

Collector John Hamilton's Newport Sports Museum – a great 20 year run

Bulk of the museum collection to be sold

By George Vrechek



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END OF AN ERA
Newport Museum Closes,
Collection Being Sold



John Hamilton with George Vrechek

The Newport Sports Museum and the turnstile to enter

John Hamilton, founder of the Newport Sports Museum in Newport Beach, California, has decided that it is time: time to close the museum and sell the bulk of his wonderful collection of sports memorabilia. The news came in March that the first of four auctions would be conducted by SCP Auctions starting April 30 through May 17, 2014. The museum was no longer open to the public after March 17.

Four years ago I visited the museum (SCD June 11, 2010). I returned again in December 2013 to meet with Hamilton and had a great visit. The 8,000 square foot museum was still a well-maintained incredible array of Hamilton's sports collectibles. However following my visit several factors caused a reluctant change of heart. In March 2014 Hamilton described to me the museum closing like "having to put down a faithful old dog."

Break-in

A recent break-in by thieves was interrupted by the museum's security system, but not before they made off with several items from the museum lobby. Baseballs autographed by Mel Ott, seven U.S. Presidents, perfect game pitcher Don Larsen, perfect game pitcher Mike Witt of the Angels, and 500-home-run hitters were stolen. If anyone is approached to buy such baseballs, Hamilton and the Newport Beach police should be notified. The value of the items lost in this smash-and-grab theft exceeded \$100,000, according to Hamilton.

Decision to sell

The break-in was disturbing. Hamilton had also been concerned about what he would eventually do with the collection, and the continuing costs of staffing and maintaining a free museum. The break-in was likely the impetus to act. Hamilton, 72, felt that his own physical and financial health would be best served if he closed the museum and sold the collection rather than continuing to operate. Hamilton had beautifully maintained the museum and the collection and made it available to the public for 8 hours per day, 5 days per week at no charge. Seven years ago it was a home burglary that caused pioneer collector Lionel Carter to reluctantly decide it was time to sell his incredible card collection.

Hamilton has been instrumental in several organizations and charities involving at-risk youngsters who have benefited from museum programs. Hamilton had stated, "I think that it is important to not keep a 'Renoir' locked up in your house, when you can share it with the public, especially kids, at no charge....Our museum is just the platform or attraction for kids. Our real goal is to change lives, by teaching kids responsibility, honesty and conditioning, allowing them to influence their communities."

First of four auctions in May

The first phase of the auction in May will involve many of the baseball items in the museum and some of the basketball and hockey memorabilia. Subsequent auctions will cover the remainder of the collection.

The museum's hockey room leads into the football room.



I was fortunate to have seen most of the collection during my two visits. I was overwhelmed by what Hamilton had accumulated covering every major sport and every conceivable collectible except cards. You walked into the museum lobby and found baseballs signed by most Hall of Fame members. The following rooms had signed hockey, football, baseball, and basketball jerseys. Continue and you found footballs signed by every Heisman Trophy winner, golf clubs and bags used by U.S. presidents, *Sports Illustrated* magazines, trophies, stadium seats, photos, surf boards, curling stones, basketball shoes, programs, and tickets.

Autographed basketballs and shoes



TEAM		STANFORD										TOTAL	
TEAM	SCORE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
WOODS	367	365	732	380	1112	370	1482						
KRIBEL													
CHANG													
RAY													
GARCIA													
CRUM													

A leader board when Tiger Woods was at Stanford



One display featured the evolution of football uniforms and equipment.

Hamilton's office

Even Hamilton's office was like visiting a museum. Above me as I ascended the stairs to his office last December were several immaculate vintage bicycles mounted from brackets coming out of the walls. The receptionist's area had amusement park bumper cars in beautiful condition.

Behind his desk was a large print of the St. Andrew's club house. The mat surrounding the print was signed by all but two of the British Open winners since 1946. Glass cabinets contained a vast collection of Hamilton watches (no



relation). A restored Newport Beach gas station pump from a by-gone era fit nicely into a far corner next to a vintage jukebox. Hamilton quickly confessed that he was a sick man when it came to collecting, especially sports collecting.



Watch for flying bicycles overhead.

John Hamilton's office is like a museum in itself.



Range of sports and collectible interests

I will always remember my visit with Hamilton when he enthusiastically discussed sports and sports collectibles. We talked about Babe Ruth still being the best known athlete today, Babe Ruth's last at bat, the BCS and McArthur Bowl Trophies having been at the museum the prior week, Brooks Robinson's clavicle, this year's HOF inductees, Ronnie Lott's speaking ability, Ronald Reagan and George Bush's golf clubs, drinking out of the Stanley Cup last year, Chris Chelios, the Arizona/UCLA basketball game that night, halfback Jon Arnett's other talents as a track athlete and gymnast, Bill Nelson and Jim Brown of the Cleveland Browns, Jim Taylor of the Packers, the Billy Ripken card, and the McKeever twins Marlin and Mike. Names and details came to him quickly. He brought the collection to life with interesting stories involving the athletes and the items. He will miss seeing the items and reliving the memories associated with them.

The Grantland Rice National Championship Trophy





Ronald Reagan's golf clubs came to Hamilton directly from Nancy Reagan. Hamilton plans to return the clubs to her.



World Series winners' team autographed balls, several balls were lost due to a recent break-in

Footballs autographed by RG3, Cam Newton, and the other Heisman winners



Some of the items displayed in the museum will be returned to friends and athletes who provided them. A few items of personal sentimental value will be retained, like former L.A. Ram Jon Arnett's jersey #26 since Hamilton wore that number, his kids wore the number, and Arnett is a friend. However the bulk of the collection will be sold. It is so varied (except for cards) that there should be something that interests every collector.

Lott Impact Award

Hamilton is discontinuing the museum but not all of the programs that the museum foundation has created. The museum foundation has a panel of athlete-volunteers who demonstrate to at-risk youth the important role that sports had on their lives, including their educational achievements and experiences with drugs, alcohol and gangs. Ronnie Lott is one of those volunteers. Lott played at USC, which is particularly dear to Hamilton as the long-time chairman of the USC Athletic Hall of Fame. Lott played 14 years in the NFL and is in the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Hamilton co-founded an annual award program to recognize the college player that most exemplified Ronnie Lott as the best defensive player in the country. The founding board advisors included Bill Walsh, Jack Kemp, and Frank Gifford. Hamilton has been board chairman. The board settled on the idea that the award should be based 50/50 on ability and character. The 50% character component considers the player's scholastic achievement, his off-field behavior, and his service to the community. The award is now 10 years old. Past recipients include J.J. Watts, DeMeco Ryans, Manti Te'o, and Luke Kuechly. Condeliza Rice presented the award last year. Fox Sports and Mercedes Benz are among those involved in sponsorship of this award and the related gifts to charities benefited by the award.

You could sit in seats from many old ball parks.

Seriously fun

The impression I had of Hamilton when I visited with him was that while he was a dedicated collector, that this was not a serious endeavor. By that I mean that he was collecting for fun and enjoying it. He even had a small basketball court in the middle of the museum complete with perfectly inflated balls you could use to shoot hoops. I told Hamilton that I really enjoyed flailing away taking shots in the small gym.



Hamilton collected this museum full of memorabilia because he enjoyed collecting, and he liked to see the positive results from the charitable programs he started. He told me he wasn't thinking of how much things would be worth. But, like many collectors, he felt the time had come. The collection will enter the hobby. Buyers should keep in mind the man behind the memorabilia and the serious fun he had in putting it all together.

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