In 1956, under the sponsorship of the M Club Foundation, the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame inducted its first class of “all-stars.”

And what a class it was: the inductees included the first modern Olympic champion in discus throw and shot put, Robert Garrett, and baseball greats Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx and Frank “Home Run” Baker.

Those first members of the State of Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame were inducted at the M Club’s sixth annual banquet on Dec. 13, 1956, at the Lord Baltimore Hotel.   Bucky Miller served as chairman and Dr. James E. Salk, the inventor of the flu vaccine, was the recipient of our Distinguished Citizen Award.

The Hall of Fame’s list of native-born – and more recently, “adopted” - Maryland sons and daughters, who are some of the region’s and even the world’s greatest athletes, has been growing ever since.

To some, a sports hall of fame may not seem like a necessity, viewing it rather like ice cream – unnecessary, but wonderful. But Michael Gibbons, director of the Babe Ruth Museum and The Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards, which houses the MDSAHoF’s memorabilia and exhibits, sees it differently.

He sees the roll of sports halls of fame in several lights:  One, as being the collectors of artifacts that represent sports histories and legacies; and two, as having the responsibility of finding a stable home for those artifacts.

“The role of museums that represent these Halls of Fame is to house the artifacts of state sports history and use them to help interpret the stories that comprise that history,” Gibbons said. “Sports heritage museums, of which Halls of Fame are a part are different from zoos, science and art museums, because their exhibits focus on local sports heritage.

“In a sense, they are more important than other cultural institutions because of that. Interpreting and preserving the legacy of Brooks Robinson has, by my way of thinking, more importance to the Baltimore Maryland community than, say, a shark at the National Aquarium.”

Fortunately, for Maryland’s athletes and sports fans, there has been a group of individuals who has worked relentlessly as part of the MDSAHoF board of directors over the past 58 years to ensure the heritage of Maryland’s highest athletic achievers.

For the first 34 years of the MDSAHoF’s existence its activities were overseen by the M Club Foundation at the University of Maryland, College Park.

In 1956, Charley Ellinger was named president of the M Club Foundation and served as the organization’s first leader until 1963, when D. Chester O’Sullivan became the MDSAHoF’s chairman.

O’Sullivan was a man committed to sports. He was the longtime chairman of the Maryland State Athletic Commission and he gained recognition for his efforts to make boxing safer. He led the MDSAHoF through its early years and remained at the helm until 1996.

During his tenure, the MDSAHoF was recognized in 1990 by a resolution of the Maryland General Assembly as the state’s official sports Hall of Fame. And during his 33 years of leadership, athletes from 26 different sports, from the traditional baseball, football and basketball to the less familiar skeet shooting, badminton and jousting were among those inducted to the Hall.

“Chester O’Sullivan was a conscientious fellow,” said former MDSAHoF board member Vince Bagli, the sports anchor at WBAL-TV for 31 years and considered the dean of broadcast sports journalists in the area. “He worked hard to keep the inductions going. He put the dinner together almost single-handedly. He kept saying, "We have to have more people at our affair” and we’d say, ‘Chester, come on.’”

Bagli, 87, served on the board for about 47 years until his tenure ended in 2012. He remembers the M Club and the University of Maryland being good stewards “that never pressured us” to induct any specific individual.

“We ran the thing like an old boys’ network,” Bagli said. “We had a good group of board members who knew a lot about sports. We did the best we could while we were there.”

In the 1960s, the Hall of Fame had its then induction luncheons at The Johns Hopkins Club on the university’s campus.  It moved to Martin’s West in the 1980s and at that time a relationship was forged with the Babe Ruth Museum. Gibbons, the Babe Ruth Museum director, worked extensively with Bagli and O’Sullivan to establish the display.

One of the longtime major problems of the MDSAHoF to that point was that it had never had a home.

In 2005, under the leadership of Jack Scarbath, who became the MDSAHoF board chairman in 1996, the Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards eliminated that problem.

Gibbons recalled the MDSAHoF turned over its collection of memorabilia to the museum to incorporate it into the museum's archives when they reached an agreement in the 1980s. At that time, the Babe Ruth Museum became responsible for the maintenance, preservation and administration of the Hall’s collection.

But it wasn’t until the mid-‘90s,Gibbons said, that “Jack Scarbath worked with the museum to solicit a $25,000 grant from First National Bank to be applied to a permanent display in the museum's planned Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards.”

In 2005, the Babe Ruth Museum opened Sports Legends, with one of its main features the Maryland Athletic Hall of Fame gallery.

“It was a $130,000 installation featuring a bio on each HOF inductee plus a large display case containing (MDSAHoF) artifacts,” Gibbons said. “The museum raised the balance of the gallery cost. Today, the museum continues to administer the (MDSAHoF) collection as part of its archives, rotating items off and on display, and using those items to interpret the story of Maryland's unique sports heritage.”

Using biographical sketches and photographs of the more than 200 athletes inducted into the Hall, the Museum tells the stories of the state’s greatest baseball, football, lacrosse and track stars. Add to that the interesting stories of duckpin bowlers, swimmers, tennis stars and the highest achievers of other sports this gallery aims to engage all levels of sports fans.

Rare artifacts, such as Frank “Home Run” Baker’s New York Yankees sweater from 1922, Don Kelley’s 1932 Olympic lacrosse jersey, and Jimmie Foxx’s catcher’s mask and Red Sox warm-up jacket are all on display.

When Scarbath, the Maryland Terrapin football All-American, became chairman in 1996, he had already been on the board for more than a dozen years.

“I thought I could bring to light various athletes from the past who should have been recognized by the people of Maryland,” Scarbath, now 83, said recently, recalling his days leading a Hall of Fame board that included Bagli; nationally recognized newspaper columnist John Steadman;  Ed Athey, the athletic director at Washington College; O’Sullivan;Tom Scott,  college football hall of famer; andBob Scott, athletic director at Johns Hopkins University,  a group he described as “gentlemen very interested in athletics” and committed to the organization.

But even though it was the efforts of Scarbath and his board that worked out the agreement for a permanent home for the Hall of Fame at the Camden Yard museum, there is no hesitation when he is asked his greatest accomplishment during his 11 years of leadership.

“Keeping the whole thing going so people could and can be recognized and given their due,” said the MDSAHoF board member-emeritus.

Bagli said Scarbath “should certainly take a bow.”

 The board, in the early to mid-2000s, was aging.

“It was too full of people like me, with age,” Bagli said. “While we were there, we tried to get younger people on the board, but it was hard. And it was hard to get people to be excited about being inducted. Jack was the linch pin. He kept it going. Others were like, ‘Let’s get it over with.’”

The board continued to induct athletes in those closing years of Scarbath’s leadership. In November 2005, with the guidance of Sen. Mike Wagner, the induction banquet was moved to Michael’s Eighth Avenue in Glen Burnie – where it is today.  That 2005 banquet featured Cal Ripken Jr. (baseball), Otto Greiner (golf), Johnny Klippstein (baseball) and Bill Stromberg (football) and was emceed by media stars Pat O’Malley and Keith Mills.

But Scarbath stepped down in 2007 and after the 2006-07 ceremony; the MDSAHoF did not have another induction until 2011.

**[COULD BE CUT FROM HERE]**  “There was a very small group running it and it wasn’t getting a whole lot of support from the rest of the state,” recalled Mills, a well-respected sports broadcaster and local sports historian. “At that time, it was difficult for an athlete to get nominated and voted in.”

Scarbath, recognized as a tireless leader and promoter for the Hall of Fame, remembers conflicts that got in the way.

“There were some people who did not see eye-to-eye,” Scarbath said. “It only takes a few to raise a ruckus.  The committee was frustrated, trying to get athletes who would be recognized by the public. There were other years we did not think various persons (nominated) should be recognized.

“Consequently, it was a situation that was very, very difficult.  In order to uphold what was the best of Hall of Fame, we did not name inductees.” **[COULD END CUT HERE]**

The leadership of the MDSAHoF came into the hands of a new chairman, legendary high school baseball coach Bernie Walter, in 2011. A new board was organized and inductions resumed. *Coach Walter describes the re-organized board as "a diverse group of doers, who are leaders in various components of Maryland sports. There are tireless working to maintain the memories of Maryland's greatest athletes."*

In 2011 Sam Cassell (basketball), Fred Funk (golf), Tara Heiss (basketball), Sean Landeta (football), Travis Pastrana (action sports), Hasim Rahman (boxing) and Geoff Zahn (baseball) were inducted.

Mills, who continued to do the emcee honors until a conflict in scheduling arose recently, said that 2011 ceremony was one he’ll never forget.

“You know, sometimes you get caught up in the grind of sports and you forget how outstanding players from Maryland have been,” Mills said. “The night Sam Cassell and Fred Funk were inducted, that was a special night, one of the most poignant I can remember.

“Sam Cassell said, ‘Mr. Bagli, I used to play at Dunbar and you’d bring your (TV) camera and I’d run home after the game to see our game.’ That kid that Vince took the time to go see, turned out to be an East Baltimore legend. And Fred Funk was so gracious. He’s a golf legend and he talked about how honored he was to be inducted into the Maryland Hall of Fame.

“You forget how great Maryland sports are. Michael Phelps will be in there one day, Muggsy Bogues. Pam Shriver’s in there. We just forget and it’s wonderful to have an organization that lets us remember.

“It went through a bad time, but in the last few years it has turned around and without question if you’re inducted now it’s a really deserving, prestigious honor.”

 In 2011, the new board also took on a long-running eligibility debate.  Should the Maryland Athletic Sports Hall of Fame remain closed to anyone who was not born in the state? Or, should it be open to athletes who made their names in Maryland and spent most of their lives in the state?

The vote was taken and the bylaws were rewritten.

The current rule reads: any individual born in the state of Maryland, or who has resided in the state of Maryland is eligible for election. Through their athletic achievements and significant contributions to the local communities and the State of Maryland he/she (has) earned the distinction at the sole discretion of the Board of Directors of becoming an “Adopted” Marylander and is eligible for election.  All candidates must have participated as an athlete at the state, national or professional levels of sports competition to be eligible.

Though controversial, the change has made it possible to honor such longtime Maryland sports legends as Pittsburgh native and Baltimore Colt quarterback Johnny Unitas and Louisville native and Baltimore Bullet Hall of Fame center Wes Unseld.

This year, the board continued to demonstrate its forward thinking attitude and is inducting the first Thoroughbred, Native Dancer, one of the greatest race horses of all time, into the Hall.

In addition, the MDSAHoF Board also presents “The John F. Steadman Lifetime Achievement Award” to a Maryland citizen whose lifetime career in sports has brought honor and distinction to Maryland and its citizenry.