

The Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center

—J. THOMAS JABLE
Department of Exercise and Movement Sciences
William Paterson University

Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center

8 Quarry Road, Little Falls, New Jersey 07424, on the campus of Montclair State University

Telephone: 973-655-2378; Fax: 973-655-6894

Website: <<http://www.yogiberramuseum.org>> [March 30, 2004]

Open: Wednesday through Sunday 12:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. and until 7:00 p.m. during New Jersey Jackals games. Closed on all major holidays.

Wheelchair accessible. Educational programs and group tours available 7 days a week.

Admission: adults \$6.00, students \$4.00, members and children under 5 are free.

"You can observe a lot by watching," one of Yogi Berra's lesser-known aphorisms, is an alluring introduction to the museum and learning center that bears his name. Although Berra memorabilia dominates the museum's permanent exhibits, the institution's emphasis on learning and education transcends his on-field heroics and popular image as an American icon. In fact, it was the museum's educational mission that convinced Berra to lend his name to the museum. Weaving together American history, the saga of baseball, and Berra's contributions, the Yogi Berra Museum & Learning Center's exhibitions and educational programs intend to "foster literacy, a better understanding of social justice, mathematical and scientific principles, and the historic and contemporary role of sports in society." The museum, through the medium of sport, reaches out to the public, particularly school children, with a full complement of special programs involving sportsmanship, race and gender issues, sports medicine, physics and kinetics, and literature.

The idea for creating the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center germinated after Montclair State University awarded Berra, a longtime resident of Montclair, New Jersey, an honorary doctorate in 1996. Shortly thereafter, the university honored Berra by naming its new baseball stadium after him. Then Rose Cali, a university board member, proposed constructing a museum that would not only tell the history of baseball but also Berra's inspirational story, which could be used as an educational model. The university agreed to provide an on-campus location for the facility. Through this partnership, Cali agreed to incorporate the museum as an independent, non-profit institution, and the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center opened to the public in December of 1998.

The 7,000-square-foot museum, located adjacent to Yogi Berra Stadium, where the minor league New Jersey Jackals play its home games, attracts 50,000 visitors annually. Upon entering the building, visitors are greeted with a giant-size picture of Berra blocking home plate, tagging out a sliding Eddie Yost of the Washington Senators. Close by is a huge model of a dairy cow, a memento of the museum's joint fund-raising effort with a neighboring community. Former New York Yankee greats like Whitey Ford and Don Mattingly, among others, and entertainers and television celebrities like Jay Leno, have autographed the black-and-white creature. Phil Rizzuto affixed his trademark "holy cow" to his signature, the exclamation he often used in the broadcast booth to describe superlative plays on the field.

Visitors begin the museum tour in the Stephen and Mary Birch Foundation Wing, which houses a pictorial display of the early history of baseball—from game's emergence in the 1840s to its development throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Another exhibit shows the evolution and progression of catcher's masks and mitts.

New York Yankee history, fittingly, occupies center stage. Photos, bats, balls, gloves, and uniforms portray the transformation of the New York Highlanders to the New York Yankees, including the construction of Yankee Stadium in 1923. Photos and news clippings of great Yankee legends—Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio—enhance the story and enrich the presentation. The exhibit of Yankee dynasties of the 1920s, thirties, and fifties accentuate the feats of Major League Baseball's most successful franchise. Across the room is a life-sized panel of Berra and pitcher Don Larsen celebrating the latter's perfect game in the 1956 World Series. Berra has often stated that catching Larsen's perfect game was the most enjoyable experience of his career. The mitt Berra used in that game has been preserved in bronze and is on display along with his American Legion catcher's glove. Nearby are the original bronze plaques of Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle that once adorned the centerfield wall at Yankee Stadium. New plaques had to be recast when the stadium was renovated during the mid 1970s.

One of the museum's most impressive exhibits is the "Lord of Rings" case that contains ten of Berra's fourteen World Series rings. Berra holds the all-time record for World Series appearances. Adjacent to the exhibit area is The Sky Box, a large, open room in which Berra's most famous quotes are inscribed on a cornice that encircles the room. In The Sky Box is a mural collage of Berra's picture on magazine covers. Another display in the museum shows Berra's endorsements over the years, as he has been in advertisements for tools, car batteries, milk, cigarettes, baseball gloves, beer, sneakers, and other products. The display case also contains copies of the sixteen books written about or by Berra.

Just off the main exhibit hall is the President's Room. It holds a collection of photographs of every president throwing out a season-opening first pitch, from William Howard Taft to George W. Bush. Dwight Eisenhower is the most animated. The collection provides an effective stimulus for examining the relationship between politics and sport. In fact, one of the museum's educational programs for school children addresses "The Significance of Politics in Sports."

Space is reserved in the center of the exhibit hall for exhibitions that often feature a theme of the museum's educational programs. Currently, the museum's recently acquired exhibit "Pride Against Prejudice: Negro Leagues Memorabilia" is on display. The exhibit

showcases artifacts of African Americans in baseball from the late nineteenth century to 1946. It is a poignant reminder of the discrimination and racial barriers that African Americans had to endure not only in their quest for admittance to baseball but also for equality in all other aspects of American life.

Although a great deal of baseball and American history is packed into the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center, there is an ambitious plan to expand the facility. Museum president, CEO, and founder Rose Cali is directing a \$12 million fund drive for an addition that will increase floor space seven-fold, to 50,000 square feet. The new addition will house a library, interactive science wing, broadcast studios for radio and television, sports video collection, ample space for traveling exhibits, and a larger auditorium for hosting special programs for the public and school groups. Construction is slated to begin in 2003 and, like the operation of the museum itself, the new addition will be financed through public and private contributions and foundation gifts.

The Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center was designed chiefly for the education of general public and school children. Other than an extensive photo archives and a collection of original newspaper and magazine articles, its holdings have limited use for sport historians, although its recent Negro leagues collection offers the beginning of research opportunities. Nevertheless, it is a pleasant place to visit and certainly is worth a look. Located twelve miles west of New York City and near major highways, the museum is easily accessible.

