

1968-2018

## Holding court

50 years of women's basketball



The 1968-69 Kansas State women's basketball team photo. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the K-State women's team as an official NCAA program.

Photo courtesy of K-State Athletics

### Former player recalls turning point of program in late '60s

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Contributing writer

Ask American history buffs about the 1960s in the United States and they will tell you 1968 was a turning point for the country.

Civil rights issues, demonstrations, voting-rights legislation, a widening generation gap and the Vietnam war provided multiple avenues for unrest among the citizens.

But at that time, a much quieter revolution was taking place in college athletics on campuses across the country. Kansas State University was among the leaders of this movement, as was the University of Kansas. The participants of the revolution didn't realize the impact their efforts would have for many years.

While student unrest made the front pages daily, women basketball players at K-State sought practice space, made up game schedules, created uniforms, and sacrificed time and energy to be able to play basketball at the collegiate level.

Five-woman teams replaced the six-woman format in 1968. The two guards, two forwards and two rovers format was thrown out. Multiple "play day" games were replaced with what we know today simply as basketball games. While the men were much more organized under National Collegiate Athletic Association

rules, the women were just beginning to formulate their own leagues and associations.

Following the December 1968 fire that destroyed K-State's Nichols Gymnasium, William Stamey, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, listened and supported the women sharing practice space with the men's program. At the time, the athletic department was a part of the College of Arts and Sciences with the athletic department and men's physical education department at Ahearn Fieldhouse, while the women's programs were housed in Nichols.

Sharing space and class time was uncommon except for dance classes. Besides space for practicing and playing games, finding equipment, uniforms and travel money was a priority. Judy Akers, former player and a graduate student, coached the team, and met on multiple occasions with the administration to establish what became, by the early 1970s, a nationally recognized women's basketball program.

The players on the 1968-69 roster were not intent on making history. Their goal was simply to play the game. They were the last team to practice and play in the storied Nichols facility.

Moving to Ahearn Fieldhouse was necessary, but being able to practice was the key. It didn't matter where. They suit-



Staff photo by Ray Martinez

Freshman wing Rachel Ranke shoots a 3-pointer during a game against Chicago State earlier this season.

ed up for games at their homes, trekked to Ahearn and used the locker room space only for the games. Home games were about the same as away games that season except for the loyal band of students, parents and basketball fans who showed up wherever games were held. It was a big deal to have the head men's coach, Cotton Fitzsimmons, show up and support the home games.

Another early highlight of the initial season for the Wildcats was being invited to a college tournament in Amarillo, Texas. Playing three games in three days in the team's first invitation to a national tournament was exhilarating. As a substitute on that initial team, I remember Coach Akers thanking me for making my free throws so the record would show we didn't lose by so much. Win or lose, it was the opportunity to play, to wear our school's name and colors, and to be ambassadors for the university and team that meant so much to us.

Over the ensuing years, K-State women's basketball set records galore. The current media guide gives the reader myriad examples of the program's successes. It had 200 wins in the first 10 years of the program. There are currently three Kodak All-Americans. There have been 31 post-season appearances — including an Elite Eight appearance in 1981-82, and the program

reached 900 wins as of one year ago.

Individual achievements fill the media guide: the first full scholarship offered to LeAnn Wilcox Plutnicki in 1976, five jerseys retired, and 40 players who have scored 1,000 or more points while at K-State.

So what is the same after 50 years of women's basketball at K-State? The opportunity to play beyond college was non-existent in 1968, and still very few players today have the opportunity to play professionally. The players of yesteryear and of today concentrate on life after basketball.

Leadership empowerment through the venue of athletics has not changed since 1968. Learning to be a team member, to contribute to the team, and to be willing to listen remain unchanged no matter the playing years. Adapting to conflicting scenarios and the opportunity to support an idea one is passionate about remain in 2018. Academic success at Kansas State has been the norm for 50 years. Support for athletes while they pursue their degrees has been enhanced, and the push to excel in the classroom as well as on the court has not lessened.

K-State is one of six universities celebrating 50 years of women's basketball this season. The result of that quiet



Women's Basketball, 1910

Photo courtesy of K-State Libraries Department of Special Collections  
The 1910 women's intramural basketball at Kansas State Agricultural College. This was long before women's basketball became an intercollegiate sport.

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