Memorial Memories

BR stadium has hosted everything from football to water skiing

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

On Nov. 4, 1949, Intramural and Catholic high schools' arch football rivals played the first game to officially open the city's brand new Memorial Stadium. The game almost didn't take place because the facility was not finished.

Recreation and Park Commission members sat in the stadium the day before the game and argued for so long whether to permit the game to go on as scheduled. The lights had not been completely installed, there were no seats at the south end, roof room facilities were not ready, and the unsurfaced, rutted parking area was unsuitable for cars.

"The people are ready to get in that stadium," Ellis A. Brown, commission chairman, told the members. "There's no reason why we can't use it Friday night."

Brown was right. A huge crowd turned out to see Intramural beat Catholic High 34 to 14 to view the new steel and concrete stadium with seating for 21,500 fans.

"Memorial Stadium was one of the first facilities BREC built," East Baton Rouge Parish Recreation and Park Commission Superintendent Eugene Young said. "It was the first class high school stadium." The facility cost $53,000.

"They built forms and poured the concrete in place," Young said. "It's more expensive to do it that way. You can't afford to build like that now."

The 32 acres on which the stadium is located were given to the Recreation and Park Commission by the state during the administration of Gov. Earl K. Long. J&P Krentz Inc. of Mobile, Ala., submitted the lowest of seven bids for the construction of the facility.

A stadium committee chaired by Vermae Smith with members James E. Brown, R.L. Darby, Ben Phelps, Jimmy Liais, Perry Anglade, Sterling W. Gladden, John W. Sargeant, Al Ezell, Frank Fanger, O.M. Helvenston, Bert Patin, Jack Persuay, Paul Speckie and Brother Ralph McCarty of Catholic High oversaw the construction.

City Councilman William V. Lohdell suggested that the facility be named Memorial Stadium in memory of those who died in World War II. "It was right after the war," Young said.

"There could be no more appropriate and justifiable expression from the people of our community than to dedicate this structure to

For 51 years, BREC's Memorial Stadium has been a center of activities in Baton Rouge.

High school football teams throughout the area have played on the field since the stadium was first opened.

The football field was flooded with more than 3 million gallons of water for a water ski show in 1970.
our young people who gave their lives in defense of their homeland in World War II," Lobdell wrote the commission.

He was joined in his recommendation by the Young Men's Business Club, then headed by Martin Abington; the Baton Rouge chapter of Military Order of World Wars with Hermann Moysie in charge of a special three-man committee; and Amvets Foss-Landry Post No. 2 with Albert W. Blake as commander.

The commission voted unanimously Oct. 31, 1949, to name the facility Memorial Stadium. Plaques at the entrances designated the name.

The largest crowd to ever attend an event at Memorial Stadium came to bear the Rev. Billy Graham Oct. 25, 1954. Graham, who was in New Orleans for a month long evangelistic campaign, appeared in Baton Rouge for a one-night event sponsored by the Baton Rouge Ministerial Association.

The crowd, estimated at 25,000, included a 1,000 voice chorus from many of the city's churches.

"They filled the stadium," Young said. "You even had people on the field."

Graham told the audience, "New Orleans needs revival more than any other city. People do things in New Orleans that would make Paris, France, blush."

In 1964, a scurfing ramp was built at the east side parking lot. Scurfing, an early version of skateboarding, was a popular activity at the time.

The Morning Advocate reported Dec. 24 that the "work was done on the ramp built on the city's expected hundreds of Santa Claus-given scurfing sets could be used immediately."

"Scurfing addicts, the latest national scale teen-age craze, have been scooting down every sidewalk and drive in the city, making themselves candidates for the traffic casualty list," the article said.

The ramp, which could be used as a sidewalk during football season, was dedicated with Young as master of ceremonies. The ribbon was cut by William R. McGehee, BREC chairman.

For years, the Shrine Circus was held in the facility. "They would have 18,000 or 19,000," Young said. "They would almost fill it up but not completely."

Another annual event was a giant Christmas tree sale conducted from about 1959 until the late 1980's by the Capital City Kiwanis Club.

One of the most well-publicized events was the Grantland Rice Bowl game first held at Memorial Stadium Dec. 13, 1969. This fundraiser for the Downtown Lions Club was televised by ABC-TV, which brought a crew of 50 cameramen, technicians and announcers.

The crowd of 16,000 spectators watched East Tennessee State defeat Louisiana Tech 34-14. Tech, with its heralded quarterback Terry Bradshaw, was overpowered in the fourth quarter when ETSU scored twice.

The bowls were held annually in Memorial Stadium until 1973.

Young recalls the time the field was turned into a lake for a water ski show in June 1970. "That's one of the great stories in the annals of BREC," said Mike Proctor, BREC accounting manager.

"They said it couldn't be done," said Gordon Ogden, who promoted the show sponsored by the Lake-shore Lions Club.

Ogden and his partner, Jerry Comeaux, dammed up the south end of the field and filled the field with 3/4 million gallons of water.

"They made me build a dam you couldn't have driven a Sherman tank through," Ogden said.

"Holes were dug 9 feet into the ground and filled with 12-inch poles. Marine plywood attached to the poles was sunk a foot into the ground. Finally, the entire dam was covered with two layers of plastic. "They thought if it broke, the water would wash the cars off the Interstate," Ogden said.

It took the Fire Department three days to flood the field. "We couldn't turn the water on full force except between about 12:30 and 4 in the morning because it would make the water pressure too low in town," he said. "The water just dribbled in during the day."

Even though Ogden ran tests to show that the grass on the field would not be ruined, many in the area were skeptical.

"God's water is good for BREC's grass," Ogden told the State-Times April 29, 1970.

Young admits he was worried, too. "We said that he was going to ruin the field," Young said. "But after he drained it, the grass grew better than it ever did."

The stadium was built with red-wood seats over the concrete. "They lasted about 30 or 35 years," Young said.

In later years, the old seats were covered with Fiberglas over Styrofoam, only after a discussion as to whether plastic or aluminum would be better.

"Somebody said that people might electrocute on aluminum seats in an electrical storm," Young said.

One year a big hurricane hit Baton Rouge early in the week before several scheduled games that weekend. The poles that held the lights were bent in the storm.

"Woody (Mayor W.W. Dumas) got them to hook up lights so they could play games that weekend," Young said. "There were guide wires all over the parking lot."

Young believes the city has gotten its money's worth with Memorial Stadium. "Over the years, it has been used for Holiday on Ice, religious gatherings, light opera and pageants. "We used to have play-ground programs in there, fireworks on the Fourth of July, boxing matches and tractor pulls," he said.

Even the parking lots have been used to train bus drivers and for carnivals. The U.S. Army Reserve Center has used the parking lot as a landing site for its helicopters.

Exxon employees regularly play softball on a baseball field on the west side.

BREC continues to maintain the stadium in good condition for the high school teams that still play there. The lights have been redone and the field redesigned to protect players from running into the walls.

This Friday, one day short of 51 years from the day Catholic High played the first football game in Memorial Stadium, it will play East Ascension High on the same field. Catholic High supporters are hoping for a victory this time.