

The Red Balloon: A decades-old tradition

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When basketball games began in the newly built Convocation Center in 1987, a tradition was born. Every Arkansas State three-pointer or block would be celebrated and documented with the help of a large red balloon.

Ken Stuart, class of 1973 alumnus, started the tradition when the former A-State Indian family mascot had a fantastic three shooting team, the same year they began playing in the Convocation Center, now known as the First National Bank Arena.

"I took a bolt and tied a string to it, threw it up over the rafters and brought it down," Stuart said, "My wife made all the threes and laminated them."

When the balloon came to Arkansas State, Stuart didn't talk to anyone before he got to work.

"I just did it," Stuart said. "Didn't have any backlash. Over the years, there have

in college, Ken was always at the games with the balloon. So it was a tradition, a special memory, he was at every single game. People got used to seeing that and enjoyed that being there."

When her son Harrison started attending Arkansas State, she and a few others got together to increase student engagement.

"We had been meeting with the athletic department on building the student experience at ball games," Herget said. "We noticed that students weren't attending the ball games, so we started meeting weekly with the athletic department — coming up with ideas and things to get them excited."

Herget said it was while they were thinking about ways to up engagement they noticed the balloon was gone.

"Scott McDaniel and I both remembered the balloon and it just kind of came up in a casual conversation," Herget said. "What happened to Ken Stuart? Where is that balloon? Why don't we have

Bobo said regardless of the mascot change, student engagement and creating traditions is a unique aspect that will always stay persistent at A-State.

"If everybody had a balloon, we wouldn't be having this conversation. It connects fans who've been around. It connects them to kind of the glory days. For younger fans, it's only been back for a year," Bobo said, "I think that's why it's important. It connects the young and the old."

Even during the nationally televised game against Appalachian State, the announcers talked about the balloon and even wanted to get in on the action.

"When ESPN2 was here last week, they wanted to ask about the balloon," Bobo said. "Their color analyst talked to me before the game. He was trying to figure out a way that during the game, he could come over and tape a three up or tape a block up."

Bobo said he hopes the students like the balloon and pass it down to the younger classes.

"The balloon is A-State basketball," Bobo said. "We're having to try to start that back with this young bunch. I hope they enjoy it,"

JP Rowton, a first-year marketing major from Harrisburg, Arkansas, said he grew up seeing the balloon at the games and has loved the tradition ever since.

"I remember being a little kid, loving to see the balloon go up and down when we hit a three or a block," Rowton said. "Love to see it up, especially being a student in college."

Rowton said he thinks the reason the program has carried on the tradition for so long, even after the hiatus, is because the fans love it.

"Something that gets people excited. Makes you remember A-State, one big thing about it," Rowton said. "Especially visiting teams and their fans coming to see it. It's just really unique and a pretty cool thing to see."

There are some students, however, that aren't even sure why the balloon is there, which is why it's important to bring back these traditions as they're becoming lost to the younger generation.

Cooper Jones, a graduate marketing major from Memphis said students who don't know what the balloon means don't think to question it.

"Unless you know somebody who knows the history about the balloon, it's easy to ignore or just not even question," Jones said. "I just don't think there's been enough explanation of it as to why or what it's for."

Jones said he thinks college traditions are important for school spirit and, in the case of the balloon, intimidation factor.

"I think those are super important. One, it just is a visual for the crowd to see, hey, we're actually doing really well. And also, on the other hand, I think it's kind of an intimidation factor for the other team," Jones said.

Obi Udom, a first-year exercise science major from



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRAD BOBO

The Balloon, with the record of all three-point shots and blocks hanging on its string..

Frisco, Texas, said these types of traditions in sports are good for the culture of the school.

"It's good to have a good culture so more people will want to go there in the future and get recruited there," Udom said.

When Udom first noticed the balloon, he wasn't sure what it was for and what it meant.

"The first time I noticed it

the balloon have occurred, such as it being stuck in the rafters and popped, both accidentally and intentionally.

"I'm the dummy that put it in the rafters," Bobo said. "A couple weeks ago, we had a women's game one night with a men's game the next. In between games, I was pulling down to take all the threes. And gave a

process. Regardless of intent, the Red Wolves took it personally. This conference attack led the Red Wolves to beat the Trojans 91-77 and post to social media with the caption "Popping our three-point balloon just means we're gonna pop you."

Udom said.

A-State made 17 threes during the game, the most made against a Sun Belt opponent, and

second most in program history.

Women's basketball head coach, Destinee Rogers, mentioned the incident in their post game press conference.

"All I'm gonna say is don't touch our balloon," Rogers said. "If you touch our balloon, we gonna fill it up. We care about that balloon. We take pride in our balloon. That balloon is there for our fans."

Udom said it's important for more people to know about the tradition.

"So when we see the balloon go up, we can celebrate it more," Udom said.

Since the balloon has been back, many incidents involving

piece of the tape too hard to tug, and it snapped the rope, snapped the string, and there it went."

A more controversial incident with the balloon happened when the women played the Troy Trojans. During the Trojan's shootaround that morning, they popped the three-point balloon. Troy claims they were pulling the balloon down to take pictures with it and it popped during the

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BRAD BOBO

A-State guard Terrance Ford Jr makes a layup while the balloon hangs overhead.

been problems with different administrators and even had issues with the Sun Belt Conference at one time."

The fans, however, loved the balloon.

"The kids loved it. Some kids would bring me a three and I'd put their three up," Stuart said. "I'd be in any store in town and 'Ah, you're the balloon guy!' And a lot of people still think that I do it."

Stuart said people still come up to him and say how their parents took them to a game and remember the balloon.

Because of a helium shortage, the balloon was gone for a few years but made its triumphant return last season when the Red Wolves went against the Troy Trojans in their penultimate home game.

Since she grew up seeing the balloon, A-State Alumni and co-owner of Gearhead Outfitters with her husband, Amanda Herget was a key player in the return of the tradition.

"I grew up going to Arkansas State ball games and I went to Arkansas State and cheered on the dance team," Herget said. "Throughout my childhood and

that? Nobody really knew."

Herget was able to get in contact with Stuart to discuss bringing back the balloon soon after.

"He handed over his duffel bag to us and he said, 'I will gladly hand this over to you guys, but you know, my wife and I are not going to be able to do it. We're older, we travel, we're not going to be at every game, but if you can make this happen, we give you our blessing,'" Herget said.

Herget and those involved worked with the athletic department to do a handoff. Stuart came to the game and was honored at halftime before passing the tradition over.

The torch was passed to the athletics department and Brad Bobo, the Associate Athletics Director for marketing and fan engagement.

Bobo said traditions in college sports is what it's all about.

"It's always cool when a place can get its thing and something be yours," Bobo said. "Especially here I think even more so because there's essentially 70 years of history being named Indians that we can't do an awful lot with,"



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRAD BOBO

The balloon hangs over the A-State game against Appalachian State Jan. 23.