

# The Art of the Athlete

By MARK YOST

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Ask people on the street to name a sports artist, and the vast majority will say "LeRoy Neiman." Neiman, with his distinctive handlebar moustache and larger-than-life personality, died on June 20 at age 91. But beginning in the 1960s, the former Army cook turned Playboy artist defined the genre through his oils, enamels, watercolors, pencil drawings, serigraphs and lithographs. While he did a number of portraits, he was most acclaimed for his paintings of live events, adapting mainstream modernism's penchant for loose brushwork and high-keyed color to the purposes of illustration.



"He painted brilliantly colored, stunningly energetic images of the sports world, capturing its motion and emotion in his brushstrokes," said Thomas P. Rosandich, president of the American Sport Art Museum, which named Neiman Sport Artist of the Year in 2007.

The museum holds seven of Neiman's serigraphs and has dedicated a small gallery to his life and work. "Olympic Fencing"—Neiman was the official artist for five Olympiads—features a mauve background with three pairs of fencers in broad strokes of white, blue and gray. For the largest pair, in the foreground, Neiman shows their tether lines going to the edge of the space, thus anchoring them to the work itself.

"Olympic Boxing, Moscow 1980" turns the whole canvas into a small corner of the ring, the ropes providing the frame for the action. The referee, in white slacks and shirt and black bowtie, is backed into a corner as he watches two boxers duke it out. And then there's "Bear Bryant," featuring the coach in his trademark white short-sleeved shirt, black tie and houndstooth fedora.

While Neiman's works are reason enough to come here, the rest of the collection at this relatively obscure museum is equally impressive. It not only houses the largest collection of sports art in the country, but is one of the more unique exhibition spaces. The museum is part of the U.S. Sports Academy, an online graduate school for high-school and college coaches and athletic directors. Many of the 200 or so artworks on display, from a total collection of about 1,700, are hung in the hallways, stairwells and conference rooms of the academy offices, all of which are open to the public.

So when visitors first walk in, they see, across from the receptionist's desk, a half-dozen miniature bronzes by Eugene, Ore., sculptor Ramon Parmenter: WNBA star Cheryl Miller, baseball and football phenom Bo Jackson, Olympians Tracy Caulkins and Greg Louganis. Across the lobby is a display of some of the 179 works donated by 2012 Sport Artist of the Year Ferenc Németh, a Hungarian sculptor who was influenced by the Cubists of 1920s Prague and Russia. Among the Ferenc items on display is a bronze first shown at the 2008 Art Biennale in conjunction with the Beijing Olympics. It features three cyclists, leaning into the wind, atop five Olympic rings that are also the cyclists' wheels.

Another lobby piece is a 6-by-8-foot abstract oil painting by **Mina Papatheodorou-Valyraki**, the official artist of Formula One racing, as well as Ferrari and other luxury car makers. She uses a technique in which she spreads the paints with bottle caps. Walk down the hallway, past the IT department, and you'll see "The Drive"—an oil painting of an NBA player driving to the hoop—by Tafa, a West African artist who spreads paint thickly on the canvas with butter knives. Across from a conference room are pencil-sketch portraits of Howard Cosell, Bowie Kuhn and Frank Deford by the illustrator Bart Forbes.

Upstairs, across from the executive offices, are the distinctive artworks of James Ridlon. A former Syracuse and NFL defensive back, he is known for his assemblages, which are mounted pieces that use miniature toys and other objects to make their point. For instance, in "Metamorphosis of the Great Ones," Mr. Ridlon amasses plastic football-player game pieces behind a series of walls on the right side of a shadow box, symbolizing everyone who ever played football. To the left of the walls, and ascending up the box, are those pieces—those players—who made it to college or the pros. Those who achieved the greatest heights, positioned at the top of the shadow box, have white silk wings. Another Ridlon piece, "Every Field Goal Kicker's Fantasy," features a miniature Islamic prayer alcove with ornate tiling. In the center of the alcove are goal posts and a ball about to sail through the middle. On the bottom are sculpted hands, reaching up as if to block the ball.

In the main gallery, in honor of this summer's Olympics, is a project by artist Charles Billich. In 19 giclée-on-canvas works, he has depicted Chinese Shaolin warriors, in traditional garb, competing in Olympic events. The archery, equestrian and shooting images aren't that unusual, but those of the warriors on gymnastic rings, or about to kick a soccer ball, are striking.

Accompanying the Billich exhibit are 12 Rick Rush prints of Shaolin warriors in traditional kung-fu poses. This small gallery explains that the sect was outlawed in China for nearly 1,000 years, but are now being promoted by the Chinese government as a cultural treasure. In addition to the Rush prints is a 1,000-year-old Shaolin sword that was made out of wootz steel, a lost art that used water to forge the sword from a single piece.

In short, the art here, breathtaking and complex, is far above the kitsch found in stadium suites and halls of fame.

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