



# BEYOND THE TROPHIES

Artifacts reveal iconic moments and hidden histories from Alabama's sporting past





*We asked sports museums, historic sites, and halls of fame across the state to spotlight one treasure from their collections that tells a unique story about Alabama. Each artifact is a snapshot of a moment in the state's long, rich sports tradition — and reveals how sports in Alabama are woven into the memories we share, the places we live, and the communities we build together.*

**Alabama Sports Hall of Fame (Birmingham)**  
**Leah Rawls Atkins' skis and rope from the 1953 World Water Ski Championships**



Leah Rawls learned to swim and surf on the Black Warrior River by the age of four. So perhaps it's no surprise that, at 18, she became Alabama's first water-skiing world champion in 1953. Winning became routine for the

Birmingham resident in the 1950s, when she also won two national titles and established a women's jumping record. In 1976, Rawls — by then known as Leah Rawls Atkins after marrying Auburn football star George Atkins — became the first woman inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame

After hanging up her skis and rope, Atkins turned to documenting history instead of making it. She earned a doctorate in history from Auburn University and later co-authored the Pulitzer Prize-nominated *Alabama: History of a Deep South State*. She also was the founding director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities at Auburn.

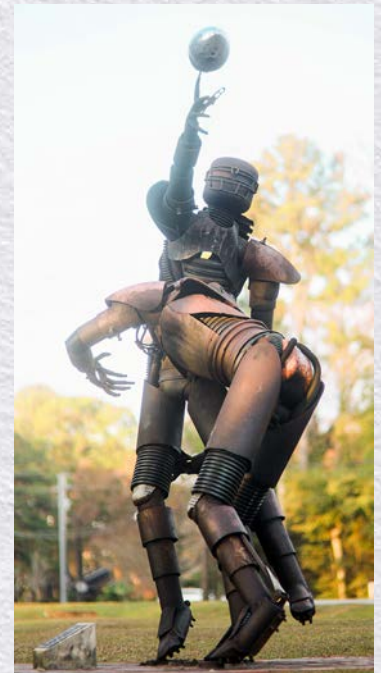
Occasionally, her love of water and recreation sneaks into her work. In *The Valley and the Hills*, her comprehensive history of Birmingham and Jefferson County, Atkins dedicates a chapter to memories of long-ago residents' favorite swimming holes, fishing spots, and water games.

**American Sport Art Museum & Archives (Daphne)**  
**Bruce Larsen's The Iron Bowl**

The American Sport Art Museum & Archives features more than 1,800 works of art, history, and literature. Its collection includes Olympic posters and medals, and works by internationally acclaimed artists like Ernie Barnes, Cristóbal Gabarrón, LeRoy Neiman, and Kadir Nelson. But its most iconic pieces come from just down the road — and they're hard to miss.

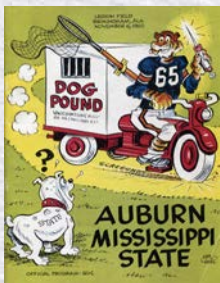
*The Iron Bowl* is one of nine larger-than-life depictions of athletes in action that dominate the museum's sculpture park. Each piece, made from salvaged scrap metal, is the invention of Bruce Larsen, a "Repo-Renaissance" artist and former high-school swimmer from nearby Fairhope. Larsen's first sculpture in the series, *Borzov the Sprinter* (see image on page 16), was installed in 2003. He created *The Iron Bowl* with iron and steel pipes, using propane tanks for helmets. In 2009, the sculpture was dedicated in a ceremony attended by Nick Saban and former players on both sides of the South's most heated rivalry.

"Sports are just fun," Larsen says. "There's no good reason for your heart to start pounding and for you to jump out of your seat yelling because a race is so close or a game is down to the wire, but you do. It's a very human experience that brings us together like no other."





## AU Ralph Brown Draughon Library (Auburn) Auburn's 1960s football program covers



Aubie the Tiger, beloved ambassador of Auburn athletics, has won more Mascot of the Year titles (nine) than any other anthropomorphic totem in college sports. He leapt onto the scene looking rather fierce, however.

In 1959, Auburn commissioned longtime *Birmingham Post-Herald* cartoonist Phil Neel to design the program cover for its home opener against Hardin-Simmons (see image on page 16). That original unnamed Aubie looks nothing like the more lovable, but still mischievous, character who materialized in Neel's series of iconic covers over the next 18 years. (Auburn went 63-16-2 during that run, making Aubie something of a good-luck charm.) The Tigers brought Neel and Aubie back in 1991 to commemorate Auburn's last "home game" at Birmingham's Legion Field.



In 2020, the *War Eagle Reader* reported that Neel had shopped his sketches to pretty much any school with a tiger mascot in

the late 1950s. Auburn was the first to jump on the opportunity. But Clemson also signed a deal with the moonlighting cartoonist, who created at least 49 covers featuring a suspiciously similar tiger named Clem. Worlds collided whenever the rivals met, with the home team's big cat starring on the program cover.

## Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum (Birmingham) Brabham BT8 (SC-1-65) 1965 race car



Barber Motorsports Park and Museum houses more than 1,700 vintage motorcycles and race cars. But this car carries a special connection to the museum's owner.

It's one of only 12 Brabham BT8 cars ever produced, all between 1964 and 1966. According to *Classic Driver* magazine, the Brabham dominated every class of open-wheel formula racing in the 1960s. And when George W. Barber bought the BT8 for his namesake museum in 2019, it was a homecoming of sorts.

Barber owned his family's famed Alabama dairy long before he owned a motorsports park, but even back in the 1960s he was probably more passionate about racecars than milk. During the decade, he raced professionally, running mostly Porsches to 63 first-place finishes. But in 1967-1968, he also raced this Brabham BT8, which flashed a different paint job and number back then. The museum has a 1968 picture of Barber in the car, surrounded by his pit crew, prepping for a Sports Car Club of America race in Courtland, Alabama.

## Hank Aaron Childhood Home and Museum (Mobile) Hank Aaron's childhood home



The Hammer. Hank. The Home Run King. Henry Louis Aaron is a baseball legend, a Hall of Famer who broke Babe Ruth's iconic home run record. He is also a son of Mobile who grew up in a Toulminville home hand-built by his father, Herbert, a riveter at the Alabama Dry Dock

and Shipbuilding Company. Aaron biographer Howard Bryant writes that Herbert collected ship timbers from Pinto Island to construct the house; six-year-old Henry gathered additional wood from abandoned buildings, including some that had partially burned.

This home is where Aaron nurtured his dream of becoming a baseball player, and it provided a rare sense of security for him and his seven siblings. "The only people who owned their homes then," he often said, "were rich people, and the Aarons." Aaron lived here until he left Mobile for his first professional opportunity with the Negro Leagues' Indianapolis Clowns in 1952.

Today the home is an artifact itself, filled with items from Aaron's childhood and memorabilia from the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Currently the home is being relocated in downtown Mobile with a reopening expected in late 2022.

## International Motorsports Hall of Fame (Talladega) Dale Earnhardt's Goodwrench Chevrolet No. 3 car

Despite hailing from North Carolina, Dale Earnhardt is synonymous with Talladega. "The Intimidator" won a



record 10 premier series races on the notoriously high-banked track. And as Mike Raita, executive director of the International Motorsports Hall of Fame, notes, “The impact his death had on both the culture and safety of NASCAR cannot be understated, and Talladega is one of the places that impact was felt most.”

Tension had been brewing for years between NASCAR’s corporate leadership and old-school drivers like Earnhardt, with the adoption of advanced safety measures being one major flashpoint. Ironically, Earnhardt’s death in a 2001 Daytona crash led directly to NASCAR’s adoption of the HANS head and neck restraint. Although the device was controversial at the time, racers like Jeff Gordon and Ryan Newman have since credited it with saving their lives.

Earnhardt’s death also cleared resistance to NASCAR’s development of a standardized and safer “Car of Tomorrow,” which made one of its first appearances on the Talladega track. “Until then, the fan could tell a Chevy from a Ford from a Dodge,” Raita says. “With the advent of the Car of Tomorrow, the only differences were the decals...Dale Earnhardt would have hated that car, and it would have been difficult for NASCAR brass to fight him on that.”

#### **Jesse Owens Museum and Memorial Park (Oakville)** **Flag from the 1936 Olympics**



When Jesse Owens won his gold medal in the long jump — one of four he earned in the 1936 Berlin Olympics — Adolf Hitler was watching. So was Carl R. Burt, who purchased this flag as a souvenir. It depicts the 49 nations that competed in the Olympics that year, along with two swastikas that offer a haunting reminder of the war that soon followed.

Burt’s daughter, Beth McGovney of Boise, Idaho, donated the flag to the museum along with photos that illustrate the experience of attending the “Nazi Games.” One image shows Burt and a friend traveling to Berlin as third-class passengers on the transatlantic steamship *Normandie*. Another features them in front of the *Olympiastadion* where Owens made history.

Burt’s attendance at the 1936 Olympics also is preserved in another way. Leni Riefenstahl — the notorious German filmmaker best known for the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* — chronicled the Berlin Games in the documentary *Olympia*. Burt appears prominently in closeups, cheering on Owens in the long jump from “seats so close to Hitler’s box, they also saw Hitler’s fury,” McGovney notes. *Olympia* footage also appears in *Jesse Owens Returns to Berlin*, a 1964 documentary recounting the champion’s achievements; the film plays regularly in the museum’s theater.

#### **Moundville Archaeological Park (Moundville)** **Chunkey stone and stickball sticks**

For centuries, long before baseball or football, chunkey was the most popular pastime in the Southeast. The Native American game featured a disc of polished stone that belonged to the entire town. One man rolled the stone on a “chunkey” yard, and he and his competitor threw wooden poles at it to score points.

By the 1800s, stickball had become the game of choice. Similar to lacrosse, which originated with the Iroquois, stickball differs in its use of two ball sticks, or *kapocha*, each about 2.5 feet long and typically made of hickory. Moundville’s stickball collection (see image on page 16) features two *kapocha* made in 1990 by Wood Bell, a Choctaw craftsman. The larger stick is the *Inki*, or Father stick; the smaller is the *Ishk*, or Mother stick. Players score when they throw the ball between two poles or hit one of the poles.

Stickball games could be violent and chaotic, sometimes with hundreds of players from different towns competing for prestige, wagered wealth, or territory. Another version of the game pitted men against women in a contest that was more social than competitive. Today, stickball remains a popular way for Creek and Choctaw members to preserve and share their cultural heritage, often at tribal fairs statewide.

#### **Museum of Alabama (Montgomery)** **Justice Hugo Black’s tennis racket**

Alabama’s Hugo Black served 34 years on the U.S. Supreme Court as one of the 20th century’s most influential justices. But he would have preferred to spend more time on another court, according to





his daughter Josephine Black Pesaresi. “The most important things in my father’s life were Alabama, the Constitution, his books, and the tennis court — and not necessarily in that order,” she said in *Of Courtiers and Kings: More Stories of Supreme Court Law Clerks and Their Justices*.

Black used the sport to recharge and to connect with his law clerks. “It wasn’t the tennis per se [which enriched the clerkship experience],” explains [former clerk John W.] Vardaman in *Of Courtiers and Kings*. “It was the opportunity to go out to the house, play tennis, and then socialize with the Judge. It turned the relationship from professional to personal.” At the holidays, Black’s law clerks often reciprocated with tennis-related presents. In one thank-you letter to a former clerk who had gifted him a box of tennis balls, Justice Black wrote, “You know where my heart is.”

The tennis racket at the Museum of Alabama (see image on page 16) is the last racket Black used.

### National Speleological Society Museum (Huntsville) “John W. Cole” Rappel Rack



Alabama’s landscape is swiss-cheesed with more than 4,700 caves, many with vertical shafts dropping 50 to 400 feet. So it’s only natural that an Alabamian invented one of the world’s most important caving safety devices.

“The early 1960s were the heyday of caving in north Alabama, and many of the deeper pits were being discovered for the first time by members of the Huntsville Grotto, the local caving club of the National Speleological Society,” says museum curator Scott Shaw. (Huntsville is headquarters for the society, the world’s largest organization dedicated to caving and cave preservation.) Deeper pits require longer ropes, but friction from the weight of those ropes could lead to uncontrollable descents, Shaw explains.

In 1966, Huntsville Grotto member John W. Cole developed a solution that he called “the rack.” It consisted of six movable brake bars on a steel J-frame, allowing a caver to vary the friction during a descent. Cole made his earliest models (like the one pictured) in his garage, giving them to friends and fellow cavers. Eventually, the rack became the preferred device in the U.S. for safer, controlled rappels into pits of any depth. It’s still widely used by cavers and high-angle rescue technicians due to its strength and versatility.

### Negro Southern League Museum (Birmingham) Satchel Paige’s 1940s game uniform

Dr. Layton Revel, founder and executive director of the Center for Negro League Baseball Research, puts it succinctly: Leroy “Satchel” Paige “was unquestionably one of the greatest pitchers of all time.” He was also one of the sport’s most colorful characters, and one who loved the game deeply.

The Mobile native’s pro career began in 1926 and spanned 40 years. Paige played for Negro League teams like the Birmingham Black Barons, Pittsburgh Crawfords, and Kansas City Monarchs. During the off-season, his barnstorming Satchel Paige All-Stars often competed in integrated matchups against other famous all-star teams. Paige also played Major League baseball with the Cleveland Indians (1948-1949) and the St. Louis Browns (1951-1953).

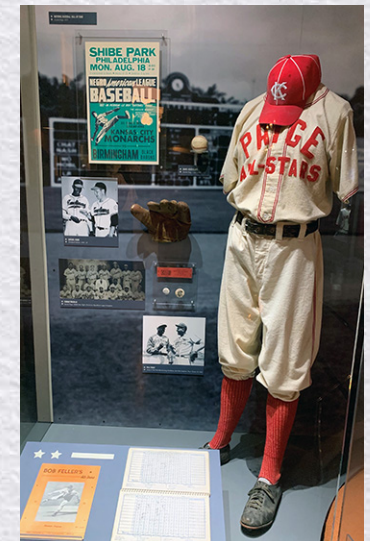
Quite the journey for a poor kid who first left Mobile under court order. In 1918, Paige had lifted some trinkets from a local five-and-dime store. As historian Donald Spivey notes, “Barely twelve years old, and with his mother sobbing at his side, Leroy was sentenced to serve five years in reform school [at Mount Meigs]. The major crime, Leroy Paige reminisced many years later, was that ‘I was a n----- kid.’”

In 1971, Paige became the first Negro League veteran selected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

### Paul W. Bryant Museum (Tuscaloosa) Drawings by second-grade students, 1983



and field along the funeral procession.



On January 28, 1983, the day Paul W. “Bear” Bryant was buried, an estimated 500,000 to 750,000 people paid tribute, wrote Paul Finebaum, then a *Birmingham Post-Herald* reporter. Mourners journeyed to Bryant’s Tuscaloosa church and the Birmingham cemetery where he was laid to rest, and they lined every overpass, sidewalk,





Those who couldn't go remembered Bryant in their own way. At Hoover's Green Valley Elementary, art teacher Ann Downing — as heartbroken as her second-grade students — suggested they draw something that reminded them of Bryant. Their artwork — peppered with footballs, elephants, crimson A's, and earnest, misspelled grief — hung on the walls for weeks. Eventually, the art was mailed to the Bear's widow, Mary Harmon Bryant.

In 2018, *Alabama Alumni Magazine* ran a story about rediscovering the art in the Bryant Museum Library's collections. One of those former students, Brian Waldroup, said, "When I was really young, I remember going to a game with my dad when Bryant was coaching. I was probably in first grade. I can't tell you if they won or who they played...but I do remember when Bear Bryant died."

#### Savery Library (Talladega)

##### Talladega College 1920 football team photo



Which school lays claim to bringing home the state's first national football championship? The answer does not reside in Tuscaloosa or on the Plains. The answer is Talladega College; the year, 1920.

Known as Alabama's first private, historically Black college, the Talladega Crimson Tornadoes (as they were then known), became founding members, in 1913, of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference. In 1920, the program won its first Black College Football National Championship; the next year they won their second. Talladega's back-to-back titles kicked off a decade of dominance by Alabama HBCUs, bookended by a Tuskegee dynasty about 100 miles south. The Golden Tigers won national Black College titles in 1924-1927 and again in 1929-1930.

Talladega, meanwhile, would remain a football powerhouse for another two decades, says Perry Trice,

librarian and college archivist. However, in 1941, the program was "temporarily disbanded," Trice notes. "The second world war left the school with too few male students and too many financial hardships." New post-war priorities at the school later made football's "temporary" suspension permanent. Until, perhaps, now. Eighty years after its last competitive football game, Talladega College is studying the viability of bringing the sport back to campus.

#### Warner Transportation Museum (Tuscaloosa)

##### Queen City Park swimming pool fountain

The University of Alabama's Transportation Museum offers plenty of clues about its former life as a community pool, built in 1943 as a Works Progress Administration



project. Aqua-tiled walls retain their "DON'T RUN" warnings inside the former bathhouse. An art deco fountain, wading pool, and bleachers surround the site. Concrete corners of the pool itself, filled in and sodded over in the 1980s, still peek out of the earth to note a 10.5-foot depth for long-gone swimmers.

The Alabama Humanities Alliance recently awarded a grant to the university's Department of History to support *Swimming Together: A Brief History of Swimming in Tuscaloosa and Across America*, an exhibit on display through August 27, 2022. *Swimming Together* traces the pool's history within the broader context of public pools nationwide, examines its path from segregation to integration, and invites residents to share how and where they learned to swim.

"The decline of community pools like the Queen City Pool occurred throughout the nation, and Tuscaloosa was not immune," notes writer and urban designer Hannah S. Palmer. "However...we have the ability to make the old pool and bathhouse into an inviting space to explore and enjoy without hiding the pool's complicated, often painful history."

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Edited by Charles Buchanan and Phillip Jordan. Opening illustration by Hagen Baker. Photos courtesy of submitting institutions. *Borzov the Sprinter* and *The Iron Bowl* photos by Brock Larsen. Phil Neel art (Auburn football covers) used with permission of the Neel family and the Phil Neel Art Agency. Stickball photo courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives & History; donated by Alabama Media Group, photo by Clark Stallworth, *Birmingham News*.



# A Hall pick six

Since 1969, the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame has inducted 385 members, and its three-story home in Birmingham now houses more than 6,000 items related to its honorees. Here are six artifacts that help tell the story of these athletes and the state they've called home.

## Red Farmer's racing helmet

Red Farmer, a charter member of The Alabama Gang, once listed his racing injuries thusly: "broken right ankle, broken right foot, left leg broken on three occasions, left kneecap removed, two vertebrae in back broken, six ribs broken, cheekbone broken, burns on 40 percent of body..." And that list, according to longtime *Birmingham News* columnist Clyde Bolton, was accurate as of 1971. Fifty-plus years and some 700 wins later, you can still find Farmer racing Saturday nights at the Talladega Dirt Track. (See helmet on page 16.)

## Charley Boswell's putter

Captain Charley Boswell lost his sight in a 1944 battle in Lindern, Germany. Back home, the former Alabama football and baseball player took up a new sport — golf. Boswell became the most renowned blind golfer in the world, winning 37 national and international blind golf championships. Bob Hope once called him "America's greatest inspiration."

## Howard Hill's arrow and tusks

A multi-sport star at Auburn in the early 1900s, Howard Hill became a big-game hunter and a trick-shot artist known as the World's Greatest Archer. He earned his sobriquet with 196 straight archery tournament victories in a 16-year span. Hill is best remembered today as a bow-and-arrow stuntman in Hollywood for films such as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

## Troy basketball net from 258-point game

On January 12, 1992, Troy State (now Troy University) scored an NCAA-record 258 points. Their opponent tallied 141 — and lost by 117. From the next day's *Birmingham News*: "Do not adjust your newspaper. Do not call Ripley. This is the actual score of an actual college basketball game played Sunday afternoon in Troy State's Sartain Hall. Believe it or not."

## Piper Davis' baseball glove

Willie Mays' mentor. A Harlem Globetrotter in his offseasons. An all-star player, manager, and scout who many contemporaries believed could have integrated the majors before Jackie Robinson. Lorenzo "Piper" Davis' life is the story of Black baseball in Alabama in the 20th century — from the industrial leagues to the South's greatest Negro League team, the Black Barons of Birmingham. (See glove on page 16.)



## Alice Coachman's track shoes

In London, 1948, Alice Marie Coachman high-jumped five feet, six and a half inches to become the first Black woman to win an Olympic gold medal. In all, the Tuskegee Flash won 36 track and field national championships and helped open the doors for more women to participate in the sport.

## AHA sports and recreation grantees

In recent years, the Alabama Humanities Alliance has supported several places and projects that explore the intersection of sports and culture, history and humanity.

### Alabama Public Humanities Grants:

- Paul W. Bryant Museum | *Breaking the Color Barrier* exhibit
- University of Alabama Center for Television and Radio | *Hometown Teams: Stories from the Box* project
- University of Alabama Department of History | *Swimming Together* exhibit
- Vulcan Park and Museum | *Alabama's Auto Racing Legacy* exhibit

### COVID-19 relief and recovery funding:

- Friends of Rickwood Field
- Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum
- Launch 2035 – Singing River Trail
- Negro Southern League Museum

Learn more about funding opportunities for public humanities projects at [alabamahumanities.org/grants](http://alabamahumanities.org/grants).