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JOEL PLATT
The Dream That
Inspired a \$150 Million
Sports Collection



JOEL PLATT *and his Dream*

INSPIRED BY A BOYHOOD VISION, REAL ESTATE DEVELOPER'S 'SPORTS IMMORTALS' MUSEUM IS ASTONISHINGLY INCOMPARABLE

Story by Ana Veciana-Suarez • Portrait by Joshua Prezant



Collection

Joel Platt with his son Jim at the Sports Immortals Showcase Museum and Memorabilia Mart in Boca Raton, Fla.

Some might label it a collection, the largest of its kind. Others might call it a dream shaped in the form of wood and fabric, paper and metal. But to be accurate, the best description of Joel Platt's dizzyingly eclectic array of sport memorabilia may demand another descriptive word altogether: obsession.

"Yes, it is a kind of obsession," he admits wryly. "I think about it all the time."

Platt has spent seven decades and traveled more than a million miles to amass the largest and the most diverse collection of sports mementos.

Autographed balls and cards, yes, but also game-worn uniforms, bats, caps, helmets, shoes, hockey sticks, skates, pucks, boxing gloves, robes, trunks, championship belts, tennis racquets, golf clubs, stadium seats, tickets, pennants, posters, saddles, boots and racing tires. You name it, he owns it — more than a million pieces. In fact, no other collector comes close to his obsessive gathering and curating.

Between 1960 and 1985, Platt purchased eight of the largest sports collections in existence. "I was fortunate," he admits, "to be able to corner the market on sports collectibles before they became valuable commodities."

Rob Rosen, vice president of the sports collectibles category at Heritage Auctions, knows Platt's eclectic assortment of sports items well. He also has visited the Sports Immortals Museum and Memorabilia Mart in Boca Raton, Fla., where some of the items are on display. "Joel's collection is quite literally incomparable," Rosen says. "The depth and breadth of it is second to none, as is Joel's passion as a collector."

PLATT LIKES TO boast that one can spend every day of a year browsing through his items, shelf after shelf, case after case, trunk after trunk — and still not see it all.

Perhaps more impressive is the fact that Platt has an uncanny mastery of where every item is stored and its meaning in the world of sports.

His son Jim, who as vice president of Sports Immortals Inc. manages inventory and spearheads development of Sports Immortals branded projects, explains his dad's ability this way. "For my father, this sports collection is his fourth child. He's very emotional about it, very attached to it. It's his life."

Platt initially was not interested in curating sports mementos for investment purposes. He simply wanted to fulfill a childhood dream of creating a museum that would pay tribute to sports' greats. "I don't want their achievements forgotten," he says.

Now, however, he says he has taken his family's advice and altered course, taking the first steps to placing his entire collection as a whole on the market to raise funds to develop Sports Immortals branded projects.

A big part of that vision is not only exhibiting the collection in a world-class museum, but developing an international hall of fame; sponsoring traveling exhibitions; licensing intellectual properties such as movies, books and television shows; and creating a sports curriculum with a major university.

Tall order? Sure, Joel Platt admits, but an achievable and meritorious one. "We already have the crown jewels [of sports memorabilia] to build the ultimate sports museum in the world. The rest is just the next step."

THE SPORTS IMMORTALS collection, the Platts say, has an appraised value of more than \$150 million and could be worth more on the open market. Rosen of Heritage Auctions demurs when putting a value on the collection, but says it would be a "substantial sum."

For the elder Platt, however, selling his collection is not about money. It's about exposure. It's about a platform that would showcase how "these sports immortals were and are an inspiration to the world." His enthusiasm is palpable as he takes a visitor on a tour of the museum.

The first floor of the showcase museum doubles as a center for parties and special events, but it's truly on the second floor where visitors get a feeling for the vastness of the Platt collection. Stepping out of the elevator is not unlike entering a sports fan's fantasy world. In addition to displays, a separate area offers merchandise for sale, everything from autographed balls to photos, cards and other items.

"People call us from all over the world wanting to sell or wanting us to take items on consignment," Platt explains.

Then just beyond the sales area is the museum's rotating display of about 30,000 items. A small theater, furnished with seats from different stadiums, plays a Discovery Channel story on Joel Platt. One can spend a good day immersed here.

Additional gems are kept in a secure off-site vault, an entire floor divided into room after room filled with priceless possessions. One room, for instance, is chockablock with programs as well as tickets from a variety of championship games and matches. Another room has tens of thousands of baseball cards, including a complete card set of 1880 Allen & Ginter baseball cards. A third room is devoted entirely to hockey, the wall lined with players' personal NHL ice hockey sticks. Here and there, hanging on walls or stored in albums, are original documents signed by the founding fathers of our most beloved games, alongside tickets to championship fights and World Series games.

The largest room in the vault contains row upon row of blue security trunks, stacked atop another, each packed with the Crown Jewels of Sports. "In my collection everything has a story," Platt says. "Actually a couple of stories. There's the athlete's story, and



Visitors to the Sports Immortals Showcase Museum might get a glimpse of the legendary T206 Honus Wagner, baseball's most famous vintage card.

my story in getting the item."

Some of the characters in Platt's stories include Muhammad Ali, Jim Thorpe's third wife, and soccer great Pelé. (See accompanying story.)

Yet, for all the impressive pedigree, Platt owns pieces considered even more valuable on the open market, coveted by collectors for their rare one-of-a-kind history. A sampling: the last ball used in the only double no-hit games ever pitched in Major League Baseball (in 1917 between the Cincinnati Reds and the Chicago Cubs); Satchel Paige's touring All-Star Uniform from the Negro Leagues; Jack Johnson's confession letter admitting that he threw the heavyweight championship fight with Jess Willard in 1915 to avoid going to jail; and one of the balls that football Hall of Fame quarterback Sid Luckman threw for a record seven touchdown passes for the Chicago Bears.

Rosen of Heritage Auctions considers Paige's game-worn jersey as particularly valuable. "Game-worn jerseys from the pre-Jackie Robinson era of the Negro Leagues," Rosen says, "turn up in a major auction perhaps once every decade or so. And Joel has the top names – Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige. It's tough to think of anything with a larger measure of both rarity and significance than that portion of his collection."

To the super-valuable pile, Rosen would also add the Jim Thorpe game-worn jersey, the Muhammad Ali Heavyweight Championship belt, and the famous T206 Honus Wagner card, all owned by the Platts.

JOEL PLATT SIMPLY "is one of the original pioneers of the sports-collectibles genre and his passion for collecting this material has provided him with one of the finest collections in the world," says Chris Ivy, director of sports auctions at Heritage. "His foresight led him to collect significant sporting artifacts before they had any true intrinsic value and I am thankful to him, because without that foresight, I have no doubt that some of his museum-worthy pieces would have been lost to history."

How Platt began assembling such a stellar sport memorabilia collection may be worthy of a dramatic movie scene. When he was 4 years old and recovering from injuries received in a gas explosion, Babe Ruth came to him in a dream, urging him not to give up on his recovery and exhorting him to become a Major League baseball player or build a museum for sports greats.

Platt would go on to play baseball, but his college career as a shortstop at Duquesne University would end after he hurt his arm. His dream of a museum, on the other hand, would live on. In fact, that dream would inspire him to accumulate what many consider a one-of-a-kind collection known for its variety. Unlike other large sports collections that focus on a particular niche, Platt's encompasses all major sports. The sports memorabilia world "wouldn't be the same without the Platt family," Rosen says.

Actually, it would be impossible to replicate Platt's collection now because collecting for many has become less of a passion and more of an investment.

"Joel is a pioneer," Rosen says. "He was chasing down important sports collectibles before the words 'sports collectibles' became a common term. He's a master researcher, a walking encyclopedia of sports history. He's obsessive and tireless. It's never been about the money with Joel – it's a true passion. Only a



Satchel Paige's footwear and early game-worn jerseys, including his 1940s Negro Leagues All-Stars uniform, are among the rarest items at the museum.

person with that kind of knowledge and dedication could have possibly amassed a collection of such size and significance."

Decades of building a collection inspired by a dream has changed Platt in more ways than one.

"I was born a shy person," he says, "but I developed this personality because when you want something, it creates a desire so strong that you do what you have to do to see your dreams come true. For me it's been a journey of passion and perseverance."

ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ is a syndicated columnist for Tribune Content Agency and author of *The Chin Kiss King: A Novel*. She collects autographed books from her favorite authors.

VISITING THE MUSEUM

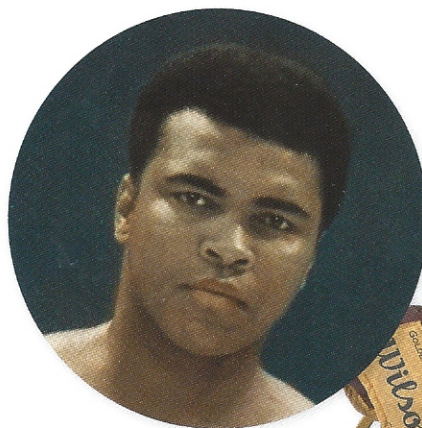
The Sports Immortals Showcase Museum and Memorabilia Mart is at 6830 N. Federal Highway, Boca Raton, FL 33487. Visit SportsImmortals.com for details.

PLATT'S FAVORITE *Legends*

Even though he owns more than a million artifacts, Joel Platt admits to having “a special fondness for the hundreds of mementos I acquired from my personal favorite athletes who achieved greatness in their sport and who I found to be caring and kind individuals who overcame adversity and were always ready to help others when called up.”

Muhammad Ali

A man Platt calls a great boxing champion and greater humanitarian. He met Ali on six occasions and Ali took to calling him, “My man, the museum man.” Platt now owns hundreds of Ali’s items, including robes, gloves and shoes. Among his favorites are the 1959 Golden Glove Championship boxing gloves worn by the boxer (pictured), then known as Cassius Clay, and the USA jacket he wore at the 1960 Olympics.



Babe Ruth

The slugger also known as the Great Bambino and the Sultan of Swat. Among the Ruth items Platt owns are the autographed first home run ball Ruth hit at New Yankee Stadium in February 1923, a game bat from the Babe’s last season as a New York Yankee in 1934 (also signed by Lou Gehrig and the other players on the team), and a baseball signed by both Ruth and Gehrig, dated Oct. 1, 1932, the day he called his home run shot in the 1932 World Series against the Chicago Cubs.



Jim Thorpe

The greatest all-around athlete of all time. Thorpe not only won gold medals in the Decathlon and Pentathlon at the 1912 Summer Olympics in Stockholm, but he played professional football. Platt is such a fan that he named his youngest of three children and only son after the great athlete and American Indian. His favorite items, given to him by Thorpe's third wife, Patricia, include the athlete's Carlisle Indians football jersey, letterman sweater and helmet, Thorpe's Indian clothes, his trophies, medals and personal scrapbooks of his sports career, and a 1912 Olympic scrapbook album with photos and personal letters from President Taft and other dignitaries.



Roberto Clemente

The Hall of Fame Pittsburgh Pirate outfielder who died in a plane crash while flying supplies to earthquake victims in Nicaragua. Platt has Clemente's bat from his rookie season, his 1971 World Series jersey when he was named MVP, and numerous other items from Platt's hometown Pittsburgh hero.

