



TELLING THE STORY of Pittsburgh Sports

By Anne Madarasz, Chief Curator/
Director, Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA
SPORTS MUSEUM

In the months leading up to the opening of the Sports Museum, the Historical Society nominated and dedicated a number of official state historical markers related to sports history in the region. At the close of the ceremony for the marker that commemorated Johnny Unitas and the Bloomfield Rams, I stopped to talk with Jocko Rice, a former semi-pro football player. He mentioned that this was the first time he had seen Al Mitchell (a teammate of Unitas on the Bloomfield Rams) in 50 years. Rice said to me, "You know, those were some of the best times. Hanging out in the locker room ... the laughs we shared." Rice looked at

Courtesy Tom Quailers



The glove of the great Negro League ball player, Satchel Paige.

Opposite page:
A sampling of the Sports Museum's collection of local sports material.



HSWP Museum collection

Lifelong Pittsburgher Betty Jane Cornett played 1950 and 1951 for the Rockford Peaches, Springfield Sallies, Battle Creek Belles, and Kalamazoo Lassies.

An early plaque listing the Yellow Jackets' roster.



Courtesy Glenn Barton

me and said softly, "Sometimes I sit all alone in my basement rec room and I think about those days. And I reach up and I find I got tears running down my cheeks."

There are moments in the life of an exhibit that define its development – the ah-ha moment when you have a creative or conceptual breakthrough, the first time you step into the new space and think, wow, this just might work, and most importantly, the moment when someone who holds a treasured piece of the past makes the leap of faith and trusts you with their story. The team that put together this exhibit has been challenged by its size and its demands, but also privileged to have had many such moments while

researching and collecting for the exhibit.

These moments have occurred in a myriad of places – at kitchen tables, in basement rec rooms, and in darkened attics, sheds, or garages across the region – as History Center curators reached out to the community to find the treasures that would tell the story of sport in the region. The major challenge we faced when we began planning the Sports Museum was finding the stuff. Unlike most major exhibit projects, the Historical Society had almost no objects, photographs, or archival collections when we started developing this story, and we had a big space to fill. Our first task was to develop a strategy for collecting that would enable us to successfully

OUR FIRST TASK WAS TO DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR COLLECTING THAT WOULD ENABLE US TO SUCCESSFULLY REACH OUT AND SECURE ICONIC OBJECTS THAT REPRESENTED SOME OF THE DEFINING HISTORIC MOMENTS IN SPORT.



Pete Dimperio's 1954 City Championship jacket from Westinghouse High School.

reach out and secure iconic objects that represented some of the defining historic moments in sport.

To aid us in the development of the project the institution put together the Champions Committee, a group of athletes, journalists, historians, and individuals with a connection to the world of sports and sports history. At the same time, the curatorial team began proactively collecting in the community using our website, some general calls for objects through the media, and, most importantly, personal contacts. It was my belief that if we built a solid collection of objects related to community sport – sandlot, semi-pro, and industrial teams, high school and amateur athletes – we would not only build a base of important and exciting stories for the exhibit, but would also have collections that would allow us to paint a very real, credible, and exciting picture of what the exhibit would be about.

Some key objects came into the collection early on. Rob Ruck, a sports historian from the University of Pittsburgh, shared with me a newspaper article from the time of Ted Williams' death. In the article, which focused

on Williams and his love of fishing, was a breakout story on Satchel Paige, the famed Negro League pitcher. The article mentioned that Tom Qualters, a former teammate of Paige's when both played for the Miami Marlins, owned a Satchel Paige glove. I tracked Qualters down in Somerset County, where he now lives, sent him a letter detailing the project, and hoped for the best. Several weeks later I had the chance to sit at his kitchen table and listen as he talked about his days playing baseball and his friendship with Paige. There on the table between us sat the glove. Negro League artifacts are extremely rare and highly collectible – we had hoped to maybe find one or two for the exhibit. We now have on display the glove of a Hall of Fame pitcher, considered one of the greatest players of all time.

Another member of the Champions Committee, Bob Grove, took a particular interest in the project, especially in developing the section of the exhibit that deals with early hockey history. Grove has covered the Penguins as a newspaper journalist and authored an official history of the team's first 30 years. While researching for that book, he uncovered the story of hockey in the pre-Penguins

years. Grove, who felt that the public would be surprised to know that Pittsburgh had a history of hockey that dated to the 1890s, assisted us in locating and securing objects that detail the story of early teams such as the Pirates, Yellow Jackets, and the Hornets. We visited an acquaintance of Bob's, Glenn Barton, who had been a long-time Hornets fan and had actively collected material from the team. Hanging in his garage was a series of painted wooden plaques from Duquesne Gardens, the original home of hockey in the city. The plaques listed the team rosters by year and dated to 1936. Two, including the plaque from the Yellow Jackets team that year, now hang in the Museum. Barton also had a red and white wool sweater worn by a player in the 1940s and a gold and black sweater and pants from Hornets player Willie Marshall – they are also now on display.

At the same time the Champions Committee was reaching out and developing connections to the stories of the past, History Center curators were researching and developing leads. In reviewing my files, I found a letter that had been sent to former Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania president, John Herbst shortly after the History Center



Gift of Anna Mae Gorman Lindberg

Competing in the 1936 Olympics were Lenore Kight (far right) and Anna Mae Gorman (second from right), winner of a silver medal. Gorman honed her swimming skills at the Carnegie Library of Homestead.



Morningside Bulldogs' pennants.

opened in 1996. It came from Peg Dimperio, one of our docents, and talked about her father's coaching career at Westinghouse. As I was collecting the material for high school football, I contacted Peg. She and her brother, Pete, met with me at Peg's house, once their parent's home. We visited at the dining room table and I told them of the plans to hang a wall of high school letter jackets at the entry to the Friday Night Football area. Peg stood and went to the hall closet. There encased in a dry cleaning bag was Pete Dimperio's 1954 City Championship jacket from Westinghouse High School. It now hangs in the Museum.

We followed up on other old leads. In the 1980s, the Historical Society mounted an exhibit on the town of Homestead. Anna Mae Gorman Lindberg shared her 1932 Olympic bathing suit for that exhibit; we used it again in our *What We Wore* exhibition at the History Center. While researching the Homestead Olympic swimmers, I decided to contact Anna Mae and other swimmers or their families if we could locate addresses. Anna Mae was easy to find – she still lives in Homestead and swims at the library pool several times a week. I made an appointment

to see her and interview her about her experiences. The Sports Museum project included an oral history component. We wanted to interview and retain the memories of people involved in the world of sport, both so we could use their words in the exhibit and to have the benefit of their perspective in telling the story.

Anna Mae agreed to meet with my intern Dana Driscoll and me. We went to her home where she showed us the medals earned in a career of swimming, both by Anna Mae and by her husband Russ Lindberg. She talked at length in a taped interview about her life and about swimming. Near the end of the interview I asked her about her most memorable moment in her sports career. Anna Mae replied, "I remember when they made the announcements...the two alternates for the Olympic team. When they read my name I can still remember losing my breath." This quote now introduces her in the Museum.

The search for images took us to archives around the region and beyond. We relied on a number of partners in our search. Patti Mistick and Dave Arrigo at the Pittsburgh Pirates, Lynne Molyneaux and Mike Fabus at the Steelers, and Tom McMillan and Barb

Pilarski at the Penguins all made sure we had access to some of the iconic images from their respective team histories. One of our most fruitful relationships has been with the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* archives. With total access to the newspaper's archives and guided by archivist Angelika Kane, we have culled over 200 images to illustrate stories from the past, as well as more recent history.

While these many long-standing relationships and partnerships have been invaluable in curating this exhibit, many of the stories in the Sports Museum and the objects that illustrate them were collected from people with whom the History Center had no previous association. Billy Conn's boxing gloves, the Chuck Cooper All-American basketball uniform, the Morningside Bulldog jacket and balls – these objects and many others required us to build a relationship with the community and individuals and hope that they would trust in our vision of the Sports Museum and the stories it would tell. Many people did – they opened the doors of their homes and the doors to the past and let us walk through. This exhibit is a testament to their faith. 🌟