

New Museum Exhibition Swings for the Fences

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“I’ve tried ’em all, I really have, and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the Church of Baseball.” Those words, spoken by Annie Savoy, the baseball muse played by Susan Sarandon in the 1988 film, *Bull Durham*, irreverently sum up the way that countless millions of Americans have felt about the national pastime since, well, it became the national pastime. It is a shrine that welcomes one and all, whether you’re standing in Ashburn Alley,



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Legendary slugger Hank Greenberg hit a home run against the Phillies in 1947 as a Pittsburgh Pirate.

watching at home or combing through the box scores. Baseball is the sports world’s version of the Statue of Liberty.

It is precisely this connecting force that is the focus of a new exhibition at the National Museum of American Jewish History. Opening just in time to whet Philadelphia fans’ appetite for Opening Day on March 31 against the Texas Rangers, “Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American” will explore the sport’s role in providing immigrants and minorities with a bridge to connecting with America and, in the process, feeling more American themselves.

Providing a sense of identity for those on the fringe through loyalty to the hometown team; being able to participate in water cooler conversations about different aspects of the game; and drawing inspiration and pride from having a member of your group excel on the field are just a few of the ways that baseball has become more than a game.

“Baseball’s history, which dates well back into the 19th century, interlocks with American history,” said Josh Perelman, the museum’s chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections. “When most people think about baseball, they think of it as a sport and all the fan activities around it. What we add to the conversation is a new perspective on issues of immigration, identity of minority communities and diversity in our society,” said Perelman, who co-curated this temporary exhibition with associate curator Ivy Weingram. “Visitors to the exhibition will experience baseball in a new way — as a portal through which minority communities have negotiated what it means to be American.”

To augment that experience, Perelman and his staff have assembled more than 130 objects, the majority of which are Jewishly linked, to help museum goers understand how people have used baseball to connect to America and to each other. Among the memorabilia on display will be original sheet music to “Take Me out to the Ballgame” (music by Albert Von Tilzer, né Albert Gumbinski), ballpark giveaways, stadium seats and plenty of game-used objects like bats, balls and uniforms.

Howard Goldstein, a 62-year-old trial lawyer from Jenkintown, has lent a number of those items to the museum. By his own estimate, Goldstein has one of — if not the most — extensive collections of Jewish baseball memorabilia in the country. “I’ve been collecting all things related to Jews and baseball” for almost 30 years, he said.

His collection stretches from a bat used by Guy Zinn, the first Jewish player for the New York Yankees (known as the Highlanders when he played for the team in 1911) to jerseys worn by Max Patkin, the “Clown Prince of Baseball” who was a comedic between-innings presence at ballparks across the country for decades and a Paoli resident until his death in 1999.

Goldstein chose to eschew cards in his collection, reasoning that a lot of people collect those. “Very few collect what I collect,” he said.

He attributes the beginning of his collection days to fate. One day in 1986, as he was exiting the Pennsylvania Turnpike, he saw a sign for a sports memorabilia expo at the old George Washington Motor Lodge in Willow Grove. “I wasn’t doing anything that day, and I wanted to see what it was all about.”

While wandering through the displays, Goldstein recalled, he was approached by one of the vendors. “This guy asked me what I collected. I said I had no idea what to collect. He said, ‘You should collect items about Jews and baseball.’ ”

It turned out to be a good sales pitch: Goldstein bought the first piece of a collection that now numbers in the hundreds — a photo of Izzy Goldstein, who pitched for the Detroit Tigers in 1932.

Goldstein is a big baseball fan. He’s even willing to admit that he avidly follows both the Phillies and the Yankees (he is originally from Brooklyn). “I wound up rooting for the Phillies in the 2009 World Series because the Yankees fans were even more obnoxious than the Phillies fans,” he said.

But collecting these items also serves as a way to keep him connected to his Jewishness and to Judaism, he said. And it appeals to his preservationist side.

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“I’m a historian at heart,” he said. “It gives me a sense of pleasure to preserve these things that will tell the story about these Jewish guys — who made the major leagues, who didn’t — and why.”

The two most famous Jews to make the major leagues are given their due in the exhibition. Both Hank Greenberg, the legendary Detroit Tigers slugger, and Sandy Koufax, the Los Angeles Dodger acclaimed as one of the greatest pitchers to ever play the game, are featured prominently. The museum has even expanded the exhibition to its concourse level for an interactive Koufax experience. “Koufax Concourse” will allow visitors to don a replica Koufax jersey and pitch off of a regulation pitcher’s mound — with Nerf balls, of course, not the real thing.

“We certainly highlight those two,” Perelman said. “They not only achieved so much as players; they also earned their place in history because of the choices they made about how they articulated their identities, of how they presented themselves as Jews so that they could fit in but also teach in some way.”

The show doesn’t just devote space to each player’s accomplishments on the field and as role models for Americans, Jewish and otherwise — it pairs them with other minority players of their time who also were trailblazers in the sport and society. Greenberg’s importance is shown in tandem with that of Joe DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper. As an Italian-American in the first half of the 20th century, DiMaggio had to overcome discrimination as well, Perelman noted. In addition to their on-field exploits, the exhibition shows that what also helped cement Greenberg’s and DiMaggio’s place in the sport’s firmament was their early commitment to fight in World War II.

Similarly, Koufax, who became a hero to Jews everywhere for his courageous decision to sit out Game 1 of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur, shares space with Roberto Clemente. The Pittsburgh Pirate, who became the first Latino player to achieve superstar status, devoted his time and popularity to raise awareness about equality and race before his life was cut short in a plane crash while on a relief mission to Nicaragua in 1972.

Among the more unusual Koufax memorabilia on display is Strike-Out With Sandy Koufax, a 1963 board game that promised to teach players to learn how to pitch like the Hall-of-Famer. It is one of the hundreds of baseball-related board games in the collection of Dr. Mark Cooper, a Philadelphia radiologist. In his case, Cooper is acknowledged by the Smithsonian for having the most complete collection of baseball-themed board games in existence. Cooper and his collection, which encompasses virtually every baseball-themed board game made between the 1860s and 1960s, have been the subject of its own book (*Baseball Games: The Home Version of the National Pastime*) and a yearlong show at the Baseball Hall of Fame Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Cooper said his collection began as a way to kill time while his wife, Lynne, was antiques shopping in Adamstown, Pa., in 1982. “We had just gotten married,” the 62-year-old recalled. “She was looking at jewelry — and I was bored out of my mind!” As he wandered through the stores, he came across a mechanical baseball game that piqued his interest. Thirty-two years and hundreds of games later, he said, “my wife still supports me.”

Cooper, who also helps run fantasy baseball camps, where those who can afford the price tag can spend a week playing and kibitzing with retired major leaguers, said that one of the benefits of immersing himself in this aspect of the game is that it has helped him connect to the history of America and of American Jews.

“Baseball has been a huge part of the migration of Jews to the U.S. and becoming assimilated,” he said, adding that the game has done the same for all races and religions. “I love what it stands for; it’s so egalitarian, it’s so fair. The more you put into it, the more you have a fair chance to win.”

In addition to the contributions from major collectors like Goldstein and Cooper, the exhibition will feature numerous artifacts from fans across the country that participated in the museum’s Tumblr blog that ran during the 2013 season. “We created the site to allow us to go to the general public and ask them, ‘What are your baseball memories, do you have a baseball artifact, do you have a story behind it?’ ” Perelman explained.

The response, he said, was overwhelming. Thousands of replies yielded treasures like the story of Esther Schimmel, a St. Louis Cardinals fan and entrepreneur who realized that there was money to be made by selling hot dogs to hungry fans parking in the lots surrounding the Cardinals’ new stadium in the 1950s.

She kept strictly kosher, Perelman said, so in order not to have contact with the non-kosher dogs she was selling, she would only hold the bun and spear the hot dog to put it in the bun. The museum will have her grease-stained chef coat on display alongside a photo of her serving hot dogs to two young children.

To help “Chasing Dreams” appeal to as many people as possible, the show includes material about players and notables from other minorities, including Jackie Robinson, Hank Aaron, Orlando Cepeda and Ichiro Suzuki. Perelman said the staff has done an enormous amount of outreach to schools, camps, religious groups and more to encourage them to visit the exhibition and take part in the various related programming that will be taking place through October, including movie series, a Father’s Day event and a speaker series featuring baseball notables.

And if the experience sparks visitors to begin their own collection of memorabilia, it couldn’t come at a better time. For their part, both Goldstein and Cooper are giving up their collections. Goldstein is looking for a single entity willing to keep his artifacts together, while Cooper is selling his games through Heritage Auctions in Texas.

Cooper has no plans to abandon the game he loves; he just thinks the time has come for someone else to explore the baseball’s unique relationship with its fans and history.

“It’s timeless,” he said. “It has always been there and it will always be there, even through the Black Sox scandal, the drinking, the steroids — just like the Jewish religion. Even through millennia of persecution, we are always there. I guess it’s a reflection of what we are made out of — and it’s the same thing with baseball.”

