



The National experience, rewarding but exhausting

By George Vrechek



On Friday, August 6, at the National, collectors were on a heads-down mission to find the cardboard they needed. Photo G. Vrechek

The National Sports Collectors Convention was back in business this year – in a big way. The one-year hiatus caused by the pandemic seemed to release a pent-up feeding frenzy after 17 months of hibernation.

The numbers

I have attended all the Nationals held in Chicago starting with the 1983 National in a cramped Holiday Inn banquet hall. I attended the July 28 to August 1, 2021, convention in Rosemont, a half mile away from the site of the 1983 show. The NSCC website reported that attendance was second only to the 100,000 at the 1991 Anaheim National. According to the National program, 343 dealers, 42 case break dealers and 35 corporate booths provided miles of cardboard to view. Booth numbers ranged from 128 to 1826. The autograph lineup listed 103 athletes. Ticket category holders rivaled the myriad of boarding categories of any airline, with VIPs, Platinum VIPs, All-Access Super VIPs, media guests etc.

Looking for cardboard, not easy

If you were looking for non-sports cards, or any specific category of cards, they were likely there. You just had to find them. Therein was the challenge. Collector Larry Tipton tracked his walking distance on day one of the convention at seven miles.

While dealers tend to take the same spots on the Rosemont Convention floor, and long-time dealers use their priority rankings to cluster near the entry, you still had dealers with cards of interest spread throughout the floor. It didn't help that table location numbering was in small print on the floor and usually covered with tables and boxes. If you were there for some 1952 Topps Look 'n See cards, for example, you might find a few among sports card dealers near the entry or at the back of the hall – probably a block away. With luck and determination, you might find a few dealers with significant selections of non-sports cards. With more luck, you might find cards on your wantlist, however my feeling was that you were looking to see needles in a large haystack. If there was a section with non-sports card dealers, it was a well-kept secret.

The crowd

Attendees reported the Thursday crowd was likely the largest, when it was challenging to get down the aisles and to easily interact with dealers. Collectors toted back backs and rolling bags. The pace was quick as collectors beelined to where they imagined the best deals were, or where they could submit cards for grading. Lines for giveaways and grading submissions added to the congestion. Kids 12 and under were free all week which likely helped the gate. There didn't seem to be any giveaways at the door.

Lollapalooza and the National were running at the same time in the Chicago area. Health officials had concerns about the possible spread of COVID-19 at the mostly outdoor Lollapalooza music festival in Grant Park. A more likely venue for a super-spreader event was the indoor National in Rosemont. There were no requirements to wear masks, and mask wearers were perhaps 10% of attendees - likely close to 20,000 per day.

Filling the space and then some

To secure dates and the first-floor location years in advance, the NSCC Committee has had to agree to take the entire 450,000 square foot (10 acre) space, which was usually a little more than they needed. One year the extra space accommodated Beanie Babies, another year Olympic pins and memorabilia. In recent years, case breaking helped fill the space along with autographs.

This year, it seemed like most available spaces were used without any "fillers." Even the usually generous autograph area was squeezed a little. One dealer wedged his inventory into a space next to a beverage vendor. Tables and chairs near the food counters were replaced with dealers. If you wanted to eat your pricey hot dog, you might find a spot to sit on the floor up against a wall. I recall the 1989 National at the Hyatt in downtown Chicago, where conversely it was easy to attend collector seminars held in rooms near the convention floor. It was a good opportunity to meet advanced collectors and learn more about the cardboard.

One significant improvement was restricting autograph announcements to the autograph pavilion rather than broadcasting them throughout the entire convention floor.

Prices

Prices for cards I looked for did not seem silly compared to prior years, but my focus was on ungraded vintage cards that were not in the best of shape, and I wasn't looking for any high-

demand cards which reflected the recent run-up to robust prices. Perhaps due to the slowdown in grading processing and the increase in grading fees, there were plenty of ungraded cards. The number of U/V dealers likely increased, but the perception was that most card dealers sold just vintage.

Tipton seemed to have better luck than I did due to his enthusiasm and persistence. Tipton reported getting discounts on all these finds, "My pickups included 53 1952 TOPPS Look N See cards for \$15, 33 1959 TOPPS Wacky Plaks for \$12, 15 1951 Bowman Jets Rockets and Spacemen \$8, all low grade. I have these sets already, but they were so cheap I couldn't help myself. Eight hits to my 1964 Rosen US Army in Action were priced \$3 each, and I finished my 1980 You'll Die Laughing set - 3 cards at \$1 a card."

Too much ice cream?

It is hard to complain about too much of a good thing, but it was a little like being given a quart of ice cream rather than a cone, or maybe that the ice cream cone was scattered over 10 acres. Collector Rick Lyons traveled to this his first National from the Seattle area. He found the selection of stuff "mind blowing." Like several others who attended all the sessions, he commented on the physical demands on his feet, legs and back from walking a huge concrete floor with a bag for several days, "When they say the concrete floor will make you sore and your feet hurt, that is FALSE. I cannot express enough it will KILL you."

I guess it is all about the hunt, but the National seems inefficient. If you are looking for a variety of cards, you probably have to ask each dealer if they have any of your interests. Glancing at the tables only gets you to the surface. Boxes are everywhere. I picked up as many of my needs from collector friends at the show as I did from dealer tables. I spent less money than I expected to, because I couldn't find what I was looking for. My hunch was what I was looking for was there – someplace.

Solutions? Good question

A good start would be to separate cards from the other stuff on the floor. Separate card dealers into graded, raw and U/V. Put non-sports, pre-war and other categories near one another. The recent, gleaming cards are of little interest to many vintage collectors; they are just in the way. I know it is hard to generalize, since most dealers will have a little of everything, and you can't get people to change easily, but there could be a more efficient system than just wandering around looking for needles in haystacks.

The best part of any National for me has been renewing acquaintances with other collectors and dealers, and on that scale, this National was a success.

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