

Halls of Fame in North America: Are They Relevant to the Sport Historian?

by

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Seventy years after the establishment of the Hall of Fame of Great Americans which did not include any sportsmen North Americans find themselves with a "Plethora of Shrines." The latest book on sports halls of fame covers 171 such institutions of which approximately one quarter that number have a building or display facility which can be visited. Most, however, keep a list of names in a person's home or office which is brought out once a year for the addition of new names to the Honour Roll.

The compulsion to honour sports greats and the sheer abundance of the number of halls of fame has brought these institutions into question. Many dwell in deepest obscurity and yet exist as tourist attractions. Their ability to function properly as museums has been called into question. Many of their collections fail to meet the basic criteria applied by more traditional museums.

The desire to honour sportsmen and make them godlike has been questioned. For the sports historian, there must be considerable concern that idealizations are being made of people thus possibly obscuring our ability to understand their real place in the development of sport. It would appear that the need to honour great individuals has taken precedence over the task of preserving our sports heritage.

Yet the men and women who run the sports halls of fame do not feel that these criticisms are necessarily problems. The appeal of halls of fame lies in the fact that they present history through the personalities who helped to form it. Man's development in sport is told through the means of the talented heroes who have been enshrined. This publicly appealing process, successful enough to attract millions of visitors each year, is justified not only because of our natural interest in people but also because of its ability to inspire people to appreciate the positive values to be found in sport. The hall of fame approach is justified for the morally didactic role they play as their contribution to sport development.

The author points out however that visitors to halls of fame will find more than shrines in which they will feel compelled to worship the sports heroes of the past. A survey was made of many of North America's major halls of fame. The survey included the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, the National Bowling Hall of Fame, four football halls of fame, the Hockey Hall of Fame, the World Golf Hall of Fame, three halls of fame devoted to birds, horses and dogs, and three multi-sport halls of fame.

In making the survey a review was made of selection procedures, types of displays, enshrinement areas and forms of sponsorship. Noting the establishment of the Association of Sport Museums and Halls of Fame, an organization encouraging more contact and co-operation between member institutions, it appears that among many of the halls of fame, a maturing process is underway. True, they are still primarily concerned with honouring individual achievement. However, many have developed separate museum areas for the display of artifacts and memorabilia relating to the general history of sport. Several, rather than remaining as static immovable collections, have instituted programs to take their story

directly to people through mobile displays, audio-visual shows or book publishing programs. Most have developed or are developing libraries with collections based on their sport for the serious sport researcher.

The sport historian may want to question their objectivity. The halls of fame view sport positively and the individuals they honour, they believe are to be admired. Many exist solely to promote a particular sport or the professional organization that sponsors them. Still they fill an important vital gap in the sports history field. With limited resources and personnel they are doing a creditable job in presenting the history of sport to the general public. They are not equipped as yet to undertake extensive objective histories of sport. That is not really their function. They are however quickly accumulating resources in which sports historians would be interested and which they may wish to investigate.