a century of

Throughout the years, the Orangemen have provided fans with many amazing moments on the basketball court

By Bob Snyder

Our windows on the world are too often framed within life’s experiences. The teenager views the lifeline of Syracuse University basketball through the windblown portals of the Carrier Dome: Etan Thomas’s shot-blocking, Jason’s He(e)art, Damone Brown’s dunks, Ryan Blackwell’s inside/outside game, and a supporting cast that seasoned orchestrator Jim Boeheim directed to the Sweet 16 in the NCAA Tournament and a 26-6 finish.

Even adult Orange hoop junkies, part of 30,000-plus crowds that seem so many yesterdays removed from the new millennium, have witnessed their share of memorable moments. They watched John Wallace carry a team to an improbable last dance with Kentucky for the 1996 national championship; Billy Owens’s all-around game; Derrick Coleman clear NCAA title game boards as no freshman ever had, only to be shot down by Keith Smart; Gene Waldron’s surreal 40-point performance in the Carrier Classic; The Shot fired by Pearl Washington, whose scintillating moves played to full houses and energized recruiting; and The Greatest Game, a Big East Tournament crown won in triple overtime on Leo Rautins’s tip-in.

Do their SU basketball memory banks end there? As if Manley Field House, seen now in its ever-expanding form, must have been some ratty hole where a bunch of nameless faces on unheralded teams played games that didn’t shape a program’s future.

Couldn’t have been much game back in those days when the only three-pointer included a free throw. Yet to have never squeezed into a packed Manley Dome, not to have tasted dust rising from beneath a portable floor, heard The Zoo fracture a visiting coach’s ego and eardrums, meant missing some of SU hoops’ most treasured moments.

There was Georgetown coach John Thompson declaring “Manley Field House is officially closed!”—a streak-snapping end to the Bouie ‘n’ Louie Show; Cinderella, Snow White, and the Seven Dwarfs taking a town on a first, almost mystical journey to the Final Four in ’75; Sweet D and the Brothers Lee; Roy’s Runts; the roof-bound flight of doves greeting their namesake, St. John’s Sonny; graceful Dave Bing, greatest of all Orangemen, whose combined scoring/rebounding/passing ability remains unequalled on Pity Hill. And could that bespectacled, bony Boeheim really play?

Well, surely, there was nothing of consequence before then. An NIT bid was a big deal. RPI was an engineering school, not a ratings percentage index. And ESPN wasn’t even a blip on your TV screen.

But much had transpired on SU’s road to more than 1,500 victories. There was a basketball life before Boeheim, who arrived on campus a walk-on in ’62. That period was not without glory, nor sans court embarrassment. Actually, men’s basketball began two years after the women took the court in 1898. For the first three seasons, the men’s team had no coach. Since then, every Orange coach—seven, beginning with athletic director John A.R. Scott, who first volunteered his services in ’09—had winning career records. Boeheim, of course, is the leader in games, victories, and winning percentage. But Lew Andreas, SU’s longtime athletic director, won 355 games...
from 1924-50 and had a .726 winning percentage. Ed Dollard (1911-24), whose 1913-14 squad was the school's only one to go undefeated (12-0), had a .725 winning percentage.

There was no NCAA Tournament until the thirties. Dollard's squad in 1917-18 won 16 of 17 games and was selected as national champion by the Helms Foundation. Andreas's team in 1925-26, led by the legendary Vic Hanson, had a 19-1 mark and also was Helms's choice as national champ.

In that era of the center jump following every made basket and a designated free-throw shooter, the Orangemen lived a spartan life. No comfortable apartment living, grand hotel accommodations on the road, plane travel. SU players lived in Pneumonia Hall. With no heat or hot water and one light in the ceiling, they slept on cots. On a long winter trip to New York City, for example, they'd trudge through the snow to the train station.

Still, the early years spawned success—and fine players such as All-Americans Lew Castle, Joe Schwarzer, and Hanson. Before Manley's doors were opened to Bing and Boeheim in 1962, SU hoops was played in Archbold Gym, the Jefferson Street Armory, the Fairgrounds Coliseum, and the War Memorial.

A team dubbed the Reindeer Five—the fast foursome of Ev Katz, Dan Fogarty, Tuppy Hayman, and captain Ken Beagle, plus "Slim" Elliott—won 34 of 40 games from 1929-31. In the late thirties, a squad was nicknamed the S-Men. Not for Syracuse, but for Sonderman, Simonaitis, Schroeder, Stewart, and Sidat-Singh.

Following a wartime suspension of the sport in 1943-44, Bullet Billy Gabor guided the 1945-46 team (23-4) to the most victories in school history until nearly 30 years later. That Gabor-led squad had an average winning margin of 22.1 points, by far the most by any SU basketball team.

Andreas's hand-picked successor was assistant and '36 captain Marc Guley. Talk about highs and lows! The Guley years began with the 1950-51 team, led by Jack Kiley, which beat host Bradley for the National Campus Tournament crown. Those dozen seasons—which included the contributions of SU's greatest football player, Jim Brown—were highlighted by Vinnie Cohen leading the Orangemen to their first NCAA's in '57, SU was ousted in the East Regional final by North Carolina, the eventual unbeaten national champion. Ironically, Brown—second in scoring as a sophomore, but a non-
starter the following year—passed up playing hoops that senior season. Certainly he would have provided added scoring, rebounding, and depth. Could he have been the difference in a nine-point loss to the Tar Heels? We’ll never know.

Thereafter, SU dipped a bit, then went into a free-fall: 4-19 in 1960-61, 2-22 the year after, when the program lost its first 22 games of the season. This was the worst team in the country, with an NCAA-record 27 consecutive losses over two winters. Fortunately, a Rice team came along and expunged the Orange from record-book infamy. For this program to rise from the ashes, it would take an all-new look. Dr. George L. Manley was the benefactor, providing the bucks for Manley Field House to be built. Fred Lewis came in as coach. He recruited Bing from Washington, D.C. And after a year when Bing played freshman ball (frosh could not play varsity on the college level at that time), the Orangemen were back on the winning track. As a senior, Bing averaged 28.4 points per game (24.8 for his career). Bing & Co. set an NCAA scoring record, averaging 99 points a game, and reached the ’66 NCAA Regional final, losing to Duke. After two more seasons, Lewis would depart.

Frosh coach Roy Danforth, who played for Lewis at Southern Mississippi, was elevated. In Danforth’s third year, the Orangemen—led by 6-11 Bill Smith—made it to postseason play. The NIT still looked pretty good back then, and it was SU’s first tournament action since the ’67 NIT.

SU basketball was back, never to really crumble on the court again. Little did anyone know at the time, but the program was bound for higher ground, uncharted territory as SU hoops and the collegiate basketball landscape were soon to undergo dramatic changes.

That ’71 NIT initiated a national pace-setting run of 22 successive trips to postseason play. An opening-round victory in the ’72 NIT was the program’s first postseason win since the ’66 NCAA. And in 1973, the Orange returned to the Big Dance for the first time in seven years. SU wouldn’t be a non-participant in the NCAA again until the eighties—and then, on the heels of the greatest collegiate game ever played in Syracuse.

In the seventies, a program given rebirth by Bing grew because of the clothesline jump shots of Greg “Kid” Kohls, the scrappiness of Roy’s Runts personified by under-sized forwards Mike Lee and Mark Wadach, and the stylish play of Dennis DuVal. Then came a fairy-tale trip.

Of SU’s three Final Fours—’75, ’87, ’96—the first and last were similar. Both were unexpected, none more so than a quarter-century ago, when SU arrived at the crossroads of a season. Having blown huge leads (combined cushions of 40 points) in back-to-back Manley losses to Rutgers and West Virginia, the
latter made worse appearing on the ECAC televised game of the week, the Orange found itself with a 14-7 mark and down 12-zip at George Washington. SU rallied to win and didn’t lose again until arriving after a magic carpet ride to the Final Four in San Diego. Nine straight Ws.

After winning the rest of the regular-season slate and the ECAC playoffs, the Orange was a five-foot jump shot away from losing to LaSalle in the NCAA opener at the Palestra. Joe Bryant missed. SU won in overtime. Then, Divine Providence!

Despite shooting .653 from the field, North Carolina—the taller favorites from Tobacco Road—was stunned by the evidence while LaSalle in the Me toto star frontcourt player Rudy “Rag Man” Hackett. “I saw Phil Ford and the boys coming. So I threw it right out to ‘Rat’ (Lee). I knew he’d be there,” Hackett said afterward. “He’s been there for three years.”

With five seconds remaining, from 18 feet away, Lee let it fly. Nothing but net. It wasn’t so neat and clean in the regional final with Kansas State. Again the clock was :05 from midnight, when Cinderella’s carriage would turn into an Orange pumpkin. Regional MVP Chuckie Williams’s bomb from the left corner had given Kansas State the lead by two. Following a time-out, SU inbounded to Williams, who raced up the left sideline in a blur and hit Hackett from more than 20 feet away. For just an instant, which seemed to the Orange faithful an eternity, Hackett fumbled the ball. But he put it in over the top, Lee let it fly. Nothing but net. The latter made worse appearing on the ECAC televised game of the week, the Orange found itself with a 14-7 mark and down 12-zip at George Washington. SU rallied to win and didn’t lose again until arriving after a magic carpet ride to the Final Four in San Diego. Nine straight Ws.

An SU-Indiana final was a virtual toss-up, and that’s the way it played out. Coleman could have iced it at the foul line, but he didn’t. And in the closing seconds, a left-side 16-footer by Indiana’s Keith Smart went in, instead of spinning out as Bryant’s had from close range a dozen years before. Hoosiers, 74-73. Little consolation that it was one of the great NCAA finals.

A cloud fell over the program with NCAA probation in ’92, keeping the team at home during postseason play the following March and affecting recruiting beyond that. But one blemish on an otherwise clean slate is a thing of the past.

No consolation needed in ’96, when hometown playmaker Lazarus Sims pointed the way as once again the Orange needed a

The 1999-2000 SU basketball team

Harry Houdini escape to advance in the Round of 16. In the West Region semis in Denver, Georgia scrapped like ‘Dogs, but Wallace found Jason Cipolla for a buzzer-beating jumper from the left corner that spelled OT. Wallace’s last-gasp bomb from just over mid-court won it in overtime, 83-81.

Then, favored Kansas fell by three. In the Final Four at the Meadowlands, Mississippi State went down by eight. Kentucky, a double-digit favorite coached by former Boeheim aide Rick Pitino, was taken to the final four minutes before winning it all by nine.

Through much of it all—including this season, in which SU had a 19-0 start, was the last unbeaten Division 1 team to fall, and won a share of the Big East regular-season title—the two constants have been James Arthur Boeheim and the fans. Surely, J.A.B. has been here forever. Didn’t he come with the old furniture and just never leave?

And while the turnstile count has dwindled in recent years, SU remains among the leaders at the gate. When next you watch the Orangemen, capture the moment. But pause a moment to remember all the yesterdays. You’ll enjoy it even more.

Bob Snyder has been a sports columnist/write for The Syracuse Newspapers since 1965. A 1962 graduate of SU, he’s a past recipient of the ECAC Sports Information Directors’ Award for contributions in coverage of athletics. Snyder’s second book—Syracuse Basketball: A Century of Memories—was published in 1999 (see Cover to Cover, page 62).