

III. GOT GAME?

Sometimes, the best way to enjoy basketball is simply to grab and take your best shot. And as we move to the ground floor of the Hall, we can do just that.

A fair amount has been written about the Hall of Fame's indoor court, and the fact it's slightly smaller than regulation size. The people who point that out are missing the point.

The floor wasn't built to host an NCAA regional, or for that matter, any official game. It's there for the frequent demonstrations and clinics put on by the Hall.

It's there for us, too. When the previous Hall of Fame put an area for kids and adults to try their luck at shooting, they found it became one of the Hall's most popular features.

And why not? I'll never be elected to the Hall of Fame, but I can say I made a few baskets in it.

If you're not into the physical playing of the game, the ground floor offers a few other amenities, too. Shopping, for one. All Hall of Fame merchandise is sold here, there's a Reebok outlet and a McDonald's, too. The Hall of Fame theatre, where there's always something going on, is on this floor, too.

I love the quotes printed above the entrance to the basketball court, which is found near the ticket window on this floor.

"My biggest thrill came the night Elgin Baylor and I combined for 72 points at Madison Square Garden," we're told in the words of early-1960 Lakers star "Hot Rod" Hundley. "Elgin had 71 of them."

"No one roots for Goliath," Wilt Chamberlain reminds us. And my personal favorite inscription, attributed to coach Weldon Drew: "We've got a great bunch of outside shooters. Unfortunately, all our games are played indoors."

The audios and videos of past and present championship moments fill this floor. And toward the outer edges of the ground level, you'll find some wallboards with information and insight into a variety of subjects, most notably the sport's integration process through barnstorming teams, all-black universities and so on.

To be honest, these panels are a little easy to miss. They're off the beaten path, especially if your beaten path is McDonald's or the souvenir shops by this point.

Don't miss them, though. They help complete a great education of what this sport has meant to America throughout the generations.

"We consider this the finest sports museum in the world," Hall president and CEO John L. Doleva has said. When you hear that, you cannot help but think of Cooperstown and maybe Canton, and you wonder whether the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame can possibly live up to those ambitious words.

This is especially as it attempts to describe the sport through the eyes of all races, both genders, more than 100 years' worth of generations and the entire world.

It pulls it off, though. There's life and vibrance to this Hall that goes beyond the words on the plaques. It treats both the past and present with respect, as opposed to tempting visitors to choose between the two.

This Hall is a library for the sport, but also a nerve center. It's hard to be either, let alone both, but my first experience allowed me to walk through the past with a sense of the present.

To represent basketball, a Hall of Fame should represent everybody involved with it. It's one of only two sports (with volleyball) invented in America, but this distinctively American game is played in every corner of the world.

Baseball was once called the National Pastime, and occasionally still is. But basketball has produced a civil rights and gender-rights timeline that, in many ways, walks us through 20th Century American society.

I worried that describing all these aspects of the sport, in a way that made sense – not to mention honoring the individual greats who are inducted each year – was too great an undertaking for any one facility. Happily, I was wrong. Maybe it is possible to offer something for everybody.

Give yourself some time to enjoy it. And feel free to take a couple of short jump shots, and maybe a layup or two, on the way out.

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