TRADITION is something you can't always put your finger on, but you know it's there nonetheless.

If you have tradition on your side, of the right kind, that is, you have a basis for success...a security blanket that warms you when things get cold and a rock-solid foundation that supports you when times get rough.

And, a winning tradition (see right kind of tradition, above) can be built on many factors.

A WINNING TRADITION can be built, in part, by a building. If, say, your home basketball court is cozy for you and undersirable for teams hitting town to play you, that place could go a long way toward winning records by season's end.

That has been the case ever since 1950 for USL, and its happy marriage with Blackham Coliseum.

Perhaps Ragin' Cajun roundball aces would do just as well at another court in another abode. Maybe so, but there is a certain magic that comes with that venerable rodeo palace.

SINCE the 1977-78 campaign, Cajun teams have compiled a remarkable 70-7-8 record in Blackham...losing only once at home in four of those seasons.

A writer covering Marquette down here last year called it "one of your old-fashioned down home, nasty, delightful pits."

He was impressed with the closeness of the fans to the court, and with the insanely bizarre nature of those fans' support for their heroes.

MOST FOLKS journeying to the hospitable Acadiana region are taken in by the gracious people, who feed them all and make them welcome as long as they don't venture onto the hardwood at Blackham.

When that happens, the entire complexion changes and the roof comes down around the ears of those audacious enough to enter the Cajuns' private playpen.

Even good teams come unglued at the prospect of playing here, which puts Blackham in the same company as such bastions of college basketball intimidation like Rupp Arena and Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

ALL OF WHICH BRINGS US to next Saturday night.

On that evening, the 1984-85 USL Ragin' Cajuns will commence the final basketball season in Blackham before moving next year into the brand-spanking new Cajundome just up the road.

And, what better opponent for such an auspicious occasion than Cajun rival Lamar University?

Some of the more highly

emotionally-charged contests every in Blackham have been against the Cardinals.

THAT puts the USL-LU series in some select company, because you can make a long list of electrifying evenings in Blackham.

My first experience at that arena came during the 1973-74 season when, as a fifth-grader, I saw Dean Church fill up the basket for USL in the middle of a great career.

Flash ahead to the 1973-74 campaign, the last before probation, and a visit by Southland Conference arch-rival Louisiana Tech. Tech had 6-11 Mike Green as its showcase. USL boasted All-American Bo Lamar.

AN OVERFLOW CROWD roared its approval as Blackham made two critical free throws, and then Green missed his, in a 75-44 classic victory by the Cajuns.

Lamar's heir apparent at shooting guard, Andrew Toney, provided fans with loads of memories before he was through in 1979-80, but perhaps none more so than his dazzling 46-point explosion in a 92-76 Bayou Classic championship win over Auburn.

Toney came back from an injury later in the season just in time to key an emotional 75-64 win over Alabama. (the Cards have not won since the 1977-78 season).

LATER that campaign, Dion Rainey's pressure-packed shot from the corner produced a 74-72 thriller over Alabama.

It was in the 1981-82 season that USL exited the SLC in high style by capturing the league title with an 81-73 win over Texas-Arlington to clinch an NCAA Tournament berth.

Who could ever forget the 71-69 win over Stetson in 1982-83, when Johnny Collins covered most of the floor in three seconds for a win?

LAST YEAR saw a return to the NIT for the Cajuns, and many thrills and chills. After an opening-round comeback win on the road, USL miffed Weber State here 74-72 in two overtimes.

Following that was a 97-76 blowout of Santa Clara that sent the Cajuns to the NIT Final Four in New York's Madison Square Garden.

Earning another post season bid, NCAA or NIT...will be a large task for Coach Bobby Paschal and his staff as they re-form a team from mostly new personnel.

STILL, that new group has already showed its penchant for thrilling with its overtime exhibition win over the Spirit Express two weeks ago, so the tradition appears to be in good hands.

Preseason ticket sales have been brisk for the final year in Blackham, and there are yet more memories to be created.

And, if it's fitting for Lamar to open this final season in Blackham, what better way to end it than to have Louisiana Tech in here next February 14th...Valentine's Day...for the last regular season tilt here?

The Cajuns love to have the Bulldogs down for a tussle. Tech beat USL twice last year...77-73 in Blackham...so their visit will be highly anticipated.

WITHOUT QUESTION the new Cajundome is a gleaming new facility, a modern new structure that will dazzle future fans and foes of the Cajuns.

But, as bright and new as that new arena promises to be, there is yet not tradition of greatness there. For winning tradition and exciting basketball, the new Cajundome can take a lesson from cramped, old, leaky-roofed, marvelous Blackham Coliseum.