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JEWES & BASEBALL EXHIBIT COMES TO CINCINNATI

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By Marc Katz, Special To The Observer

If your legs go wobbly every time you see a historic baseball exhibit — and you're especially interested if the exhibit is about Jewish players — the Skirball Museum at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati should be on your list for a visit this summer.

Highlighted with two-foot-tall polyclay sculptures of Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Al Rosen by artist Philip Ratner (some of his work is on

display at the Statue of Liberty), the museum has a fascinating collection of memorabilia anyone of a certain age — as well as youngsters — would enjoy.



Hank Greenberg hits a third inning homer against the Philadelphia Phillies, April 29, 1947. Bettmann/CORBIS

Called *Chasing Dreams: Baseball & Becoming American*, the exhibit originated at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia. It defines how baseball “has played a crucial role in understanding, and sometimes challenging, what it means to be American.”

Cobi Weissbach, director of development at the Philadelphia museum, said the “pop-up” exhibit traveling the country is a segment of a larger baseball exhibit offered to larger museums and includes interactive information panels with pictures and video.

“We currently have two pop-up exhibits touring,” Weissbach said. “One is on baseball, the other on Bat Mitzvahs. We have a third one (about to tour) on Soviet Jewry.”

Asked about the Jewish love of the game, Weissbach said, “some of it has to be that Jews were part of baseball from the earliest days. Lipman Pike was the first Jew to play for money — and one of the first professionals — and managed the Cincinnati Reds in 1877. Barney Dreyfuss, who owned the Pirates, created the World Series.”

While the Philadelphia museum is providing the packaging and story panels for the Skirball exhibit, most of the artifacts come from Skirball’s collection and items obtained when B’nai B’rith closed its museum space at the Klutznick National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C., a few years ago.

Don’t be surprised to see a robust collection of baseball cards featuring Jewish players. Several years ago, Martin Abramowitz of suburban Boston, founded Jewish Major Leaguers, a collection of baseball cards featuring every major leaguer with some type of Jewish background. He is currently working on The Jewish Baseball Card book, which will be released in time for Chanukah.

While Abramowitz can’t pinpoint the exact draw of Jews to baseball, he does point out some of the early players changed their names so they wouldn’t be identified as Jewish, while today, the opposite is happening.

“Baseball helped make Americans out of Jews,” Abramowitz said, “and now we have the opposite. It’s a way for American Jews to become more Jewish.”

In addition to the Ratner sculptures, the exhibit includes such artifacts as signed Cal Abrams and Al Rosen bats, signed baseballs by Rosen, sportscaster Mel Allen, pitcher Saul Rogovin and catcher Mickey Owen, and a series of plaques from the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame, featuring Koufax.

A section is dedicated to Cincinnati’s Mayerson JCC, with photographs and art detailing the history of its youth and adult softball leagues, and information provided by the Reds on Lipman Pike.

The exhibit is free to the public, as is the rest of the three-story museum, which traces Jewish history, primarily in this country, with an emphasis on the Cincinnati area.