Wednesday, May 3, 2007 marked the dedication of Bishop Garcia Diego High School's new $3.4 million gym. The following article by Mark Patton, News-Press writer and member of the Class of 1972, is reprinted with permission from the Santa Barbara News-Press.

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The sun sets for Bishop's Dawn Squad

Mark Patton

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We were the Dawn Squad. The original Breakfast Club.

The upperclassmen at Bishop Diego High School had other names for us, most of which you couldn't print in a family newspaper. The pecking order had already been established when I arrived there and began playing junior varsity basketball for the Cardinals at the dawn of the 1970s.

We knew our place, and it was the 6 a.m. practice slot.

The varsity ruled Bishop's cramped, little gym after school. There wasn't room for anyone else, especially with the unretractable, wooden seating.

So we became the cockroaches that would skitter around the gym floor during the dim early light.

One of my fellow roaches, Pete Georgi from the Class of '72, showed up for Wednesday's dedication of Bishop's new $3.4 million gym -- and we wallowed in envy together.

"Man, remember how cold it would get in the gym during the morning?" said Georgi, now the father of Cardinal athletes Bryan and Melissa.

Everyone referred to it as The Brickhouse because of its architecture, but those of us in the Dawn Squad called it The Icehouse.

Coach preferred it that way because he could always see who was dogging it: "Hey, Patton -- how come yours is the only breath I'm not seeing?"
Lockerroom space was a problem, too. Since Title IX hadn't yet kicked in, we underlings often used the girls lockerroom to dress for our games -- a mystical experience for a pubescent boy.

I was amazed to discover that the girls at our Catholic high school were given their own, individual shower stalls. We boys, on the other hand, were thrown into the water together like cattle. Cockroach cattle.

You'd develop an inferiority complex even before the coach started ripping into you.

Bishop's gym-space trouble only worsened when girls athletics came into vogue a few years later. One of the Cardinals' first female sports stars, Patty Sebastian Charest, also had to serve as the team chauffeur.

"I'd pack seven of us into my Chevy Impala at 5:30 every morning," she recalled. "If it rained, the girls in the back had to hold their legs up -- the rainwater would leak inside and puddle on the floor."

But nobody hated Bishop's 6 a.m. practices more than the morning crew at Sambo's Restaurant on upper State Street. The Dawn Squad turned into The Breakfast Club during the 45 minutes between the end of practice and start of school.

Imagine having to serve a dozen dirty, sweaty, rowdy, prankish teens every morning.

I always wanted to ditch first period, just to see the reaction of those coffee drinkers when they tasted the salt that we'd poured into their sugar bowls.

A bigger surprise, however, might be the new life that has been breathed into my alma mater. Bishop had nearly 600 students during the baby boom years of the '70s, but they almost closed the place when enrollment dipped to nearly a third of that a few decades later.

Bishop's rebirth, accelerated when it became an independent Catholic school two years ago, is now blooming into full view with a new, roomier Brickhouse.

The gym includes six baskets, two basketball courts and two volleyball courts. The school has also added new restrooms, showers and locker rooms at the main gym, and is in the process of installing a bell tower and new landscaping to the quad area.

None of us former cockroaches appreciates the new facilities more than Dan Peeters. He's had to deal with the "pressures and frustrations of having one small gym shared by so many programs" long since his graduation from Bishop in 1987 -- when he became the Cardinals' athletic director.

"Therefore," he said during Wednesday's ceremonies, deepening his voice for emphasis,"it gives me great pleasure to announce to the next generation of Bishop alumni that we're not going to have any more 6 a.m. practices."

Bishop celebrated that news by having several of its athletes play volleyball and basketball in front of the large crowd. Kevin Duley won an impromptu 3-point contest, nailing 6-of-9 shots. Ryan Aijian was the first to dunk in the new gym.

It reminded me of how things were so different in my day. There was no 3-point shot in the '70s. I couldn't dunk then, either -- or ever, for that matter.

And so now the Dawn Squad will soon fade from memory at Bishop Diego High School. Sleep well, cockroaches.

Mark Patton's column appears on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

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GYM DANDY

The sun sets for Bishop's Dawn Squad

Pictures by Photo Journalist, STEVE MALONE / NEWS-PRESS

Bishop Diego's student body president Tucker Stein joins several school dignitaries and students in clipping the ceremonial ribbon Wednesday at the dedication of the new sports practice gym on the school's campus.

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GYM DANDY

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