

“Dr. J was totally awesome,” one was saying to a tyke too young to know first-hand. Another was explaining what the red-white-and-blue ball of the American Basketball Association meant to the game from 1967 to 1976. I noticed that one member of the original Hall of Fame Class of 1959, George Mikan, is still around today – a living, 7-foot monument to the very beginnings of the shrine.

Speaking of the shrine, this is its third home. The first was at Springfield College, a small, functional facility that offered a fair assortment of artifacts and made almost no effort toward storytelling, which is what helps make the modern Hall so fascinating and fun.

The second facility, which served the sport from 1985 to 2002, was far better. It brought interactive displays to the Hall, and created a link between the sports earliest days and its modern era, which made it much more interesting for children.

The new Hall of Fame dwarfs both of those facilities in both size and scope. You’ll find there is always sound – from the rhythmic bouncing and backboard thumping of basketballs on the center court downstairs, to the audio that brings the countless videos in the Hall to life.

On the bottom floor alone, I could hear the famous “Havlicek stole the ball!” call coming to life again, nearly 40 years after it happened. There were more recent audios of the 2002 championship moments for the Connecticut women’s team, Maryland’s NCAA champions and Los Angeles Lakers’ threepeaters, too.

I digress, though. We’re still on the top floor. Hey, that’s Lew Alcindor – later to be known as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar – taking a reverse layup in his college days at UCLA, isn’t it? There’s more to come, but the Honors Ring can absorb you for an hour, easily.

II. TIME TO TAKE A WALK THROUGH TIME.

Let’s move down a floor, finally. Just to emphasize the point, but after a walk through the Honors Ring, you’ll soon realize that you were wise to budget yourself at least a couple of hours, and ideally a little more, to experience the Hall of Fame.

The more time you give yourself, the more time you’ll be able to enjoy the various visual displays and interactive exhibits, many of which are on this next floor – which, to be honest with you, is my favorite floor.

I would come just for this floor. It’s nice, though, that I don’t have to do that.

The Honors Ring walks you through basketball history through the exploits of its greatest

individual legends. Now it’s time to explore the game in a more generic, historic form – complete with the artifacts and memorabilia that, to some of us old-fashioned folks, is what still makes a Hall a Hall.

There are several rooms on this floor, and a purpose for every room. What made this experience different for me, though, is that there was a life and a voice to the displays that was tangible to the senses and the emotions.

I visited the original Hall of Fame, which closed in 1985. The exhibits were interesting and informative, a forerunner to what we have today. But that facility was more library than entertainment center – while today’s displays, I found, are both.

This floor is about “The Game,” and everybody in the game is represented. Over here, there’s a jersey worn by 2003 Hall of Fame enshrinee Meadowlark Lemon of the Harlem Globetrotters, who were enshrined as the fifth Hall of Fame team in 2002.

Over there is a statue of Larry Bird, practically asking for a child to be photographed next to

Each of these subjects has meaning for many of us. It was like poring through the chapters of a book, finding something different yet interconnected with each one.

Maybe I digress, again. We’re coming around the corner now, and coming upon display cases filled with uniforms of so many of the greats.

My recommendation is to look at these from a reasonable distance first, before you get close enough to read the plaques and nameplates. How many of those jerseys can you recognize?

Maybe you can recognize almost all of them, though I doubt most people could. (And the ones who can have been around for awhile). But it’s fun to do this with the kids. Enough of the modern jerseys are included so that a younger person can identify the numbers and logos of many of the more recent men’s and women’s stars.

You’ll see uniforms from pro to college, and from Cousy (star point guard of the 1950s) to Kidd (star point guard of today).

You’ll see Marianne Crawford’s jersey, too.

Who’s Marianne Crawford? She played for Immaculata College, the tiny Pennsylvania school that became the first great college women’s basketball power, 30 years ago. What I liked about these displays is that they gave you a history, without making you feel like you were in history class.

Another room focuses on the sports ancient history, dating back to the days from the game’s invention in 1891. The oldest uniforms and memorabilia you’ll find in the Hall are in this room, including a 1915 jersey from Smith College of Northampton, Mass., which reminds us that women played the



game back then, too. In one room alone, a display of panels reminds us of all the different types of contributors and contributions this sport has seen.

One panel focuses on the referees. Another talks of the game’s history of racial integration (and generations ago, racial separation). Still another salutes the era of UCLA dominance of the college game in the 1960s, of the explosion of interest in the women’s game, and so on.

This might not matter so much to you, but the very breakdown of topics was fascinating to me. Somebody, or some group of people, had to take all the intertwined aspects of the sport, unravel them and explain them to us in a manner all ages could understand.

There’s a display just for “Showtime,” and what that style means to the modern game. Another for overseas leagues, for the WNBA, for the old ABA.

game back then, too.

You’ve got the old peach baskets, too, a basketball banner from the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, and other memorabilia and historical descriptions from those early days. The older visitors, especially, seemed to love this room.

I was surprised, though, with how much interest the younger set showed, too. Maybe they just couldn’t believe how women were able to compete in those less-than-sleek 1915 cloth jerseys.

Let’s stop for a moment. You can probably tell that my personal tastes lean to the history of the game, its evolution and expansion.

To wait much longer to talk about the interactive exhibits, in which the spectator becomes the participant, would be to miss a huge, integral part of this Hall of Fame.