

Museum

The National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame, 2625 Clearbrook Drive, Arlington Heights, Chicago, IL 60005, (708) 437-3077.

The museum, which opened at Elmwood Park in 1977, has relocated to a new site in Arlington Heights only minutes from O'Hare International Airport. The museum displays exhibits from Italian-American inductees drawn from professional, college, and international sports. It is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends. Admission is by donation. While the external architecture of the museum is undistinguished, the entrance is dominated by a striking sculpture of the ever-elegant Joe DiMaggio stroking the ball. The inscription, dated May 18, 1991, reads: "commemorates the 50th anniversary of baseball's greatest achievement—Joseph Paul DiMaggio's 56 game hitting streak."

The museum has a quirky, cramped feel to it. This closed-in, almost constricted layout, striking just the right note for the greatest impact, is achieved by exhibits devoted to sports that take place on a smaller, rather than a larger, stage. For example, the museum has big, bold, starkly black-and-white photographs showing some of America's greatest boxers in the twilight of their lives as civilized gentlemen—elder statesmen—dressed in tuxedos. Elsewhere in the museum these fighters are shown as they really were: men with scarcely cloaked ferocities, baggy shorts, brightly colored dressing gowns, battered faces, and hirsute torsos—Joey Maxim, Joey Giardello, Jake La Motta, Rocky Graziano, Carmen Basilio and Willie Pastrano. Then there are the massively constructed size 22 boots of the "Ambling Alp," the six-foot, six-inch Primo Camera who was the World Heavyweight Champion in 1933 and 1934.

Pride of place, however, goes to the most successful heavyweight boxer of all time: Rocky Marciano amassed a 49 and 0 career record. Of these contests, 43 ended in knockouts and one of the five video units in the museum shows the highlights of his fistic career. Historians constantly talk of Marciano's toughness and his hardness. Revisiting the archival film shows a magnificent combatant who was always on the move, moving at and into opponents, and possessed of sensationally quick hands. There are primary sources aplenty: The *Ring* magazine covers spotlighting Marciano (January 1954 and February 1956), and the *Chicago Sun Times* newspaper of 1 September, 1969, its front-page report of the death of the "Brockton Blockbuster" in a small plane crash.

The rich variety of the sports and the luminaries covered by the exhibits is encyclopaedic. There are sections devoted to swimmer Matt Biondi (tied

with Mark Spitz as the most decorated U.S. Olympian with 11 medals); Linda Fratianne, 1980 Lake Placid silver medalist in women's figure skating; the incomparable Mary Lou Retton with gymnastic slippers of elfin proportions; Mike Eruzione, the captain of the U.S. men's hockey team that won "impossible" victories at the 1980 Olympics; the great Vince Lombardi, repeatedly caught with his gnat-toothed smile, and framed within some of his lesser known quotations—"The objective is to win—fairly, squarely, decently, by the rules—but to win"; football players such as Joe Montana, Dan Marino, Franco Harris, Dan Pastorini, Daryle Lamonica; broadcasters Harry Caray and Jack Brickhouse whose career spanned Roosevelt's inauguration and the first National Football League telecast; professional show business celebrity, and wrestler, Randy "Macho Man" Savage; golfers Gene Sarazen, Ken Venturi, Donna Caponi, and Larry Laoretti; and jockeys Kim DeLaura, Eddie Arcaro, Joe Culmone, Mike Manganello, and Carmine Abbatiello.

The museum is to be commended for the attention devoted to areas that traditionally have been ignored by Halls of Fame. There is, for example, a serious focus on the contributions made by handicapped athletes with material on Richard Ruffalo (the founder of "USA Blind Athletes"). Tony Volpentest (a 1992 Barcelona Paralympic gold medalist in the 100 meters), and Darlene Hunter (a 1992 National Wheelchair Games Champion).

There are some nicely created comedic exhibits. Willie Mosconi was the world's billiards champion in the 1940s and the 1950s but his contribution is a tongue-in-check conversation piece. "This shirt was worn in a match against Minnesota Fats [a celebrated hustling type of pool player]. Notice, I didn't even break a sweat."

In a sense the National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame suffers from a problem faced by many museums of this type. There is sense of "show and tell," an impression of superficiality and one-dimensional blandness. There are missed opportunities that, while difficult to craft, would allow visitors to ask questions of themselves regarding the complexities of sport. What comes to mind with this collection is how Jennifer Capriati and Lyle Alzado are treated. What they experienced deserves more searching scrutiny than a technicolor photograph and a brief caption. Then there is Mario Andretti who announced his retirement from auto-racing in late 1994. It is not enough to say that he won the Indianapolis 500 in 1969 and became Formula One World Champion in 1978. Why did he switch from one form of racing to another and what accounts for his lack of success in the later stages of his career?

As noted at the start of this review, the presence of Joe DiMaggio permeates the museum. There is the *Oakland Post Enquirer* of July 27, 1933, with a column by Lester Grant. The "Yankee Clipper's" record was stopped at 61 games. "It's a sad, sad story any way you look at it. Joe DiMaggio is through marathoning."

The museum is also home to a heartwarming tribute to Chicago Bears

running back Brian Piccolo who died on June 16, 1970. The artifact is the actual speech that teammate Gale Sayers read as he accepted the George Halas Award:

Brian Piccolo has never given up because he has the heart of a giant and that rare form of courage that allows him to kid himself and his opponent—cancer.

The Italian American Sport Hall of Fame building foundation chairman is Tom Lasorda, manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers. The museum houses his office in which is located an oil painting of his wife with Frank Sinatra, himself photographed with Ronald Reagan, and two cans of Ultra Slim-Fast.

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