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Houston Sports Icons Apple Of NY's Eye

Hakeem Olajuwon, Clyde Drexler, Earl Campbell, Nolan Ryan and Yao Ming are sporting around on a new playing field.

The local sports legends -- along with Houston's Astrodome and Minute Maid Park venues - - have all earned spots in a new museum in New York City.

The Sports Museum of America, which opened May 7, houses exhibits and multimedia displays from the American sports landscape, many of which have Houston roots.

Basketball legends Olajuwon and Drexler and football great Campbell are included in exhibits, while current Houston Rockets star Yao Ming will hold a place in a section devoted to the globalization of American sports.

Visitors to the lower Manhattan museum can also view memorabilia from Ryan's record-breaking career as a pitcher for the Houston Astros. The home plate from the famed hurler's seventh no-hitter and a pair of tickets from the game where he struck out his 5,000th batter are on display.

The museum's founder and CEO, Philip Schwalb, says he wants visitors to leave the museum with a better understanding of sports heroes.

"People will see what sports can mean beyond the game's score," Schwalb says.

To that effect, many of the exhibits focus on the individual athlete as much as the sport they dominated.

"That's the main thing, people will get the emotion behind the star," Schwalb says.

As the first domed stadium, the Astrodome also earned a coveted spot in the museum. Museum architect Frederick Bland has a personal connection with the Dome.

"I remember when the Astrodome was being built, I remember going to games in it," says Bland, a Houston native and managing director of New York-based architecture firm Beyer Blinder Belle Architects & Planners LLP.

Houston's new baseball stadium has a place in the museum as well. In a section devoted to baseball's most unique field designs, Minute Maid Park makes an appearance thanks to Tal's Hill, the 90-foot-wide incline at the far edge of center field.

Construction for the \$100 million for-profit museum was financed by \$57 million in World Trade Center redevelopment bonds and another \$43 million in private investment. The price of admission ranges from \$20 to \$28. -Casey Wooten