

Memories resound for Berkhof as Karges Center era closes

February 9, 2017--Jeff Berkhof still remembers the first time he saw the R.A. Karges Center on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls.

“It was the spring of 1992 and I was visiting campus for the first time as a prospective student,” said Berkhof. “I thought Karges was just fine. It looked like a great place to play. I never imagined there would be a day when it wouldn’t be big enough or adequate enough.”

Twenty-five years later, Berkhof, now head men’s basketball coach at UW-River Falls, is preparing to say goodbye to the R.A. Karges Center - affectionately known as Karges - for the final time. The Karges gymnasium has housed the basketball programs at UW-River Falls for over half a century but with the new Falcon Center nearing completion, the 2016-17 basketball season has served as a farewell tour for the gym.

Karges’ namesake, Professor R. A. Karges, served as a faculty member and basketball coach at UW-River Falls in the early 1900s. Karges took part in laying the cornerstone for the Karges Physical Education Center in 1959 and while Berkhof did not arrive on campus until many years after Karges had left his mark, he has now spent the better part of 25 years running the floor and pacing the sidelines inside the gym.

Berkhof spent two seasons as a member of the Falcon basketball team and when asked about his favorite memory of his playing time as a Falcon, he doesn’t miss a beat.

“It was my senior year in 1994,” he said. “We were at home playing in Karges. We were playing Platteville, and Bo Ryan, who would go on to coach the Badgers at UW-Madison, coached them. I hit a 3-point shot at the buzzer to win the game in overtime and it was such a cool moment. It’s a really fond memory.”

Berkhof has only added to the fond memories inside Karges since graduation. After graduating from UW-River Falls, Berkhof spent the 1994-95 season as a volunteer coach before landing a paid assistant position with the Falcons. He spent 12 years as an assistant under former Falcon head coach Rick Bowen. While an assistant, the Falcons took home the WIAC regular season trophy in 2004. It was the Falcon’s first WIAC regular season championship since 1950.

“I remember the atmosphere that day that we won the title,” Berkhof said. “I still remember ‘We are the Champions’ playing over the PA system and I remember it like it was yesterday. It is really something special to have that memory on our home court.”

When Bowen announced his retirement in 2006, Berkhof was elevated to head coach. The 11 years since have only added to the abundance of memories Berkhof has of Karges Center, a gym that seats 1200. The memories that stick with him are varied, big wins over rivals, heartbreakers at the buzzer, sending seniors off for the final time, and welcoming them back years later. Some memories even include the comical.

“We played Eau Claire a few years back and the fire alarms went off in the middle of the game,” Berkhof said. “We finally got them turned off but the alarm’s strobe lights wouldn’t quit. Here we are in the middle of a conference game and my assistant is across the gym on a ladder trying to cover this light so we could keep playing.” Berkhof reminisces with a shake of his head and a chuckle, “only in Karges.”

Wins or losses, the atmosphere that Karges has provided will be something Coach Berkhof carries with him.

“There have been some games where you could not find a more electric atmosphere than Karges,” he said. “It’s unbelievable at times. The fans are practically sitting on top of you. The place will be absolutely packed and you cannot deny the home court advantage that comes with that sort of crowd.”

But now, as the Athletic Department prepares to move into the new Falcon Center, a sense of nostalgia is slowly kicking in.

“I don’t think it has completely set in yet,” Berkhof said. “It probably won’t hit me fully until we have won or lost our last game there and we know for sure there isn’t another one.”

The nostalgia is balanced with excitement for the time being. Berkhof has been on campus for the entire Falcon Center process, from the first inception to the current state of partial completion.

“It has been a long process. We’ve told many years’ worth of recruits about plans for the Falcon Center and the new gymnasium. It is absolutely outstanding now, as we get closer, to bring recruits in and show them the place, to be able to show alumni what the years of patience has given us,” explains Berkhof, “but it’s been a long, long road.”

The future of UWRF basketball will play out in the new Don Page Arena within the Falcon Center. Page Arena is the last major phase of Falcon Center construction and is expected to open before next season. Karges’ name and legacy will carry on to the new facilities, though. A brand new Karges Gym has already been completed in the Falcon Center and serves as a multi-purpose space that will serve Health and Human

Performance, Campus Recreation, and Athletics. The original R.A. Karges Center will be demolished after the move.

It seems only fitting that the final season in Karges for the UWRF men's basketball team has been its best ever. This season's squad rattled off a program record 17 straight wins and sits at 20-2 on the season. With a win over Whitewater on Saturday, the Falcons would claim the 2016-17 WIAC regular season title.

Saturday, Feb. 11, will mark the Falcon men's final regular season contest in the R.A. Karges Center. It's alumni day and Berkhof fully expects it to be a nostalgic day.

"The guys who played four years here are going to miss it most," he said. "I hope they can be here on Saturday, take one final look around, and generate those memories for themselves."

As for the fans, Berkhof encourages everyone to come take in a little piece of Falcon history.

"Even if you haven't been to a lot of Falcon games- this year or ever- there is going to be something special about this last stretch," Berkhof said. "There is something to be said about the history and the turning point for this campus." It's extra special, he adds, that "we have been able to put a good team out there this year. It's something I am very proud of. You can't ask for more than to go out on a winning note."

"Without a doubt, though, it's going to be bittersweet. I have spent many hours, many early mornings and late nights, in this place as both a player and a coach," Berkhof said. "It's going to be very strange to turn the lights off in there for the final time."

The UW-River Falls men's basketball team plays host to UW-Whitewater on Saturday, Feb. 11, at 5 p.m. They will finish the regular season on the road with contests against UW-Eau Claire and UW-Platteville. WIAC tournament and potential NCAA tournament games will be announced at a future date.

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Photo: Falcon Men's Basketball Coach Jeff Berkhof reacts during a game again UW-Eau Claire on Jan. 4 in Karges Center. UW-River Falls photo by Kathy M Helgeson.