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Fred Grimm: It's sink or swim time for hall of fame

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Only me. Only visitor in sight. Couldn't even find someone to take my \$8 admission fee before setting off among the yellowing wax effigies of Johnny Weissmuller, Duke Kahanamoku, Mark Spitz, past the black swim trunks of Greg Louganis, onto an exhibit of exceedingly modest swim wear once forced on American women. The 1915 Sports Illustrated swim suit issue would not have been so very titillating.

The display of antique swim wear, women in long black woolies, only added to a sense that the International Swimming Hall of Fame was mired in 1965 museum sensibilities, a place OK for Tarzan-to-be Olympians like Johnny and Buster Crabbe, but Michael Phelps seemed utterly out of place. Nor did diver James Foley's century-old swim trunks cheer up the place. He wore them on his last fatal 100-foot plunge into a five-foot-deep vat of water.

The museum, stuck like an afterthought in the back of its namesake pool complex on Fort Lauderdale Beach, only draws 12,000 visitors a year. Standing there alone amid the clutter of exhibits on Friday afternoon, I wondered if ISHOF had had to pad attendance stats just to reach 12,000.

It's a forlorn space. And likely it's leaving Fort Lauderdale.

Blame it on timing. Blame it on the Miami Marlins stadium fiasco. The International Swimming Hall of Fame has become another casualty of Jeffrey Loria Syndrome. Thanks to the Marlins' machinations, as the Miami Dolphins' Stephen Ross can attest, 2013 has not been a good year for sports enterprises to ask for a boost from local government.

Not that the International Swimming Hall of Fame's putting the squeeze on Fort Lauderdale for great gobs of money. The museum just wants something grander than the piddling 10,000 square feet of space offered in the on-the-cheap renovation job planned for the city's aging aquatic swim complex.

A \$70 million project, with a hotel and restaurant and a wave pool, has been pared to an unremarkable \$32.4 million re-do with a Ron Jon Surf Shop across the street in Alexander Park, in case tourists run low on tank tops, flip flops and Mr. Zogs Sex Wax.

Meanwhile, Santa Clara, Calif. has been wooing the hall of fame with the promise of \$10 million upfront and a \$2 million endowment. Santa Clara, obviously immune to Loria Syndrome, wants to put the museum next to the 49ers' new \$916 million stadium (47 percent of that paid with public money).

The International Swimming Hall of Fame, stuck behind a 1965 swimming complex, has been threatening to strike out for new digs for years. There were threats of absconding to Hollywood, Deerfield Beach, Daytona Beach and as the sweetener in a very dubious condo deal a developer tried to pull off in Pompano Beach. But this time, the suitors include former FaceBook CFO Gideon Yu, who also happens to be president of the 49ers. And Fort Lauderdale seems resigned to losing one of its few iconic institutions.

The once grand pool complex had been an obvious choice for the hall of fame back in the day, given that so many Olympians trained and competed in those blue waters. But all those medals and historic swim gear and posters and videos and mannequins seem destined for California.

It didn't have to be. In 2001, the Fort Lauderdale City Commission, by a 3-2 vote, turned down an offer from a developer to build a \$44 million HOK retro-design International Swimming Hall of Fame with swimming and diving and training pools, a modern interactive electronic museum, a library and hall of fame headquarters, with a 742-space municipal parking garage. The five-story Mediterranean-Italian design was meant to recall the famed saltwater casino pool built on the Fort Lauderdale beachfront in 1928. It promised to fill

100,000 hotel rooms a year.

The project, to be built on city-owned land at the Intracoastal Waterway and the Las Olas Boulevard Bridge, would have cost taxpayers nothing in construction costs after a land-swap with a condo developer. But the three dissenting commissioners held out for another plan that promised to fill that same parking lot with condo towers and a supermarket.

That bridge-side lot, by the way, has remained empty. The commissioners traded a new world-class aquatic complex and hall of fame for a supermarket that never happened. And now we'll have a cheapo replacement with an empty museum hall.

Perhaps, in tune with the new Ron Jon, the city should reach back into the city's most notable contribution to American culture and convert that abandoned space to a Spring Break Hall of Fame. After all, legendary intercollegiate competitions were held at the Button and the Candy Store. World records were undoubtedly set along the rowdy Lauderdale strip in beer chugging and teeny bikini and wet T-shirt contests.

Nostalgic parents could bring their children to the International Spring Break Hall of Fame and show them photos and news clipping and videos and police arrest records from the Easter weekend when Momma bared it all and daddy chugged a beer in four seconds, all for their respective alma maters.

Fill the room with authentic, 1978 kegs and beer huggies. Build a replica of the old wooden bar at the Button.

Feature a dank Lauderdale beach hotel room with eight kids sharing two double beds. I can tell you this, the wax figures adorned with an historic 1980 bikini exhibition will be a hell of the lot more alluring than that sad mannequins of Johnny Weissmuller.

I can guarantee, the ISBHOF will bust the ISHOF's 12,000 annual attendance record, no sweat, and no need to pad the stats.