



Cincy's embarrassment of baseball museum riches model for Chicago?

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Posted Thursday, December 19th, 2013*

CINCINNATI – This old river city has an embarrassment of baseball riches.

No, not necessarily the Reds, who pulled the biggest pratfall of the pennant race and playoffs, losing the last five in a row in the regular season *and* the wild-card play-in game against the Pirates -- and then losing Dusty Baker as manager as a result.

But in honoring baseball history, Cincy is as powerful as its Big Red Machine of four decades ago. They're world-beaters like the two-time champs. The Queen City of the Rhineland is a treasure trove

for baseball nostalgia lovers with not one, but two general baseball museums – the expansive Reds Museum and Hall of Fame next to Great American Ballpark and the Green Diamond Gallery, a spectacular private collection on the northern outskirts of the city.

Leave it to Reds Hall of Fame radio announcer Marty Brennaman, last of the true tell-it-like-it-is voices, to explain why one of baseball's smallest markets does the most prolific job of celebrating baseball history in and out of town.

"I think it's an influence, it's an indication that those of us who've lived in this town (have known) for a lot of years," Brennaman said the other day while walking the exhibit corridors at Green Diamond Gallery. "There may be towns that draw more people and supposedly have more interest. There's no city in baseball that has a better feel and a handle for the history of its ballclub than this city here."



Hall of Fame announcer Marty Brennaman is flanked by museum managers Bobby Bench (left) and Dan Bell (right) at Green Diamond Gallery.

With Chicago having no active sports museums, including no team baseball museums, there is a niche to fill in the country's third-largest market. The city is home to two baseball teams and a rich diamond history that also includes the Negro League, women's professional baseball and a passionate softball culture.

Thus an expedition from the Chicago Baseball Museum toured both the Reds and Green Diamond facilities to cull ideas for the planned bricks-and-mortar CBM building in Whiting, Ind. This writer, CBM president Dr. David Fletcher and executive director Paul Ladewski all came away impressed with the different presentations, ranging from extremely rare memorabilia to a pitching tunnel where amateur hurlers can throw from the regulation 60 feet, 6 inches and have their pitches both timed and called a ball or strike.

Reds ownerships endorse preservation of history

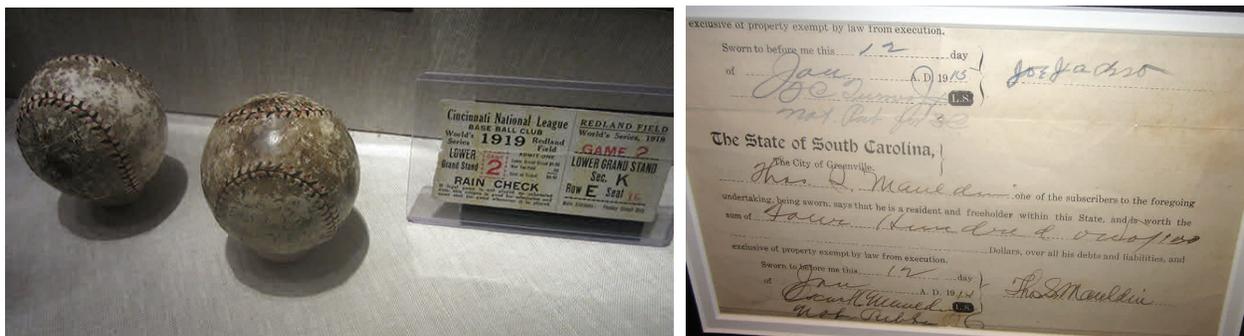
Successive ownerships of the Reds dating back to the 1950s have been supportive of preserving history. Meanwhile, one of the country's super sports memorabilia collectors is personally responsible for the display at Green Diamond that wowed Hall of Fame officials visiting from Cooperstown.

"They went to the Green Bay Packers Museum, which may be the best sports museum in the world. The Reds got a lot of ideas from that," Brennaman said of the outfitting of the Reds facility. The museum opened in a 16,000-square-foot building in 2004 on the old Riverfront Stadium footprint, one year after Great American Ballpark began operation.

"The previous ownership of the club, Carl Lindner, God rest his soul, was a man who spearheaded the drive to build that building and house all that memorabilia and artifacts they have," Brennaman said.

"It is something they can be singularly proud of. I don't think there's another club in baseball who has anything of such a grand design as the Reds have. Any team that has any interest in doing something similar to this has sent people into Cincinnati to look at that facility."

The Castellini family ownership that succeeded Lindner's group in 2006 is just as supportive of preserving and displaying the town's baseball history.



The last-out ball hit by "Shoeless Joe" Jackson in the tainted 1919 World Series (left) at the Reds Museum; a bail-bonds document "signed" by Jackson (right) at the Green Diamond Gallery.

But they have a kindred soul in Bob Crotty, a lifelong collector who has personally stocked Green Diamond Galley with his massive collection. Once again, Brennaman is the storyteller befitting of his status as a legendary voice of the game.

“This town is fortunate to have as one of its residents Bob Crotty,” he said. “There came a time when his wife said you can do one of two things: You can sell this stuff or you can build a building. That’s what he did.”

Green Diamond impresses HOF brass

Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson is said to have marveled at Crotty’s collection, neatly organized in themes in the two-storefront Green Diamond headquarters. He had good reason to be impressed, said Brennaman.

“Next to Cooperstown, there’s nothing in the country that can equal what Bob Crotty has under one roof,” said Brennaman, who lives a 25-minute drive from Green Diamond. “Every time I come in here, I marvel at what’s in this facility and with the knowledge that one man is responsible for having collected all of it.”



The most popular exhibit at the Reds Museum is the pitching tunnel, viewed here from the rubber 60 feet, 6 inches away.

Amazingly, both the Reds Museum and Green Diamond share a rare connection to an all-time name on the Chicago baseball scene – banned White Sox master batsman “Shoeless Joe” Jackson.

The Reds facility has the ball Jackson hit for the last out in the eighth and final game of the 1919 World Series tainted by the Black Sox Scandal to which Jackson was linked. Meanwhile, Green Diamond has a rare Jackson signature – he was illiterate – on a bail

bonds form to get his brother out of jail. Jackson apparently carried around a copy of his signature his wife had crafted for him to affix to crucial documents.

The explanation of the Jackson bail-bonds artifact comes from another of two famous Cincinnati names connected with Green Diamond: Bobby Bench, son of Reds Hall of Famer Johnny Bench. The younger Bench is assistant manager, while manager Dan Bell is grandson of 1950s Reds outfielder Gus Bell and nephew of Buddy Bell, former Reds third baseman and coach who now is White Sox assistant general manager.

“The story is he didn’t read the bail bond, so when they gave it to him initially, he signed the top of it upside-down,” said Bench. “So they turned it around for him and he signed the bottom part. So we have the better, bottom part. It’s rumored the original

owner of this document cut it in half and sold the top part of it. He (Crotty) found it in an auction.”

So much of the history of Bench, the Bells, Pete Rose, Joe Morgan and a gaggle of other Reds stars is featured on two floors of the Reds Museum. Stunningly, visitors enter in a gallery that features the autographs of all but 15 Reds who have played in at least one game for the team since 1920.

“They are two collections combined,” said Reds Museum curator Chris Eckes. “Dick Huebner lives in California and his collections represents the pre-1920s up through 1939. A local gentleman named Jay Neal takes us from 1940 to the present. They did the hard work. For the most part, (the signatures are on) flats...baseball cards, index cards, cut checks, signatures from letters.

“We’re sure (on getting all but 15). We did the math on it. They had to appear in a game. We discussed ‘ghost players’ (callups who never got into a game). It’s impossible to know for sure.” So the “ghosts” remain off the signature boards.

The autograph collection is so expansive that non-baseball celebrities are also displayed, such as John F. Kennedy as a U.S. representative in 1950 and the three Apollo XI astronauts, the first men on the moon.

Try pitching from regulation mound

Gobs of photos lead visitors up stairs and past a collection of 4,192 baseballs festooned to the wall in honor of Pete Rose’s hit total that overhauled Ty Cobb. On the second floor are more photos, uniforms (the 1956-66 sleeveless version with the name under the number is unique). The most popular exhibit is the pitching tunnel.

“Everyone wants to see how hard they throw,” said Eckes. “The No. 1 comment is, ‘Boy, it doesn’t look like the pitcher is that far away on TV.’ The first reaction is, ‘Wow, 60 feet 6 inches is a long way away.’”

Nearby is an interactive broadcast booth, part of the TV-radio history exhibit featuring Brenneman and all his predecessors along with a vintage Western Union ticket machine. Visitors can call a play introduced by Brenneman and his late, legendary broadcaster partner Joe Nuxhall. They then hear how Brenneman and Nuxhall actually described the play. A great clip for play-by-play fodder is Lou Piniella, then Reds manag-



Statues of the entire starting lineup of the 1975-76 Big Red Machine "interact" with each other at the Reds Museum.

er, uprooting first base and heaving it into right field in a bang-bang play at the bag against the Cubs in 1990.

Also on the second floor, past statues of every member of the Big Red Machine everyday lineup, fans can see the actual Reds Hall of Fame. Ownership was far more history-conscious than their Chicago counterparts. The team Hall of Fame actually began in 1958 at old Crosley Field – three Cincinnati ballparks ago -- with more recent plaques constructed in slightly different material than the early ones.



Marty Brennaman with a photo of himself and Joe Nuxhall, his beloved late broadcast partner, at Green Diamond Gallery.

Meanwhile, the pictures tell a thousand words at Green Diamond. Copies of familiar photos are included among the many themed (Brooklyn Dodgers, Yankees, Negro League) displays. Photos of all Hall of Famers, in order of their induction date, along with the majority of their signatures, cover one wall.

Thomson HR, Gehrig farewell photos one of a kind

But the pinnacle are angles of two historic events never seen that are simply stunning.

One is a photo taken from the faraway center field area of the celebration at home plate for Bobby Thomson’s “shot heard ‘round the world” pennant-winning homer on Oct. 3, 1951 at the Polo Grounds. The image is a double perspective. In the background is the mob scene at home plate. In the foreground is a frustrated Jackie Robinson, hands on his hips with the No. “42” on his back facing the camera, while nearby third baseman Billy Cox has his head down in utter dejection.

Another photo shows a different version of Lou Gehrig during his farewell speech at Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939. Rather than the stoic, heroic Iron Horse addressing the crowd as the “luckiest man on the face of the earth,” this Gehrig is shown looking down just before he spoke, somewhat pained with hands at his temples, likely pondering his mortality after being diagnosed with his fatal ALS illness.

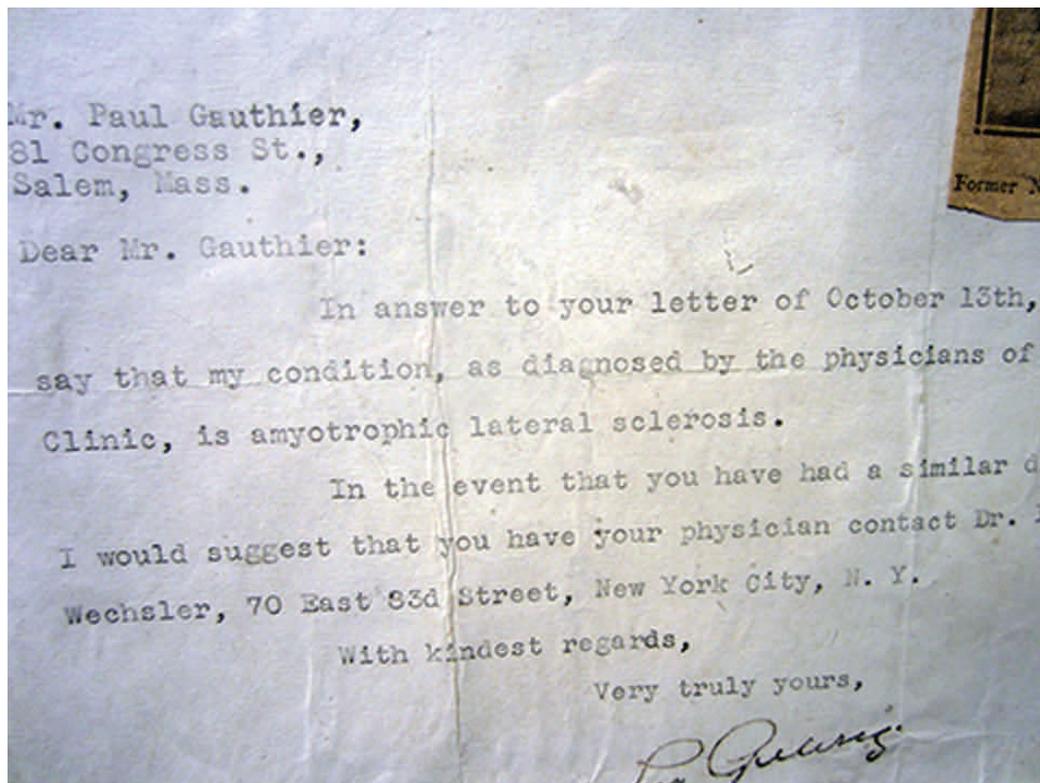
Crotty, Bell and Bench are both candid and funny in their presentations.

Atop one wall in a kind of rogue’s gallery are jerseys of admitted and suspected steroid users – Sammy Sosa, Mark McGwire, Jose Canseco, Barry Bonds, Manny Ramirez, Roger Clemens and Rafael Palmeiro.

And on one of the bathroom walls is displayed a vintage box of Champ prophylactics...”sold for the prevention of disease.” Leave it to Crotty to find a baseball angle to condoms. An individual packet is also displayed with a drawing of Ted Williams in mid-swing. We’ll never know if the Splendid Splinter got an endorsement fee, or whatever, for use of his likeness.

The only caveat at Green Diamond is to enjoy the memorabilia, the fan has to be a member at one of two participatory and pricing levels. You can join by contacting Bell or Bench at 513/984-4192 or info@GreenDiamondGallery.com. Membership not only provides access to the gallery, but also access to regular events at the gallery. A slew of Hall of Famers, led by Mike Schmidt, Bob Gibson and Andre Dawson, has appeared at Green Diamond.

Between the models at both the Reds Museum and Green Diamond, it sounds like a good way for Chicago fans to soak up – and even actively participate in – their baseball heritage at a local version of what is part of everyday sporting life in Cincinnati.



A 1940 letter from Lou Gehrig offering advice about ALS at the Green Diamond Gallery.