

LUCAS COUNTY ARENA SPARKLES AS THOUSANDS GET SNEAK PEEK

Downtown facility wows open-house visitors

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The Durbin family has been excited about the Toledo Walleye hockey team for a while.

They've already got tickets to see a game this month - even if it might be a little different from what 4-year-olds Kacie and Kallie once thought.

"At one point, I do think they thought fish were going to be playing hockey," said their mom, Michele, of South Toledo.

Still, seeing a locker room made for human hockey players yesterday only heightened their excitement as they joined about 8,000 people in catching their first glimpse of the Lucas County Arena during a public open house. While the two girls posed for pictures with their brother Brock, 12, who flexed his arm and looked tough, others walked around the arena with their necks craned up in appreciation.

Alice and Mark Lemle of West Toledo were among the first to take a look after the doors opened at noon. Their reactions were instantaneous.

"Wow! Look at the comfortable seats!" Mrs. Lemle exclaimed as she walked inside.

"Yeah, they're more like the theater seats," Mr. Lemle said.

Outside the weather was dreary, but inside the new \$105 million arena, all was gleaming. Smiles were wide, concession workers did the wave, and Jamie Darr even took a few shots on goal on a small patch of ice that was left exposed.

"It's pretty cool!" the 11-year-old Millbury child said.

That seemed to be the general consensus. Eighty-year-old Dorothy Jaegle, who remembers watching Goaldiggers games in the former Toledo Sports Arena, said the new facility doesn't compare to the old one.

"This is great!" she said.

During yesterday's event, visitors had access to a locker room and were treated to live entertainment. They were allowed down onto the arena floor and up into the luxury suites. Some sat in the penalty box; others grabbed concessions and plopped down into a comfortable chair they might buy a ticket for one day.

Even a couple of celebrities stopped by: Harlem Globetrotters legend Curly Neal signed autographs, and Walleye mascot Spike traded high-fives with kids who had more teeth than he did. The event continues today from noon to 4 p.m.

The arena gets down to business in earnest later this week when it hosts comedian Jeff Dunham on Friday. The Walleye's first home hockey game in the arena will be Oct. 16.

For East Toledoan Katie Vaughan, 68, nothing can change the fact that the new facility is not in her part of town, where the Toledo Sports Arena stood for so many years. Still, she admitted that the end result downtown is nice.



Hayden Millets, 6, watches Nicholas Wallace, 12, pose in the locker room for their mom, Robin Kupperman. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

"I think it's going to be better, but still, deep down, I wanted it to be on the east side," she said.

Yvonne VanDorn of West Toledo had only one concern.

"We're worried about parking," the 59-year-old Toledoan said. "Everybody is."

Everything seemed blissful for Chris Reinhart, 45, who walked across the floor with his son Adam, 12. Like just about everyone else, Mr. Reinhart's head leaned back to get a better look at his surroundings. Like an awestruck kid, his eyes darted everywhere, enjoying every moment.

"This is really cool. It really is," he said.

His son passed his own judgment: "It looks like there's not a bad seat."

Meanwhile, David Hitt, 46, of Sylvania Township, complimented the overall layout and design of the arena.

"It's everything that a professional arena is, just on a smaller scale," he said. "Here, it's a little more intimate."

He just hopes that more people come downtown to check it out.

"If you never come down here for anything, you'll never know what you're missing," Mr. Hitt said.

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