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As baseball-card sales drop, North Jersey card sellers look to the stars

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While Major League Baseball tries to hold on to its fan base, a business born from the national pastime — baseball card stores — has been in a decade-long slide, forcing local card-store owners to scramble to maintain their niche and learn valuable business lessons in the process.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the baseball-card business boomed into a billion-dollar industry, drawing kids as well as adults who hoped their cards would appreciate in value over time.

Walter Curioni, owner of Curioni's Market in Lodi, jumped into the baseball-card game a generation ago. Curioni sold baseball cards as a side business at his pizzeria beginning in 1988, and at the height of the baseball-card craze he would spend between \$20,000 and \$25,000 on cards per year.

"In the late 1980s, people would think someone would be a huge home run hitter or something in the future, so they would buy their rookie card almost as an investment," Curioni said. "But now, that whole idea has just fallen through the floor for me. I really only sell cards now if people call me up looking to finish a set."

According to the weekly publication *Sports Collector's Digest*, card sales peaked at \$1.2 billion in 1991, but dropped below \$400 million by the end of the 2000s. In that period, the magazine said, the number of dedicated sports card stores dropped to 500 from 5,000. A reliable number for such card stores in New Jersey does not exist.

North Jersey store owners said video games where children can trade or play with their favorite players has had a role in the decline in the allure of baseball cards. Also, free agency has loosened the bond between fans and players who constantly change teams. Interestingly, the Internet has been less of a bane to collectors than for other business models. Online commerce has allowed the remaining stores to expand their business beyond local collectors.

The diminished market has made the hunt to find rare and valuable cards essential for North Jersey's few remaining stores.

"Now the more big-ticket cards you have — like the Mickey Mantle rookies or the Joe DiMaggio rookies — the more credibility it adds to your inventory," said Richard Budnick, the owner of America's Pastime in Fair Lawn.

A Joe DiMaggio rookie card can sell for more than \$1,000 and a 1952 Mickey Mantle card can cost him upward of \$15,000, Budnick said, which he can then sell for a profit. Finding such highly valued vintage cards isn't easy, though.



Richard Budnick, the owner of America's Pastime in Fair Lawn, with the cards of sport stars, from left, Lew Alcindor, aka Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; Joe DiMaggio in a 1938 Goudey Heads-Up card; Mickey Mantle in a 1952 Topps card valued at \$25,000; and Joe Namath in a 1965 Topps card.



Budnick said he finds cards by attending yearly national or regional sports card expos in Chicago, Baltimore and Cleveland, among other cities. He said he travels to the shows a day early and visits tables while others are setting up.

"The national card shows allow me to see what everyone else has available before they are out of the showcases or have been snatched up by other dealers," Budnick said.

When he attends shows, Budnick said, he brings "tens of thousands of dollars" in cash to spend on cards. The key, he said, is finding a way to get a leg up on his competitors – such as going a day early – because there are only so many cards that collectors are willing to spend significant money on. He said this is a lesson for not only baseball card stores, but any small business.

"Today's buys are tomorrow's sales," Budnick said. "It's like being a hunter. I'm going up against a guy like me in Chicago and doing what I'm doing. I just have to beat them to the card."

Finding the card is only half the battle, Budnick said. Once he finds a card he is willing to buy, Budnick said, he inspects the card for any imperfections that might decrease its value.

"You have to be careful because if you miss something on a card, it can kill you," Budnick said. "It can be a \$5,000 difference sometimes. You can't make a mistake like that."

Dave Lancaster, a co-owner of The Baseball Card Store in Midland Park, said his store finds rare cards mostly by collectors walking into the store or by getting cold calls. He said he focuses on finding cards from the 1950s or the 1960s, particularly if they are star players. He said he has a network of customers who come into the store once or twice a week looking for new buys. Many times, he said, his prior relationships lead to quick turnarounds on valuable cards. For example, if a Tom Seaver card came in, he would alert die-hard Mets collectors.

"If it's a really nice old card, it would be shocking if we still had it by the end of the day," he said. "There might be less and less people looking for cards, but those kinds of cards are always in demand."

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