

Hobby history from over here... and over there

Number 27: Highlights of Card Collecting in the US

Part 2, The Growth Years after 1963

by George Vrechek

In the first part of this article, we looked at activities of card collectors in the U.S. starting with the first published articles by Jefferson Burdick. By the time Burdick died in 1963, the hobby had grown but was still a relatively obscure activity. Today the card-collecting hobby in the U.S. has grown to a multi-billion dollar a year business. What happened? It is a long story, but I will try to be brief.

Topps and sports licensing

The post-war baby boom, the improved economic climate and television contributed to the popularity of sports and related businesses like trading cards. **Topps'** creative approach toward licensing enabled them to buy out **Bowman** by 1956 and fight off potential competitors in court.

Topps dominated the baseball market through individual player contracts and had their pick of the football, basketball and hockey card markets through agreements with the leagues. **Sy Berger** of Topps was an important force in securing a profitable, annual line of business. Card designs and photography improved (slightly), and more players were getting paid for being in longer sets.

Of course, as soon as someone has a profitable market under control, others want to share in the fun. **Leaf, Fleer** and others still wanted in but were initially unsuccessful through the courts. While stars like Ted Williams and Stan Musial were able to negotiate better deals, most players didn't have much bargaining power with Topps and the players' association gains were modest – that is, until **Marvin Miller** (1917-2012) became the first executive director of the MLB Players Association in 1966.

Even before he battled with owners over the reserve clause, free agency, strikes, arbitration and pension benefits, Miller began dealing with prospective new licensors for baseball cards. He urged players not to renew their Topps agreements until he got them something better than radios selected out of a gift catalogue. Team owners also decided that they needed a piece of the pie for the use of their distinctive team names and logos.

Sports card issues wound up with some odd results for a few years in the 1960s and 1970s with team logos airbrushed away at times, players missing and entire leagues (in football) not under Topps contracts. In 1974 Topps baseball sets were all printed and issued at the same time, thereby eliminating scarcer high-numbered cards.

TCMA (Tom Collier and Mike Aronstein) began issuing mostly unlicensed baseball sets in 1972. **Renata Galasso** and **Larry Fritsch** produced reprint sets or cards with retired players. In 1981 the floodgates were finally opened through the courts for **Fleer, Donruss, Score, Upper Deck** and others to get into the licensed sports card market as long as they didn't include bubble gum. Topps finally ditched the gum themselves in 1992. The flood of card issues ushered in the junk wax era of the 1980s and 1990s.



Frank Nagy in 1973. Nagy was an avid collector and the associate editor of the Sport Hobbyist, published on and off by Charles Brooks between 1956 and the late 1970s.

Small hobby publications

While athletes were finally getting some big bucks, the card hobby was still mostly operating with pennies in the late 1960s. Burdick's CCB morphed into an auction publication under Bray and mostly young collectors started their own kitchen-table publications to help defray their collecting habits.

Richard Burns published **Sports Trader** starting in 1964. **Dan**

Dischley was a police officer from Lake Ronkonkoma, New York, and started **The Trader Speaks** in 1968.

Mike Bondarenko started **Sports Collectors News** (SCN) in 1968 when he was 16.

John Stommen of Milan, Michigan started **Sports Collectors Digest** (SCD) in 1973. Many other publications increasingly came and went during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Shows, collectors clubs and the National

Collectors in Chicago, New York and other cities had been getting together in kitchens and living rooms in the 1950s and 1960s. Discussions about a truly national meeting started as early as the mid-1950s. However, it wasn't until 1969 that young Californians **Jim Nowell**, **Ed Broder** and **Jim McConnell** were able to draw 10 other collectors to meet in Nowell's home. They followed up with 26 attendees in 1970, who included hobby pioneers **Goodie Goldfaden**, **Lionel Carter**, **Irv Lerner**, **Ray Hess**, **Ray Medeiros**, **Bob Jaspersen** and his son Mike. Great collector minds must think alike because in the

next few years gatherings organized by collector clubs or groups in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Boston and other cities started to grow into hotel meeting room conventions attended by hundreds of people over a weekend. Collectors became dealers and promoters. People like **Jay Barry**, **Pat Quinn**, **Gar Miller**, **Kit Young**, **Larry Fritsch** and **Mike Keasler** sold cards and memorabilia acquired on buying trips or directly from manufacturers. Card show walk-ins were an attraction to table holders and auctions were held right at the shows. Cards of star players began selling at steep prices versus commons, yet in retrospect, still very cheaply.

Gavin Riley, **Mike Berkus** and **Steve Brunner** have been credited with getting the **First National Sports Collectors Convention** off the ground at the Airport Marriott Hotel in Los Angeles in 1980. The National has now been held in 12 different cities over the past 46 years. The 450,000 square foot



Bob Jaspersen (left) published Sport Fan magazine and collectors directories as early as 1955. Irv Lerner (right) published Who's Who in Card Collecting in 1970.



Participants posed at the 1969 gathering at Jim Nowell's house. Photo Nowell.

Rosemont Convention Center outside Chicago has hosted about half of the recent shows. The National includes vintage cards, modern cards, sports memorabilia, uniforms and autograph

guests. Some collectors and dealers will just hit a few of the biggest local shows or the National. The rest of the buying and selling now takes place on the internet and local card stores or shows.

Price Guides

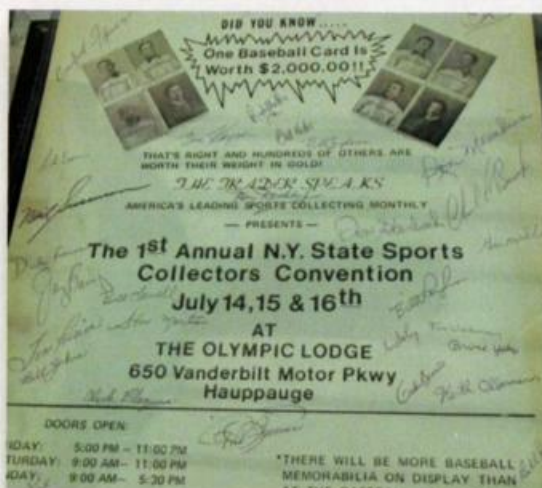
Without any price guides in the 1930s, card collectors were left to wonder as to the value of their collections. Jefferson Burdick developed his system for cataloguing cards; an important aspect of that effort was disseminating estimated card values. His articles and bulletins (CCBs) led to publishing his first catalogue with prices in 1939. He updated the catalogue and prices every seven years thereafter in his *American Card Catalog*. Typical prices skyrocketed from pennies into nickels! Burdick would likely have pleaded guilty to undervaluing cards, since he hoped to continue to collect cards he still needed at reasonable prices.

Early mail-order dealers in the 1950s and 1960s would prepare buy and sell price lists, which effectively became price guides. **Bert Sugar** published *The Sports Collectors Bible* in 1975, 1977, 1979 and 1983 complete with general prices and checklists for significant sports cards issued through those dates. **Todd Lee Andrews** published his 1948-1976 *Baseball Guide* in 1977. However, prices were escalating and readers poked holes at some of the information.

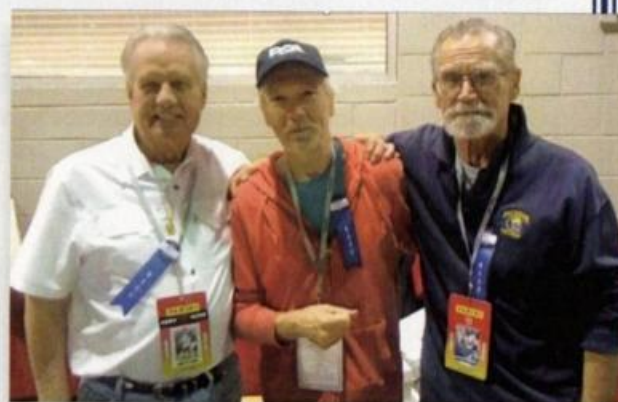
James Beckett got into the price guide business with his statistical knowledge and interest in cards. Utilizing forms and announcements in the hobby publications, he surveyed collectors and dealers. In 1977 he reported the results as to average values for common cards in average condition. Beckett and **Dennis Eckes** published the first annual *Sports Americana Price Guide* in 1979 complete with prices for each card in three different ranges of condition. By 1984 he was publishing values in his monthly Beckett Baseball magazine.

Greed and dishonesty

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York reported that some cards in Burdick's collection had been pilfered or lost when made available to visitors. Collectors were suspected of visiting other archives and museums and walking out with documents, especially those with signatures of athletes.



An ad for the first New York State convention in July 1972 was promoted through Dan Dischley of *The Trader Speaks*. This poster was signed by attendees Dischley, Bill Haber, Charles Brooks, Fred McKie, Bruce Yeko, Bill Mastro, Keith Olbermann, Don Steinbach, Chuck Blazina, Bill Lowell, Ron Menchine, Rich Egan, Gar Miller, Bill Loughman, Jay Barry, Pat Quinn and others. These collectors stayed involved in the hobby for years. Poster courtesy of Steve Bloedow and Mark Theotikos of Collect Auctions.



National Convention dealers each year since 1980 – Pat Quinn, B.A. Murry and John Rumierz in 2019, photo George Vrechek

Memorabilia started to disappear, jerseys walked out of locker rooms, hobby shops and homes were burglarized, rare cards came out of some uncertain woodwork and the authenticity of some cards, autographs and uniforms were questioned. Cards could be sent to card doctors for refurbishing, trimming or whatever they could get away with. An oversized T-206 Wagner improved with age. With the escalation in prices came the temptation to crank out your own Pete Rose rookie card or about anything else that could pass a quick inspection. Skill bidding occurred. Some guilty parties served jail time.

Upper Deck's introduction of holograms on cards helped cut down on counterfeiting of their new cards, but it didn't solve the problem for anyone else or for older cards. While the vast majority of sales transactions were likely honest transactions between buyers and sellers, the hobby needed some changes, especially for big-ticket items.

Grading

By the 1990s, it was time to address some of the issues through third-party verifications. PSA entered the market followed by **Beckett** and **SGC**. At the time, card dealer **Al Rosen** (Mr. Mint) thought this was not good for the hobby. He could make his own determination of a card's authenticity - but how about others who were buying cards and didn't have handy technology to decide on their own?

PSA's parent company **Collectors Holdings Inc.** headed by **Nat Turner**, recently bought out Beckett and SGC. The incredible premiums realized for cards in the highest grades have produced a new set of issues involving tampering, regrading, grading fees and market control.

Chase cards, redemption cards, variations and contrived scarcities

Collectors found that even beautiful new card sets they had pieced together weren't worth much in the after-market as everyone else was doing the same thing and had all the newer cards they needed. Card companies finally decided that too much cardboard was too much of a good thing, and they had to do something to perk up interest by creating scarcities.

"Rare" cards were included in cases of product which had autographs, pieces of memorabilia ("relics") or redemption prizes. Case-breaking became a word. Chase cards, rookie cards, parallel cards, **TCG** cards and **Pokémon** became the big-ticket new cards in what has increasingly become a modern versus vintage market. Even with the contrived scarcities, the card "brands" issued by major manufacturers have continued to increase. For example, in 2023 you could buy at least 58 different types of baseball card issues, most of which were not affordable for the typical youngster.

Michael Rubin entered the markets for licensed sports cards and apparel in a huge way with **Fanatics, Inc.** around 2011. Fanatics acquired Topps in 2022. Fanatics has 22,000 employees and has branched into just about every corner of the rapidly changing sports fan business including betting and events.

The future hobby

"Mint Condition: How Baseball Cards Became an American Obsession" written by **Dave Jamieson** in 2010 remains an excellent source for understanding the history of card collecting in the U.S. Jamieson grew up in the 1980s but dug into the important details of how the hobby developed over the prior 100 years. He asked the right questions and talked to key people.

Today, shows and shops for trading cards may combine modern and vintage cards, but it has become more like having an event which combines vintage cards with coins, stamps and lottery machines. Modern cards have left many old-time collectors scratching their heads.

Jefferson Burdick would be flabbergasted by how the hobby developed. Keep an eye on the U.S. trading card market to see where it goes over the next 100 years.

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