Hilton South

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2001/iss4/3

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Every year thousands of devoted ISU fans migrate south on Interstate 55 to Kansas City, Mo., for warmer temperatures and a dose of pre-March Madness. Kansas City is the beginning of the Cyclones' run for championship hardware, starting with the rigorous four-day Big 12 Conference men's and women's basketball tournaments. For those who make the trip but can't get tickets, Kelly's Westport Inn has established itself over the years as the home away from home for ISU faithful and a reunion spot for alumni.

Co-owner Kyle Kelly and his brother, Pat, host the biggest ISU party in Missouri every March, the five-day bash "Cyclone Nights." Inside Kelly's, seating in front of the big-screen TV is a rarity, but nevertheless all eyes are fixed on the game. The ritual is repeated many times each night: Hundreds of ISU fans raise their 44 oz. glasses of brew and raucously chant, "Oh, shit! Go, State!" in salute of the Cyclones.

Similar to a posh Los Angeles club, the line stretches down the block with people ready to join the celebration. Even after the men's disappointing loss to the Baylor Bears in the second round of the tournament last month, the party roared on all night. And the eventual crowning of the Cyclone women as Big 12 tournament champions helped to boost the spirits of the ISU true believers who stayed south even after the men's loss.

Kyle Kelly says the weekend of the Big 12 tournaments is one of his two busiest times of the year. Kelly estimates anywhere from 4,000 to 10,000 people drop by his bar throughout the weekend of the Big 12 Tournaments. "That Friday and Saturday is comparable to St. Patty's Day. Those two days are neck and neck," Kelly says. "Each year beats the year before, and we just scratch our heads and go, "Wow.'"

"A lot of people stay longer than on Patty's Day because they'll come in and find a stool or a table and they'll park. It's standing room only after one o'clock in the afternoon," he adds.

The ISU-friendly attitude is obvious. Cyclone flags and pennants are proudly displayed throughout the bar. Triumphantly adorning one of the walls is a banner commemorating the ISU women's Big 12 Tournament Championship. Kelly purchased the banner, which was hanging on Elwood Drive following last year's tournament victory. The ISU fight song is even on the jukebox. "We'll play it during commercials, and the whole place will start singing it," Kelly says.

Kelly's, located in the heart of downtown Kansas City, has caught some flack for showing support for "Within three years, there was a line in front of the place to get in there. The whole thing just got extremely popular, and it got to be the place to go." - Dr. Jon Fleming, ISU and Kelly's fan
an Iowa university and not one from its native Missouri, Kelly says. As long as business is good, he doesn't care. "If Missouri or Kansas or Oklahoma or anybody else would have come in and established a home base like Iowa State has, we'd be crazy to turn them away," he says.

The annual rendezvous was unintentionally spawned 16 years ago by four ISU alumni in town for the Big 8 Tournament. Dr. Jon Fleming, Pat Gude, Craig Bauerle, and Mark Fender are credited with starting the tradition on a Thursday night. Fleming, an intestinal specialist with the McFarland Clinic in Ames, suggested the group stop at Kelly's the night before the game.

"We were about the only four people in there, believe it or not," Fleming says. "We just sat around for an hour and talked about the games, just kind of hashing around who we thought would win."

The four ISU fans returned the following year for the tournament and another night out at Kelly's. This time they invited a few more friends. Three years later, Kelly's had become a Cyclone tradition as word spread among the legions of ISU followers and with media coverage in both Des Moines and Kansas City.

"Within three years, there was a line in front of the place to get in there," Fleming says. "The whole thing just got extremely popular, and it got to be the place to go. It really was out of control, and I was just shocked by the enthusiasm for it."

Cyclone luminaries have made cameo appearances at Kelly's, riling up the already rowdy crowd. "Probably the most vivid memory is Jim Walden, our former football coach, standing on a table down there leading the entire group of several hundred people in the Iowa State fight song, bellowing at the top of his lungs," Fleming recalls.

Fleming also remembers when an Iowa Hawkeye fan, dressed in black and gold, tried to join the party. "He left completely, 100 percent saturated in beer," Fleming says. "They just gave him a beer shower. He walked in and within 30 seconds, he was just soaked from head to toe."

Kelly's also functions as a mini reunion for some ISU alumni. "They fly in from all over the country to the tournament," Fleming says, adding that some of his former fraternity brothers flew in for this year's tournament. "They do it every year."

Ty Loeffelholz has made the pilgrimage to Kelly's every year from his home in Minnetonka, Minn. Loeffelholz, a 1996 ISU graduate, uses Kelly's as a meeting place to hook up with old colleagues. "The sad part is you always run into the same people every year, but that's OK," Loeffelholz says. "It's got to be tradition because you know that you're going to run into people you knew in college."

Loeffelholz hasn't attended the men's tournament since his trumpet-playing days in the pep band; he usually just goes to the women's tournament. He watches the men play from Kelly's.

John Smith travels to Kansas City every year to witness the men make their bid for a Big 12 tournament championship.

"It seems like you end up seeing people there that you haven't seen in awhile," says Smith, a Manchester native. "It gets a little crowded, but usually when you're walking through the crowd you end up running into somebody you haven't seen for a long time so that's what makes it bearable."

The Kelly brothers' bond with Iowa State stretches further than Cyclone fans spending money in their bar. The brothers have donated a scholarship to the university for the past three years. The $1,000 donation was given to the Athletic Department to be split into two $500 scholarships.

"What we did was we talked to Jon [Fleming] about it and said we wanted to kind of give back since Iowa State's been so good to us during the Big 12 and throughout the whole year," Kelly says.

"Cyclone Nights" and Kelly's bond with Iowa State won't last forever though. Both the men's and women's tournaments will be relocating to Dallas in 2003 for a two-year trial run before returning to Kansas City.

Kelly doesn't believe the tournament will receive the same warm reception there that it has throughout the years in Kansas City. "I don't think they're going to find it that welcoming in Dallas," Kelly says. "It's just not a basketball town."

Loeffelholz agrees that Dallas may wound the intimate relationship fans have built with the tournament. "When they go to Texas, it's going to be hard finding a place where everybody goes," he says.

For at least one more year, that place is Kelly's.

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