

By SCOTT FOWLER  
Assistant Sports Editor

# A \$33.8 million marvel

It's stark, Carolina Blue brilliance interlaced with vacuum cleaners; a potpourri of splendor mixed with rolls of carpet stacked haphazardly against an unpainted wall.

"It's beginning to look a lot like a baaahhllgame," one worker sang lustily, making up in enthusiasm for what he lacked in pitch.

After several delays, the Student Activities Center — which tonight should be renamed for Dean Smith at a \$500-a-plate, black tie dinner in the Center — finally opens Saturday in a game that is fitting of the gym's physical monstrosity. Duke and UNC, two unblemished and occasionally unbelievable teams, will square off in a game and arena of near-epic proportions. The many banners have been imported from Carmichael and will all be firmly in place as UNC tries to get a new tradition off on the right foot.

The SAC is beautiful and befitting the nation's top-ranked basketball team, no doubt about it. And there's no doubt either about what UNC's team colors are. All the 21,426 seats are Carolina Blue, as are the loudspeakers that hang down toward the floor, as are the rafters, as is the floor, which is a near-carbon copy of Carmichael's. A big Carolina Blue map of North Carolina right in the middle, Carolina Blue lanes . . . if it wasn't for the fact that from the upper deck it feels like you're sitting on top of the Grand Canyon looking down, you might mistake it for Carmichael.

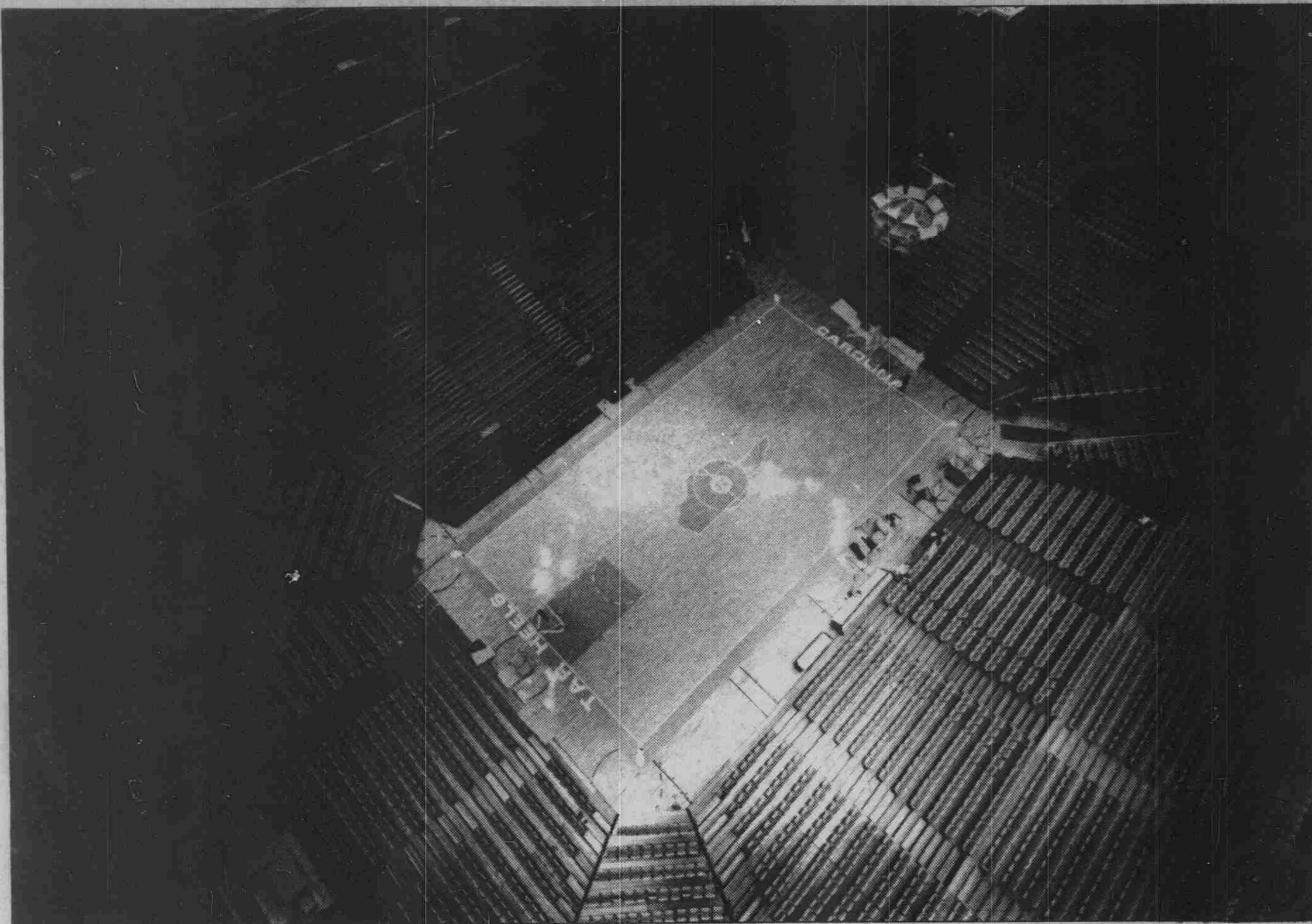
Inside the gym, everything seems to be almost perfectly in place. The restrooms are one rather interesting feature. Rather than labeled a mundane "men" and "women," instead there are paintings of ladies and men on the wall leading into the restroom who look like they are standing in line to use the john. It gets the point across, and the figures are at least not painted Carolina Blue.

If you venture beyond the restrooms into some of the corridors that are more off the beaten path, the behind-the-scenes look at the rest of the facility reveals what an incomplete state it really is in. The push must have been great to get the basketball part finished, for everything else seems to have been dropped in its favor. There are hallways that are just cement with paint stains, offices which house only pieces of scrap wood and concrete, carpet sitting in huge rolls, waiting to be laid down.

Where do the vacuum cleaners come in? One worker, equipped with a very long extension cord, was vacuuming Wednesday morning among the first four rows of seats, which resemble Carolina Blue LazyBoy recliners in a carpeted living room. Most of the seats in the gym are padded, but the padding and the air both get thinner as you go upwards into the far reaches of the ozone Dome. As one of my friends who saw the seats said: "The padding is directly related to the number of \$100 bills given by the guy who sits in it."

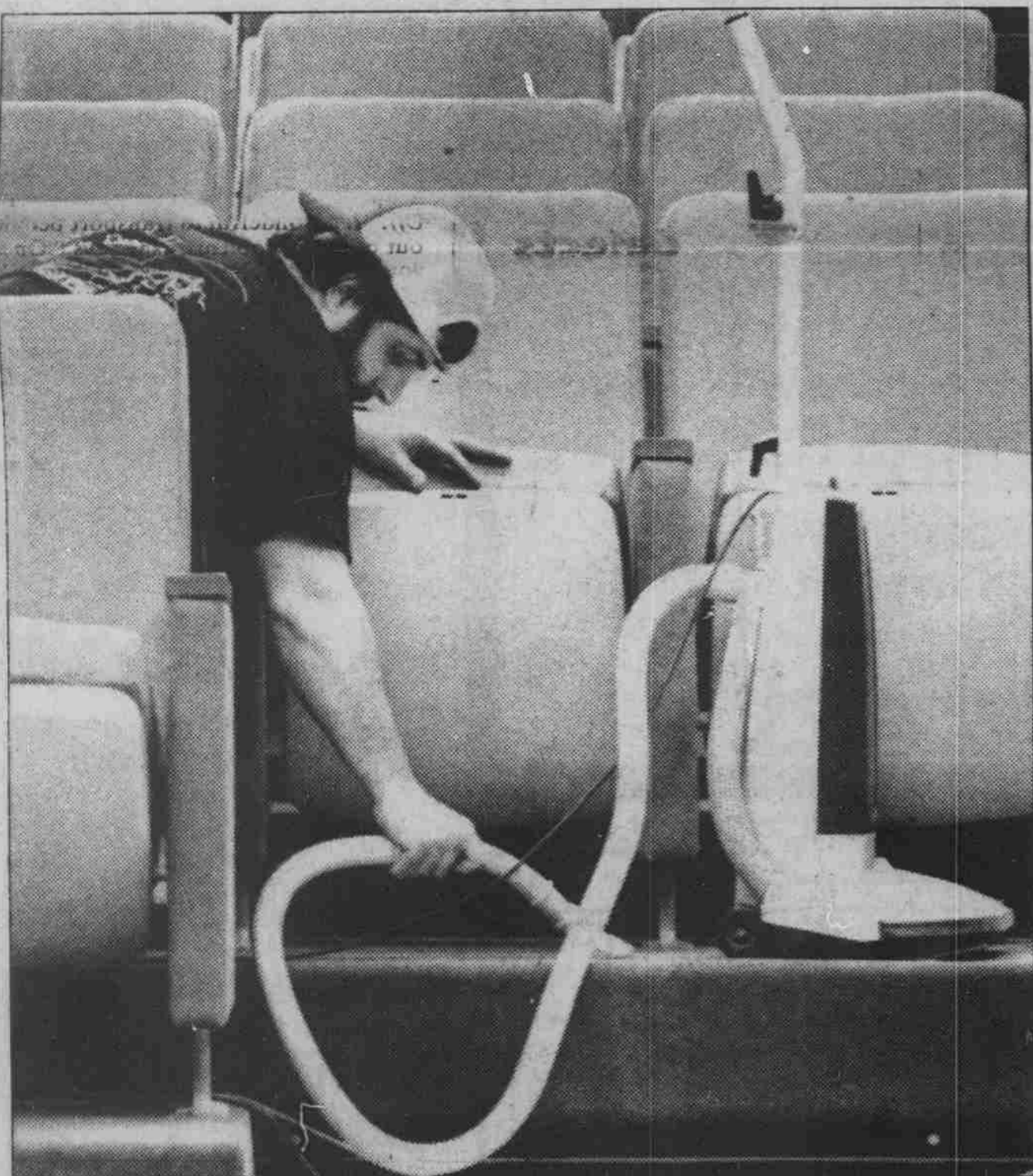
Now, let's take a tour of the upper deck, a sight that will become quite familiar to many UNC students. First of all, bring your camping gear. It's quite a walk up to the top, and you might want to make a two-day trip out of it. Or alternatively, you can use the gear to camp out the next time tickets are distributed so that you don't have to sit in the high-altitude area. If you start losing your breath going up into the sections labeled in the 200s, take solace in the fact that it is probably the thin air forcing your gasping, not being out of shape.

Then, if you sit in the top seat in the top section and hold your thumb and pointer fingers a quarter-inch apart, that's how big the players are. Binoculars might be a good idea, all kidding aside.



DTH/Charles Ledford

This view from the rafters at the SAC is not one for the fainthearted, but it showcases a carbon copy of the Carmichael court surrounded by most of the 21,426 seats



DTH/Charles Ledford

A worker vacuuming the carpet under one of the luxurious seats for VIP donors



DTH/Charles Ledford

Point guards will bring the ball down with this court-level view — if you can imagine thousands of Carolina fans and nine other players

