



# Convention(al) thinking

By George Vrechek



## A look back at the evolution of shows

### Once upon a time, not that long ago

At one time, the Chicago Tribune sports section included a listing of local card shows to be held that week. There might be a dozen shows in one week spread around the Chicago area. A collector, exactly like me, could hit a hotel ballroom show with a \$2 admission near O'Hare Airport and then get to the Brickyard Mall in Chicago for a free show, thereby hitting two shows in one day. With a little more ambition and gas, someone could hit a third show at a hotel in Schaumburg.

It wasn't hard finding "vintage" cards because most of the inventory was pre-1981 anyway. Prices didn't seem bad. You could even find a few non-sport cards. Nothing was graded and

plastic sleeves were not universal. You got to physically touch the cards sometimes. What a concept! Ah, the relatively good old days - in at least some of the metropolitan areas.

And when were these good old days, you ask? Actually, I am not quite sure myself, but I recall it was after the mid-1980s and before eBay. And why didn't the prices seem so bad? Many collectors were Johnny-come-latelies to the card show scene, and we had no idea what prices had been five or ten years ago...or even the year before. Prices seemed reasonable given that someone had been hanging onto this stuff for decades, and they weren't making any more of the old issues.

You could walk into a show with some duplicates to trade or sell with the hope of obtaining some of the cards on your newly created wantlist. You needed plenty of cards since your childhood collecting years were relatively short, there were plenty of issues and you may not have worried about ever finishing a set anyway. What you bought was more a matter of how much cash you had decided to stick in your wallet when you left the house. Most dealers did not take credit cards and certainly not checks. There weren't ATM machines around. You had no choice but to stay within the budget created by the size of your billfold.

### Show origins

Hobby publications starting in the 1940s mentioned a few gatherings of a few collectors. Dr Lawrence Kurzrok started a club in New York City in 1948. Hobby pioneers would visit other communities and look for fellow collectors who they knew from trading but had never met. Jefferson Burdick reported travelling 3,000 miles one year, most of it by train since he didn't drive. Burdick's collection of non-sport cards dwarfed his sports collection by a factor of 9 to 1.

Collectors gathered around kitchen tables. Lionel Carter, Buck Barker, Bob Solon and Charles Bray got together to trade cards in 1958 around Carter's kitchen table in Evanston, Ill. I have been in Carter's kitchen, and the table, kitchen and house were not that big.

In 1969, Jim Nowell, Ed Broder and Jim McConnell, decided to have a "show." The show was held in Nowell's Brea, Calif., home and 13 people attended. Some came from out of state leading to the notion that they had put together the first "national" show. The next year, 26 people came to Nowell's house, including Carter, Irv Lerner, Goodie Goldfaden, Bob and Mike Jaspersen, Dave Meiners, Ray Hess, John England and Ray Medeiros.

*Bob Jaspersen reported on the gathering in his September 1970 Sport Fan publication.*

**SPORT FAN**  
September, October, 1970 ROSEMONT, PA. FOUNDED IN 1951

**SPORT FAN ATTENDS COAST CONVENTION**  
By Bob Jaspersen  
SPORT FAN Publisher

The second annual West Coast Sports Collectors convention, held at the home of Jim Nowell in Brea, Calif., on Aug. 22-24, gave evidence that these get-togethers are growing in popularity and will undoubtedly spread to all corners of the nation within a few years.

SPORT FAN publisher Bob Jaspersen and son Mike, who attended two earlier conventions this year, and Irv Lerner of Phila., publisher of Who's Who in Card Collecting, flew to California for their first meeting with collectors in that section of the country. Also attending from the Phila. area was Jay Ludwig, of Orland, Pa., who made the (Continued inside)

**AUTOGRAPH BUFFS STRIKE IT RICH AT COOPERSTOWN**  
By Bob Jaspersen

If we hadn't been there to see it with our own eyes we wouldn't have believed it. Even after seeing it we still found it hard to believe. The scene was the huge lobby of the beautiful Onaga Hotel in Cooperstown, N.Y., and the time was the eve of the annual induction ceremonies into the coveted Baseball Hall of Fame.

There they were---Jesse Haines, Lou Boudreau, Ford Frick and Earle Combs, who were to be enshrined the following day, plus Casey Stengel, Lloyd Waner, Ed Roush, Luke Appling, Lefty Grove, Joe Mauer, Stan Coveleske, Cassie Slusko, Mrs. Lou Gehrig, Red Raf-

(Continued inside)

Front row, left to right, Jay Ludwig, Allan Kaye, Rusty Moshier, Jeff Johnson, Ken Baker, Steve Black, Paul Wright, Steve Brasell. 2d row, Pat Connelly, Harry Hoffman, Keith Jackson, Steve Marschall, Lionel Carter, Joe DeRita. 3d row, Mike Jaspersen, Jim McConnell, Bob Jaspersen, David Meiners, Irv Lerner, John Thom, Ray Hess, Dale Britton, Ray Medeiros, Matt Katushaki and Jim Nowell.

### **Those 1970s shows, prices up but just the beginning**

Things changed quickly. By 1971, 500 people attended a card show in Detroit. New York collectors held a convention on Long Island in 1972. Collector clubs popped up in areas like Chicago, the Twin Cities, Milwaukee, St. Louis and Seattle with regular meetings. Meetings turned into ballroom shows and grew each year. Promoters were born.

Table holders would leave their cards in a ballroom overnight, maybe with a sheet covering them for security. A table fee at a three-day 1975 Chicago show was \$7.50. Star athletes were just starting to be priced at premiums and card condition was not of utmost importance. Some table holders would bring non-sports.



Collectors supporting their habits and a handful of full-timers, like Jim Beckett, Pat Quinn, Don Steinbach, Gar Miller and Mike Keasler, began touring the country with wads of cash on buying trips. They would run ads and meet people with cards to sell in motel rooms, sometimes running afoul of locals trying to do the same thing. Often the only mistakes these buyers made were re-selling too soon and not bothering with cards from the 1960s. Shows in the 1970s had walk-ins bringing collections in shoe boxes, on the spot auctions and a general airing out of attics, closets and cards under beds.

### **The 1980s, the hobby hits the mainstream**

The first official national convention was held in 1980 in Los Angeles. Gavin Riley, Mike Berkus and Steve Brunner are credited with getting it off the ground after the concept had been discussed for years. Fleer and Donruss legally competed with Topps in the baseball card market in 1981. Conventions and local shows grew dramatically in the early 1980s.

There were even card show wars. The relatively long-standing monthly Chicagoland Sports Collectors Association shows were held at the Hillside Holiday Inn. Out of town show promoters would rent the same space for their own shows held on other weekends. I can personally attest that the Chicago show organizers went to their newly arrived competitors' shows and talked to their table holders, strongly suggesting that they support the Chicago group shows first. Don't screw up a good thing with too many shows.

But by the mid-1980s, all bets were off. Shows were all over the place. There were a few table holders with just recent cards, but most people carried pre-1981 cards. Why buy '80s cards from a dealer when you could go to a supermarket and buy them right off the shelf.



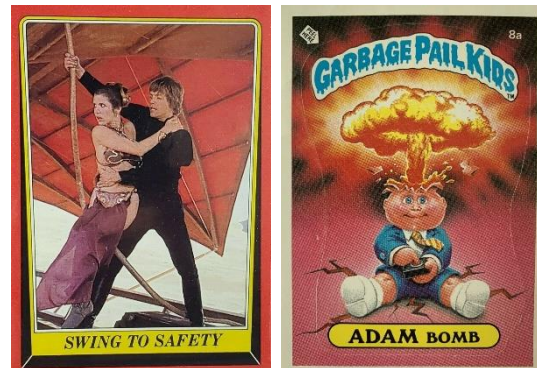
*The show on the left is the 2016 St. Leander's Show in San Leandro, Calif., run by Mark Macrae. I met Bill Christensen somewhere in the middle of this grade school gymnasium. On the right, collectors line up to enter the 2013 National in Rosemont, Ill. Sometimes small shows with collectors selling their cards at reasonable prices were easier places to find what you needed than searching the millions of cards at a National. All photos by George Vrechek*

### **The 1990s, junk wax and beyond**

Just as things were getting good, they got crazy. A good thing had been screwed up. There were too many shows, too many card stores, plus stamp and coin dealers jumped into the card market. Card sets were issued that didn't hold their value. The number of shows dwindled about as quickly as they had emerged. People who had jumped into the hobby jumped back out.

Because the 1980s and 1990s sports cards were so abundant, shows still seemed to feature mostly vintage cards with a smattering of modern cards. The non-sport demand was a little different with issues like Star Wars and Garbage Pail Kids livening up demand through the 1980s.

After the late 1990s, collecting continued to evolve with grading, the internet, eBay, auctions, limited licensing agreements, limited issues, cards with memorabilia imbedded in them and larger players in the market like Fanatics. Then COVID-19 put a damper on strangers pressing against one another in tight ballrooms and convention floors.



### **Convention(al) thinking today**

So where does this leave us as to shows and conventions today? The annual National Sports Collectors Convention seems to be chugging along again. Long-standing shows in Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Boston and other cities seem to be back in business. Exclusively non-sport shows include the Philly Show (Oaks), Harry Martin's Collectables Show (Franklin, Mass.) and the Chicago Show (Carol Stream). But even where regional shows are thriving, there may be only two or three such shows a year.

In metropolitan Los Angeles, with only a lousy 13 million people in just Los Angeles and Orange Counties, a collector today at a local show is hard-pressed to run across 1951 Bowman Fight the Red Menace, 1952 Topps Look 'N See, 1962 Topps Mars Attacks or about anything else that looks like a trading card created before 1981. Yes, some local small shows have re-emerged, and they seem to be busy, but the product available that I have seen is definitely not vintage. Delaware collector Jim Craig commented, " I only attended a local card show a couple of times a year even prior to the pandemic. Sometimes a good deal on non-sports cards would pop up." My sense is that many small shows are now run for local collectors who have picked up current cards by buying boxes and are either reselling them or breaking them into saleable lots.



### **New versus old stuff**

Cards available in 1985 ranged from say 1910 to 1985 and today the population of cards is from 1910 to 2022. Even in 1985, it was easier to have an inventory of cards from 1981 to 1985 than from 1910 to 1980. Today the inventory available is heavily 1981 to the present, and the 1980s and 1990s are ancient history to younger collectors.

When did this happen? Collector Rick Lyons provided me a perspective from attending a recent show in Vancouver, "Picked up some stuff, nothing big but enjoyed going. I've been going for 15 years, and it was basically all vintage back then, but over time modern has gradually taken over the show. Now, at best, 20% of the room was vintage; everything else slabbed UV. Dealers 15 years ago were more established and knowledgeable than today's dealers who seem new to collecting/selling."

I noticed a version of this attending the Nationals held in Chicago over the past 25 years. Modern cards were in a small back corner. The corner seemed to grow a bit at each show and in 2021, the modern card area was a significant segment with plenty of younger (even than me) people at the tables.

### **Card shops**

Card shop owners tell me they can't pay the rent by selling a handful of vintage common cards that have to be dug out of boxes for fussy long-time collectors. It is somewhat easier to deal with such requests with an internet store. Card shops need collectors who come in during a break in their day, buy a box or two of (expensive) new product and then head out the door. During the junk wax era, this formula wasn't working too well since there was no rush to get one's mitts on the new stuff. Many people decided to skip the stuff entirely, and card stores folded. Business seems to have picked up in card shops selling modern cards.

Shows have been an occasion to renew acquaintances with table holders and collectors about the continued quest for cards. You can find people looking for the same things you are looking for wading through bargain bins. The times they have changed, but there is still cardboard to be found. I am interested in your take on attending shows again.



*A busy table at the 2019 National in Chicago*

*George Vrechek can be contacted at [vrechek@ameritech.net](mailto:vrechek@ameritech.net)*

*This article appeared in The Wrapper #343 August 28-October 15, 2022. Our thanks to The Wrapper for letting us post the article on the OBC site*