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museums

Riding backwards on a bicycle perched on a thin wire suspended 25 feet off of the ground doesn't make you a good parent. But seeing the joy and laughter on a child's face while you try not to look down while pedaling makes the stunt worth it.

But it wasn't a stunt, really. It was a lesson in balance and center of gravity at Science City, a wondrous museum in Kansas City that I attended with my son, Miles. And about that bicycle — it was specially weighted not to tip.

Our afternoon at the museum also took us through a marvelous time that included optical illusions, a world of model trains, dinosaur exhibits, musical instruments, radar guns, various sizes and slithers of snakes, lessons in weightlessness and a video simulation of landing a space shuttle (I missed once, landed twice). The day brought out the inquisitive in us both and left us with more than enough to talk about over burgers and sodas at a diner afterward.

Even though by vocation I teach, it's not that instinct that makes me want to visit museums with my children. It's far more simple — it's just curiosity and constant desire to learn. Ever since I saw glowing rocks in the black-lighted back room at the old Saline County Historical Museum as a child, I've been

FEW FAMILY OUTINGS ARE AS MEMORABLE OR AS MUCH FUN WITH THE LITTLE ONES

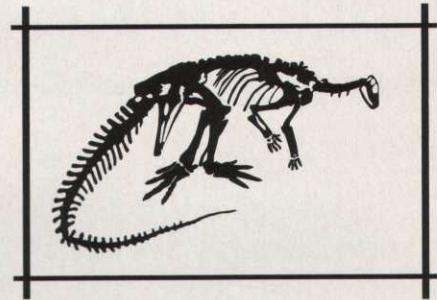
BY MARK LUCE

fascinated with museums of all stripes.

And now, luckily, I can share that passion with ones dear to me. I recall a visit with Miles to Kansas City's hidden treasures: The Negro League Baseball Museum and the Jazz Museum, twin areas of culture in the old 18th and Vine District, which was once the center for jazz in America. Bird and Dizzy may only be around in old recordings and exhibits, but the two spaces transport you to different, not-always-so-good old days.

We looked at old uniforms from the Negro League teams, checked out a ball-field of statues and saw pictures of Jackie Robinson as a Kansas City Monarch. On the music side, we played percussion, mixed a song, learned about improvisation, and heard more than our share of cuts by Satchmo. Miles smiled there, too.

But he didn't smile nearly as much there as he did at the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas, one of our favorite stops. There, we marveled at dinosaur skeletons, watched



video of bees inside an active hive, examined seriously large cockroaches, tapped on the glass at the snakes (even though we're not supposed to) and pretended the giant stuffed polar bear could talk. Again, the thrill certainly rests in the discovery, but it's in the sharing of the encounter with ones you love.

The key in taking young children to museums rests in your ability to refrain from being a guide. Remind them what's available, then let them lead the way. Asking questions ("Did we already see the birds?"), using of elevators or escalators (always a hit) and the unspoken promise of hitting the gift shop will inevitably make the visit go smoothly.

Find a museum in your area and take the little ones, you might surprise yourself, and more importantly, them, with what you uncover.

Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he's scolded by museum security guards for getting too close to the exhibits.

GOLFDOM (ISSN 1526-4270) is published monthly (12 issues per year) by Questex Media Group, Inc., 306 W Michigan Street, Suite 200, Duluth, MN 55802. Corporate office: 275 Grove St., Suite 2-130, Newton, MA 02466. Accounting, Advertising, Production and Circulation offices: 306 W. Michigan St., Suite 200 Duluth, MN 55802-1610. Subscription rates: One year \$39 (U.S. and possessions), \$59 (Canada and Mexico) and \$89 (all other countries). Air expedited service is available in countries outside the U.S. and Canada for an additional \$75 per year. Current issue single copies (prepaid only) \$5 (U.S. and possessions), \$7 (Canada and Mexico) and \$8 (all other countries). Back issues (if available, prepaid only) \$10 (U.S. and possessions), \$14 (Canada and Mexico) and \$16 (all other countries); add \$6.50 per order shipping and handling for both current and back issue purchases. Periodicals postage paid at Duluth MN 55806 and additional mailing offices.



POSTMASTER: Please send address changes to GOLFDOM, P.O. Box 5057, Brentwood, TN 37024-5057. Canadian G.S.T. Number: 840033278RT0001, Publications Mail Agreement number 40017597. Printed in the U.S.A.

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