

Westcott: Save the Mickey Vernon Museum

By Rich Westcott, Times Guest Columnist

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Walk into the Mickey Vernon Museum at the Granite Run Mall and you are hit immediately with an amazing collection of memorabilia that celebrates Delaware County's extensive sports history.

The focal point of the museum, of course, is its namesake, Mickey Vernon, the finest baseball player ever to come out of the county and a two-time American League batting champion. The Marcus Hook native's storied big league career, as well as other significant parts of his life, are vividly commemorated with special exhibits throughout the museum.

A considerable amount of space also is devoted to Chester's Danny Murtaugh, a fine player and later an outstanding manager, who won two World Series with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

A visitor also can spot a trophy, pictures and a uniform belonging to Geoff Petrie, the former Princeton star and NBA co-rookie of the year in 1972. Then there's a section that pays tribute to Bo Ryan and his 2007 award as Division One Coach of the Year at Wisconsin. Jack Klotz's New York Jets uniform resides at the museum, as does Mike Scioscia's uniform from the 2002 Los Angeles Angels World Series champions that he managed.

There a football signed by Heisman Trophy winner John Cappelletti, Granny Lash's Harlem Globetrotters jersey, Augie Pantellas' boxing gloves, and the hockey and lacrosse sticks that were used by Gertrude Dunn and Alice Willetts, the only two women in the nation ever to earn places as All-Americans in both sports. And there are special tributes to numerous others, including Billy (White Shoes) Johnson, Jack Ramsay, Kia Davis, Dick Christy, Lew Krassue Jr., Rene Portland, Al Atkinson, and Bob Rigby, all noteworthy performers from various sports.

These are just a few of the items in the very special collection in the store that houses the museum.

Pictures, trophies, plaques and uniforms fill virtually every space in the large room. There is also a collection of books written by local authors. A history of the Delco Baseball League with pictures, scorecards, and even ticket stubs is displayed. And newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, letters, award certificates, and many other precious items are featured throughout the area. All have a part in helping to proclaim Delaware County as one of the greatest sports areas in the country.

The idea for the museum had its origin back in 2002 when a collection of items relating to county sports,

including an extensive tribute to Chester High School basketball teams, was assembled by local sports activists Harry Chaykun, Joe Cirilli, Rich Pagano and Jim Vankoski, and displayed at a bank in Chester. The exhibit was closed after two years. Then, in 2005, the material became part of a new Mickey Vernon Museum at the Delaware County Conference and Visitors Center in Chadds Ford.

“We were trying to celebrate the achievements of all our great athletes, both natives and ones like Paul Arizin who lived here for 50 years or more,” said Vankoski, the curator of the museum. “Sports is such a big part of Delaware County history, dating back before the Civil War, and we have had so many great athletes that when we put it all together in one place, it was just amazing. There are more than 3,000 counties in the United States and I don’t think any more than five have museums like ours.”

In Chadds Ford, the museum was a little too far off the beaten track to attract many visitors. When the building was sold in 2013, Center director Tore Fiore helped the museum relocate to Granite Run, where it became extremely visible and fourished.

According to Vankoski, the museum at the mall initially attracted an average of 600 visitors each month. In a little more than one year, some 9,000 different people stopped in to have a look. Tere were more than 10,000 hits on the museum’s web site.

Many visitors have been past and present players and coaches. Others were fans of the county’s enormous sports history. It is a history that has made a huge difference in the lives of many of the county’s most successful athletes.

“The rich tradition of athletics in Delaware County inspired me to strive to excel in sports,” Scioscia summarized. “Delaware County is among the most prestigious athletic areas in our country.”

Over the years, the museum has featured numerous special events ranging from celebrity visits, autograph and book signings, lectures and special monthly displays. In recent months, the museum has had special exhibits, commemorating the county’s Olympic performers, top women athletes, and local boxers.

Ex-Phillies manager Dallas Green appeared recently at a book-signing and sold all the books he’d brought with him. Racecar driver Dave Donohue, son of the late Mark Donohue, and pro golfer Ed Dougherty were also popular guests in the last year.

It all is coming to an end. On March 7, the museum will close in anticipation of the ultimate destruction of the mall. Thousands of special items that are dear to the hearts of the county’s remarkable sports population and its history will be packed up in boxes and stored away.

There is no new museum site on the horizon. And that is a colossal shame. The Mickey Vernon Museum has been a tremendous asset to the county, not just as a sports shrine, but as a place that ably showcases what is perhaps the county’s most successful product.

Hopefully, someone will come along who can help find a way to keep this magnificent museum alive.

Rich Westcott is sports writer and historian and the author of 24 books, including. Mickey Vernon – The Gentleman First Baseman. He once wrote sports for the Daily Times.

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