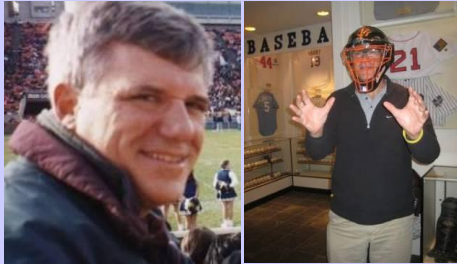


# The Newport Sports Museum – Everything You Always Wanted and More



by  
George Vrechek

While vacationing in Southern California recently my friend, Jim Daniels, asked if my wife and I would like to visit a sports museum in Newport Beach. I said “sure” without even knowing anything about the museum. I thought in the back of my mind I would have to shorten the visit a bit in order to keep my wife’s interest since her enthusiasm for all things sports-related has its limits. I estimated we might stay an hour. We overshot the hour considerably; I could have stayed the entire day.

## **Renoirs in the Basement**

The Newport Sports Museum is really a sports collectibles museum. Museum founder John W. Hamilton is a 68 year-old commercial real estate developer and manager from Newport Beach who has assembled an incredible collection of memorabilia from many sports. Sixteen years ago he decided that “it doesn’t do you any good to have a Renoir in the basement” and put the collection to work to help others. John’s wife also “encouraged” him by asking when he was going to get all the old sports stuff out of the house. Hamilton established a not-for-profit museum that charges no admission and charges no fees for programs to mentor thousands of Southern California youngsters about life choices and responsibilities. In addition to financial donors, the museum and Hamilton have enlisted over 150 current or former professional athletes who have donated their time to conduct programs targeting the student-athlete who may need some direction.



Collectors like Jefferson Burdick, Larry Fritsch, and Barry Halper all would have liked to have seen their collections in museums and made available to the public. Burdick's card collection remains at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City but little is available for public viewing. Fritsch opened and then closed his museum in Cooperstown. Some portion of Halper's collection was purchased by the Baseball Hall of Fame. Gary Cypres of Los Angeles has a huge 27,000 square foot facility housing his Cypres Family Sports Museum, but it was only open briefly to the general public. John Hamilton, however, has donated over 10,000 sports memorabilia items that can be viewed by the public for free six days a week, all day. Even parking is free!

### **Baseballs in the Lobby**

The museum is located less than a mile from the Pacific Ocean in Newport Beach, California, and occupies 8,000 square feet of a two-story building with a basement. Parking is directly adjacent. As you walk toward the door you might think you are going into a suburban bank but for the sports statuary lining the entrance. The facility was actually a bank until Hamilton purchased it in 1999. Once inside you sign your name and can start meandering. The lobby contains several autographed baseballs. I took a closer look.

Autographed team baseballs are not from just any old teams but all the World Series winners starting in 1940. The next display case has single-signed balls arranged alphabetically signed by Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, Wagner, DiMaggio, Mantle, and a good portion of the rest of the Hall of Fame gang. There are baseballs autographed by Cy Young winners, 300-win pitchers, 3,000-hit batters, 500-homerun sluggers, and perfect game pitchers. Wow! This is all in the first 100 square feet of the museum.



*Babe Ruth and Honus Wagner autographed balls*

### **Impossible to Have a Quick Look**

I wanted to walk through quickly to see where I should devote my time. It was impossible. The avid sports collector can't walk three feet in this museum without being captivated. I thought the next room would be more baseball – not the case at all.

Over 100 hockey sticks signed by the players march along the first wall in a glass case followed by a large display of hockey jerseys.

The next room has autographed football helmets and jerseys. Southern California teams are featured significantly and you can tell the founder is particularly fond of his alma



mater, USC. Players' jerseys are displayed from Montana, Rice, Young, Tim Brown, Starr, Payton, Butkus, Emmitt Smith, Aikman, Favre, Moon, Marino, and other HOFers. Individual balls signed by Heisman trophy winners are lined up. Game balls signed by all of the Super Bowl champs are there. NBA and WNBA collectibles are next – game-used balls, jerseys, and shoes autographed by the likes of Jordan, Johnson, Jabbar, Russell, Wilt, Bird, Shaq, Walton, and many others. All the jerseys in the museum are game-used and over half of them are autographed.

A shelf contains complete runs of *Sport Illustrated* magazines in pristine condition. The paper 1954 Topps cards are still intact in the early issues. A display even shows the *Sports Illustrated* prototype mock-up that was promoted prior to the first issue.



Programs are there from every Super Bowl and many sporting events in Southern California.

Right in the middle of the museum is a small basketball court. A sign requests that you remove your shoes or play in shoes that won't leave scuff marks. You are invited to gun away at the regulation baskets and backboards using any of the perfectly inflated NBA game balls lying around. How much fun can you have?



### **Golf and Other Sports**

While the major sports are well represented, the rest of the sports-playing world is featured as well, particularly sports popular in Southern California. The museum features memorabilia from golf, surfing, skateboarding, swimming, cycling, auto racing, horse racing, sailing, volleyball, Olympic events, boxing, tennis, and curling. Ali's gloves from a championship fight are autographed and hanging there with dozens of other items. Golfing greats are represented with golf balls signed by all post-World War II British Open winners except Tony Lema. You'll find clubs from Tiger Woods, Jack



Nicklaus, Arnold Palmer, Ben Hogan, Sam Snead, Payne Stewart, and Lee Trevino. Hackers are honored as well. However, the hackers happen to be Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, and every other President who has played the game other than Woodrow Wilson – one of the few things still on the founder’s wantlist. Presidents’ clubs, bags, golf balls, and even autographed baseballs make up an impressive bag room.

### **Stadium Remnants and Seating**

The baseball section of the museum continues beyond the entrance area into the basement. You can view newspaper clippings from the early 1900s courtesy of a former official scorekeeper. There is an exhibit honoring native Californian and Chicago Cub Ken Hubbs who died suddenly in a 1964 plane crash. A locker area from old Comiskey Park is there as well. Downstairs you can rest on any of the 50 plus seats salvaged from major league stadiums, such as Tiger Stadium, Braves Field, Yankee Stadium, Ebbets Field, Crosley Field, or League Park in Cleveland which was demolished in 1951. You can sit in an old seat from the LA Coliseum where fans watched two Olympics, Super Bowls, and a World Series.



### **An Interview with John Hamilton**

I was able to talk to John Hamilton about the collection and the museum. I could have spent the entire day in the museum and another day just talking to Hamilton. A gift of a football autographed by members of the *Look Magazine* All-American team got the 10 year-old Hamilton hooked on collecting in 1953. Later in the 1950s John’s dad landed him a home run ball hit by Ted Williams. Hamilton and his family were active in sports and politics in California; for example, his mother and Nancy Reagan were friends. John played football and ran track in high school and always kept an eye out for acquiring sports memorabilia. He has been a long-time *SCD* subscriber. His success in business gave him the ability to make significant acquisitions and eventually the ability to donate it all to the museum.

He has been collecting long enough to understand what can be involved in determining if an item is authentic and has religiously avoided suspect material. In many cases the museum items, including all of the hockey memorabilia, have come directly from the teams or athletes to Hamilton. Hamilton and his son remain active in adding to the collection. Some athletes have been more challenging than others to approach, but Hamilton has had success. As we know, the difficulty of the search factors into the “reward” for a collector when an item is eventually found. The museum could use a leather Rams football helmet, a Woodrow Wilson golf club or ball, single signed balls of Walter Johnson and Jimmy Foxx, and I’m sure a few other items as well. A collector is always looking to expand the horizon.

*John Hamilton*



### **Ike's Sticks**

John Hamilton has some great stories about acquiring items. He is particularly proud of the Eisenhower golf clubs. Ike's widow, Mamie, gave the clubs and bag to a long-time friend. When the friend died, his wife mentioned to a Hamilton acquaintance that she would like to sell the clubs. The clubs had been used by Ike at Augusta National and had been provided by the club pro, one Bobby Jones. Each club bore the engraving "General Ike" with 5 stars and was marked "Serial #1". Hamilton immediately agreed to the asking price, jumped on a plane, flew 2,000 miles, and bought the clubs and bag. Not wanting to let the clubs out of his sight or worry about them in baggage on the return flight, he brought the clubs onto the plane in this pre-911 era. The pilot said the clubs couldn't ride with the passengers but once he was told whose clubs Hamilton was escorting, he volunteered to keep a good eye on them in the cockpit. The clubs rode "first class plus" on the flight home and now hang in a row with five other presidential golf bags at the museum.



### **Other Items in the Collection**

While most of the items are those of Hall of Fame category athletes, there are other unusual collectibles as well.

- A plastic athletic cup protector worn by LA King Dave Taylor is displayed, missing a chunk of plastic as a result of being struck by an errant puck during a game.
- Jim Craig was the goalie for the "Miracle on Ice" U.S. 1980 Olympic hockey team. His jersey is autographed by Craig and late Olympic coach, Herb Brooks.
- Russian hockey great Valerie Karmalov's jersey is there courtesy of hockey's Dave Tallon who traded jerseys with Karmalov at mid-ice after a 1972 Canadian-Russian game. Karmalov later died suddenly and mysteriously.
- The USC - Alabama 1970 football game is remembered with the game ball presented to star running back, Sam "Bam" Cunningham. The coaches were Bear Bryant and John McKay. A recent book by Don Yaeger (*Turning of the Tide: How One Game Changed the South*) described the significant impact of this game.
- Hamilton acquired ticker tapes used to relay the accounts of the 1932 World Series between the Yankees and Cubs. He hoped that the tapes would contain something about Ruth's called shot. Unfortunately the ticker tape from that game was missing.
- Elgin Baylor provided a uniform he wore when playing at the Forum. USC Heisman winner Mike Garrett has also been very generous and supportive.

In his spare time Hamilton also is Chairman of the USC Hall of Fame Committee and The Pacific Club IMPACT Foundation. Hamilton got the IMPACT Foundation started to annually honor a college defensive player with the (Ronnie) Lott Trophy. Equal weight is given to personal character as well as performance on the field.

Hamilton never got into collecting cards; consequently cards are about the only sports collectible missing from the museum. Too bad the tucked-away Burdick card collection in New York City

couldn't be joined with Hamilton's accessible memorabilia collection. The two collections would have to meet half-way and be housed somewhere around Tulsa.

### Museum Programs

Hamilton gets more enthused now about the activities of the museum programs that have grown to reach over 7,000 kids each year. For example, Hamilton said "one program involves former NFL players acting as mentors to young athletes who have the capability of playing at the next level, be it college or pro." Candidates are selected based on need with a particular emphasis on disadvantaged, at-risk athletes lacking roll models or family support. Former football pros Ron Yary, Jackie Slater, and Mike Haynes will accompany three selected student-athletes to the Hall of Fame induction weekend in Canton. The students will meet many of those attending the induction. The former pros also donate their time to meet with larger groups of students at the museum, emphasizing that it is a small fraction of athletes who are able to make it to the pros and remain healthy. The message is that sports are great, but you can't count on sports alone for a livelihood.



I asked John about the reason for the basketball court. He said that it serves multiple functions and has been used by golfers, baseball players, and hockey players to demonstrate their sports as well as basketballers. Nets are erected and the players swing or slap away. Tiger Woods is among those who have teed it up there.



You can rent the museum for events or attend special programs dealing with sports history, anti-drug talks from athletes, as well as autograph and photo sessions with players. The museum has a large board that helps recruit donors to support programs, and it doesn't hurt that there are many current and former pro athletes residing in Southern California. With no admission fees or government funding there is always a need for donations. The museum runs on a modest operating budget and welcomes publicity about the collection and museum programs. They are "looking to change lives" in the words of John Hamilton.



*Former NFL and USC great, Curtis Conway talks to youngsters about school and sports*

### **Don't Keep the Museum a Secret**

I am surprised that national publicity about the museum appears to be modest, although local publicity I found correctly described the experience as “jaw dropping.” This museum is a small jewel for the die-hard sports memorabilia collector and has worthwhile programs. It would be virtually impossible for the sports collector not to enjoy a visit. You can even shoot a few buckets. The museum is located at 100 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach, California, 92660 about 45 miles south of downtown Los Angeles by freeway. The phone is 949-721-9333 and the website is [www.NewportSportsMuseum.org](http://www.NewportSportsMuseum.org).

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