section. It seemed like West Catholic was playing South Catholic in high school and then meeting again in college. There was a little bit of pride in your neighborhood. You'd be pulling for one another at times and then at other times you'd think, 'I'd like to see Villanova get whacked tonight.'"

"That's why the Big 5 was so unpredictable," said Jim Williams, the first Temple player ever to score 1,000 points and grab 1,000 rebounds in his career. "All of us played against each other in the summertime. There was nothing that we didn't know about each other's game. It was like, 'I know what you have and you know what I have, so it's going to take your best to beat me.' That's what made the Big 5 so great."

Williams was an all-state star at Norristown High School, outside Philadelphia. His team was eliminated in the state district finals in his junior year, then lost the championship game to Uniontown the following season. "We were all excited not because we were playing for the state championship, we were going to play in the *Palestra*," he recalled. "From the time I was in high school, it was a thrill and a goal for any kid in the area just to set foot on the Palestra floor. If you were privileged enough to suit up there, you had hit the epitome of basketball."

"Even though the Palestra was located on Penn's campus, it belonged to all five teams," said the Quakers' Kevin McDonald, a member of the Big 5 Hall of Fame. "In the summer between my junior and senior year, I had the key. We would open up the doors and everybody would come. If you thought the games during the regular season were good, somebody should have had a camera there during the summer when we were just playing pickup and there was nobody in the stands." Villanova's Herron brothers—Keith and Larry—were regulars. So were Temple's Tim Claxton and La Salle's Michael Brooks, as well as Duke's Gene Banks. Even people like Darryl Dawkins of the Philadelphia 76ers dropped in occasionally. "The hard part was keeping people out of there," said McDonald.

"We had a fascination with the Palestra from the time we were kids in Southwest Philly, but we didn't have any money," recalled Jim Boyle, who would later play and coach at St. Joseph's. Boyle and a bunch of West Catholic High School buddies like Jim Lynam and Herb Magee, who had a "burning desire" to play there, quickly discovered two ways to sneak into the building. They would scale an outside wall and climb through a window that opened underneath the scoreboard, or arrive at adjacent Hutchinson Gym well before game time and sneak through a door that opened into the Palestra.

"I figured out a third way," said Boyle. "If there were a lot of people moving around near the entrance, you could walk *backwards*."

Pat Williams, the former general manager of the Philadelphia 76ers and Chicago Bulls, never missed a weekend doubleheader at the Palestra from the beginning of the Big 5 in 1955 until he graduated from high school in 1958. "I had an intense love affair with the Big 5," explained Williams, who drove the two-hour round trip from Wilmington with his boyhood buddy, Mike Castle, the future governor of Delaware and now that state's only representative in Congress. Williams still has a copy of *Palestra Illustrated* from every game with his ticket stub neatly stapled to the program. "To this day there is no taste or smell in the world like a boiled Palestra hot dog slathered with yellow mustard," added Williams, who is now the senior executive vice president of the Orlando Magic.

"With the streamers, the rollouts, the mascots, and the bands, the Palestra is an entirely different atmosphere from a professional game," said Harvey Pollack, the nationally-known statistician who has handled Big 5 games since the beginning. "The logistics are great, you can see anywhere and you're right on top of the action. And, besides, every year is different with new players, new faces, new cheerleaders, new gimmicks, and, sometimes, new coaches. I learned early in the game to tune out the noise; that's why they call me the Ice Man. If you get captured by all the noise, you wouldn't be able to do your job." Pollack, a member of the Big 5 Hall of Fame, and his statistical team set a number of unofficial NCAA records back in the 1960s for speed in compiling box scores after games. That was when everything was handwritten, before the computer age.

Just the sight of the Palestra changed the lives of some players. Dave Wohl, for example, was recruited by

Penn to play quarterback on the football team. One day, shortly after arriving on campus, he took a walk down 33rd Street. "I was just looking for a place to play and walked into the Palestra," the Big 5 Hall of Fame guard recalled. "There was nobody in there but to me it was just magnificent. It was the biggest thing I had ever seen at that point as a player. I just took one look at it and I was sold." Soon Wohl started making daily trips to the Palestra. "I started playing pickup games with all the guys who had been recruited for basketball—guys like Steve Bilsky and all the seniors that I would eventually graduate with. I really liked them and started to feel, 'Hey, these are the guys I want to hang around with.'" When Wohl, who would go on to a successful 27-year NBA career as a player, coach, and general manager, informed the football coaches that he decided to concentrate on basketball, "they told me I'm probably making the biggest mistake of my life."

"Tennis players talk about how they just love to step on Centre Court at Wimbledon," said Matt Guokas Jr., the St. Joseph's All-America who later coached and played for the Philadelphia 76ers. "That's the way I felt every time I walked into the Palestra. Coming out of that locker room, getting into your layup line with the crowd screaming and yelling, literally you got chills. You never walked into that building when it wasn't an event."

One of the most famous events in the history of the Palestra convinced Guokas to transfer from the University of Miami to St. Joseph's. It happened in 1962, in the opening round of the Quaker City Tournament, when St. Joseph's pulled off one of the most riveting upsets in Big 5 history 58–57 over Bowling Green.

Even though he liked coach Bruce Hale and teammates like Rick Barry, Guokas had been homesick from the moment he stepped off the plane in Florida. "I probably changed my mind a hundred times between Thanksgiving and Christmas," he recalled. "Then I came home and went to the Quaker City Tournament. I'm sitting with my mother in the same seat—to the right of the bench—I sat in as kid when my father broadcast Big 5 games on TV or radio. When Jim Boyle hit that winning jump shot, it felt like the roof was going to blow off. My mother turned and looked at me. She could see that I was beaming and I said, 'This is me, mom. I have to come back here.'"

The Palestra even affected Ollie Johnson's career. "The lights on the left side of the basket were much brighter," recalled the former Temple/Big 5 Hall of Famer who played for ten years in the NBA. "When I looked up, I was looking right into those lights. They were always in my eyes because I'm a baseline shooter. It was probably a career decision just because of the Palestra. Whenever I knew we had a game there, I would practice more from the other side of the court. That's why I think I shoot better from the right side."

To say that some of the nation's greatest players appeared against the Big 5 would be quite an understatement. Take the 1957–58 Palestra All Opponent team, for example—Robertson of Cincinnati, Chamberlain of Kansas, West of West Virginia, Bob Ellis of Niagara and Lou Pucillo, the first player under six-feet ever recruited by North Carolina State. Pucillo was cut two straight years by Jack Kraft at Philadelphia's Bishop Neumann High School before finally making the team as sixth man in his senior year. "That shows you how smart I am," deadpanned Kraft, who later coached at Villanova.

The 1964–65 All Opponent team wasn't too shabby, either, with Princeton's Bill Bradley, Miami's Rick Barry, Davidson's Fred Hetzel, Penn State's Bob Weiss, and Detroit's Dorrie Murray. Nor was the 1968–69 team of Detroit's Spencer Haywood, Western Kentucky's Jim McDaniels, Kentucky's Dan Issel, Princeton's Jeff Petrie, and Columbia's Jim McMillian. Or the 1969–70 squad that included Julius Erving of Massachusetts and Calvin Murphy of Niagara. Other stars who played against the Big 5 at the Palestra included Si Green and Dave Ricketts of Duquesne; Marvin Barnes, Vinnie Ernst, John Thompson, and Leu Wilkens, of Providence; Adrian Dantley of Notre Dame, Dave Bing of Syracuse; Bob Lanier of St. Bonaventure; Mike Gminski of Duke; Paul Silas of Creighton, and Rod Thorn of West Virginia. Pete Gent, the author of *North Dallas Forty*, made the Palestra All Opponent team in 1964 when he starred for Michigan State. Former Boston Mayor Ray Flynn (Providence) and NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue (Georgetown) also played at the Palestra, as did Syracuse's Jim Brown, the great Cleveland Browns running back.

But the best of all was probably Bradley, the only Palestra opponent ever to be voted the Outstanding Visiting Player for three consecutive years (1963–65). "I remember when I was working at Villanova," recalled Jim Murray, the former Wildcat sports information director who later became general manager of the Philadelphia Eagles. "George Raveling took me up to Princeton to see this great freshman from Missouri. We stopped at Krispy Creme Donuts on Roosevelt Boulevard in Northeast Philadelphia on the way up and George couldn't stop raving about this kid. It was Bill Bradley."

"That guy came into the Palestra and tormented me for three years," recalled Penn's Jack McCloskey. "He played six games against us and we beat him only once. We tried everything. We would go zone, we would go box-and-one. We'd go man-to-man against him and every time he touched the ball, we had somebody else

▲ Wilt Chamberlain of Kansas is guarded by Bob Clarke of St. Joseph's in 1957 game at the Palestra. *(St. Joseph's University)*

running at him. He was such a great player it never bothered him. I used to say, 'Get upset! Be mad that we're doing this to you!' But he was just as calm as could be. He waited until he had that open spot and BOOM, he'd bury that shot. He might have been as good a college player as ever played. And just a great person."

In 1989, after Detroit won the first of two NBA titles under general manager Jack McCloskey and coach Chuck Daly, the Pistons were invited to the White House to meet President George H. W. Bush. Afterwards, the Michigan congressional delegation hosted the champs at a reception in the Senate chambers. New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley came over to say hello. So did Maryland congressman Tom McMillen, who had played against McCloskey for the Terrapins. "Every time I saw Bill I reminded him that I was tired of finishing right behind him all the time," said McCloskey. "I told him that I was awfully glad he graduated."

"I don't think there's a place on earth that is comparable to it," said Les Keiter, the voice of the Big 5 during the glory days of the 1960s. "I've broadcasted games all over the world and no matter where I was, I would

always say, 'You don't know what it's like until you walk into the Palestra.' You talk about the *Field of Dreams* in baseball, this was my *Field of Dreams.* The mystique and the history of the place are unparalleled. When you first come through the doors there's a certain feeling that you get that just transcends the moment. Then you walk out on the floor and look up at nine thousand people, the scoreboard, the streamers, the fervor and fever in the stands, the intensity of the players and the coaches. There's nothing like it in the world in sports. It almost defies description."

"I've broadcast games in just about every arena in America, and there's nothing louder than the Palestra when it's full," said Al Meltzer, a Philadelphia sportscaster for more than 35 years. "I can still feel the drum which was always underneath the broadcasting booth. I can feel it from my toes right through the top of my head. Every time he hit that drum, you could almost see your brain explode. You had earphones on but it was impossible to shut the noise out. You thought that you lost your mind or something. The intensity was beyond description. You got to such a boiling point, you thought the building couldn't take it any more. I'm surprised it's still standing."

Keiter and Meltzer were part of an impressive list of local sportscasters who broadcast Big 5 games at one time or another—people like recent Baseball Hall of Fame inductee Harry Kalas, the longtime play-by-play man of the Philadelphia Phillies who handled telecasts with future National League baseball president Bill White. Television, in fact, probably did more than anything else to turn the Big 5 into one of Philadelphia's most popular institutions.

"The Palestra didn't lend itself well facility-wise to TV," said Bill Campbell, who did Big 5 telecasts in the 1960s with Richie Ashburn, the late Phillies Hall of Famer, on Channel 17. "It was not the greatest place to broadcast, especially working way up high in the rafters like we did. If you had a guest to interview, he had to climb all the way up on that ladder. It was brutal and a lot of guys would turn you down. They'd say: 'I have to go all the way up there?' It was pretty primitive and it wasn't that easy, but we managed to survive. But that doesn't detract from the mystique that the Palestra has."

"It amazed me the first time I climbed up there and thought, 'Wow! Al Meltzer has to do this every night,'" recalled John Nash. "And what happens if he has to use the restroom and get back in time for the second half? Back in those days, we dictated to television, they didn't dictate to us. The cameras for the most part were all the way up at the top of the Palestra. We did the games initially with one camera. Then we eventually got them on the floor and we'd argue about him standing or sitting because the cameras could be destroying sight lines. Somehow we got it done. I think the TV people were always a little more willing to accept less at the Palestra than they would, say, at a Pauley Pavilion or one of the bigger arenas because they realized they were dealing with a much smaller situation."

Keiter had been brought to Philadelphia to become sports director of WFIL-TV and radio, then owned by Walter Annenberg's Triangle Publications empire. In 1963, he began broadcasting the entire Big 5 schedule on radio and selected city series games on television. He came from New York, where he had broadcast the old American Football League games of the New York Titans, then owned by Harry Wismer (today they are the New York Jets). He also did the New York Giants football games for seven years and New York Knickerbockers games from Madison Square Garden, where his statistician was a young kid named Marv Albert. Keiter grew up in Seattle, where one of his boyhood pals was Edwin Guthman, later press secretary to the late Senator Robert Kennedy and editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer.* One of Keiter's first jobs was broadcasting University of San Francisco football (before the Dons dropped the sport). USF's coach at the time was Joe Kuharich, who went on to a long career in the National Football League, much of it cloaked in controversy with the Philadelphia Eagles. USF's publicity man was Pete Rozelle, who would go on to become NFL commissioner.

"When I was in New York, various Philadelphia teams would come into the Garden to play, and there were always references made to the Big 5 and the 'Philadelphia-type' ballplayer," recalled Keiter. "When I arrived in Philadelphia in 1963, I was very curious to see if it were true. And boy oh boy, did I find out in a hurry! I've done 14 heavyweight championships and have been privileged to be part of the Olympics, but the Big 5 was always right up there front and center at the head—at the top. Sitting at ringside with some of the greatest fighters of all time, I'd get that terrific feeling inside of me and I'd always say that it's reminiscent of how I felt at the Palestra in Philadelphia."

Keiter quickly became a favorite among Big 5 fans for his colorful descriptions of players shooting "ring-tailed howitzers"—some of them went "in the air, in the bucket," others "tickled-the-twine" or went "in again, out again, Finegan!" And as a tribute to the 9,200 screaming fans at the Palestra, he would always come on the air saying, "WELCOME TO PANICKSVILLE, USA!"

"I didn't do them consciously," said Keiter of his signature expressions. "In those days announcers had their own styles doing play-by-play on radio. Sportscasters, especially on TV today, are pretty much clones of each other because they're under direct orders not to be flamboyant, not to have a flair. I used many of those expressions when I was doing New York Knicks games in

▶ Les Keiter (right) and his color man, Matt Guokas Sr. (left), shown with the author, prepare for a Palestra broadcast in 1963. *(La Salle University)*

the Garden, long before I came to Philadelphia. I just got caught up in the excitement of a certain player or a given sequence in a game. They came out naturally. They were not contrived."

Keiter's first color man was Matt Guokas Sr., the former Philadelphia Warriors' great and the father of St. Joseph's star Matt Guokas Jr. Soon he brought in Al Meltzer, a young disk jockey from Buffalo, to help with the Big 5 games. The two worked together until 1966, when a struggling new station, WPHL-TV, starting broadcasting on a new, unfamiliar ultra high-frequency channel from an old warehouse in Wyndmoor, Montgomery County, just outside the city. Its first hire was Meltzer.

"I was the only *live* person at the station," Meltzer recalled. "I went over there basically to do all sports all the time but I also did the afternoon movie, all the announcing, and everything else." Channel 17 needed a hot product to fill its airwaves and Meltzer helped talk the Big 5 athletic directors into televising every home game. "That was a miracle in itself because Channel 17 didn't have any money," said Meltzer. "It had a tough time meeting its payroll, as a matter of fact. Luckily the athletic directors bought it." Rights fees were minimal—"maybe ten thousand dollars for each school"—but the telecasts created an entirely new audience for Big 5 basketball. "I don't know if the Big 5 made Channel 17, but it certainly made UHF television. At the time, TV sets didn't have UHF tuners. You had to buy a separate tuner with a circular antenna. That pushed UHF-TV over the brink because people couldn't get the games unless they bought that equipment. We were the ESPN of the mid-'60s but we didn't know it then, nor did anyone else. We like to think we were the forerunners of the basketball TV explosion. The college game down South and in the Far West, except for Kentucky and UCLA, was virtually non-existent. The timing was absolutely perfect. It was great for us because shortly after that college basketball just went crazy."

Although Keiter stayed in Philadelphia for only six years—he left WFIL to return to Honolulu the day they broke ground for Veterans Stadium in 1970—his name became synonymous with the Big 5. Most fans remember him for one thing. "The first thing they say is 'Remember the Bomb Scare?' I've heard that hundreds of times," Keiter said. "It even happened to me when I went over to London to do the Muhammad Ali–Brian London fight at Wembley Arena. I'll never forget. A couple from Philadelphia came up to me and said, 'Les, do you remember the Bomb Scare?'"

No wonder. It only caused a 40-minute delay, but if there was one singular moment that will always live in the minds of Big 5 fans, it's the "Bomb Scare"—February 20, 1965.

I was La Salle's sports information director at the time. The Explorers had beaten Western Kentucky in the first game and Keiter invited me to join him in his broadcasting perch high above the Palestra for the second game, between Villanova and St. Joseph's. In those days the play-by-play man usually did the color, game-analysis, and halftime interviews, so I guess I gave Keiter's voice a welcome respite for those few seconds when he would call on me for a comment or two. It was halftime and suddenly Mike Morgan, a young Temple student, starts making a startling announcement over the public address system. Immediately 8,735 fans start filing out. I was sitting to the left of Keiter's statistician, Toby DeLuca, the long-time music librarian of WFIL-radio. Toby hears the announcement and turns to his right, where Keiter is interviewing referee Lou

Eisenstein. "Les, Les," DeLuca says, gently nudging Keiter, who does not respond. "LES, LES . . . " Keiter turns to DeLuca, visibly annoyed, and says, "Toby, I told you. Never interrupt me when I'm doing an interview!" "But Les, IT'S A BOMB!"

"My memory," said Keiter, "started with the announcement by that young man who was on the PA system saying 'Will everybody please rise and leave the building.' He must have repeated that a dozen times. I'm up in the booth high up in the rafters looking down and trying to figure out where everybody was going. And why they were all leaving. I could hear in the background his voice saying, 'Please leave . . . Please leave. . . .' And they were all leaving their coats and their pocketbooks and their briefcases at their seats. Everyone went up the steps and filed out of the building. Can you imagine that? People leaving their belongings on their seats and calmly filing out? And then I suddenly saw the police and bomb squad come pouring in from all the exits. There must have been a couple of dozen of them. And they started to search all the coats and the briefcases and pocketbooks, looking under them very gingerly. I'm up there trying to make sense of all of this because our cameras are showing what the police are doing. I'm trying to just ad-lib, saying something to the effect that 'obviously there is something in the building that they're looking for and perhaps it's a bomb and that's why everybody has left the building.' And then I said, 'I'm sure that we'll be leaving now, too, and we'll be returning you to the studios.'"

At that point the phone rang. "Toby DeLuca picked up the phone and I could hear the voice at the other end. It was Tom Jones, who was WFIL's program director. I had just uttered the phrase, 'We'll be leaving . . . ' and I heard Tom saying, 'TELL LES THAT HE'S NOT GOING ANYWHERE. STAY ON THE AIR. EVERYBODY IN PHILADELPHIA IS BEING CALLED BY OTHER PEOPLE AND KNOWS THAT THIS IS GOING ON BY WORD OF MOUTH. WE'VE GOT THE BIGGEST AUDIENCE WE'VE EVER HAD. TELL LES HE'S TO STAY RIGHT THERE—NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS!'

"So I said something funny and pointed up to the ceiling and said, 'Well, I guess that we're going to stay right here but the next thing you might see is Toby and me going right through the ceiling if the bomb goes off.' I don't know what else I said for the next 15 or 20 minutes. The next thing I saw was the police officer directing the bomb squad who was giving orders to everybody. He reminded me of one of those red-necked southern cops that you see in the Jackie Gleason movies or something. Anyway, he's pointing up at me suddenly, screaming at me loudly, 'YOU TOO! OUT OF THE BUILDING RIGHT NOW!' So now I'm betwixt and between. I'm being ordered by the police to leave and I've been told by my boss on the phone to stay put. So I just turned to Toby and said something off the air—but it actually was on the air—to the effect that 'Well they want us to leave but we are not going! We're staying here!' Now the policeman in charge was getting louder—yelling at me and pointing. He finally threatened me, saying 'If you're not out of there in five minutes, we're going to come up that ladder and bodily carry you out.' And I invited him, replying 'Come on up!' We were high up on a platform that you could only reach by going up a ladder through a little opening. Climbing all those steps up to the TV booth was like climbing Mount Vesuvius.

"Then I told Toby and our cameraman who was in our booth to cover the opening with some of our equipment so there was no way they could get through. He was just fuming down there. He sent two cops up the ladder and they couldn't get through the opening. So they had to go back down and this guy was just ready to either physically assault me or arrest me. He was ready to explode, he was so mad at me. Then all of a sudden the police left and the people came filing back in and the game resumed. But it was a very traumatic experience."

In 1970 Keiter returned to Honolulu, where he had begun his sportscasting career 21 years earlier, to become owner of a local advertising/marketing agency. Soon he began broadcasting the baseball games of the Triple-A Hawaiian Islanders in the Pacific Coast League (where he succeeded a young sportscaster named Al Michaels), and later became sports director of KHON-TV. He also appeared in a few episodes of the popular TV show *Hawaii Five-O*. But he never forgot the Big 5. "During my nightly sportscast, I'd give the top three or four college basketball scores in the country and then I'd say, 'And in the Big 5 in Philadelphia tonight it was La Salle so and so, Temple so and so.' I had an affinity." Keiter retired from sportscasting in 1993 and is now the special assistant to the manager of Aloha Stadium, the site of the NFL Pro Bowl and various college bowl games.

In the early days, all of the Palestra doubleheaders were played at night. Saturday nights, in fact, were big date nights for local guys and gals. "When you think about it, we were one of the few places in the country that didn't have games on Saturday afternoons," said John Nash, the Big 5 executive director from 1975 to 1981. "I remember it was one of the topics at an athletic director's meeting. One of the reasons we didn't play in the afternoon was television. The people at Channel 17 didn't want to compete for ratings against college football and things like that. Also, our society lived a different lifestyle twenty or thirty years ago. Back in the '50s every-

body went home, had dinner, then went to the games. Fast food places didn't exist. Maybe they had a hot dog or popcorn as a snack at the arena, but you went to watch basketball. You didn't go to eat. Today we've become accustomed to going to the game *and* eating at the arena. Then the Palestra doubleheader started at 7:00 P.M. but if the first game went into overtime, the second game might not start until 9:30. You couldn't take grade school kids in the middle of the week because now you're looking at the game ending at 11:30 or 11:45. When I was a kid I thanked my parents for letting me go to the Palestra because they would say, 'you're not going to be home until midnight.' But they had the benefit of being able to turn the game on TV and gauge how much time it would be before I got home." In 1978, Saturday afternoon doubleheaders were inaugurated at the Palestra and quickly became popular. "We had some terrific games," recalled Nash. '"And the best part about it, you could bring kids."

One of the charms of the Palestra was its antiquated scoreboard, which could only be reached by walking up to the top row of the stands, pulling down a set of stairs, and climbing about 15 more feet to a catwalk. The ritual was repeated by a Penn student between games of every doubleheader, when the names of the teams had to be changed on the scoreboard. "I knew a lot of people who did it," said *Philadelphia Daily News* sports columnist Rich Hoffman, who was the sports editor of the *Daily Pennsylvanian* in 1979. "It was a pretty coveted job until they installed the new scoreboard in the mid-'70s. Students would climb up and change the letters with this suction cup contraption that was attached to the end of a long pole. They didn't pay you but you got a season pass to all the games. I always thought it was a great job."

The Palestra is the home of the infamous "Emma Square," which was painted on the court as an aftermath of the longest, perhaps most bizarre, game in Big 5 history. It happened on January 24, 1959, when an unknown Providence team came from behind to upset Villanova 90–83 in *four* overtimes. The game featured tremendous play by John Driscoll, a 6' 8" Villanova sophomore who had 22 points and 23 rebounds. Equally brilliant for the Friars were future NBA stars Len Wilkens and John Egan, who scored 39 points against the Wildcats and was voted that year's outstanding Palestra visitor. But the turning point and the most memorable moment came when George Emma, who was better known as captain of Villanova's baseball team, was inserted into the game by coach Al Severance. "He came somewhere down the line but he sure as heck didn't report to me," recalled Bob McKee, the Big 5's Hall of Fame scorekeeper. "I'm screaming my fool head off, '*Come here! Report! Report!*'"

The Villanova bench was also screaming for Emma to report to the scorer's table, but he ran right onto the floor. "We had no choice but to blow the horn and indicate to the officials that he hadn't reported," said McKee. The crucial technical foul not only enabled the Friars to tie the game and force it into overtime, but also resulted in a permanent white box being painted on the floor in front of the scorer's table. Since then, players have been told, "Look for the square or you're not getting into the game."

One of the most colorful traditions that set the Palestra apart from other college basketball arenas was the ritual enjoyed at the beginning of every game by each Big 5 school. After their team scored its first field goal, students would throw hundreds of colorful crepe paper streamers onto the floor, often completely covering the court in a sea of crimson and gray or cherry and white. Play would stop briefly while the floor was cleared. For the most part, opposing coaches accepted the delay in good spirits. Then around 1985, Princeton fans started to throw out orange and black marshmallows. Soon students in other areas of the country began abusing the privilege by tossing pieces of fruit or heavier items. Predictably, the NCAA stepped in and banned the tradition. "I called the NCAA and requested a waiver," said Dan Baker, the former Big 5 executive director. "But they said that if they granted an exception for one school they would have to do it for others. They were afraid of injury and ruled that a technical foul should be assessed against any team whose fans throw streamers on the court." When the NCAA ruling came down, Baker had to inform the referees working the Big 5 doubleheader that night that they would have to enforce the ban on streamers. The first official he notified was Jim Huggard, the former Villanova guard, who had seen many a blue and white streamer during his playing days.

Penn's Fran Dunphy and St. Joseph's John Griffin wouldn't take no for an answer, however. After making a personal plea to the NCAA to reconsider, and being rejected, the two coaches took matters—and the Big 5 tradition—into their own hands when they matched wits in a Big 5 game in 1994. When the streamers came flying out of the stands after the Hawks scored the first basket, the officials promptly called the "T." But Dunphy told Andy Baratta to deliberately step over the free throw line when he shot his free throw. Rap Curry, of St. Joseph's, was told by Griffin to do the same thing after Quakers fans let loose with their streamers.

And there were the rollouts—those frequently creative, sometimes controversial, often outrageous examples

of student resourcefulness. Some of them were relatively harmless, like "HAWKS BANK ON McFARLAND TO CHASE MANHATTAN." Others were often tasteless, containing double entendres or questions about a player's academic ability or sexual preference.

"The rollout would start in the upper stands and be passed down overhead like it was in a mosh pit, down to the front where it would disintegrate," recalled Brother Patrick Ellis, the former La Salle president. "They were a constant series of exchanges that tended to escalate toward the edge of propriety which, of course, is normal undergraduate behavior." La Salle used to sponsor a traditional formal dance on campus, the Blue and Gold Ball, the same colors of the basketballs used in pre-game warms. One night a banner came fluttering out of the St. Joe's rooting section: "LA SALLE HAS BLUE AND GOLD BALLS." The La Salle fans immediately countered with "IS THAT WHAT THE JESUITS TEACH YOU?"As can be imagined, a high-level meeting immediately ensued with the disciplinarians from both schools, and rollouts were banned . . . for about a game.

"When I was coaching I didn't have time to read rollouts during the game," said former St. Joseph's coach Jack McKinney, who also served as the Hawks' athletic director for a while. "Sometimes the students would slip one in that I had censored the day before. Somebody would tell me later, 'Oh that rollout was so funny.' And I'd say, 'Whoops, I think we're going to have a meeting today.' So many of them were so good, so clever. When I was checking them over, I would laugh and say to myself, 'Pretty darn creative, but I don't think La Salle—or Temple—will think so.'"

Villanova's Whitey Rigsby remembers warming up with his teammates before a game at the Palestra. He was standing next to the Herron brothers when the St. Joseph's fans unfurled a rollout that said "LARRY HERRON CANNOT READ THIS." "The younger brother turned to Larry and said, 'Look,'" recalled Rigsby. "He pointed up to it and laughed and started cutting Larry up." And with that, the Hawk fans rolled another banner that said "DON'T LAUGH, KEITH, NEITHER CAN YOU." "Then, of course, we all got on them."

"As an athletic director I was much less enamored and a little more fearful of the rollouts than I was as a student," recalled former La Salle athletic director Bill Bradshaw, who is now the athletic director at Temple University. "Often they were quite ingenious, but you just held your breath when they came out because they would cut to the jugular of the other school."

It wasn't just the rollouts that brought out the best *and* worst from the students at the Big 5 schools. Villanova's Chris Ford sometimes got pelted with miniature hot dogs when he appeared on the court. Students from La Salle and St. Joe's regularly dribbled basketballs from their campuses to the Palestra as a show of support. Once after a big city series win in 1965, eight carloads of Hawk supporters paraded around Philadelphia's City Hall with their horns blaring. Then they drove right into the courtyard, scattering onlookers and interrupting a murder trial and other court proceedings upstairs before being hauled into a police station, where they were lectured by the cops and their dean of men, the Rev. Joseph Geib.

Some of the pranks were incredibly creative. Like the time the St. Joe's student pretended to be a producer at WCAU-TV and told the Villanova *Wildcat* mascot that sportscaster Tom Brookshier wanted to do an interview at the station on City Line Avenue. "Bring your costume to the studio because Tom might want to take some film of you wearing it," suggested the "producer." "Leave it in your car, drive up to the entrance, run inside, and notify the guard. Tell the guy on the security desk that you're here to see Tom Brookshier. And don't worry—one of our people at the station will park your car for you." The Wildcat did precisely as instructed and some St. Joe's students, waiting in a nearby car, promptly stole the costume. The *Wildcat* went to the St. Joe's game the next night dressed in a tuxedo.

"One day I was scheduled to speak at a pep rally at St. Joe's, but something came up at the station and I sent my regrets," recalled Keiter. "Lo and behold, the entire Hawk student body came out of the gym and marched down City Avenue to WFIL's station. They all moved into the parking lot and started screaming 'We Want Les!' I'll never forget George Koehler, the general manager, hearing all this noise as they were yelling for me. We were in a meeting and he turned to me saying, 'Les, for God's sakes go down there and give them whatever it is that they want, give it to them.'" Which Keiter did with a personal appearance.

One of the most innovative fans in the early days was a La Salle freshman who regularly brought a rather vocal contingent to the Palestra in a retired 1948 Buick ambulance, fully-equipped with the flashing red Pierce-Arrow lights on top. The enterprising young lad had assured his parents that the flashing lights were disconnected, but somehow after Explorer victories they suddenly became operational; during return trips up Broad Street the ambulance would barrel through traffic signals and make it back to campus in record time.

But if the young fans didn't always uphold the highest standards in the early days, there were always people at the Palestra to keep them in line. "I have a buddy whose grandfather had a concession stand at the Palestra," said Jim Murray the former Villanova sports information director. "His name was Eugene 'Onie' Smith. One Friday night a guy comes up in his Hawk

jacket and asks for hot dog and Coke. Onie said, "Not here pal.' 'What do you mean?' the kid said. 'You can't get a hot dog here,' replied Onie. 'It's Friday.' And the kid protested and said, 'You don't understand. My name is Cohen. I'm Jewish. I'm just going to St. Joe's!' Onie was unmoved. He said, 'There's no way you're getting a hot dog at this stand.'"

It was a different time, even in the broadcasting world. "I'll never forget interviewing Bob Lanier of St. Bonaventure after a game," said Al Meltzer. "He said live on television: 'We played a *helluva* game.' And I remember saying to myself: 'He said *helluva* game. Oh my God! We crossed the boundary line!' It wasn't that long ago, either."

"I also remember a couple of weird incidents, a couple of death threats at the Palestra," recalled John Nash. Probably the most serious occurred in 1979, when Temple officials received a threat to star player Rick Reed prior to a Big 5 game. After being alerted by Temple's athletic director Ernie Casale, Nash called Mike Chitwood, a friend and Philadelphia police homicide detective, seeking advice. "Would you like me to come up and act as his bodyguard? I could leave the locker room with him, walk with him, and sit behind Temple's bench," said Chitwood. "I'll act like a secret service guy would act protecting the president." Nash then called Casale. "I told him that I had this guy who at the time was probably the most highest decorated police officer in the history of Philadelphia. Today he's the police chief in Portland, Maine. Ernie said, 'fine, let's do that.' So Mike sat right behind the team bench and no one ever knew what was going on. It never got in the papers. They never did tell Rick Reed until after the game what had taken place. I'm not sure if I was his parent how I would have felt about that. It's a tough call."

Although La Salle had the *Explorer,* Temple the *Owl,* Penn the *Quaker,* and Villanova the *Wildcat,* the St. Joseph's *Hawk* was the most notorious of the Big 5 mascots. "That damn Hawk flapping his wings," recalled Villanova's George Raveling. "I can remember many times sitting there and trying to catch him not doing it. It used to really tick me off because they'd always be saying '*The Hawk never dies.*' So one game I said, 'I don't believe that.' I tried to catch him. Even during the game he'd still be over on the side flapping and I would say, 'I'm going to catch him one night.' I never did!"

The unofficial mascot of the Big 5 was the lovable Yo Yo, an unkempt, disheveled, comical figure named Harry Shifren. Yo Yo bummed cigars from Harry Litwack, quarters from everyone else, and regularly shot fouls during halftimes at the Palestra. "We think he was from Brooklyn," said longtime *Philadelphia Bulletin* and

▲ Yo Yo. *(Urban Archives, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)*

Daily News sportswriter Bob Vetrone. "After the games he would mingle with the pressmen at the *Bulletin* building on 30th Street. He had a unique way of speaking—the school in New York was '*Ford-a-ham*' and he liked to see '*cap-city*' crowds at the Palestra."

"I would say that Yo Yo was the most colorful, unique person ever associated with the Big 5," said Dick Weiss, of the *New York Daily News.* "He was unbelievable, like one of those Damon Runyon characters. Here's this hobo who made a living walking two French poodles in Rittenhouse Square. He used to work in the '*Ack-a-me*' and he slept either in the old *Bulletin* building or the Camac Baths downtown. He used to walk into the Palestra like he owned the place. He would always ask people for money to buy hot dogs and everybody used to take care of him. He must have grown up in New York, because he had a great memory for New York teams. He always talked about '*Frank Si-na-tio*' from '*Hok-a-broken*'. Curry Kirkpatrick, the *Sports Illustrated* writer, was covering Villanova and South Carolina one night in the Garden and he said, 'God, is that troll still traveling with the teams?'"

"Some people in the Big 5 tried to get rid of him," recalled retired Villanova athletic director Art Mahan.

"But I used to take care of him. I never knew how he got in the building at Villanova, but the first thing you know he'd be in my office and I'd make him a sandwich and give him a cup of coffee." Once, before a sold-out Holiday Festival game at Madison Square Garden, Mahan was about to catch a train for New York when he received a telephone call from former Villanova assistant coach Joe Walters, a long-time Wildcat benefactor, who said that he needed a ticket for sportscaster Al Meltzer. "Joe I don't have any left but I'll see what I can do," Mahan replied. Just as he was leaving the house, Mahan's daughter said, "Dad I have a paper due tomorrow, why don't you give my ticket to Joe Walters?" Mahan called Walters back and said the ticket would be at the Will Call window. "So I get to the Garden," recalled Mahan, "and my wife is sitting in one of those fancy loge VIP chairs and I have to climb over this guy sitting in the middle seat—which was my other ticket. It's Yo Yo! I said, 'Hey, Yo Yo, you're in the wrong seat.' He says, 'No, No, I'm in the right place.' I said 'Let me see your ticket stub.' Then I said, 'Where did you get this?' He said, 'My friend *Al Meltzer* gave it to me!'"

"Yo Yo used to come up to see me at Villanova and say, 'O'Halloran, take me to dinner,'" recalled former Wildcat guard Fran O'Hanlon. "On game day, I'd take him down to the cafeteria and he'd eat off of my plate before he'd start on his own plate. I'd say, 'Yo Yo, I've got to have some food, you know?' For whatever reason, Yo Yo liked me. Whenever we played at the Palestra, he would come into our locker room, go right to me, and say 'O'Halloran, How you doing?' Then he'd take my Coke and walk away with it."

When Yo Yo died in 1979, the Big 5 athletic directors contributed $300 toward his funeral expenses and the Philadelphia Phillies paid the rest.

The name *Palestra* was suggested by Dr. William N. Bates, a professor of Greek at the University of Pennsylvania. Bates explained that young men in ancient Greece would train for their feats of prowess—wrestling, gymnastics, tumbling, and leaping—in their *gymnasia*. Then they competed in a variety of events and displayed their skills in a rectangular enclosure attached to the gymnasium called a *Palestra*. The organizing committee was satisfied that the name fit all of its specifications—authentic, dignified, descriptive, and novel. "The only deviation was made in deference to Philadelphia's winter weather," explained the late Ralph Morgan, a Penn trustee who served on the Penn athletic council that planned the building. "We put a roof on our Palestra. The Greeks left theirs open in the winter."

The Palestra opened on January 1, 1927—Penn beat Yale 26–15—and immediately became one of the social hubs of the community by regularly sponsoring dances after the games with men attending in tuxedoes and ladies wearing long dresses. By the time the Palestra hosted the Eastern semifinals of the first NCAA Basketball Tournament in 1939, it was a nationally-known venue. Since then it has held more fans at more basketball games than any other arena in the United States.

In 1987 the building received a major $2 million facelift that reduced its capacity from 9,240 to 8,700. The hard wooden bleachers were replaced with more comfortable plastic benches. Rows of seats with backs were added near courtside. Media facilities were upgraded, lighting was improved, and a fresh coating of Carolina blue replaced the brown paint on the walls and ceilings. Still remaining, however, is its distinctive roof braced by ten arched-steel trusses and brightened by rows of skylights on the south side. The building sits next to Franklin Field on the northeastern edge of Penn's campus, tucked behind outdoor tennis courts and adjacent to the Amtrak railroad tracks and the Schuylkill River.

"In today's world it's antiquated," said Fred Shabel, the former University of Pennsylvania athletic director "I find that I don't do a good job verbalizing it so the best way for me to describe the Palestra is to take somebody to a game. I like to sit down on Press Row at the Penn-Princeton game, for example, with friends from places like Fort Worth or Cleveland. Usually they're basketball guys who are just amazed. When you're that close to the floor, right on top of the action, it's a different world."

Shabel didn't always have such a fond appreciation for the Palestra, especially when he was an assistant coach at Duke and head coach at the University of Connecticut. "We had the feeling that the Big 5 was a marvelous concept," recalled Shabel, who is now vice chairman of Comcast-Spectacor in Philadelphia. "But we certainly had the very strong feeling that we didn't like coming to the Palestra to play a game. It was one of those situations where it was very difficult to win."

In 1965, Shabel's U-Conn team won the Yankee Conference title and was rewarded with a first-round game against one of Jack Ramsay's greatest St. Joseph's squads at the Palestra. "I remember calling the NCAA and saying, 'Look, this is a first-round game for us. Why are we playing on their home court?' I'll never forget the NCAA's answer: 'It's not their home court. Their Alumni Memorial Fieldhouse is.' I said, 'You guys have got to be kidding me!'" Connecticut led at intermission but Shabel was whistled for a technical foul in the second half and St. Joe's went on to win 67–61.

"I always thought the officials in the Palestra let you get away with more physical play," said Dave Wohl, the former Penn guard. "So teams would come in from dif-

ferent conferences and they were really almost intimidated. Nothing like the NBA, but you could hold and grab a little more, you could bump a little more, you could bang under the boards a little more. So the Philadelphia kind of style was more accepted and when the city teams would go against each other I thought the officials would even let you go another notch for the college game."

"I loved the Palestra when I was coaching at Villanova," said Jack Kraft. "But when I used to come back to play there with Rhode Island, I didn't think the place was as good. Sometimes it felt as though the people in the stands were sitting right on top of you. Out of bounds on the side, you only had an area of about three feet before you hit the stands. Underneath the baskets, the stands came right up to the braces of the backboard."

Al McGuire, who won a NCAA championship at Marquette in 1977, refused to bring his teams back to the Palestra after Villanova nipped the Warriors 80–78 in 1966. "He told me 'We just can't win there,'" recalled Kraft. Gary Thompson of Wichita felt the same way after St. Joseph's converted 30 of 32 free throws to upset his unbeaten, top-ranked Shockers 76–69 in the championship game of the 1964 Quaker City Tournament. "The conditions were ridiculous," Wichita's coach said after the game. "Our treatment on the floor by the officials and off the floor by those damn, horn-blowing, hollering St. Joseph's fans was atrocious. It was a damn farce."

When John Nash became executive director of the Big 5 in 1975, one of the first coaches he called was Al McGuire. "The answer was 'Never at the Palestra,'" said Nash. "Al was smart enough to recognize the incredible home court advantage of the Palestra. I remember McGuire or his assistant Hank Raymond making reference to the number of nationally-ranked teams that had come in and been defeated. It had been 11 years since Gary Thompson ripped the fans and officials, but the power teams were afraid. They would not come. Notre Dame obviously was a highlight on the schedule, but I couldn't get North Carolina to come in. We did get Ralph Sampson and Virginia to come and play Temple but I couldn't encourage some of the other big powers into the Palestra. Duke (with Philadelphia's Gene Banks) agreed to play La Salle, but only at the Spectrum."

Officials of the Eastern College Athletic Conference had trouble attracting top intersectional teams to the Quaker City Tournament after Thompson's outburst. The Christmas holiday tourney had begun amid considerable fanfare in 1961 and enjoyed its best crowds in 1964, when 34,332 fans watched eight teams competing for the title won by the Hawks in that shocking upset over Wichita. The Quaker City tourney that year actually produced more revenue for its contestants than its New York counterpart, the Holiday Festival in Madison Square Garden—much to the embarrassment of the ECAC. The Garden matchups featured Bill Bradley's Princeton team and a University of Michigan powerhouse led by Cazzie Russell. But the Quaker City Tournament was moved from the Palestra to the Philadelphia Spectrum in 1967, then was discontinued after 1973.

The Minneapolis-based Jostens Ring Company made a five-year commitment to sponsor a four-team Holiday Tournament at the Palestra beginning in 1985. Featuring an opening-round match-up between two Big 5 schools—thus guaranteeing a local team playing for the championship—it enjoyed one sellout when Villanova's defending NCAA champs made an appearance in 1985. However, the final year was canceled after Loyola Marymount, coached by Paul Westhead and featuring Bo Kimbel and the late Hank Gathers, was ordered to withdraw by the university's new president because the tournament conflicted with study time before final exams. "Jostens invested about $100,000 a year to sponsor the event but realized more than $1.5 million in free publicity," according to Bob Kane, a former La Salle tennis player, who ran the company's Mid-Atlantic college division and served as the tourney's executive director.

Palestra appearances by nationally-ranked powerhouses afterwards were tougher to arrange. Arkansas came in to play Villanova one Sunday afternoon and Razorbacks' coach Eddie Sutton raved about the atmosphere of the Palestra. La Salle hosted Western Kentucky and Florida State, and Penn did the same with Atlantic Coast Conference opponents Duke and Virginia. But the other big names usually belonged to traditional Big East teams like Syracuse and Georgetown—and most of those games eventually ended up in the Spectrum. Denny Crum, who had vowed never to return, changed his mind in 1984 when he brought his Louisville team with Camden High products Billy Wagner and Milt Thompson in to play La Salle in a game won by the Cardinals 93–88. Dean Smith scheduled one of his North Carolina teams against La Salle as a personal favor to Explorer coach Lefty Ervin, but by the time the game was played—and won by the Tar Heels 79–72 in 1987, Ervin had been replaced by Speedy Morris.

However, the mystique remains. As sportswriter Bob Vetrone said wistfully: "If they hadn't built the Palestra, maybe there never would have been the Big 5."