

NIELSON TENNIS STADIUM



Fig 1. The Nielson Tennis Stadium from the air in February 1997. The two extensions at the right are the main entrance. [Del Brown Photo, AP-67]

The Nielson Tennis Stadium was built in 1967 as a gift of Arthur C. Nielson, class of 1918. It provides year around tennis, squash and racquetball courts to students, faculty and the general public a nominal charge.

The Nielson tennis stadium is unique among University buildings. Other buildings were built by private donations, (e.g. the Memorial Union, the Wisconsin Center, and the Elvehjem). But those donations were made by request for a specific project, as defined by the University. In the case of the tennis stadium, the donor had the funding and the idea for the building, with no previous discussion of need by the University.

In April 1966 president Harrington reported to the regents meeting on a proposed recreational facility for racquet sports, to be made possible by an expected gift in excess of seven figures from Mr. A. C. Nielson Sr. At that meeting the regents voted to accept the gift of 800 shares of the A. C. Nielson Company and voted authority to prepare preliminary plans for a tennis-squash facility at an estimated cost of \$1.25 million. Of this money the state would provide \$250,000. In April the state building commission approved the project and appointed architects Walton and Walton of Evanston, Illinois. They had been the architects of a previous tennis stadium built by Mr. Nielson for the town of Winnetka, Illinois.¹



Fig. 2 Construction of the Nielson Tennis stadium, September 20, 1967. [series 7/4 folder #2, jf-100]

Mr. Nielson intended to take an active part in the realization of his dream. Nielson had come to the University as a member of the class of 1918, and became captain of the varsity tennis team. He was frustrated by the inability to play the game during nearly half the year in Madison's well known climate. Besides making a fortune in marketing research, he made tennis a lifelong passion, and collected information on indoor facilities throughout the world with the intent of donating such a facility to his alma mater. Nielson involvement was such that the University declined to appoint a building committee, noting that the donor would largely prepare the building program, and that the connections to the state committee would be handled by the architects. The proposed site was on the marsh on the far west end of campus. This marshy site would require special treatment to be suitable.²

In May 1966 the regents voted that the proposed tennis-squash facility be named the "Nielson Tennis Stadium". They explained that this name did not violate their informal rule against naming building after living persons, since the name referred not to Mr. Nielson himself but to his family. After an engineering company made a thorough study of the soil conditions at the site, the regents voted in June 1966 that the stadium be located north of March Lane, and west of lot 60.³

By mid September the state had approved a modification to the program that added 1500 square feet and \$400,000 to the plan. The extra money would come from Nielson and from University funds earmarked for the maintenance of its many outdoor tennis courts which would be rendered unnecessary by the new facility. The University estimated that because of increased efficiency scheduling of use, an indoor court was the equivalent of two and a half outdoor courts. They planned for 10 indoor tennis courts and five squash courts. In September 1966, the regents approved Walton and Walton's final plans. The total estimated cost was now \$1.83 million, to be funded by Nielson's gift and \$400,000 of state funds. Completion was estimated for mid 1968.⁴

In February 1967 plans were developed to prepare the marsh site for construction. It was hoped by all concerned that the building could be completed by May 1968, the date of Mr. Nielson's 50th class reunion. In March 1967 the contract for filling and preparing the site was let to Madison

Crushing and Excavating for \$104,450. This work was begun March 17, 1967. Construction bids received in April exceeded the budget by a \$400,000, but Nielson informed the University that he was "obligated and fully prepared to contribute the entire cost (less the \$250,000 contributed by the University) --*whatever it may be.*" [emphasis original]⁵

At their May 1967 meeting the regents awarded construction contracts after reading a letter in which Mr. Nielson agreed to supply the additional necessary funds. The general contract was awarded to Orville E. Madsen and Son of Minneapolis for \$1.48 million. The total contracted cost was \$2.36 million. Gifts and grants totalled \$2.1 million, and state funds \$250,000. Construction began immediately in May 1967. By April 1968 the building was close enough to completion that the regents could arrange the grand opening. They noted that the Nielson Tennis Stadium was the largest gift by a living donor in UW history, and the stadium was the largest building in volume and area of any University building.⁶

The dedication of the Nielson Tennis Stadium took place on May 25, 1968, with a presentation by the varsity singers, remarks by president Harrington, A. C. Nielson, and governor Knowles. The speeches were followed by exhibition matches, one of which featured the seventy year old Nielson and his son losing to the captain and co-captain of the University tennis team in a "hard-fought" doubles match.⁷

The building, the largest indoor racquet sports center in the world, is 392 by 255 feet of structural steel under a single, multipitched roof. It has face brick and porcelain trim over concrete block walls. It contains twelve tennis courts, six squash courts, players lounges, seating for 1500 spectators, locker and dressing rooms, a pro shop, and offices. In 1970 six outdoor courts were added on the north side of the building. Operating capacity is 6160 players per week on a one hour fifteen minute session basis. The facility is open to students, faculty, staff and the general public in that priority order at very modest fees.⁸

The Nielson Tennis Stadium stands as a tribute to a man with a dramatic vision and the determination and will to attain it for his alma mater. The donation was made by Arthur C. Nielson (class of 1918) and his wife Gertrude B. Nielson (class of 1920) in the words of the dedication plaque "in grateful appreciation of the privilege of a good education".

1) *Regent's Minutes*, April 1, 1966; Agency Request for State Building Commission Action, April 11, 1966, Culbertson to Lorenz, April 28, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 10.

2) *Regent's Minutes*, June 10, 1966; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June-July, 1968, p. 8; Atwell to Mikol, April 27, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 10.

3) *Regent's Minutes*, May 6, 1966, June 1966.

4) *Regent's Minutes*, September 9, 1966; Nielson Tennis Stadium, Walton and Walton, September 1, 1966, series 24/9/3 box 10.

5) May to Western Builder, February 15, 1967, Sites to Nielson, February 14, 1967, Nielson to Fleming, April 28, 1967, Engman to Atwell, February 21, 1967, Edsall to Engman, February 28, 1967, Dietrich to Dorman, March 27, 1967, series 24/9/3 box 10.

6) *Regent's Minutes*, May 5, 1967. This remark was made before the construction of the University Hospital and Clinics complex.

7) *Regent's Minutes*, April 19, 1968; Dedication pamphlet, May 28, 1968, Archives Nielson Stadium subject file; *Wisconsin Alumni Magazine*, June - July, 1968 p. 8.

8) Plans in physical plant plans room; American School and University, May 1969, Johnson to Edsall, June 5, 1969, series 24/9/2-1 box 9; *Regent's Minutes*, January 16, 1970; Lemon to Wisconsin State Building Commission, January 6, 1970, series 40/1/7-1 box 125. *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 14, 1972; Nielson Tennis Stadium schedule handout, September 1994.