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Diddle Arena

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On the morning of November 15, 1961 chapel services were moved out of Van Meter auditorium to the site where Diddle Arena now stands. That morning, which was also Founders Day, Kelly Thompson announced to nearly 1000 faculty, staff, students and townspeople that construction would begin on an athletic facility to replace the existing Physical Education Building now known as Helm Library. He and E.A. Diddle were soon atop a bulldozer and breaking ground for the Athletic-Academic Building.

Just the day before, Clark Construction Company of Owensboro had submitted the winning bid to construct the building which was designed by Frank Cain and Ben Johnson. Thompson wasted no time putting them to work saying "I believe some sort of national record has been set here today. The contracts were not signed until 3:30 p.m. yesterday. Now at 10:00 a.m. today, we ask Mr. Clark to issue the order to his employees to start to work."

Diddle Arena was officially named in January 1962. The framework was completed by September of that year and it opened in time for fall semester classes in 1963, even though the construction crews were still putting on the finishing touches. As the 300+ foot diameter, 90 foot high, three level arena rose next to Russellville Road, planning began for the grand opening and dedication. The full December 7th program attended by 3000 people included televised interviews with E.A. Diddle, a faculty procession in full regalia, an open house, speeches by then Governor Bert Combs and Lt. Governor Wilson Wyatt, a basketball game and the presentation of a new car to E.A. Diddle by the W Club.

The public saw what \$3 million could build including the Olympic sized swimming pool, state-of-the-art language lab, offices and 8,500 seat gymnasium. Diddle Arena could house 34 times more spectators than the original Red Barn's 250 capacity and doubled the seating of the Physical Education Building. In Kentucky, it was the second only to Freedom Hall in Louisville. The only thing that could dampen spirits was the 60 to 82 loss to Vanderbilt on the court as E.A. Diddle began his last year of coaching.

Three years later WKU athletics experienced its first sell-out crowd of over 13,000. However, the game was another Vanderbilt victory. More seating was added in 1970 and event attendance rose steadily reaching a million during the 1971-72 basketball season when a total 107 games were played in Diddle Arena. The arena would see 2 million spectators by December 1980.

Other improvements followed. The current scoreboard is the third, the first being replaced in 1980. Bleachers were replaced with theatre style seats in the early '90s. The original sound system has been completely replaced and upgraded. Sixteen luxury suites were added in the major renovation of 2002. That makeover saw the removal of the exterior ramps and walkways, installation of a food court and the creation of four entrances. The original floor came out in 2003 along with the remaining original seating.

Like the original construction, the latest renovation took less than two years to complete culminating in the rededication of the building November 12, 2003. Diddle Arena has seen a lot of action and changes in its nearly 50 years. It is a fitting tribute to the coach whose name it bears.

Images:

F1035-1 Diddle Arena Building Committee

F1035-2 Diddle Arena Building Committee

F1037-1 Thompson, Diddle and others on bulldozer, 11/15/1961

2009.176.14 Diddle Arena rendering by Frank Cain

FOS109-2 Drawing of E.A. Diddle w/ proposed Diddle Arena

F1049-2 Interior 1965-1966