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TOP STORY | EDITOR'S PICK

Political bobbleheads get the nod of approval from visitors to the RNC

JENNA WANG For the State Journal

Jul 19, 2024



Co-founder and CEO Phil Sklar discovered the collecting bug after watching his father collect baseball cards.
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Bobbleheads of Donald Trump have always been a bestseller among political candidates in the National Bobblehead HOF and Museum.

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MILWAUKEE — In a second floor walk-up tucked above a coffee shop, you'll come face-to-face with former president Donald Trump and incumbent Joe Biden, waving and smiling alongside each other.

Walk along the shelves a little further, and you'll spot even greater surprises: Trump swinging a golf club and holding a Bible upside down and Biden high-fiving vice president Kamala Harris.

In their mighty but small 6-8 inch statures, they strike their poses and do one little action that makes them different from regular action figures: bob their heads up and down.

The political figures and their bobbleheads became the center of attention at downtown Milwaukee's National Bobblehead Hall of Fame and Museum during the 2024 Republican National Convention, where Trump accepted his nomination for president.

“His supporters are very fanatic, in general a lot more vocal I'd say, than Biden supporters,” said co-founder and CEO Phil Sklar. “So we've seen and probably sold more Trump than Biden.”



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Trump's bobbleheads have historically outsold Biden's figures, according to Sklar.

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To celebrate the RNC in Milwaukee and the Democratic National Convention in Chicago this August, the attraction has also produced and sold an elephant and a donkey bobblehead, both clad in red, white and blue.



Museum co-founders produced only 2,024 of the limited-edition elephant and donkey bobbleheads to commemorate the RNC and DNC.

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“People like to have trinkets that they remember events by, whether they’re a delegate or just coming to be part of the conventions,” Sklar said. “Bobbleheads are going to be a unique way to commemorate that.”

Political bobbleheads aren’t the only nodding clay figures that exist at the world’s largest collection of bobbleheads. The nearly 10,000 bobblehead-large collection features everything from sports and pop culture to music and movies.

It’s been nearly a decade since Sklar and his co-founder, Brad Novak, launched their online shop and dreamed up plans for a museum in November of 2014. Since then, their business has transformed into a treasure trove of history and quirky American

culture — and a unique way of capturing the historic 2024 presidential election cycle come November.

'It's kitschy'

The co-founders first met in middle school and became best friends in high school before attending college together in Milwaukee. The Illinois natives haven't left each other's sides since, and have spent their friendship growing a collection together.

The collection first began with Rocko, the mascot of a baseball team called the Rockford Riverhawks. Once Novak got ahold of the bobbing bird from a giveaway, the craze began.

The pair would then travel to baseball stadiums across the country to collect as many sports bobbleheads as they could and circling as many giveaways as they fit on their calendars.

“That's how the collection grew, from that single bobblehead into one display, two, three, four, to out of control,” Sklar said.

In 2014, Sklar took a leap of faith to follow the bobblehead dream and left his corporate finance and accounting career behind. From there, the figures would find their way into the homes of thousands of fans and greet visitors from over 30 countries at the museum.

Project manager Andrew Horschak said people always stay longer than they expected.

“Next thing you know, two and half hours later, ‘Oh, we have dinner reservations, like we were here this long?’” He said. “You can't be upset looking at bobbleheads. It's kitschy.”

The political bobblehead trends

The attraction boasts all 46 presidents, 22 Supreme Court justices, a rare John F. Kennedy bobblehead from the 1960s, and a bobblehead series of presidential candidates every four years.



Museum store houses a display of all 46 presidents waving and smiling up at visitors.

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Politics and history buffs aren't the only ones who've found fun in the varying depictions of political figures. In fact, Sklar said many visitors have come to check out viral moments in the political landscape that have transformed into bobbleheads, like when a fly landed on former vice president Mike Pence or when Bernie Sanders became a meme for his mitten attire on Biden's inauguration day.

In the midst of the presidential election cycle, Trump bobbleheads have been popular — but they've also existed even before he entered politics, said Sklar. A bobblehead of him uttering his catchphrase, "You're fired," on the set of "The Apprentice" is proof of one such instance.

"Biden doesn't have as many bobbleheads — it's just not that level of enthusiasm or like a rabid fan base," Sklar said.

He pointed to the different styles of rallies between Trump and Biden as an example.

“There’s a little bit of a different mindset, more of like a circus-type atmosphere, whereas Biden’s more like a business atmosphere, and his rallies are not going to be the same type of environment,” Sklar said.

The trend has even proved consistent stretching back to 2020 and 2016, where Trump bobbleheads still outsold both Biden and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton respectively, according to Sklar.

‘Bobbleheads can fit right in’

Thanks to the addition of new bobbleheads, Horschak said he’s gotten to learn about new people that he would’ve never known otherwise.

Writing press releases on topics like the Negro leagues, baseball teams composed mostly of Black players, felt more like “term papers” than anything else.

“I’ve got to be one of the most educated people now about this, just because we put out some bobbleheads,” Horschak said. “It’s fascinating.”

That knowledge has translated to the scavenger hunts that museum visitors can partake in, which encourages them to find certain bobbleheads, learn new facts and earn prizes at the end.



After senator Bernie Sanders went viral for his mitten-clad sitting posture at president Joe Biden’s inauguration, his bobblehead became the second best-selling figure at the store.

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Challenging people to find an iconic striped character called Waldo and “playing it up” for children has been fun for Horschak.

“It’s your job, this is your mission — while you’re here, you have to find Waldo,” Horschak recalled of what he told children. “They’re so tunnel vision-focused on finding that one bobblehead. It’s so cute, especially when they can’t find it right away because then, ‘Can I have a hint?’”

Although children might struggle sometimes, he remembered a moment where a child found Waldo within minutes when adults struggled for much longer. But whether they can eventually find the glasses-clad figure or not, there are ample surprises along the way for everyone.

“They’re yelling out, ‘Oh my gosh, it’s Larry Bird and Magic Johnson! Oh my gosh, it’s Howdy Doody!’” Sklar said. “Just hearing them get excited and talking to their friends or family, it’s fun.”

Even though Sklar and his co-founder weren’t born in Milwaukee, they quickly realized how much of a “hotbed” it was for bobbleheads and visitors all over the world.

“There isn’t a birthplace for bobbleheads, so there wasn’t really a spot where you said, ‘Oh they’re born in Salem, Massachusetts, you have to have bobbleheads there,’” Sklar said. “Milwaukee is sort of a quirky city with a lot of different cultural things like beer and brats and burgers, and we figured bobbleheads can fit right in.”



Museum visitors during the RNC week have been able to complete fun scavenger hunts.

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