

Exhibit knocks one out of the ballpark

Nancy Wigston, Special to The CJN, Wednesday, August 27, 2014



The exhibit runs until Oct. 26.

A window onto Jewish America opens with *Chasing Dreams*, the lively and sometimes surprising exhibit in Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH).

The exhibit illuminates that most American institution, baseball, showcasing and educating about the “barrier breakers and change-makers,” according to publicist Ilana Blumenthal, from 1908's “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” (music by Albert Von Tilzer, son of Polish Jews) to the heady days of major leaguers Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax.

Although rooted in the particulars of the Jewish experience with the game, *Chasing Dreams* is universal in its appeal, with its themes of marginalization and belonging that apply to all immigrant groups. The number of museum visitors has climbed significantly since *Chasing Dreams* opened on March 13.

“We're seeing people who don't always go to museums,” says Blumenthal.

In addition to ballpark heroes like Greenberg and Koufax (neither would play on Yom Kippur), the show pays homage to several non-Jewish barrier breakers: Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, Roberto Clemente and Ichiro Suzuki.

Baseball is not just a game, but also a metaphor. It's “the national pastime,” and a pathway to becoming American that was almost instantly recognized by newcomers or their children.

In 1903, the *Jewish Daily Forward* editors warned that immigrants who didn't give their children balls and bats risked raising them as “foreigners” in their own country. Six years later, American philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen wrote, “Baseball is a religion and the only one that is not sectarian but national.”

In the 1910s, Rabbi Solomon Schechter allegedly told his rabbinical student, “Remember this, unless you can play baseball, you will never get to be a rabbi in America.”

By the end of the 20th century, the game had become so firmly entrenched in the American Jewish experience that a character in the Coen brothers’ cult hit, *The Big Lebowski*, joked: “Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax.”

The NMAJH exhibit heralds pioneering Jewish names like batting great Lipman “Lip” Pike who began playing for the Philadelphia Athletics the day after his bar mitzvah in 1866, and went on to become one of the game’s first professional players. Behind the scenes was Broadway actress Helen Dauvray (born Ida Gibson). She funded the first World Series Trophy (the Dauvray Cup) in 1887.

Much of the pleasure in this exhibit comes from nuggets about players like Moe Berg, an anti-Nazi spy for the U.S. government, a highly educated man who some said was “a better spy than a player.” Among the highlights are Jewish summer camp photos (Koufax is there); a bizarre Omer Counter made from Louisville Slugger bats; baseballs signed by Rabbis; photos of an all-girls Orthodox team in the Bronx and the cover of Bernard Malamud’s 1952 debut novel, *The Natural*.

Yet baseball would be nothing without fun, and the exhibit supplies plenty of it with its interactive games. I do modestly well catching imaginary balls from famous pitchers playing the interactive game called Catching History. On the concourse level, space is devoted to Koufax on the Koncourse, where, after donning a reproduction Koufax jersey, players stand on a pitcher’s mound, doing their best to pitch like the legendary Dodger. Visitors can also choose their dream team of players from digitized baseball cards, then email their team to family and friends.

Rare photographs and memorabilia have been culled from the public through the micro-blogging site Tumblr. “This is my favourite,” says Blumenthal, as we pause before a 1948 photograph of smiling hot dog vendor Esther Schimmel at her stand outside Sportsman’s Park in St. Louis. The little boy at the left is her nephew. Look again and you’ll see that Schimmel’s hands are not touching the non-kosher hot dog – she’s using a fork.

A major theme in the exhibit focuses on overcoming persecution. The arrival of Jackie Robinson in the majors was a great event, not least for the Jews who identified with his struggle. During our tour Blumenthal confides that in the 1950s, her aunt picketed that other Philly institution, *American Bandstand*, until it, too, was integrated.

In the *Chasing Dreams* book, edited by curator Josh Perelman, one particularly dramatic moment comes to life. It’s 1947. “Hammerin’ Hank” Greenberg and Robinson collide at first base, during a time when anti-integrationists were seething. “Thousands of fans gasped,” the book describes. “Greenberg held out a hand and treated Robinson with empathy and respect.” Legend has it that Greenberg told Robinson he knew it was tough, but to stay in there, and keep his head up. After the game Robinson told reporters, “Mr. Greenberg is class, it stands out all over him.”

It was Greenberg's final year of a 17-year career, and Robinson's first, but Greenberg had long been a hero, especially to his Jewish fans. Actor Walter Matthau's words sum it up: "I was delighted to know that there was somebody like Hank Greenberg around, and that I didn't have to wind up as a presser, a cutter, or a salesman in the garment center."

If Greenberg was a role model and a hero, Koufax was a heartthrob. As Jane Leavy writes in the *Chasing Dreams* book, "Koufax didn't just challenge batters; he challenged stereotypes of Jewish beauty and toughness and athleticism."

After the exhibit, I wander down to the museum shop, where a woman is purchasing sets of Jewish players' baseball cards for her grandkids. My choice is a T-shirt with Koufax's retired Dodgers number "32" on the back, and the excellent *Chasing Dreams* book, with its myriad of contributions from ordinary fans (with extraordinary connections to the game) to cultural icons, such as Philip Roth and Billy Crystal.

This is a grand slam of an exhibit, guaranteed to enrich your next trip to the ballpark. n

Chasing Dreams is on show until Oct. 26, when it will embark on a national tour.

If you go: Visit [here](#) and www.NMAJH.org.

- See more at: <http://www.cjnews.com/node/130083#sthash.GU2VX26h.dpuf>