

# GRIDIRON GLORY IN CANTON

## City celebrates annual Pro Football Hall of Fame festival

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CANTON — For one weekend every year, all eyes turn to this quiet city in northeast Ohio.

Millions tune in on their televisions. Thousands are drawn here in person. Even celebrities come to town to pay homage — good celebrities, too, like Mr. T.

When the Pro Football Hall of Fame holds its annual enshrinement ceremony for the sport's best players, as it will on Saturday, the world stops and takes notice. Many have come to call it football's greatest weekend, and it's made even greater by more than a week of festivities preceding it, from rock concerts to a rib burnoff to a hot air balloon race.

But first things first: The football.

The nation's shrine to the gridiron is located just off I-77, about an hour south of Cleveland, in what appears to be a giant orange juicer. (Or you could argue it's a football-shaped cathedral. You be the judge.)

Inside is everything a devoted fan could want. There are contemporary artifacts, such as a uniform worn by LaDainian Tomlinson, the San Diego Chargers running back who last year broke the single-season record for touchdowns scored. For history buffs, there's a shoe worn by Tom Dempsey, of the New Orleans Saints, who kicked an NFL-record 63-yard-long field goal in 1970. (If you think the shoe looks a bit odd, remember that Dempsey had only half a foot.)

There are exhibits explaining the history of the game, including why the Hall ended up in Canton in the first place. Answer: The city of about 80,000 people was home to an early pro-football powerhouse, the Jim Thorpe Canton Bulldogs. It was here that what became the National Football League was founded in 1920.

### MULTIMEDIA

[See Canton slideshow](#)

[Read sidebar on other Canton sites](#)



Barry Sanders, from left, John Elway, Carl Eller, and Bob Brown pose with their busts after their induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame Sunday, Aug. 8, 2004, in Canton, Ohio. (ASSOCIATED PRESS)

There are photo galleries and Super Bowl rings. The Hall even has a rotating theater and interactive exhibits that allow visitors to tackle trivia or toss a pigskin.

The centerpiece of the collection, though, remains its many bronze busts, one for each enshrinee. These regal reminders of

the legends of the game are inspiring in a way that the plaques or portraits of other halls of fame cannot match.

As a reminder that this is a living museum, the sport's faithful gather here every summer to enshrine a new class of athletes, making it the best time to visit by far. This year's class is highlighted by Dallas Cowboys receiver Michael Irvin and Buffalo Bills running back Thurman Thomas.

Those who make the trip to Canton Saturday will have a chance to see the athletes in person at the enshrinement ceremony.

I remember growing up in Canton, waking up early to grab a free seat outside the Hall of Fame's front steps to catch a glimpse of them. We'd bond with other fans over doughnuts and hot cocoa — while watching with amusement the hefty Washington Redskin fans dressed up like women and wearing hog noses — waiting for legends such as Walter Payton and Joe Namath to enter history before our very eyes.

## IF YOU GO:

**Getting There:** Canton is located 150 miles southeast of Toledo, about a 2 1/2-hour drive. Take I-80 east to I-77 south.

**Pro Football Hall of Fame**, 2121 George Halas Drive NW, Canton:  
[www.profootballhof.com](http://www.profootballhof.com), 330-456-8207.  
Summer hours: open daily 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. through Sept. 3; closes at 5 p.m. on day of enshrinement.  
Admission: \$16 adults, \$10 children 14 and under, \$13 seniors over 62.  
Enshrinement: Saturday, 6 p.m.  
Hall of Fame Game: Sunday, 8 p.m.

### **Hall of Fame Festival,**

[www.profootballhoffestival.com](http://www.profootballhoffestival.com)  
Timken Grand Parade: Saturday, 8 a.m.  
Concert, fireworks: Saturday, 6 p.m.

Those days are over now. It's just too popular. Today, more than 20,000 can buy tickets and cram into Fawcett Stadium, next to the Hall of Fame, to hear the former players speak. At times they can get long-winded but there are usually bright spots to counterbalance the length:

Funny moments, like when the crowd learned that Buffalo coach Marv Levy used to tell players a story about Adolf Hitler, how he almost conquered the world but got bogged down in Russia. "He couldn't win on the road," he famously said.

Or touching moments, like when quarterback Jim Kelly choked back tears as he saluted his son in the audience, who had a fatal nervous system disorder.

The night after the enshrinement, the same stadium hosts the NFL preseason Hall of Fame game, offering a chance to see some of the great players of today, too. This year that could mean Ben Roethlisberger and Reggie Bush when the Pittsburgh Steelers take on the Saints.

For football widows and others who aren't tuning in every Sunday in the fall to watch football, there are things to enjoy as well for the entire week leading up to football's greatest weekend.

There's a fireworks display downtown, and the annual ribs burnoff this year will feature rocker Pat Benatar and country singer Darryl Worley at the county fairgrounds. There's also a fashion show and a balloon race featuring 70 hot air balloons (including one this year that is shaped like a football).

And who doesn't love a parade? The Timken Grand Parade the morning of the enshrinement ceremony is one of the longest and best in the country.

The 2.2-mile route is lined by 200,000 people and carried on national television. There are marching bands, high-tech floats, and big helium balloons, as you'd expect. This being a football-inspired parade, there are plenty of former players sprinkled throughout as well.

Like a great football game, the excitement is over far too soon. But also like a great football game, you can't wait to experience it again.

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Pro Football Hall of Fame.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)