



MARK SAUER

Virginia/MI-B players run out of the locker room to take the ice for a Section 7A playoff game at the Miners Memorial Building against Eveleth-Gilbert/Mesabi East on March 20, 2021. The game was the last varsity contest held at the arena which will soon be demolished.

MINERS

FROM B1
the Miners Memorial Building, my home away from home. Goodbye my old friend. I will miss you terribly!"

Regarding demolition, Park and Recreation Director Brian Silber said the contractor mobilizes on Tuesday with work starting in the back rink and then moving to the main building. Before the "wrecking ball" will be on site, there are a lot of items that need to be removed (light fixtures, door closers, etc.) that can not be demoed. After the removals take place, then the building will come down. "Personally I expect to see that occur towards the end of the month but I do not have a hard date for that."

Many others have spent considerable time at the Miners and are sad to see it go. At the same time, they realize the need for a new facility and see what it can bring to the city. John Kemppainen saw the first hockey game at the Miners in January 1960 and has now been public address announcer for Blue Devil hockey the last 18-19 years. "There's been a lot of good players that came through that Miners," Kemppainen said. "It was fun to watch."

The Virginia resident was a sophomore in high school in 1960 and he still remembers the top talent that played at the Miners. Former UMD head coach Mike Sertich, Jack, Steve and Jeff Carlson (now famous for the 1977 movie "Slap Shot"), Keith Hendrickson, Tony Sachetti, 1976 Olympian Steve Sertich, 1980 Olympian John Harrington and Matt Niskanen (Stanley Cup champion with the Washington Capitals). Players from Eveleth, Gilbert, International Falls, Grand Rapids, Babbitt and Hibbing made their mark, as well.

Kemppainen is "looking forward to the new arena" and joked that he plans to do at least one game at the MECC, which will be a "drawing card" for the area. "I think it's going to help out a lot."

Mike Sertich, a 1965 Virginia graduate and Blue Devils hockey player, said a part of him will be "gone" when the building is taken down.

The MECC, however, "is going to be great" and it is something that Virginia needs. "That's a good beginning for that whole area," he said of the new multi-use facility.

Looking back on the Miners, Sertich's first memory was seeing the Harlem Globetrotters (starring NBA great Wilt Chamberlain) play there. "It was pretty neat actually."

Back then the Miners was a brand new event center, he said, and it was "a big deal."

For Sertich, he and his brother Steve were fortunate enough to have a key, which meant they could go in after hours and play hockey by just the security lights.

The Miners brings back great memories for Keith Hendrickson, both as a player and head coach (from 1985-2011).

"I grew up playing in that rink" with some very good hockey teams and was also able to watch and idolize the Blue Devils (with players such as Steve Sertich and Billy Sipola) growing up as a kid. "There was a lot of tradition that was built there."

The 1975 graduate remembers his high school days playing in front of packed houses when their opponents were loaded with Division I players and the fire marshall had to turn fans away.

"There were some pretty good hockey players" in Virginia, including the Carlson brothers, Charlie Zupetz, Harrington and Dave Joelson. "It was a good time to grow up, that's for sure."

Hendrickson, now a scout for the Vegas Golden Knights, said watching his son Garrett come through the Blue Devils program and coaching three Section champion teams are great memories at Miners.

"Those were really special times for sure," said Hendrickson, especially since those kids came through the youth hockey program he was really active in.

One of his biggest memories of the Miners complex was seeing a small group of people (including himself) come together to get the back hockey rink built and artificial ice later installed. The added rink provided a lot of extra ice time, while the weight room that was added a couple years later provided year-round



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Hundreds of former Blue Devil players scrawled their names on the walls of the former high school coaches' room, which was under the bleachers.

workout and conditioning opportunities.

"Those kids grew up skating seven days a week."

With all of those improvements, Hendrickson added there was "a lot of deep satisfaction when the high school team started having consistent seasons." He said that was even more gratifying as a coach than as a player.

Willie Spelts, who grew up in Virginia, said the Miners "was basically a large indoor playground" during his younger years. Beginning at age 3, he took part in Ice Mites, which was started by Jim Padgett. The North Room and South Room were part of the playground, he said, while "some people knew how to get under the bleachers."

The Miners was the place to be in the 1970s, Spelts added.

"The biggest thing to do was to go to the high school hockey game. It seemed like it was the pros."

Spelts would often be at the Miners from 4:30-10 p.m. on game nights, going to the concession stand, eating popcorn and "just begging for sticks" as the players left the arena.

"I can remember the smells. I can remember the sounds," he said. "That place was the center of it all."

In addition to begging for sticks, Spelts (a fifth- or sixth-grader) and others begged "Padge" or the Park and Recre-

ation Department's John Guralski to resurface the outdoor back rink ice with the Zamboni.

"Padge would always do it," he said. That was skating outside" on a Zamboni rink. That was pure heaven."

Spelts will miss the Miners dearly, but he also said it was needed. "This new facility is going to be incredible for generation after generation after generation."

John Guralski has spent 40 years working at the Miners and has recently been working on taking everything out of the building to prepare for the eventual demolition. That includes moving all of the tables and chairs into the new building and driving the Zambonis over to their new home. The boards have also been taken out of the back rink for a new rink in Ridge-wood.

Demolition equipment started moving onto the Miners property Friday, said Guralski, who plans to retire in November.

That was not exactly a sight Guralski wanted to see.

"It will be tough for me when it comes down." Looking back on the hundreds of events he has seen at the building, the best hockey game for him was when Finland played Czechoslovakia in an Olympic exhibition game. "It was so fast. It was amazing how fast it was."

Other events he remembered were the National Junior College



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For many years, this Blue Devil mascot was a fixture at the Miners Memorial Building, which is set for demolition (probably later this month) to make way for the new Miners Event and Convention Center.



VIRGINIA AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Miners Memorial Building is pictured shortly after it opened.

hockey championships in the 1990s, women's U.S. curling, motorcycle and snowmobile competitions, Minnesota Vikings basketball and donkey basketball.

"It's amazing the things they've done in there," Guralski said. "It's been so much fun."

Having a first-hand look at the new state-of-the-art MECC, he said, "It's beautiful. It's gorgeous."

He's looking forward to the new ice bumper cars, which should be a great hit at September's grand opening and for years to come.

Looking ahead to the demolition, Guralski said he'll definitely be there to watch it. "Parking across the street ... and toasting the place."

Mike Thomas, who played in the first game ever at the old Miners in January of 1960, was "very sad" about the building being slated for demolition.

After graduation, Thomas went to the University of Minnesota to play baseball. He later head coached Richfield hockey for 14 years. He is currently in his 20th year as an assistant at Eagan.

He came back to Virginia every few years and always enjoyed being in the Miners again.

"It was probably the nicest arena on the Iron Range" at the time and was state of the art back then, said Thomas, who now lives in Richfield. "I thought it was a great building."

The 1961 Virginia graduate said, "It was really nice, especially for practices" and there was seemingly unlimited ice time. Another benefit was

simply playing indoors, he said, because many other places the games were played outdoors.

Former Blue Devil goalie and 2010 graduate Casey Myhre now works at the Miners and had mixed feelings with the building in its last days. "It's definitely sad and it's a little surreal."

Helping take things out of the building, including the back rink boards, Myhre had some unique finds. That included pucks that had been in the corners "for how many years" and his old football picture from the 2009 Homecoming taped to the equipment door.

"It's going to be a sad day when it gets taken down, said Myhre, who started playing hockey at age 3. "That building was my second home. It was a home away from home" for many years.

His favorite memory is "just being with the guys" going through youth hockey and finding success together at the high school level, which culminated with trips to the State Tournament in 2009 and 2010.

"Just being with all those guys. Sitting in the locker room and laughing and enjoying it" was the best part for Myhre.

The former goaltender will miss the old building but sees the need for a new one.

He also thinks of other young boys like he was that will have the same opportunities he did — but at the new MECC.

"If that can be his home away from home, then I'm all for it."

Happy Independence Day

Wishing you and your family a safe and festive July Fourth holiday.

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