

# baseball mecca

IS THIS HEAVEN? NO,  
IT'S COOPERSTOWN.

BY MARK LUCE

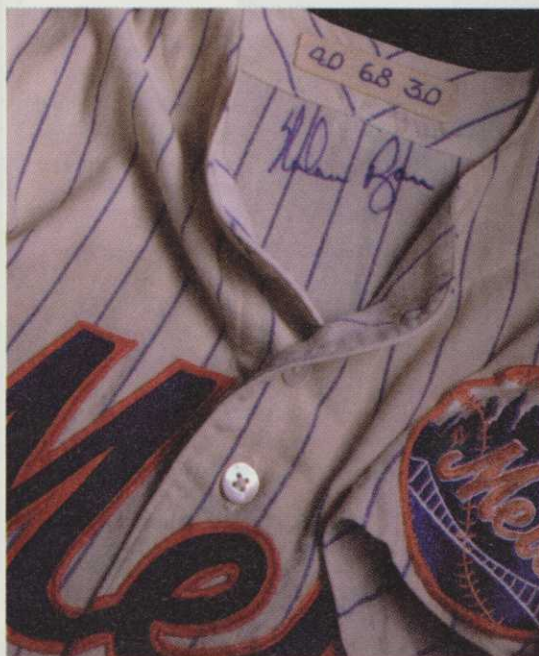
**I**t's not heaven, and it's not Iowa. But inside a large, colonial brick building on Main Street in the sleepy hamlet of Cooperstown, N.Y., lies baseball's true field of dreams — the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum.

And as the boys of summer dwindle to the lucky few who'll play in the Fall Classic, chances are that in this month's World Series you might see someone who, years from now, will be immortalized in bronze among baseball's elite.

So as the golf season winds down, why not pay homage to the dirt and leather, and spikes and sweat of what still is — thanks to Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa — the quintessential American game?

Be advised that there's no simple way to get to tiny Cooperstown — only a winding, two-lane blacktop road dropping south from Interstate 90, about halfway between Albany and Syracuse. But once in the town, and later in the museum, you'll be swept away by the serenity and simplicity of baseball nostalgia.

Whether as a family destination or just a father/son getaway, the Hall of Fame offers perhaps the best way to bridge any generation gap — and an unrivaled historical perspective, not



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only of the game, but of our country.

Here you'll discover the rag-tag roots of baseball in the late 19th century, when players like the notorious Cap Anson and the lawyerly John Montgomery Ward worked to bring baseball from a lower-class diversion to the mainstream.

The museum section, arranged chronologically, offers a trip down memory lane: The 1919 Chicago Black Sox, the dominance of Babe Ruth's mighty bat and the hitting science of Ted Williams.

Bats, balls, gloves, bases, ticket stubs, scorecards, uniforms, programs and catcher's gear from greats past and present rest inside nicely designed exhibits and are explained in straightforward prose, which allows even the not-so-rabid fans to understand how the game evolved and the space it occupies in our national consciousness. Special exhibits on equipment show the evolu-

tion of bats, balls and gloves, from the tiny bat of Hall of Famer Wee Willie Keeler to the so-called "idiot tools" of Yankee great Yogi Berra.

One of the museum's more frightening exhibits — the development of the uniform — has examples of the most garish outfits you can imagine, from the bright orange of the late 1970s Houston Astros to the baseball shorts worn by the Chicago White Sox in 1976.

There's more. Sheets and sheets of baseball cards, some of them the same ones that your mom threw away, and several you've probably never seen, such as an early-century tobacco card of Honus Wagner, worth upwards of \$1 million.

The museum also has a contemporary section chronicling the historical feats of the 1990s.

The real draw, though, is the hall of fame itself. The bronze plaques, complete with sculpted portraits and descriptions of players' careers, shine in the well-lit hall. And although the pictures aren't always of the best likeness, the feelings of awe can still be overwhelming.

There's Bob Gibson, arguably the most intimidating pitcher ever; Roberto Clemente, who finished with exactly 3,000 hits before being killed in a tragic plane crash; and some of the old Negro League greats, including Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell and Judy Johnson.

For more information on the high church of baseball, or to join the congregation, contact [www.baseball-halloffame.org](http://www.baseball-halloffame.org).

*Mark Luce, a freelance writer based in Lawrence, Kan., has 3,000 hits to go to reach 3,000.*