

RI VOICES

Go inside the best basketball gym in all of Rhode Island

The Classical High School gym has a leaky roof and rickety bleachers but it pulses with Purple pride after a banner year

By [Edward Fitzpatrick](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 29, 2025, 6:00 a.m.



Classical High School Athletic Director Robert J. Palazzo stands before a wall of championship banners in the school's historic gymnasium in Providence, R.I. The 1970 facility, which housed last year's state championship team, is slated for renovation in the coming years. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — With a leaky roof, rickety bleachers, and cinder block walls, the gym at Providence’s Classical High School could be a dispiriting home court for a basketball team.

But purple banners blanket that cinder block, celebrating Classical Purple victories ranging from the 1943 state football championship to the 2024 field hockey division championship.

Fans and cheerleaders pack every plank of those bleachers, stomping their feet when opponents shoot free throws and erupting in singsong chants of “Purple! Purple!” when the home team wins.

And after watching my two sons play Purple home and away games for eight years, I can tell you that Classical has the best gym in all the (R.I.) land.

So what makes it so special?

It’s an urban version of the [Hoosier Gym](#), home of the small-town Indiana basketball team portrayed in the 1986 movie “[Hoosiers](#).” And like those Hickory Huskers, the Classical Purple are state champions, having knocked off mighty La Salle Academy last year with [a buzzer beater](#) to complete a perfect 24-0 season.

On Wednesday night, Classical will travel across Providence for [a rematch with La Salle](#), stepping into a spacious, modern gym that would be the envy of any small liberal arts college. As a public school in a city that just [averted a financial crisis and cuts to winter sports](#), Classical will probably never have the money to erect a shiny basketball venue like that. But renovations to the old gym are on the way. So there’s no better time to pause to appreciate this well-worn wonder.

Robert J. Palazzo, a longtime track and field coach and a former state senator, has been Classical’s athletic director for 36 years. He bleeds Purple. He wears school championship rings the size of golf balls. And during pep rallies, he wears a toga and gives impassioned speeches about the Purple battling foes from far off lands, such as Newport.

Sure, Palazzo has seen the “perpetual” banners that hang in some gyms: When a team wins a championship, that year gets added to an existing banner listing other championship years. They’re generic, orderly, and don’t take up much space. But, Palazzo said, “We’re into shock and awe here. That’s what we do.”



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Inside Classical's gym, you can spend the entire first half reading purple banners of various sizes heralding Purple glory from various decades. But it wasn't always that way.

Jackie Poullos said when he was a member of the Classical basketball team that beat La Salle in the 1985 state championship, the court had no banners — not even a center court logo. Just cinderblock walls.

“It was prisonlike,” Poullos said. “It could be Anywhere USA. In Italian, Palazzo means palace, and Bobby turned it into an iconic palace. He has celebrated the accomplishments of Classical athletes like no other. It builds self-esteem, and he teaches life lessons.”

Some people bust Palazzo's chops, telling him he'd put up a banner for a ping-pong champion. But, Palazzo said, “Listen, we have a different level of success here that we celebrate.”

He gives a speech to the student body each year, encouraging them to get involved, and he wants to recognize their achievements, big and small.

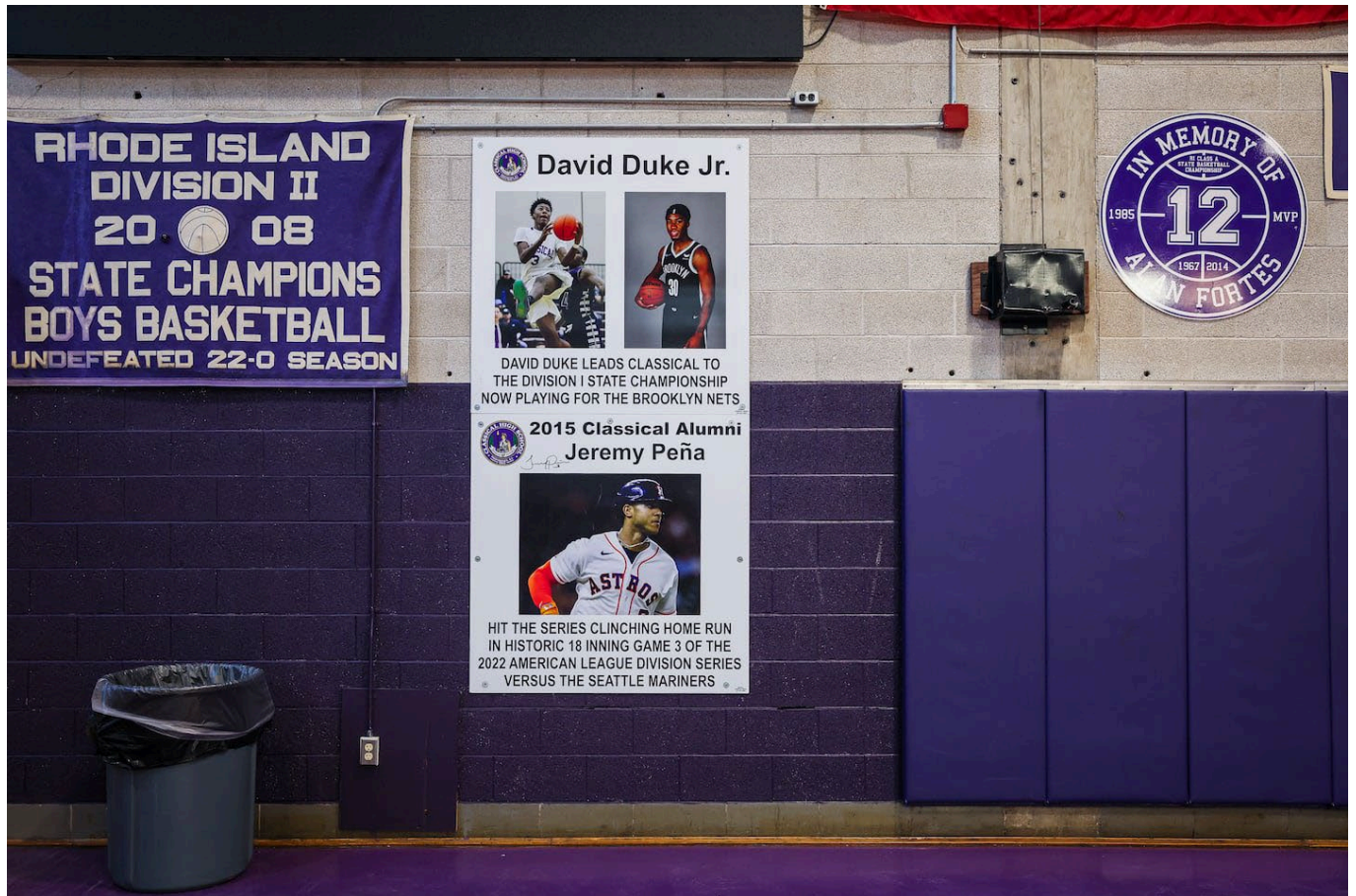
“The message is inclusion,” Palazzo said. “There’s got to be something that you can do to move the school forward. And this place can’t exist with kids just going home at 3 o’clock.”

So he keeps buying purple banners, making Classical second only to Penn State as the oldest customer at the Nixon banner company, in Massachusetts.

Granted, it can be hard to find the gym. The first time I attended a game, I went in the front door, got lost, and somehow ended up in a space outside the walls of the school auditorium. To get to the gym, you have to go through the cafeteria and up a flight of stairs.

A sign above the entrance lets you know you’re entering the “Home of the first RI Interscholastic League State Championship Ever Played: Classical Baseball. March 1899.”

Another sign celebrates [David Duke Jr.](#), a Classical and Providence College basketball star who went on to the NBA, and [Jeremy Peña](#), a Classical baseball star who now plays for the Houston Astros.



Championship banners and alumni tributes line the walls of Classical High School's gymnasium, including honors for NBA player David Duke Jr. and MLB star Jeremy Peña, alongside a 2008 state championship banner commemorating the school's undefeated 22-0 season. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Yet another sign proclaims the school's Latin motto: "Certare, Petere, Reperire, Neque Cedere" (To Strive, to Seek, to Find, and Not to Yield).

As layup lines form before a game, loud speakers reverberate with the bass beats of Gunna and other rappers — far hipper than the Journey anthem played at an East Greenwich game last year.

Classical was [founded in 1843](#), but the current building, with its bunker-like Brutalist architectural style, wasn't completed until 1970. Parts of the school have been renovated in recent years, but the gym is showing its age.

"The roof is leaking like a sieve," Palazzo said, pointing out water stains trailing down a wall and over banners. "The heating system is atrocious. You've been in here with the sauna. And then in the summer, it's terrible."

There have been improvements. During the pandemic, the scoreboard blew out, so Palazzo brought the football scoreboard inside and put in on the floor. He said the then-schools superintendent showed up for a playoff game, and said, “We gotta do better than that.” So Classical ended up with a new scoreboard that displays the points scored by all of the players on the floor.

Palazzo said it can be hard to keep pace with private schools such as La Salle and Bishop Hendricken, which draw students from throughout the state, plus the likes of Ponaganset and North Kingstown, which are becoming magnets for career and technical education programs.

But Classical is poised for progress. Palazzo said a state bond will provide funding for a second phase of Classical renovations in 2026 and 2027, and he’d like to see work on the roof, bleachers, gym floor, heating system, and air conditioning.

In the process, Palazzo said, Classical must maintain room for the history, the tradition, the character — and the banners. More immediately, he said, he hopes Classical beats La Salle.



A commemorative basketball marking Classical High School's 2024 state championship season sits in a trophy case at the school's gymnasium. The team went undefeated in both the State Open Tournament and Division 1 Championship Tournament. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF