

SPORTS

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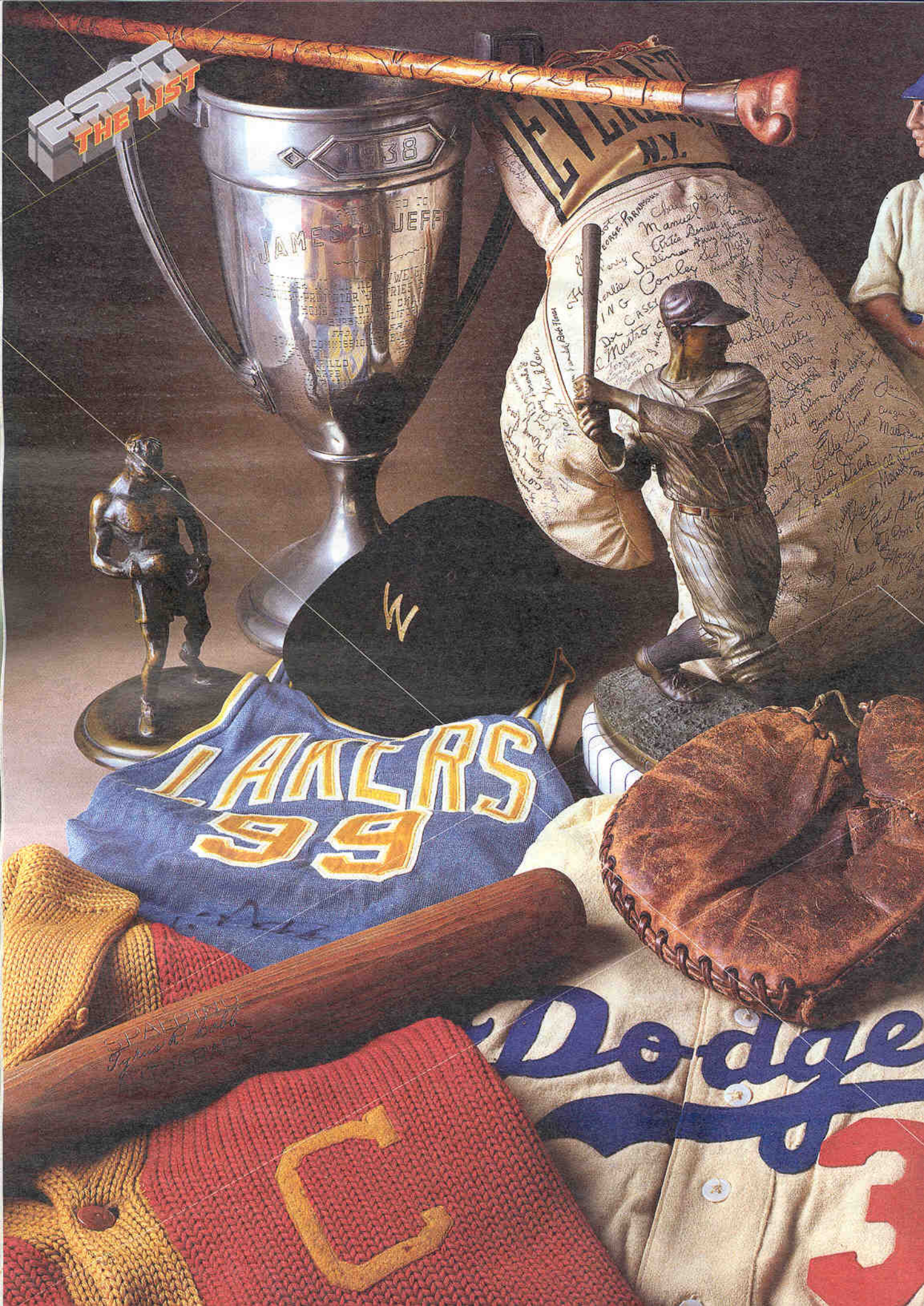
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THE LIST



1938
JAMES G. THOMPSON

EVILINIA
N.Y.

Handwritten signatures on the jersey include: Manuel, Sid, Conley, and others.

YANKEERS
99

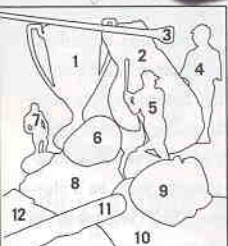
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SPENCER
Fryman R. B.

C

From top: Jim Thorpe's Canton togs and handmade gloves; autographed Wilt Chamberlain jerseys; the most valuable bat and ball in existence; Dwan Moran's 1908 heavyweight belt.



1. Jim Jefferies' 1938 heavyweight championship trophy 2. Oversized glove signed by over 100 boxing champions 3. Turn-of-the-century cane engraved with likenesses of champion boxers 4. 1900s fireplace iron 5. Lou Gehrig bronze 6. Walter Johnson's Senators hat from '25 Series 7. Jack Dempsey bronze 8. Autographed George Mikan Minneapolis Lakers jersey 9. Gehrig's glove from '27 Series 10. Roy Campanella's last Brooklyn Dodgers uniform 11. Ty Cobb's bat from 1912 season 12. Jim Thorpe's Carlisle Indians letterman's sweater



BEST TESTAMENT TO OBSESSION

"What is this?" Jim Platt asks, contemplating a worn, leathery, embroidered square of fabric sheathed in clear plastic.

"Jim Thorpe's Indian clothes," Platt's father, Joel, responds. "And this is his scrapbook. Have you ever seen it?"

"No," Jim says, and then, to a visitor, adds, "I'm named after Jim Thorpe."

Father and son (shown above) are burrowing through Trunk 21, one of hundreds, each stuffed with artifacts from the past century-and-a-half of human athletic endeavor.

Just another day at the Sports Immortals Museum in Boca Raton, Fla., home to the greatest private collection of sports memorabilia in the universe. Proprietor Joel Platt has it all: Babe Ruth's hat and Shoeless Joe's bat. Ty Cobb's spikes and Evander Holyfield's ear ("Just a little piece I picked up off the canvas"). He has Lou Gehrig's mitt and Muhammad Ali's belt and the signature of every player in the American League in 1939. He boasts the priciest bat and baseball in existence; estimated at more than \$1 million each, they're signed by over 100 Hall of Famers—and Pete Rose. He's got the ball that killed Ray Chapman, the gloves that felled Joe Louis, the plate that Bobby Thomson crossed when the Giants won the pennant. But Joel Platt has something more valuable than all of that, something that sets him apart from the legions of collectors who gobble up the detritus of sport spectacle. Joel Platt has a dream.

Actually, *had* a dream. Recovering from an explosion that left him semi-comatose for months (he threw a match in a junked car's gas tank when he was 4), Joel was visited by a vision of Babe Ruth. "Kid," he said (you gotta figure Babe led with "kid"), "you're gonna be a great big leaguer someday. And (here's the important part), you're gonna build a museum to immortalize the greatest sports heroes of all time." The big league dream died in college. The museum dream lives on. "I'm on a God-given mission," Joel says. "We will create a Mecca for athletic greatness. Our collection will inspire and motivate people to strive for maximum effort. It will benefit mankind." Lofty goals for a real estate developer from Pittsburgh, but Joel Platt has a knack for getting people to believe. People like Mrs. Babe Ruth, Mrs. Christy Mathewson, Mrs. Jim Thorpe. He comes to them a stranger, tells of his dream—and they believe. Then they give him whatever he wants.

Mrs. Mathewson gave him Christy's World War I chemical warfare pin, the one she plucked from his lapel just before they closed the casket. Wilt Chamberlain's mom offered her son's high school jersey. A telegram from the third Mrs. Jim Thorpe reads: "Dear Joel. Am confined to bed. Come and get Jim's things." But it hasn't all been given to him. Platt has spent millions acquiring eight other collections. His tally stands at over one million mementos: 30,000 on display at 6830 N. Federal Highway in Boca Raton (www.sportsimmortals.com); the rest stowed away in trunks reminiscent of the last scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The Mecca remains a dream for now, as father and son look for a sponsor, a company with the vision—and the bucks—to make their dream a reality. They're looking for one more believer.

—Brendan O'Connor