

ILLINOIS' BEST HIGH SCHOOL GYMS

By Vincent D. Johnson

Morgan Park Academy

The First High School Basketball Team



Chicago's Morgan Park Academy has roots dating back to 1873, making it one of the oldest private schools in the state, but when it comes to basketball it tops all others. It was the first high school to have a basketball team in the world, thanks in part to College Football Hall of Fame coach Alonzo Stagg. He had just come to work for the University of Chicago in 1892 from Springfield College in Massachusetts, where a fellow faculty member named James Naismith invented this new game called "basketball." Morgan Park Academy was then a prep school for the new university and Stagg taught & coached sports there as well. While the university and some local YMCAs had intramural teams, Morgan Park Academy was the first high school to organize.



The main entrance to Morgan Park Academy's field house. The gym makes up the majority of the west side of the building, on the right. A smaller, but almost identical gym is located on the 2nd floor of the East wing of the building.

Built in 1897, the field house was designed by Dwight H. Perkins in an new architectural form called Prairie style, which would become popular through the buildings of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Despite having a basketball program older than any other, the boys' only-playoff run of note was a regional championship in 2009. Girls basketball has 7 regional titles, all since 2008, but neither team has advanced past sectionals. Girls volleyball is the bright spot with an Elite 8 appearance in 2013. Being a small school, that has always been more academically than athletically focused, it's no surprise the playoffs were rough until the 4-class system started in 2007.

Gym Shorts

Name: Andy Bitta Gymnasium

Built: 1897

Capacity:

Best Teams: Girls volleyball 2013 Elite 8

Notable People: Alonzo Stagg

Three Points:

- First H.S. basketball program in the world.
- Built in Prairie Style architecture.
- School started as a military academy.



The gym features limited seating on one side, but is not directly on the sideline.



The most successful Warriors' seasons in the gym have been in girls volleyball.



Metal roof supports make half-court shots kind of tricky.

Moline H.S. - Wharton Field House

The Largest High School Gym in Illinois



Moline High's Wharton Field House is a massive 7,250 seat basketball arena. It's been dubbed the "Madison Square Garden of the Quad-Cities."

When it comes to venues for high school basketball in Illinois, the Wharton Field House in Moline is as big as they come. No gym built for an Illinois high school holds more fans. With a capacity of 7,250 this venue is the 10th largest h.s. gym in the U.S. in terms of capacity. It was also once the home of the NBA's Atlanta Hawks prior to their relocation.

Built in 1928, this massive brick building has steel-beam rafters holding up a wood roof. The majority of the seating is in a U-shaped upper balcony, with removable bleachers at court level, including a retractable bleacher wall on the south end. Clerestory set of windows above mid-court give the gym the feel of an old barn or factory. Permanent fixtures to look out for are court-level concessions stands, old ticket windows, a fear-of-heights inducing press box, and the Adolf Oppenheimer memorial clock above the south bleachers.

In 1946 an upstart National Basketball League (NBL) team would move midway through their first season from Buffalo, NY to Moline, becoming the Tri-Cities Blackhawks. They would make Wharton their home, even after the NBL merged into the NBA in 1949. Playing two seasons in the NBA before moving to Milwaukee in 1951. They are still in the NBA today and known as the Atlanta Hawks. Hall of Fame NBA coach Red Auerbach, who led the Boston Celtics to 9 of its championships from 1950-1966, coached one year with the Blackhawks at Wharton during the 1949-50 season.

Gym Shorts

Name: Wharton Field House

Built: 1928

Capacity: 7,250

Best Teams: Boys 1943 & 1951

Notable People: Red Auerbach,

Three Points:

- Largest capacity high school gym in Illinois, 10th in the U.S.
- Was once home to the NBA's Atlanta Hawks.
- Holds more fans than Northwestern's Welsh-Ryan Arena.



Originally named the Moline Field House, it was renamed in 1941 to honor Theodore Finley Wharton, an executive with Moline based John Deere, who was the school's booster president and spearheaded the project raising funds to get it built at a cost of \$175,000. He probably would never have imagined that it would one day house an NBA team, along with world famous musicians and politicians appearing there, as well as the Maroons.

High School Success

The Maroons have had solid runs in the playoffs as early as 1916 where they made a Sweet-Sixteen appearance, a feat they've repeated several times including in 2018. A few more Elite-8 & Final Four finishes topped off with a pair of second place finishes in 1943 & 1951 is as close as the boys have come to a title though. The girls made a pair of Final Four appearances in 1978 & 1989.

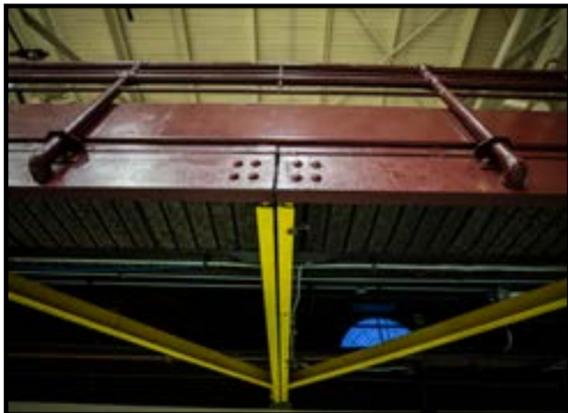


(Top) The main entrance of the Wharton Field House. (Left) Banners of basketball success line the rafters at Wharton. (Right) A ticket window near the front entrance





Moline's Braden Freeman dunks against Waubonsie Valley, during the Martin Luther King Jr. Eastbay Shootout at the Wharton Field House on Jan. 15, 2022.



(This page, left) metal beams of the balcony looking up from the court. (Right) I-beams where the ceiling & wall meet. (Next page, top left) the view from the last row of the north side balcony. (Top right) Concession stands have a perfect view of the court. (Bottom) Tipoff during between Rock Ridge & Limestone during the MLK Shootout, Jan. 15, 2022.

