

Arena a library next to Cajuns' court

THE OFFICIAL SEATING CAPACITY at Southwestern Louisiana's Blackham Coliseum is 9,000, which doesn't exactly explain what 1,323 people were doing there a few nights ago when Marquette played. Most of that defies explanation anyway.

It was all about screeching and bellowing and blowing trumpets, scattering confetti, throwing wadded up newspaper on the floor and making life generally warm and steamy for the out-of-town talent. The customers listened politely to a pregame invocation and then raised holy hell the rest of the night.

Blackham is one of your old-fashioned, down home, nasty, delightful pits. Barnum and Bailey sends people into cages like that, but only with a whip and a chair.



Dale Hofmann

It's called an all-purpose building, which means it can be rented between rodeos. The ceiling looks as if it's only about 10 feet higher than the baskets, and the roof leaks. Strangely enough, there was no hot water available in the visitors' locker room when Marquette arrived:

There are bleachers situated seven feet behind the visitor's bench, and the fans who sit in

them need not be enrolled in divinity school. Two minutes before game time, the home team takes a lap around the arena, led by a larger-than-life Cajun mascot riding in a golf cart with a blaring siren. By the time the players hit the court, a handful of spectators and most opponents are in intermediate stages of cardiac arrest.

There is a huge section of stands occupied solely by a group of fans dressed in white T-shirts. They have red dots on the shirts and mayhem in their eyes. They're called the Red Dot Club. There's a smaller section populated by a group called the Animals, whose fame does not derive from their wardrobe.

We'll never know how much all of that helped the Ragin' Cajuns get by Marquette, but

it sure didn't hurt. It takes more than coincidence and inspired scheduling for a team to win 40 of its last 42 home games.

MARQUETTE COACH RICK MAJERUS lists Southwestern Louisiana as one of the five or six hardest places in the country to play. That's what people used to say about the Milwaukee Arena when the Warriors were putting together astronomical homecourt winning streaks, and Al McGuire called the crowd his "sixth man."

It's not like that anymore.

When Lafayette fans get home from a basketball game they have to wring the sweat from their red dot T-shirts. Marquette rooters press their pants to get the wrinkles out when

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they were sitting on their hands.

The best thing that can happen to the present day Warriors at home is to get a couple of bad calls in the first minute or two. That seems to get the crowd into the game. The Southwestern faithful started booing the visiting players while they were in the locker room getting taped. A lot of Marquette spectators only boo referees, Medicare and no-fault divorce.

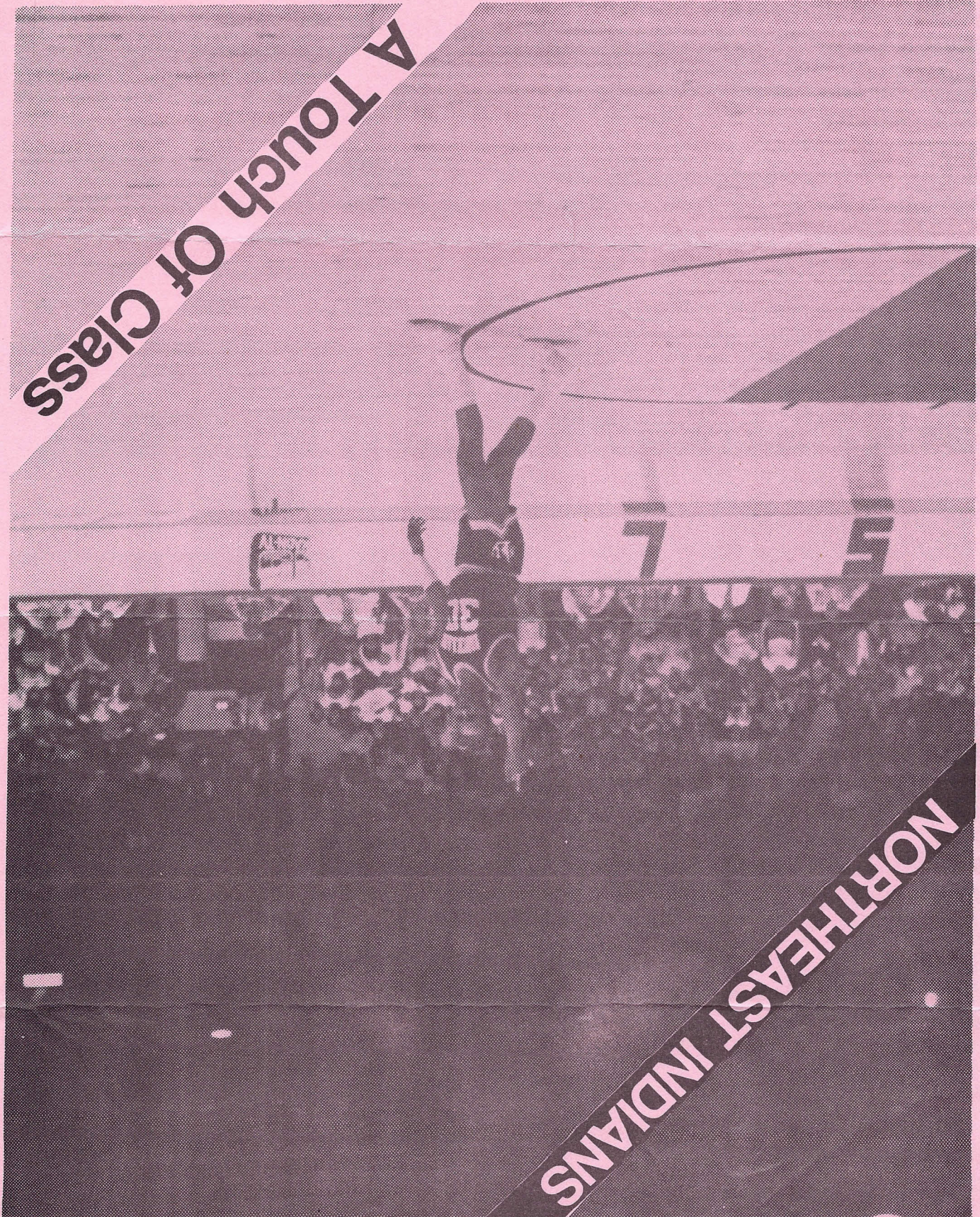
Marquette had six games scheduled this season when the students were out of town. Even when they're on campus, only 3,000 of them can get in at a time. And then they're all gathered behind one basket. That way they don't disturb anyone's nap in the lower parquet.

IT'S HARD TO SAY WHEN the Warriors' homecourt advantage began to ebb quietly away, but it would be a terrible thing to lose completely. There was a time when the Warriors won 81 games in a row at the Arena. They haven't been anywhere near that since.

Sure those teams were more talented than this year year's outfit, but 11,000 screaming ticket holders can still put an inch or two into anyone's vertical leap. With all the trouble the Warriors are having on the road this season, they could do with a little aid and comfort at home.

It would probably help to lower the ceiling, move the seats in and punch a few holes in the roof just for atmosphere. Barring that, the fans sure could stand to get a little rowdy.

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