HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Acclaimed La. sports museum still goes unnoticed by many

BOB TOMPKINS  GANNETT LOUISIANA

little more than two years since its opening, the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame and Northwest Louisiana History Museum in Natchitoches is evolving as a target tourism destination.

Doug Ireland, the executive director of the Hall of Fame Foundation who has been a key player in making the $23 million museum a reality, acknowledges the Hall's good fruit since it opened, but he sees the opportunity for more. “We've got more than we ever dreamed we might have,” he said, “yet we still have a lot of ground to cover. Two-thirds of our exhibition plan is installed. As for the rest, that’s a budget issue. What we have is wonderful; what we could have is magnificent.”

The museum is, for the most part, a showcase of Louisiana's rich sports history, spanning more than 150 years. It is one of nine state museums and the only one north of I-10.

If it seems the hype the newest museum received leading to its opening has fallen short, consider what's missing.

Virtual reality not real

Mitch Landrieu talked 10 years ago (when he was the lieutenant governor) about how (at the then futuristic museum) you would be able to run on the football field with Billy Cannon or dribble down court with Pete Maravich,” Ireland said of a projected virtual reality experience room that hasn’t materialized.

“The technology is out there to do those things,” said Ireland, noting the Hall of Fame Foundation has been “tapping on doors” seek...
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The museum is open on weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and on Saturdays, from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. School and group tours may request an early arrival. It is closed on Sundays, with the exception of state holidays.

The Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame, in place of the Louisiana Sports Museum, is a world-class museum. It is open every day through Saturday, except Sundays. Visitors are encouraged to visit the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame Museum.

The museum features exhibits of professional athletes and coaches from the major universities in the state, this museum has honored athletes, coaches, and administrators from 14 different colleges, numerous high schools, and professional teams.

For all the talk of a "sports-crazy state," there's potential for more awareness of the latest gem in the state museum system, Ireland said.

"It all gets back to awareness," Ireland said. "My contention is there are people standing at the Church Street Bridge downtown that have no idea that 300 feet away is a world-class museum."

Museum director Jennae Biddiscomb, hailing the museum's average of more than 15,000 visitors a year and its "many, many programs" at the museum over the last two years, disputes that.

"We are well marketed in the city," she said, citing help from the Visitors Center, the Chamber of Commerce, and the programs at the museum.

"Now, when they have the Fall Tour of Homes and the Christmas Tour of Homes, we've gotten on that, too."

No. 1 in the world

The building, named No. 1 on Azure Magazine's 2013 Top 10 Architecture Projects list from around the world, was designed by architect Victor F. "Trey" Trahan III, and the 28,000-square foot box-shaped building overlooks the public square on Front Street in downtown Natchitoches.

While the cutting-edge exterior is in marked contrast with the architecture of other downtown buildings in the oldest permanent settlement in Louisiana, the interior design is in sync with the local geography and culture.

The interactive databases with biographical information, quotes and statistics on the inductees are also popular, said Biddiscombe, as is the Clementine Hunter art display in the history section upstairs.

Another popular feature is a wall with running film of Louisiana sports highlights over the years such as Tom Dempsey's record, game-winning field goal for the New Orleans Saints against the Detroit Lions in 1970.

The pro football exhibit features, among other things, the size 16 EEE cleat of Ernie Ladd of the San Diego Chargers, who was an All-American at Grambling.

The Hall is open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., and Sundays, 1-5 p.m. School and group tours may request early arrival. It is closed Mondays and state holidays. The cost is $5 for adults, $4 for students, seniors and military; and free for children 12 and under.