

"I remember walking up the hill," Ben Jolly said. "I'd seen it being built, but that first game, seeing all the people and the anticipation and the vibe, I still remember that like it was yesterday."

Forty-three months after breaking ground on 300 Skipper Bowles Drive, the Dean E. Smith Center hosted its first game - but it wasn't any game.

Jan. 18, 1986, undefeated top-ranked North Carolina took on the third-ranked Duke Blue Devils, a rivalry worthy of the long-awaited Dean Dome.

UNC's Steve Hale's 28 points, coupled with Brad Daugherty's 23-point and 11-rebound double-double, helped North Carolina secure the 95-92 victory despite the Blue Devils' 7-0 run to end the game.

"I never felt like there was any doubt," Jolly said. "It was a close game, but the whole time, you kind of had that feeling that this is the first game. They're not going to lose that first game."

Jolly grew up a Carolina fan his entire life he attended the university from 1987 to 1991. Before him, his father attended the university as an undergrad from 1955 to 1959 and medical school from 1959 to 1963.

The father-son duo went to countless games in Carmichael Arena before the opening of the Dean Dome, but the 1986 season was different.

"We had lower-level seats that first season," Jolly said. "The only season my dad had tickets in the Dean Dome. I really think he got them by mistake. His name's on a plaque in the Dean Dome. I don't think he gave a lot of money, but they sent him the ticket order form."

And it wasn't just game days that created those unforgettable memories. Many years ago, the Dean Dome was also a stage for some of the biggest names in music.

"I saw Bruce Springsteen in what would've been my freshman year," B. Jolly said. "That was right before spring break, and I just decided on a whim, you know, 'I'm going to go to see Springsteen.'"

Alongside Springsteen, legends like The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Billy Joel, Tina Turner and Tom Petty all took the stage at the Dean Dome.

The magic of those memories at the Dean Dome, whether a concert or game days, are ones B. Jolly will never forget.

"I can still close my eyes and just think about every game I went to," he said.

Now, almost 40 years later, the Dean Dome is set to change.

"In order to continue our championship success, we are investigating multiple options for the arena – including renovating the [Dean E.] Smith Center and building new," UNC's Senior Associate AD for External Affairs and Strategic Communications Robbi Evans said.

In February 2024, the athletic department released a report presenting six options for the new arena. Currently, the Dean Dome lacks amenities such as box seating, larger concourses and additional bathrooms.

"Our goal is to create the best experience possible for Tar Heel student-athletes both in the classroom and on the court," Evans said.

With plans for a new arena underway, Jolly can't help but reminisce about the past. He admits he misses the atmosphere of games inside Carmichael Arena, a feeling he hopes the new arena can capture.

"[Carmichael] was deafening," Jolly said. "It had a home court advantage like no other. I think over the years, that's why there's been more losses [in the Dean Dome]."

Nevertheless, as the Dean Dome faces an uncertain future, its history remains personal for fans.

Today, Jolly gets to share the same Carolina traditions he once shared with his father with his daughter, Katherine Jolly, a current sophomore at UNC-CH.

Like her father, K. Jolly was born and bred a Carolina fan.

"I don't remember a time when I wasn't a Tar Heel fan," K. Jolly said. "We always had the games on. My parents bought me cheerleading outfits and shirts, and as I got older, that's when my parents started bringing me to the games."

As for her first game in the Dean Dome, neither K. Jolly nor her father remembers the exact game. However, the pair both recalled a particularly special game on Dec. 28, 2016.

"I remember you didn't tell me [we were going to the game]," K. Jolly said. "I woke up, and you came into my room. You had gotten tickets from one of your friends, and they were really good. That was a fun day."

Sometimes, change is hard but necessary. And according to B. Jolly, if the Dean Dome has proved anything, it's that greatness isn't tied to a building but to the people inside.

"Michael Jordan, [James] Worthy, [Sam] Perkins, none of those guys played in the Dean Dome, yet their jerseys are in the rafters, as they should be," B. Jolly said. "If they build a new place, you can still preserve the importance, the symbolism, the significance of all of those who have contributed to Carolina basketball."

For B. Jolly, one of his most unforgettable Carolina basketball moments came not from a game or an experience in the Dean Dome but rather when he was reporting for a little paper in his town. He unexpectedly encountered former President Bill Clinton the day after Clinton's home state university, Arkansas, beat the Blue Devils.

"I was in this line, waiting, thinking, 'What am I going to say to the President of the United States?'" Jolly said. "I get up to the front of the line, and Bill Clinton's looking right at me. So I said the first thing that came to my mind, 'I'm a UNC grad, and I'm so glad your Razorbacks won last night.'"

Clinton's response? A nod to his Carolina basketball knowledge.

"Well, you guys beat them twice."

For B. Jolly, Carolina basketball isn't about the arena but the memories made along the way. And like Carolina basketball, the Dean Dome will always hold a place in history, no matter the future.