

BASEBALL

# For love or money: baseball card collector draws line

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I was never into baseball cards for the money. Oh, sure like every other of the one in 100 people who had actually decided to keep their cards from their childhood days, I was certainly not disappointed when I discovered years later that I had landed a gold mine. Cards that I had paid a nickel for back in 1975 were suddenly worth more than \$100 and cards that I had paid \$20 for were now worth more than \$1,000. That's not to say I didn't get sucked into the baseball card craze of the 1980s. I was an avid collector in my youth (I'm 22 now). I would trade and purchase cards regularly. I would revel in the art of "ripping" somebody off, whether it was friend or foe. There was nothing more satisfying than purchasing a 1982 Cal Ripken rookie or 1983 Ryne Sandberg rookie for 25 cents, knowing it was worth \$30 and \$20 at the time. Now, the cards go for \$70 and \$50, respectively.

I never really felt guilty, either, buying these cards, even when it was from a non-collector friend who didn't know any better. Sometimes I even bought cards from kids five years younger than me. It still didn't matter. It wasn't that I didn't have a conscience.

It was like this: I never had any intention of turning around and selling the cards, which would mean clearing a monetary profit, so who was really getting hurt? In my mind, I might have been getting a great deal, but in my friends' minds they were getting cold cash for a piece of cardboard they had paid a nickel for and didn't really want any way. I would go to the shows, too, spending \$50 once a month and coming home with \$300 worth of cards. And they're really worth that. It honestly would have not been difficult at all to sell the cards for that value.

But I didn't want to. Somehow it was more enjoyable knowing I had a \$1,200 rookie Nolan Ryan that I had paid something like \$20 back for in 1983, than to have the actual money. I know it sounds crazy, especially when you're old enough to realize a piece of cardboard can't buy you much, but \$1,000 goes a long way. Heck, it could almost pay for Bobby Bonilla to catch one fly ball.

But the thing with me and baseball cards was they were more than just pieces of cardboard with photographs on the front and a bunch of numbers on the back. They were something I planned to pass down to my children and I hoped my children would pass down to their children. These were my childhood heroes, a part of history. They were a part of me.

Two months ago, I nearly gave it all up. I almost let greed get in the way of the whole reason I went into collecting baseball cards.

I decided to become a dealer. I bought a table at a show for \$35. That allows you to sell your cards. Some of the people who purchase tables are permanent dealers, who actually make a living off the industry. The rest are pretty much people like me — guys who collected cards as kids, got tired of it and wanted to make

a quick buck.

When I did shows in 1987 and 1989, it was to enhance my collection, not be rid of it.

It's a well-known fact in the baseball card industry that dealers get the best buys and trades. They have to. How else would they make money? What good it would be to purchase a Nolan Ryan rookie card for \$1,200 if that's what the price guides list it for? What kind of profit could a dealer turn?

Most willing sellers are well aware of card values and will offer a dealer a good price if not a great price to purchase their scrap cardboard. And if the dealer still thinks the price is too high, generally the seller can be talked down even more.

I had pocketed about \$150 at the last show and promptly reinvested it in a combination rookie and first year Johnny Bench (1968 and 1969) and second year Steve Carlton (1966). The cards went for about \$700 combined on the market. So I left the show with no more money, but a lot more in baseball card value.

And here I was once again, behind a table as a dealer. But there was one difference: I was keeping the money this time.

I had prepared long and hard for this show. I asked my best friend, Paul, to help me out, because he, too, was an avid collector. He knew the prices by heart and was in sales to boot.

Paul had interested me in collecting, ironically after "ripping off" my cards, purchasing them for 10 percent of their value. He turned around and sold them, too.

At the previous two shows, Paul and I shared a table. Half was to sell my cards and half to sell his. But not this time. This time, I wanted all the customers, all the sales, all the money.

I still had competition surrounding me, but at least now there was one less person. Although Paul was doing it as a fa-



Baseball card collectors hawk their wares to potential customers, but most visitors to the show were just looking.

vor, I did agree to give him a more than fair percentage of my sales for his efforts.

I was determined to make money once and for all off my 10-year investment.

The show started out slow. I made a few sales early on, about

\$25. As it wore on, the pace picked up. Fathers shopped with sons, high school buddies with each other. There were even grandmothers looking for gifts for their grandchildren. At least that's what I thought, until I realized what was going on.

They were looking, not buying. My prices were well below the Beckett Price Guide (Beckett is the bible of card values in the sports trading card industry) and still nobody was interested.

I was selling Rickey Henderson rookies for \$90 and not even a nibble. They list for \$140 in the price guide and all the other dealers were selling them for \$120. I had Sandberg rookie cards for \$35. The guide listed it for \$50 and this is Chicago. The closest competition was \$45. Still, no dice.

What was happening?

It turned out it wasn't only me that was having a slow sales day. All the dealers were. We discussed it and all came up with the same answer: the recession.

It made sense. After all, who in their right mind would pay more than \$5 for cardboard even if it is worth so much more, when they are trying to make ends meet at home for the family. People are cutting corners, and naturally, collecting cards would be just as good a place to start.

I was discouraged. I had went into this show to make money. No other reason. Forget enhancing my collection or so I thought at the time. I wanted money. I was hoping to clear \$500.

With about an hour left in the show, I had \$110 and \$25 of that came from a sale of a 1984 Don-russ Cubs team set worth about \$75. And that guy probably turned around and sold it.

As the show wound down, I thought I had wasted seven hours of my life. Sure I had made some money but nothing like what I had hoped for. Then it happened.

A kid, probably about high school age, approached my table and told me he was selling cards if I was interested. His cards included a second-year Whitey Ford, Don Drysdale, Hank Aaron — a 1954 rookie Satchel Paige!

My adrenalin started flowing. Memories of the Ripkens and Sandbergs for 25 cents, the Ryan for \$20, the Bench, the Carlton.

"How much do you want for the Satchel Paige?" I reluctantly asked him.

The card booked for \$250 in its condition. The guy asked \$90. I talked him down to \$60.

As I contemplated the purchase, Paul started shouting in my ear.

"Are you nuts?" he said. "Satchel Paige — \$60. Do you know what kind of addition that is to a collection? I've never even seen a Satchel Paige. If you don't buy that, I will."

I bought the card. By the time the show was over, I had spent the other \$50, too, buying a Drysdale and some other cards, which were worth about \$200. I had spent all the money I had made. I couldn't believe it.

My dreams of money had turned once again to cardboard.

As I packed up, I didn't say much to Paul. He could tell I was upset. He kept telling me what great additions to the collection I had made. He emphasized how lucky I was to have the Satchel Paige.

"I know," I told him. "But you know the reason I came here this time was to make money. You said it yourself: 'It's just cardboard, after all.'"

"To me it is," Paul answered. "But not to you." He was right.



Todd Natenberg displays his prized Nolan Ryan rookie card, valued at \$1,200, to a passing customer. Daily Herald Photos/Mark Welsh

TENNIS

# McEnroe may be taking final swings at Australian Open

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — He's baaack. In all his devilish glory, cursing umpires as venomously as ever, scorching linesmen with his burning eyes, picking up where he left off when last they banished him.

But on the eve of the Australian Open, John McEnroe returns as a relic of a tennis age gone by, his rantings now more pathetic than obnoxious as he seeks for perhaps the last time to retrieve his lost genius.

Never was it clearer than this week when McEnroe, after all his work over the past two years to revive his game with these new-fangled racket rackets, stared in amazement as Jim Courier's shots soared past him.

"His idea is to hit hard enough to give you no time," a frustrated McEnroe said after his 6-3, 6-4 loss in a tune-up tournament in Adelaide. "The cycle now in tennis is the power game. This is the type of game that will be played from now on."

Courier's new age game crackles with power from both sides and on

his serves. But he comes into the Australian with a superb chance of winning because of three other strengths that McEnroe can no longer muster — poise, confidence and fitness.

The events of two years ago, when McEnroe became the first player in history to be thrown out of the Australian Open, haunted him in Adelaide when he cursed officials in his losses to Pete Sampras and Courier. Ever the mad artist, investing himself so fully in each shot that he can't help but lose control eventually, McEnroe — who skipped Australia last year with an injured shoulder — still possesses in his moments of grandeur those soft, sweet drop volleys and sweeping wide-angle serves that marked his style in seven Grand Slam victories.

Yet each year those moments become fewer. The real reason McEnroe is seriously considering retirement after this season at age 33 has nothing to do with his temper. It is the simple fact that he can only rarely beat any of the top players anymore.

Courier, seeded No. 2 after an amazing rise from the No. 25 ranking a year ago, has to be considered the favorite over the next two weeks — even against top-seeded Stefan Edberg, who is rusty and sore-muscled after a long layoff.

At 21, Courier has the verve and a better serve than a young Jimmy Connors, but without any of the vulgar theatrics.

Courier reached only the fourth round here last year. His big improvement, though, came later when he won the French, made the quarters at Wimbledon and the finals at the U.S. Open, where he stopped Connors' incredible run in the semis. Connors decided to pass up this tournament.

Two of Courier's most dangerous rivals here — Edberg and Goran Ivanisevic — are coming in with aches after also playing in Adelaide. Edberg, who sat out the past two months because of knee and wrist injuries, is bothered by a sore arm. Ivanisevic quit his match against Edberg on Friday because of a blister on his right foot, and is also

suffering a sprained left ankle.

Defending champion Boris Becker, who could meet McEnroe in the third round, is likely Courier's toughest challenger, along with Sampras, who lost to Courier in Adelaide.

Hard-serving Frenchman Guy Forget, Wimbledon champion Michael Stich and Michael Chang represent outside threats to win.

Monica Seles, the defending women's champion and top seed, hasn't played since winning the Virginia Slims Championship in November. The 18-year-old spent Christmas at home for the first time in three years, worked on a new wrinkle in her game — serve-and-volley — and tested out her new Jaguar. Her biggest problem was deciding which color the car should be — she settled on red — then she took off for Australia and ran into a more serious problem.

It seems she slept kind of scrunched up on the plane and developed a kink in her neck, which resulted in a pulled muscle when she practiced serving a few days later.

She says that's healing fine, but she points to the bump on her left shin that won't go away.

The shin splints that she blamed for missing Wimbledon — the only Grand Slam event she didn't win last year — apparently have left her with a permanent reminder. Special soles on her tennis shoes help protect her legs, especially when playing on hard courts like the ones at the Australian.

Gabriela Sabatini, the No. 3 seed, has been playing well at a tune-up event in Sydney and thinks the time is right to make a charge on Seles.

"Monica is beatable," Sabatini said. "I have worked on a strategy with my coach Carlos (Kirmeyer)." That strategy is the same one Sabatini used so successfully in winning the U.S. Open in 1990 — rushing the net when she has the opportunity instead of playing only from the baseline as she had in the past.

Sabatini might be thinking about Seles, but she'd be wise not to overlook a 15-year-old who looms as a potential quarterfinal opponent — No. 5 Jennifer Capriati.



Tennis' new power game ages John McEnroe.

Associated Press Photo