Winning defines McCarthey, but there’s so much more

Truth be told, Adam Morrison liked the old Kennel, even though basketball just a few feet to the west. “Loved it,” he said. “It was so loud, and you had the general admission part that kind of emped things up – and the Kennel Club wasn’t university sponsored then, so you know what they were up to beforehand.”

Morrison acknowledges maybe a little cough and rumble. It was a gym, not all that different from the one where basketball was born. Like Morrison’s game, it was old school and edgy – maybe even a little dangerous.

“Then when we moved into the building, you could see the program taking the next step,” the one-time NCAA scoring champ said, “and that was exciting in a whole different way.”

Now it’s 10 years after, and going home has never meant quite so much to the Gonzaga Bulldogs.

In November 2004, Gonzaga University opened a building befitting its newfound basketball notoriety, and the Zags have never looked back. How much of that precisely is the doing of playing games in the McCarthey Athletic Center and not the snug old Kennel cannot be quantified, but it’s impossible to imagine the momentum being quite so irresistible without it.

In the 205 weeks of poll voting since their move next door, the Zags have been in the Top 25 for 144 weeks, an absurd 74.4 percent of the time. Of those losses, four of those losses came against Top 25 teams; Saint Mary’s and Santa Clara account for the only debits in a 74-2 mark against West Coast Conference opponents.

On the nights when the men are out of town, the women are only somewhat less dominant: 133-17 over the first 10 years.

Now, it was in an earlier visit to McCarthey and not the arena-record 52-point drubbing he endured this year that St. Joseph’s coach Phil Martelli cast some necessary light on those numbers.

“You understand that the toughest part about playing here,” he said, “is the guys in the other uniforms.”

Meaning it’s not the noise from the obligatory sellout crowd, the Kennel Club’s bon mots, the championship banners or the legacy. It’s the players, duh.

And yet you can hardly discount the comfort level.

“This is easily the best place I’ve ever played in,” said forward Byron Mullens.

Winning defines McCarthey, but there’s so much more.