

New arena adds excitement to season

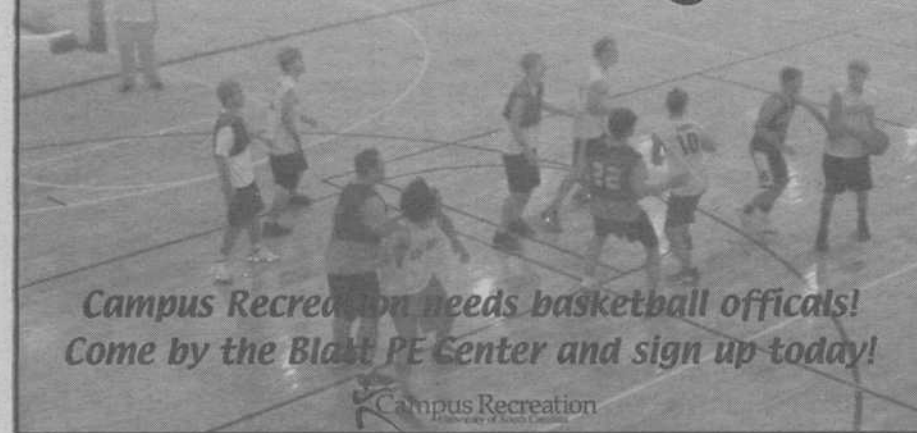


PHOTO BY CANDI HAUGLUM/THE GAMECOCK

The Carolina Center, shown here during the construction process, replaces the Frank McGuire Arena, which was the home of USC basketball for 34 seasons.

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BY KYLE ALMOND
THE GAMECOCK

A new era begins Friday when the USC women's basketball team opens its season against Clemson.

The Gamecocks will be playing the first-ever game in the Carolina Center — a new state-of-the-art arena built on campus in the offseason.

"We are very excited to host the very first event in the new Carolina Center," USC head coach Susan Walvius said. "The Carolina Center will be a great opportunity for us to sell our program and will be an exciting venue for us to play."

The new arena has 18,000 seats and will be home to both the USC men's and women's basketball teams. It replaces Frank McGuire Arena, which is located in the Carolina Coliseum and has been the Gamecocks' home for 34 seasons.

The Carolina Center can accommodate other events, such as concerts, motocross, professional wrestling and hockey games. But it was primarily built for USC basketball.

"It is with a great sense of appreciation that we designed the Carolina Center with our basketball fans in mind," Athletics Director Mike McGee said.

The Carolina Center should be an excellent place to watch college hoops.

For starters, the seats are close to the action. Even though there are 5,000 seats more than in Frank McGuire, the farthest seat in the new arena is just as close as the farthest seat in the old arena. And the overlap of the upper deck extends far over the lower deck, giving those up top a great view as well. It's steep, but it allows for better sight lines.

The scoreboards in Frank McGuire didn't offer much more than the score. But the main scoreboard in the Carolina Center will feature four high-definition video screens — each facing a side of the arena — and the point and foul totals of all the players on the floor. Complementing that multimillion-dollar scoreboard will be two smaller scoreboards on the upper deck and two "hustle boards" in the corners that will give the statistics for such categories as rebounds and assists.

"This venue is one that is architecturally engineered in a fashion that is very participant-friendly," said Dave Odom, head coach of the men's basketball team. "It is very fan-friendly."

Outside on the concourse, fans can enjoy concessions and re-live some of the

greatest moments in Carolina sports history. Featured throughout the arena are picture displays of these moments, such as B.J. McKie's winning basket against Kentucky and the baseball team's win over Clemson in the College World Series.

And don't worry about waiting in line forever to use the restroom. There are 296 restrooms, almost three-quarters of which are for women. The old arena only had 79 restrooms.

Bob Dekas, the coordinating producer of NCAA basketball on CBS, was blown away by the new building when he visited on a business trip.

"The Carolina Center is one of the nicest on-campus basketball arenas that I have ever seen," Dekas said. "And I say this having done every basketball arena survey for CBS Sports for the last 19 years."

Student seating a concern

In Frank McGuire, there was often a conflict between the students and the paying customer. The students, who were scattered around the building, wanted to stand and cheer like at football games, while the paying customer, usually a booster or alum, wanted to sit to watch the game.

McGee and his staff were committed to fixing that problem and giving both sides what they wanted.

"Both sides were right," said Chris Massaro, the associate athletics director in charge of ticket operations. "The students have a right to stand, but the booster pays a lot of money, and he's got a right to watch the game without standing."

So when they went to draw up the new seating chart, USC officials tried their best to make everyone happy.

"At Frank McGuire Arena, students were broken up a little bit. So we wanted a clearly defined student area, and I think we've accomplished that," Massaro said.

The student section in the Carolina Center will include all of section 110, which is behind a basket; sections 111 and 112, which are located in the corner; and sections 216, 217 and 218, which are in the upper-deck corner. The first eight rows of sections 113, 114 and 115 — which are courtside on the sideline — are also student seats.

With nearly 500 sideline seats and 1,700 lower-level seats, the student section is not only unified, but bigger and better

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