

The Home Forum.

Dribbling through the hall of fame

YOU'VE got the basketball. Seven-footer Ha-keem Olajuwon, arms outstretched, is looking to block your shot. Can you score? Maybe. After all, this Olajuwon is only a life-size cutout of the real superstar; one of the best big men in basketball history. If you miss, no championship is lost.

This is just one of many skill challenges and playing opportunities at the new Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass.

Visitors aren't just spectators here, limited to viewing glass-encased exhibits. They're encouraged to work up a sweat, since that's what young basketball players love to do when given a hoop - any hoop - to shoot at.

From the outside, the new building resembles a huge silver basketball. In fact, when the building is pictured on a postcard, you hardly need to read the fine print to guess its purpose. That's part of the idea. Naturally, it doesn't hurt that there's a spire 15 stories tall by the entrance with a large fiberglass basketball perched on top.

Inside, the hall is a glorified gym. A beautiful full-size court serves as the centerpiece around which two floors of exhibit space are located. At the edge of the court are numerous baskets, some at graduated heights for younger players, and some with old-fashioned backboards and rims.

There's even a peach basket similar to those used to launch the sport in 1891.

It's common to hear basketballs being dribbled and sneakers squeaking here. Kids and their parents, perhaps inspired by the many displays and videos, can't resist getting into action, it seems. What few visitors realize is that right beneath their feet is a basement full of basketball memorabilia. The collection includes 800 basketballs, 4,000 jerseys, and more than 40,000 photographs.

THE COLLECTION INCLUDES 800 BASKETBALLS, 4,000 JERSEYS - AND A CUSTOM-BUILT RACE CAR.

There's more, including a card collection worth \$250,000 and a custom-built race car that belonged to Hall-of-Famer Wilt Chamberlain.

It is the storehouse of basketball history, the home of the largest such collection on earth. Individual collectors might privately show off what they

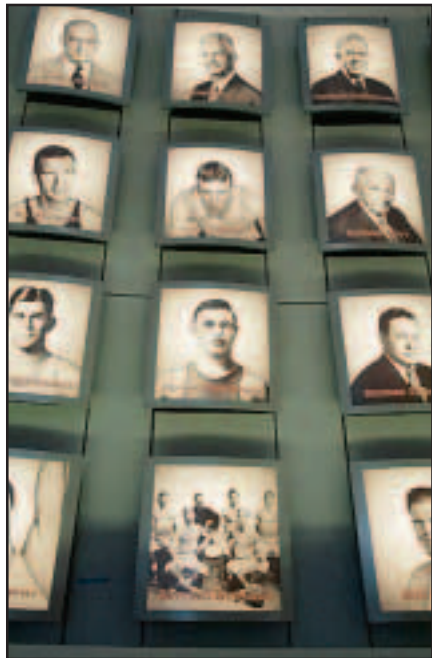
own, but the Hall of Fame takes seriously its responsibility to display as much as possible to the public.

The new hall sits on an interstate highway and is far larger than either of the hall's two previous homes in basketball's birthplace of Springfield, Mass.

Space alone, however, won't entice an anticipated 350,000 people a year to visit. That takes finding neat ways to tell the story of basketball and its great players, 251 of whom have been inducted since the original hall opened in 1968.

R.A.

■ *The Basketball Hall of Fame is happy to field questions from students. Go to: www.hoophall.com/library/library_form.htm Or write: Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame, 1000 West Columbus Ave., Springfield, Mass., 01105. Allow four weeks for a reply.*



PHOTOS BY MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN - STAFF

GLORIOUS GYM: The Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield, Mass., recently moved into a strikingly modern building. The new digs encourage interaction - visitors may test their reaction time or play on a court where 251 Hall of Famers (left and above) look down on them. The center court also hosts autograph sessions and lectures.

BASKETBALL HALL OF FAME

Where visitors can 'hoop' it up



BASKETBALL is so popular, fast-paced, and global that it deserves a popular, fast-paced Hall of Fame, too. So last fall, the museum that honors basketball's greatest players moved out of its gray, boxy home in

downtown Springfield, Mass., and into a strikingly modern building.

The architects who designed the spherical exterior wanted the inside to be just as dynamic. They recommended that the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame hire, not traditional museum designers, but a company that designs sets for Broadway shows. The idea was to create a "theater" of basketball history.

Play under the stars

The most dramatic element is the domed ceiling. Rows of Hall-of-Famer photos create a halo-like ring in the basketball heavens. They peer down upon a full-size basketball court that is the centerpiece and grand concourse for the \$45 million museum.

John Doleva, president of the Basketball Hall of

Fame, says the goal is to immerse visitors in learning about and experiencing the game. They are encouraged to grab a ball, get out on the museum's court, and break a sweat if they're inspired to try to emulate their heroes.

Today's museums, Mr. Doleva says, are about "edu-tainment," combining education and entertainment. Entertainment is important in a world where museums compete with TV, the Internet, and video games.

Planning the museum took a long time. A committee of a dozen basketball people hammered out the details over 18 months in meetings with designers and engineers.

The planners studied other mu-

seums, including two in Washington, D.C. For tips on using interactive electronic equipment, they looked at the Newseum, a news museum. For inspiration on how to craft exhibits with impact, they went to the Holocaust Museum. Committee members also experienced the reverential atmosphere at other sports museums. Visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., "was like walking into a church," Doleva says.

Travel through basketball history

Basketball fans were also consulted in small groups. They were especially keen on being mentally transported back to different eras in basketball history.

So the game's early history is chronicled in a gallery that resembles the college gym in which basketball was first played. Next door, a marquee conjures up the electric atmosphere of games in New York's Madison Square Garden in the 1950s.

Scattered throughout the exhibit areas are interactive displays and skills challenges. After learning about the game's great players, for example, visitors can test their own re-



HOME OF THE DOME: The ball-shaped museum and spire (with basketball on top) convey the building's purpose.

Continued on next page

Why the goals aren't square

BASKETBALL with square baskets. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But it almost happened.

In 1891, when James Naismith set about creating a new game at the YMCA Training School in Springfield, Mass., he asked the janitor for two 18-inch-square boxes to use as goals. The janitor suggested half-bushel peach baskets instead. Round ball, round basket. It made sense.

An instructor at what today is Springfield College, Dr. Naismith wanted to create an indoor game that would break the boredom of winter physical education classes that were heavy on calisthenics. He tried various things, including forms of tag, but eventually hit on the idea of combining elements of soccer, lacrosse, football, rugby, and a game he played as a boy in Canada called Duck on a Rock.

The goals were positioned high enough to require tossing, rather than throwing, the ball (a soccer ball, originally) into the goal. Baskets were nailed to a track suspended 10 feet above the gym. They have remained at that height ever since.

Someone had to retrieve the ball each time a basket was scored, but that did not happen often. Even in 1936, the Olympic gold-medal game was a low-scoring affair in which the United States beat Canada, 19-8.

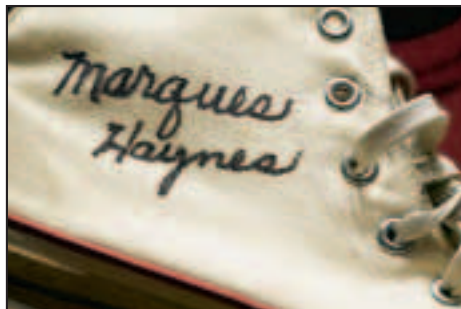
To prevent interference

by spectators, backboards were introduced in the late 1890s, first made of wood and later from fan-friendly glass. At about the same time, metal rims and cord netting began to replace wooden baskets.

At first, dribbling wasn't allowed. The restriction was slowly lifted and dribbling became a major means of moving the ball.

This helped basketball become an exciting game, but one less rough (by design) than sports in which players carried the ball. Even so, the original game was rougher than desired because there were nine players on a side. Naismith simply wanted all 18 of his students playing at once. (Five was the standard by 1905.)

R.A.



ARTIFACTS: Harlem Globetrotter Marques Haynes signed his shoe (top). The 1996 NCAA women's champion Tennessee Vols team autographed a ball.

Continued from previous page

bounding or reaction time.

Besides having the hall be an active and reverent place, designers wanted it to accommodate a variety of events. The center court can host autograph sessions, lectures, business meetings, and pickup games.

The Springfield Spirit, a women's pro team, holds practices there on Tuesday nights. Kids are invited onto the court to meet players and hone skills.

Reasons to keep visiting

This is called "programming," and it is seen as critical to a museum's success. Museums want people to visit, not just once every few years, but several times a year. To accomplish that, there must be something new to see or do. Changing gallery displays is expensive and time-consuming. Bringing in guest speakers, changing videos, and offering clinics are inexpensive, simple ways to keep things fresh.

Matt Zeysing is the museum's assistant curator. He was an ordinary athlete growing up, but he loved basketball and decided he wanted to work at the Basketball Hall of Fame. He studied history at the University of Kansas, a basketball hotbed, and then earned a graduate degree in museum studies.

Mr. Zeysing does research, catalogs artifacts, and works to preserve the collection. He also helps acquire and select artifacts – all while wearing basketball sneakers.

Like a detective, Zeysing has to be careful how he handles objects, lest he leave fingerprints. Oily fingerprints can damage old trophies and such. "We've got stuff that's over 100 years old," he says, "and we want it to be in good condition 200 years from now."

Everything is treated as though it were fine china. Zeysing wears white cotton gloves when he picks up anything, even an old basketball. One current project is photocopying fragile paper items. That way, the original doesn't have to be handled. Researchers can use the copies instead.

The Hall of Fame doesn't buy artifacts. They depend on people's donations. Fortunately, many colleges, players, and leagues have been generous. Players like the idea of sharing souvenirs that highlight their accomplishments.

The hall cannot possibly put everything on display – just 1,200 or so items make the cut. Some donations are politely declined. And curators never make promises about when, how, or if a donation will be used.

Ross Atkin