

The 2026 National – an array of logistics, lines and finds



Stephens Convention Center photo: bogdanstepniak, Wikimedia Commons



By [George Vrechek](#)

I have been reading reports in other publications about the National Sports Collectors Convention held from July 29 to August 2, 2026, at the [Stephens Convention Center](#) in Rosemont, Illinois. I would like to provide a report as well.

Wait a minute, Vrechek. You weren't even at the National. What makes you think you can add your two cents?

Tribune front page story

Having attended all the Chicago Nationals except the most recent and helped dealers and publishers a few times, I was interested in how it went this year. I looked for reports in the press and contacted some participants. The Chicago Tribune ran a front-page story the Monday after the National. The New York Times had coverage. Adam Warshaw posted detailed reports and photos on his daily Adam's Card Blog.

The long Tribune article by Lila Hempel-Edgers was titled “Crushing it, Baseball cards are worth more than ever. And kids are making a fortune.” A first impression from the article was that this year’s National was an opportunity for kids to enjoy the hobby and experience the high-stakes world of trading in a volatile market. The writer described the spectacle of mini-safes rolling down the aisles dragged by mini-kids, and that “lines formed hours before the doors opened each day, with attendees stretching nearly a mile down North River Road. The crowd skewed younger than ever before.”

However, before concluding, the Tribune quoted Ronnie Holloway, a Chicago shop owner, on his experience fielding calls from young sellers trying to recoup their losses from speculative purchases they had made in the recent past. “I hate to say it, but they were misled,” Holloway said. “The bubble is going to pop, and I don’t think these kids can handle that.”

The Tribune added, “Holloway said he blames card manufacturers for transforming what was once an accessible hobby into a high-risk market driven by speculation.” The Tribune included references to chase cards, lottery tickets, livestreams, jackpot pulls and dopamine rushes.

If you read the Trib article in reverse, it seemed like a pretty accurate report on the increased presence of kids in attendance.

Sports Collectors Digest

SCD reported, “Among the crowd Thursday were dozens of teenagers carrying backpacks full of trading cards hoping to make deals.” The Card Kids Trade Zone was a popular destination. Plenty of buying and selling took place off the floor at Trade Night, the VIP Lounge and hallways outside the lounge. “Rob Gronkowski was on the eBay Live Stage ripping packs and revving up the crowd.” To cut down the lines at PSA, they implemented a \$400 minimum card value starting on Thursday.

Lines to leave

Yogi Berra’s name was associated with the quip, “No one goes there anymore. It is too crowded.” (Berra also confessed, “I didn’t really say everything I said.”)

For some collectors and dealers, might the National have reached the point of being too crowded, too expensive and not worth the effort? I talked to a few attendees. No one said they were throwing in the towel; however, among the complaints were the lines to get in, the cost of attending, the cost of dealer tables, high prices for products, crowding and waits of 45 minutes or more to even get out of the adjacent parking lot.

The 2026 National website boasted, “You won’t have to worry about parking at your next visit. Visitors have the convenience of ample, well lit, on-site, gated parking spaces. All this makes for easy access into and out of the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center!” I parked in the convention center garage once, and ever after arrived via CTA or parked in the CTA lot a few blocks away.

But maybe it wasn’t even all that much fun for vintage card collectors. I heard from a dozen long-time collectors that the second-floor crowding was ridiculous. The aisles were too narrow in what felt like dangerous overcrowding. You had collectors rolling hard-shelled luggage in opposite directions amidst strollers and backpacks. To escape from an aisle might take 15 minutes. Podcasters wandered through the aisles followed by people filming them and bringing their lights. It was an enviable spectacle of imagining that you were doing something important and had an entourage of followers trying to get a glimpse of the action.

Collectors’ views

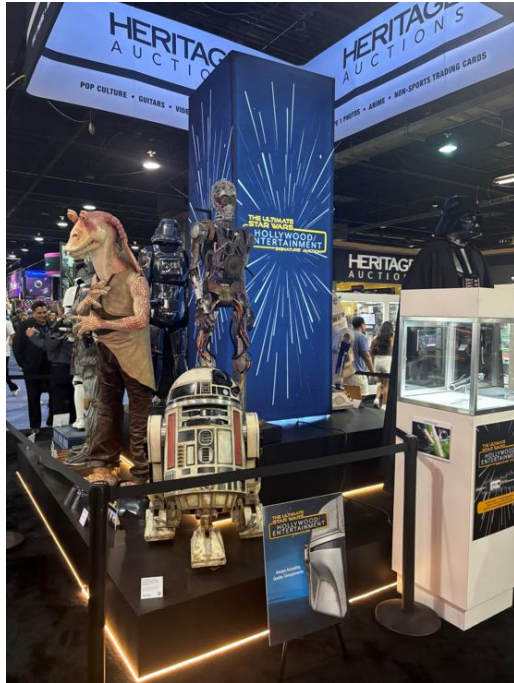
Scott Jensen attended the show for all five days along with his son and grandson on one of the days. He was pleased to find several of the final cards needed to complete sets and was surprised that there was enough to keep his young grandson busy – for a while. The non-sports cards he looked for ranged from the tobacco era to the late 1960s. He commented:

“I try to buy the pass for early access and the (free) Wednesday autographs. Years past included big names. This year was a trio of decent guys and kudos to show organizers for a more efficient process. I’m guessing my wait time was reduced by an hour. Off to the show floor, I felt like Wednesday was far more crowded than prior years.”

Patient collectors at shows will scout out their needs, compare prices and then circle back to purchase the best deal. Jensen had his wantlist of set killer cards in hand. At a typical show, it isn’t hard to remember where you spotted cards. At the National, remembering which dealer had those cards and where they were can be a challenge. Booth numbers are hard to spot, you have 600,000 square feet of convention floor and you have been looking at stuff for five days. You think, I should have bought it when I saw it and saved running up my step totals.

Jensen reported, “Parking garage was a huge headache. Thursday arrival at normal time and 3rd floor of the parking garage ...already. It’s only 8:30 a.m. Gonna be a long exit. Friday, I wandered upstairs to start. Terrible setup. Crazy narrow aisles and almost no vintage. I wonder why they don’t move the auto signings upstairs and use the full show space on the floor.”

On Saturday Jensen went with his son Brett and his 6-year-old grandson Matthew. “I was concerned that a few hours of ‘you can look, but don't touch’ might be the most boring day ever for Matthew and let's face it, the National is a lot to take in for seasoned collectors. But it was thoroughly enjoyable. The boys humored me so I could hit Bob McCann's 50% sale



and picked up a nice stack of T218s. Then, off to have a few custom cards made of Matthew and a morning in the digital playground. Virtual card pulls, wheels to spin and a few more things that I don't fully understand. There were a number of dealers who handed him cards, packs and trinkets, but also a few 10–12-year-old kids who offered cards. It also helped that one of the auction houses had a sizeable Star Wars exhibit. The days of dime and quarter boxes are mostly dead. Fifty cents is the new dime box.”

The Star Wars display at Heritage Auctions, photo S. Jensen

Mike Rich also singled out dealer Bob McCann. “Bob’s prices are really good, but yesterday he started his 1/2 everything sale. There was a feeding frenzy. Those of us left went back again today.”

Jimi Thayer commented: “We spent a few hours at the show on Friday just walking around, and we didn't buy a single thing! Those who did not go need to understand just how OVERWHELMING this year's National really was. It was a lot to soak in...thousands of people with thick backpacks and cases on wheels all over the place! My last big purchase was finally having the gall to ask a guy if I could buy his entire binder of non-sports cards! I walked away with an amazing collection of some tough non-sports ‘rookies,’ 19th century Presidents, famous actors like Clark Gable, Katherine Hepburn and Judy Garland.”

Mark Talbot found even fewer vintage non-sport cards than in the past and added, “You could look at the age of the table holder and determine if you were going to find a variety of products or a seller with just slabbed cards of superstars.”

Logistics

Collectors and dealers will adjust their plans to try to improve their experience or combat new problems. Dealers reported enjoying higher sales and have put up with the challenges. This year you had weather-related travel delays to contend with. VIP passes help, for a price, but don’t solve the problems dealing with large crowds. Pokémon and TCG cards

have likely been a factor in bringing in a wider audience but just get in the way of people looking for sports cards.

Collecting is all about the search process and maybe it is the searching that is the attraction rather than possessing. But do people like to be in long lines to get in, get an autograph, get to PSA's table and get back home? Do they want to roll their collections in with locked cases and see who is handing out wads of cash? Maybe?

Reflections on Chicago Nationals

The first National I attended was the 1983 Holiday Inn show near O'Hare. It didn't seem much different than the large local shows that sprouted in the early 1980s. The 1989 National at the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Chicago was a big step up. I was impressed with the breakout presentations to cover topics of interest. The 1993 McCormick Place Chicago National was an eye-opener with what may have been 1,000 dealers and 75,000 attendees in a classic, 300,000 square foot space at the lakefront.

The National returned to Chicago about every other year starting in 1998, but at the Rosemont Convention Center. Organizers originally had to rent surplus space they had to pay for but didn't really need. In time, they added more autographs and one-shot uses like Beanie Babies and Olympic pins. Crowding still wasn't too bad. But business has improved as the market has expanded with modern cards, case breaks, manufacturers, corporate types and more customers – standing in longer lines. The once surplus space at Rosemont has been absorbed.

Had I been in Chicago, I probably would have gone for one day, focused on the spots to find clusters of vintage card dealers, spent money sparingly chasing some long-time wants and said hello to collectors and dealers. I may have graduated beyond the target age market for buyers at the National.

Other National sites have not always received rave reviews either. My guess is that overall Rosemont is still a good future site with some adjustments. If you want to cut back on the crowds, you can always raise the prices even more, but the way things are going, that may attract even more people. The 2027 National will be back in Rosemont, but the 2028 National will finally be in downtown Detroit.

I'd be interested in hearing other collectors' impressions of attending the National.

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