



The Sports Museum of Los Angeles



One of the Wonders of the Collecting World

By George Vrechek

Saying that Gary Cypres has acquired a few sports collectibles is like saying that Tony Bennett has sung a few songs, or that Arnold Palmer has played golf a few times. Los Angeles businessman Gary Cypres, 70, has a 46,000 square foot building that houses his sports collectibles. He jokingly describes himself as a “massive volume collector.” The building is called the Sports Museum of Los Angeles.

While the museum is now private, Cypres has loaned several hundred artifacts for display to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. The 12,000 square foot library exhibit, called “Baseball! The Exhibition,” links Cypres’s collection with items from Ronald Reagan’s sports broadcasting career. The exhibition runs through September 4, 2014.

Museum opened and closed to the public

When I learned of Cypres’s museum six years ago, I knew I had to see it. By the time I planned my first visit I had missed my window of opportunity. Publicity was plentiful in 2008 when Cypres announced his museum would be open daily to the public. A few months later there was an announcement that the museum would no longer be available to the general public. Cypres decided that the cost of security, insurance, and operating personnel outweighed the potential revenue. The museum would be private but open for charity and other group events upon appointment. Website information about the museum remained static. A 2013 *New York Times* article about Cypres’s collection gave me the impression that the museum idea had been mothballed.

Gary Cypres, right, with George Vrechek



Gary Cypres's tour for SCD

I was happy to get a response from Cypres a few months ago that the museum was available for a special SCD tour. The museum is located in an older industrial area near the expanding downtown business and residential districts and a mile from the Staples Center where the Lakers and Kings play. The museum is prominent, well-maintained, and has ample parking just outside the front door. The surrounding high fence and security gate remind you that the area is still evolving. Gary Cypres greeted me at the door. For a sports memorabilia collector the next few hours were like seeing one of the Seven Wonders of the Collecting World – if there were such things. I saw just about everything except any mothballs. What an experience!

Cypres eventually followed New York teams to Los Angeles

Cypres explained that he grew up in the Bronx as a Yankees fan but also followed the Dodgers and Giants. He played basketball for Hofstra University and later worked in New York City as a CPA with Arthur Andersen & Co. He then served as a corporate CFO, moved into investment banking, and finally his own very successful businesses. In the process he moved from New York to New England and by 1990 to Los Angeles. Mom threw out his cards, but he resumed collecting as an adult, when his five children came along. He decided that what he really liked was the application of American folk art to sports collectibles, particularly early baseball items. He was more interested in several examples of a product or issue as opposed to having every card in a set or having cards in the finest condition. Success in the business world gave him the opportunity in the late 1980s to really get going, collecting items that interested him. He became a massive volume collector, especially with respect to Dodgers memorabilia.

Where to hang this?

Many items were best appreciated by hanging them on a wall. Other collectors have had the experience of running out of wall space and having spouses who envision other uses of walls than displaying sports memorabilia. Cypres concluded he needed a good-sized building to display his collection, and he happened to already own such a building in Los Angeles. The building is slightly larger than the Basketball Hall of Fame and about 60% as big as the Baseball Hall of Fame. The museum proper is 32,000 square feet, but there is another 14,000 square feet of offices on the second floor decorated with many additional items and providing storage for collectibles not currently on display.



Everything is well-organized and beautifully displayed in this private historical museum of baseball collectibles.

Museum overview

The entire museum is well lit with high ceilings and ample room to maneuver. The entry is dominated by paintings purchased from the Chicago car dealership owned by White Sox player Tony Piet (1906-1981). Piet commissioned large paintings of 25 of the major members of the Baseball Hall of Fame. These unique pieces decorated Piet's dealership and now set an initial tone for Cypres's museum. Ruth, Gehrig, Cobb, and the rest of the gang look down upon the visitor.

Cypres's familiarity with every detail enabled him to walk through without lingering on each item. My unfamiliarity with the museum caused me to barely move as I tried to grasp everything that came into view. After a few minutes touring the museum with my very gracious host, I asked him how they ever got collectors back out the door once they got in. Cypres was on the same page and joked that they would throw them out, eventually.

One museum gallery has everything you want to know about Jackie Robinson, the next gallery features the Yankees. There are galleries for the Giants, early baseball, and baseball cards: T206s, Old Judges, Topps and Bowmans, Goudeys, Diamond Stars, Exhibits, other tobacco cards, and trade cards. The T206 Wagner is in the building. Continue and you find everything well-organized and explained such as bobble heads, Negro League items, large models of ballparks, newspaper clippings, photos, football equipment, balls, uniforms, jackets, stadium seats, hockey pucks, movie posters, old bicycles, golf clubs, baseball board games, and baseball pinball machines. It is almost impossible to describe.

I asked Cypres for an estimate for the value of the collection. He feels that it is hard to really know until you sell an item, but he believed a reasonable estimate would be above \$20 million. I'll do my best to walk you through the museum.



Jerseys and jackets are part of the Dodgers gallery.

Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers

One of the first galleries contains enough items featuring Jackie Robinson that the crew for the Jackie Robinson movie "42" used the room to host the publicity events. Robinson game-worn jerseys are displayed along with cards, bats, and photos. Framed pages from 1947 newspapers describe reactions around the league when Robinson made his debut and when he was harassed on his first trip to Philadelphia.

The adjacent Dodgers gallery contains a large scale model of Ebbets Field. Blue prints of Ebbets Field are mounted on a wall. Uniforms worn by Leo Durocher are displayed. There are special satin Dodgers uniforms from the early 1940s. Babe Ruth coached for the Dodgers in 1938. His Dodgers uniform with the tag "Babe Ruth" on the inside collar is in a case. His Brooklyn cap is in another plastic case.

Cypres described some of the myriad of Dodgers items, "I have the Dodgers acceptance letter to the National League in 1889; the first ball thrown out in Ebbets Field; the deed to Ebbets Field; the massive bronze plaque which hung in the marble roundabout; an Ebbets Field turnstile; the Dodgers Sym-Phony drum; Dazzy Vance's MVP trophy; Newcombe's MVP, Cy Young, and Rookie of the Year awards; the first Gold Glove in 1957 to Gil Hodges; Robinson's 1952 jersey and game used bats; and so on."



Note the patch for the 1939 World's Fair on the Dodgers jersey worn by Coach Babe Ruth in 1938. (left)
The 1869 Red Stockings (right)

Tobacco insert cards from the late 1800s are displayed with an Old Judge advertising poster.



Cards of the non-card collector

Across the hall are two galleries containing baseball cards. You can find one of the earliest known cards in its own case, the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings Peck and Snyder trade card. Old Judges and other 19th century tobacco and trade cards are in plastic sleeves, clipped to a frame, and organized in cases hung on the walls. T206s are mounted in several cases as well as T201s, T202s, T205s, T218s, early candy cards, strip cards, Goudeys, Diamond Stars, Play Balls, Red Mans, and Wheaties panels. Most cards are ungraded, but in very nice condition. The graded cards are generally at least PSA 6s, although Cypres said he wasn't overly condition conscious and couldn't get revved up over slight differences to achieve the highest grades. I didn't notice any of the obscure issues from the pre-war era or any interest in variations. No particular effort had been made to necessarily acquire and display complete sets. He has also obtained advertising posters for baseball tobacco and gum cards, unopened boxes, and uncut sheets. He enjoys the artwork associated with such items.

A wall with T206s



A second room features Bowmans and Topps from 1948 to the mid-50s. Several cards are autographed. I asked Cypres what were the first cards that he collected. He really didn't remember, but guessed they were probably Bowmans and Topps from the early 1950s. He had not fallen in love with the specific pieces of cardboard from his childhood, but liked everything from the era before cards got to be too much like photographs.



1953 Topps with Mantle in the middle

One of two rooms of cards contains probably 20 times the number of cards normally displayed by the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art from Jefferson Burdick's collection. Burdick had 306,353 cards. Cypres said he had no idea how many cards he owns.

Conlon photos

The main hallway through the museum has hundreds of prints made from photographer Charles Martin Conlon's (1868-1945) glass negatives. Ruths, Gehrigs, and Cobbs share wall space with regular players from the era with their rumpled uniforms exhibiting dirt from contests from 70 to 100+ years ago.

Yankees gallery

The gallery for the New York Yankees has uniforms, balls, photos, and stadium artifacts. There are several 12 inch trophies given to team members commemorating World Series Championships. Cypres has acquired similar World Series trophies from Dodgers and Giants displayed in other galleries. Balls from DiMaggio's hitting streak were acquired from the DiMaggio estate and include the balls that were hit to tie and break the record in games #45 and #46. Cypres also acquired the ball caught by Ken Keltner to

stop the streak in game #57. Two large ink drawings of Mickey Mantle from the front and back caught my eye, drawn in fantastic, unbelievable detail. The drawings look better than photographs exhibiting every fold, muscle, and freckle. The room isn't saturated with Babe Ruth items since Babe has his own gallery in the museum.

The LA Dodgers and Giants

The Los Angeles Dodgers gallery contains representative cards from their 1958 arrival through recent years along with World Series items, programs, balls, uniforms, photos, and bobble heads. Koufax, Drysdale, Valenzuela, and others are featured in displays. A huge stadium flag commemorating the 1952 Dodgers National League Championship is pinned to a wall leading to the restroom.

The Giants have a gallery with scale models of the Polo Grounds, uniforms, bats, balls, and photos continuing through their move to San Francisco. The ball Barry Bonds hit to tie Aaron's record of 755 home runs is displayed in a case.



A colorful mural of boxing matches was rescued from an amusement park booth.

Other galleries

The most colorful gallery contains large murals featuring prize fighters displayed at the entrance to an amusement park booth. Here you can see how the combination of American folk art and sports collectibles attract Cypres. A dozen bicycles from various eras going back to the 1860s fill a room. Mechanical players from an old amusement park include a pitcher, catcher, and batter who could be operated to throw and hit baseballs. The old baseballs needed for such an exercise are in a large tray

between the nearly life-sized players. Bruce "Boo" Smith's 1941 Heisman trophy is there as well as various baseball MVP trophies. There are 30 galleries in the museum; many have descriptions like "How early XXX began" and cover the history of sports or teams.



Mechanical players are ready to bat the balls.



Baseball uniforms and jackets are displayed.



Cypres also collects posters for sports-themed movies.

Babe Ruth's raccoon coat



On the second floor are large movie posters of what seemed to be every conceivable sports movie ever made. Many of the posters have been restored to remove folds. Cypres observed that restoration in the art world is almost expected while card restoration evokes considerable debate. (His wife collects art which adorns their home, since he has his own building for displaying sports collectibles.) There are

hockey pucks, old French tennis racquets, basketball cards, players in cigarette ads, footballs, old football helmets and pads, quilts with baseball players, and thousands of other items. I took 200 photos. I would have taken more, but I wanted to get home that day.

The Babe's room

My favorite room in the museum is the Babe Ruth gallery. A raccoon fur coat worn by Ruth is in its own case. Ruth's shotgun is there. Many well-known photos of Ruth are exhibited including Ruth as a three-year old, as a newcomer to St. Mary's Industrial School for Boys, as a star player for the school, working with his dad as a bartender in the family-run Baltimore bar, and Conlon photos of Ruth hitting or posing with players and fans. I especially liked the photos of Ruth obtained from newspaper photo files which included many images that I had never seen. It didn't look like Ruth ever dodged the paparazzi of the day and was glad to be photographed with the silliest of props. Ruth was shown with women, kids, horses, and even a chimpanzee. Photographs of Ruth show him in his early days, in his prime before a packed house, as a Brave with few fans in the stands, in his post-baseball years, and finally ravaged by cancer. Ruth's mother died at 39, his dad at 47, and Babe at 53. Yellowed notepaper captions are attached to the photos and reflect the over-stated newspaper language of the day.

Interesting photos of Ruth



One display case described as "Babe's Travel Trunk" is dedicated to Ruth memorabilia from his 1934-5 tour of Japan with other major leaguers. His trunk is there along with his robe. There is also a photo book about the tour that was produced shortly afterwards as well as a sheet of 1950 Japanese baseball cards featuring Japanese players and also one card of Ruth described as the joker.



Memorabilia and displays are on every wall.

Collecting with a museum philosophy

Cypres explained that when he decided to house the collection in a museum, it altered his approach to selecting future collectibles. He started to differentiate about how an item would display, how it might fit in with other items, and how he would explain the item to others. Each major item in the museum is accompanied by a wall-mounted text explaining the item and in many cases educating the non-collector on the background behind an item. The items reflect sports history and the texts celebrate that history.

Cypres is not focused on having complete sets but enjoys looking at a broad spectrum, the big picture. He said he didn't really have a want list and wasn't sure of whether or not he had complete sets of certain issues. For example, he did not have 1952 Topps high numbers or every T206, but he had most of the T206s and the Wagner plus high grade Mantle and May cards. He claimed he "was never a card guy," although it looked like his card collection isn't too far short of those assembled by hobby pioneers like Lionel Carter.

A vigilant bidder

Cypres started collecting relatively late in life for a major collector. He didn't have the advantage of buying items before the 1980s and has had to outbid many other collectors in the open market for items he has wanted. He continues to remain active in acquiring collectibles. He usually buys items through auction houses, although some items will be offered to him directly. He bought items from the estates of several players. He has sold very little of his collection at this point. He acknowledges, however, that eventually the collection will go on the market.

He is well aware of instances of fraud in the hobby and is particularly vigilant in investigating the authenticity of an item. He feels recent investigations by the FBI are positive influences to reduce future hobby fraud. However, he is philosophical about being unable to guarantee that everything you purchase is genuine. Even with letters of authenticity and grading, you may not be 100% certain, but Cypres likens the situation to retail establishments that suffer shrinkage or theft. It is part of the process. You are going to have some items that aren't what they are supposed to be, but with vigilance you can minimize such losses.



Other images from the museum visit

Cypres is the principal curator for the museum, a true Wonder of the Collecting World. He likes seeing the items every day he is in the building and continues to expand and display the collection. He is not

only an uber-collector but very knowledgeable about sports history. There are likely collections with more items in a particular category, but it would be hard to imagine a vintage collection with as many visually appealing items as those found here.

The Sports Museum of Los Angeles is a private museum open only by special appointment. The museum is at 1900 S. Main Street, Los Angeles, California 90007. Occasionally, Cypres has loaned parts of the collection for display elsewhere such as the current exhibit at the Reagan Library which is well worth a visit. The museum website is: <http://www.sportsmuseumla.com/>.

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