Contemporary Collectibles: After 98 years, baseball card is still a hit

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

Baseball cards are not the hot collectibles they once were, but there is at least one outstanding exception to that statement, as evidenced by the price of $2.35 million paid for a 1909 Honus Wagner card a few weeks ago. So, you may wonder, who was Honus Wagner and what made this card so valuable?

Wagner was a legendary Pittsburgh Pirates shortstop, one of the first five players to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Nicknamed the "Flying Dutchman, he was National League batting champ in eight of his 21 seasons, finishing his career with a lifetime average of .329. He retired in 1917 with more hits, runs, runs batted in, doubles, triple and steals than any other National League player.

The two key factors in the value of such a paper collectible (as in many other fields) are rarity and condition. A "tobacco" card inserted into a cigarette package - which predated the more familiar Topps, Fleers, and other bubble gum cards - there are now only about 60 Honus Wagner T-206 cards known to have survived. One reason usually given for this scarcity is that Wagner, a staunch nonsmoker, got an injunction demanding that the American Tobacco Co. withdraw his image from the 1909-11 series of cards, fearing that it would encourage young people to smoke - although this notion is cast into doubt by the fact that he was pictured on a 1913 Pirates team card distributed in Fatima cigarette packs as well as a 1914-15 set issued by Peoples Tobacco. (There's another theory that Wagner had the cards recalled because he was never paid to appear on them.)

This card is in unusually fine condition, another reason for its desirability. It made headlines before, in 1991 when hockey star Wayne Gretzky and former Los Angeles Kings owner Bruce McNally bought it at Sotheby's for $451,000, then the highest price ever paid for a piece of sports memorabilia. They held on to it for only four years, when it became part of a Wal-Mart sweepstakes, then was sold in 2000 for $1.26 million to Brian Siegel, who displayed it at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and brought it to opening bell ceremonies for the Nasdaq stock exchange in New York. All that is known of the present buyer is that he is a Southern California collector.

The first American cigarette cards, modeled after British ones, featured a wide range of subjects, from animals to opera stars. The Honus Wagner card appeared early in the history of baseball cards. The very first example was printed in 1868 and featured the Brooklyn Atlantic Nine team, but it would be about 20 years before individual player cards were produced, when a New York City cigarette manufacturer, Goodwin & Co., presented sepia cards of such Hall of Famers as Tim Keefe and Roger Connor in boxes of its Judge and Gypsy Queen cigarettes show. In 1913, the Fatima company issued the first major set of baseball cards of the 20th

century, the T-200 set, including all 16 teams then playing.

Although baseball cards were an immediate success, they almost disappeared as a result of James Buchanan Duke's near monopoly of the market, reducing avenues of promotion. Luckily, competition was revived when New York tobacconists began importing cigarettes from such countries as Turkey, Greece and Egypt, resulting in independents gaining back 25 percent of the market.

The T-206 set containing the Honus Wagner card and those of 27 other Hall of Famers was included with 16 different brands of cigarettes, including American Beauty, Hindu and Polar Bear. Wagner's card was originally distributed with the popular Sweet Caporal cigarettes. One other surviving example, part of the Jefferson Burdick Collection, now can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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