

Time flies at The 2013 National

**Five days seems long,
unless those days are
filled with trading
cards, memorabilia
and dealers from
across the country**

By

George Vrechek



After the VIP reception, the flood gates were opened and collectors charged in within minutes.

Have you ever gone to a reunion or a wedding and wondered how did the time go by so fast? If you have been active in the sports collectibles hobby and attended the 2013 National Sports Collectors Convention, you might have wondered how the five days of the convention went by so quickly. There were dealers and collectors to greet, old cards and equipment to inspect, new cards to discover, autographs to acquire, and money to spend. One adage has been that if you don't find it at the convention, it probably doesn't exist. While that isn't exactly true for collectors of scarce items, it was surprisingly true (at some price) for a wealth of items.

Wednesday preview

The convention started on Wednesday afternoon July 31 in the VIP lounge with promoter Mike Berkus surrounded by hundreds of "VIPs" interested in the first crack at material...as well as complimentary food and autographs. There were no long speeches, but there soon were long lines for the autograph guests. Everyone seemed to be able to get what they wanted and at 4 p.m. the substantial crowd of VIP ticket holders quickly entered the convention floor. Various ticket packages encouraged the purchase of badges and packages granting easy access to the floor and no long lines.

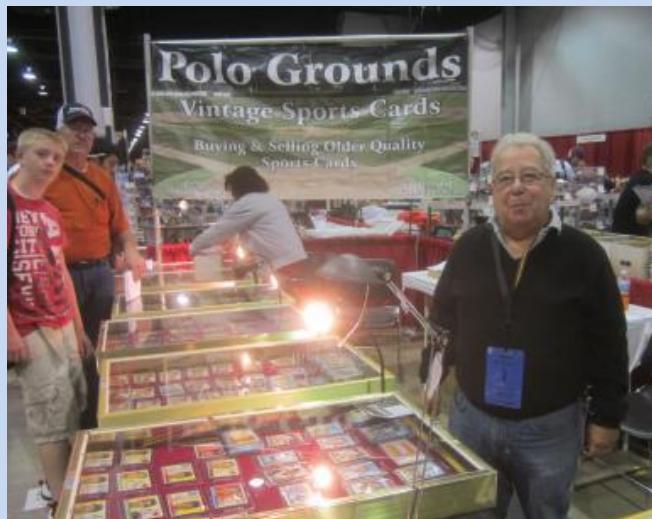


First impressions in the door

At Nationals several years ago, special trading cards were distributed as you entered the convention. Less of that seems to occur each year. This year there was a one bag handout containing Heritage's Official Program of the National and the SMP Sports Market Report with prices from PSA. The Official Program included a schedule of events and table layout; although I missed finding it until six days later because I mistakenly thought it was just information about Heritage auctions.

Dealer locations

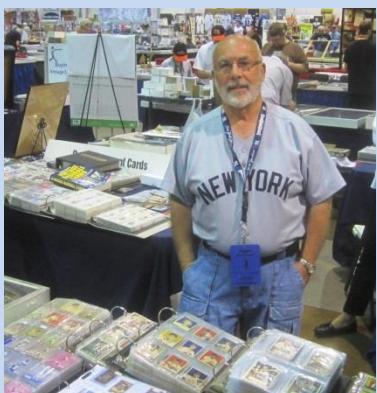
Based on the system for awarding opportunities to select table locations, you found a mix of dealers near the entrance. They had at least one thing in common, however - all of them have been to many Nationals and get to pick their locations sooner than those with less history. Some such dealers are still small, personal operations defraying their own hobby expenses; others have grown into larger full-time operations. Four table-holders have been at all 34 Nationals - John Rumirez, B.A. Murry, Pat Quinn, and *Sports Collectors Digest*.



Bill Nathanson of the Polo Grounds (left) and Kevin Savage of Kevin Savage Cards (right) were busy but happy to pause for a photo.

Not too much further in the door, you encountered most of the rest of the familiar dealers (minus Al Rosen) who have attended Nationals. For those of us who have mainly attended shows in Chicago, there was a particular interest in visiting dealers not normally appearing in Chicago, such as those more active on the East or West Coasts. The impression from the first part of the convention floor was that about everyone sold vintage baseball cards. This impression again had more to do with the system for selecting locations than the evolving nature of the hobby and the rest of the convention space.

Dealers, dealers everywhere – left to right top row: Larrie Dean, Randy Kniffin, Kurt Tourdot



Bottom row: Kit Young, Dick DeCourcy, and Ron Estes (standing)

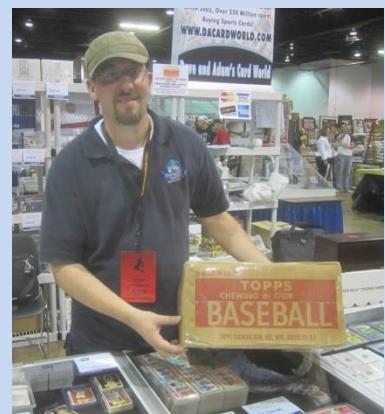
Long-time attendees get first choice. Long-time attendees tend to be vintage baseball card dealers. They will locate near the front entrance, hoping to catch collectors before their energy, footwear, and money all run out. Convention information mentioned that as the hobby has changed only about 15% of the convention floor was devoted to vintage cards. However many of those vintage card dealers were right there as you entered the floor. There were plenty of vintage card dealers to choose from among the 311 dealers that I counted. My concern that older cards were all getting slabbed proved to be unfounded.

Business seemed to be active throughout the show in the dealer section, but there was room to maneuver. At Nationals years ago, you might run into long lines, crowded aisles, and difficulty accessing tables. There were plenty of people at the 2013 Convention, but they had room to get around with wide aisles and adequate circulation space. It was not always easy to find the booth numbers on the floor in front of the dealers or posted above their space. Lighting was pretty good but depended on how close you were to the overhead fixtures. Some dealers paid for electricity at their booths and had task lighting to help collectors see what they were buying.



Convention aisles were busy but never too crowded to get to the products.

Gallery of Unusual Items



Clockwise from upper right: Gaedel bat, Bench Warmers, 1952 highs empty box, 52 highs, Mantle jersey, 61 Nu-Card football, Wheaties panel

Unusual items

If you were looking for 1952 Topps high numbers, they were there. Even the box in which Al Rosen found high numbers in 1986 was there at Dave and Adam's Card World. If you wanted unopened packs of 1961 football Nu-Cards and the original vendor box, they were there. A Mickey Mantle jersey and hat were on display at Legendary Auctions. How about Eddie Gaedel's bat? The bat that midget Eddie Gaedel held while drawing a four-pitch walk from Bob Cain in 1951 was in a Heritage Auction display case. Since Bill Veeck told Gaedel to never swing at a pitch, the bat is probably still in mint condition. Two nice looking ladies "manned" a booth for Leaf products promoting Bench Warmer cards. They were not ignored.

I even saw kids at the convention! What a concept. Children under 12 were free. General admission for everyone else was \$20.

Corporate Pavilion

Once beyond the initial group of card dealers, the 34 corporate participants had very professional displays featuring their products or services. Manufacturers Topps, Upper Deck, Panini, and Leaf all seemed busy handling lines of collectors and promotional items of some kind. The lexicon of the promotional language included wrapper redemptions, relic cards, 1/1 cards, mystery packs, and other limited card issues too complicated for me to explain or understand. But at least now I know where the entrance freebies from long ago Nationals have gone; they morphed into redemptions.

Heritage Auctions, Hunt Auctions, PSA, Beckett Media, and Blowout Cards also had large spaces. The carpeting in this area was a welcome relief. I could see how important the corporate participants were to the financial health of the convention.

Tristar Autograph Pavilion

Athletes attracted many to the convention to not only get autographs but to purchase balls, uniforms, supplies, and perhaps spill over to the dealer tables. Dealers handling autograph-related items were



adjacent to the autograph area. It is apparent that Tristar has handled autograph events galore, and the operation seemed to run about as smoothly as possible. It was a particular bonus that announcements about autograph times and lines didn't spill out to the remainder of the convention floor and interfere with conversations.

Among those signing were Mike Piazza, Chipper Jones, Pedro Martinez, Johnny Bench, Carlton Fisk, Eddie Murray, Ozzie Smith, Cal Ripken, Jr., Ernie Banks, Joe Morgan, Pete Rose, Roger Clemens, Bob Gries, Dan Hampton, Lawrence Taylor, Mike Ditka, Lou Holtz, Eric Dickerson, Frank Gifford, Mia Hamm, Bobby Hull, Tony Esposito, Jerry Lucas, Elvin Hayes, Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns, and Roberto Duran.

Olympic Pavilion and Fosbury

The Olympic Pavilion consisted of 18 dealers primarily with Olympic pins...and plenty of room in between. The space they occupied is apparently surplus to the needs of the card dealers, corporate, and autograph operations, but all part of the space package offered/required by the Rosemont Convention Center.

My best experience there was visiting with Dick Fosbury, 1968 Olympic Gold Medalist in the high jump. Long jump 1968 Gold Medalist Bob Beamon was also present.

Fosbury was at a table to promote Olympic athletes in general and represent the World Olympians Association of which he is the past president. Fosbury is a retired civil engineer living in Idaho. I asked him when he last high jumped. He said it was in 1999 in the Senior Olympics where he placed third, not bad high jumping at his then age of 52. We talked about special shoes for track athletes and high jumpers in particular (.4 inches of padding allowed in the toe area), foam in the landing area, composite tracks, and the evolution from amateurs to professionals. Fosbury is a tall, athletic 66 year-old, who will be forever identified with the Fosbury Flop, but who should be equally known as an all-around nice guy.

TV show

A new cable TV episode for a program called "Piece of the Game" was filmed at the National. The set was complete with lights, cameras, and action featuring collectibles. Collectors were invited to stop by for a free evaluation of their items and to share stories of interest to the world of sports collectors.



The more distant dealers

If you returned to the more distant corners of the dealer area, you might find some hidden gems from dealers not as high on the priority table ranking. It was interesting to find dealers with boxes of inexpensive new cards that attracted collectors. There was something reassuring about the future of the hobby seeing collectors search through boxes of newer cards priced at 25 cents. I expected to find less enthusiasm and a lot less space devoted to inexpensive cards.



Collectors found deals and thumbed through boxes on inexpensive cards. Chandy Greenholt (right) had plenty of inexpensive "stuff."

The sometimes unorganized filing of older cards in these outlying areas resulted in a sea of people thumbing through cardboard in search of hidden gems at great prices. For example, dealer Chandy Greenholt of Lewisville, North Carolina, provides hours of entertainment with boxes of miscellany. At Mike McCann's (Johnson City, NY) table at the edge of the convention floor, if you dug hard enough and dove under a table or two, you could find 60s commons in decent condition for 5 to 10 cents each, well worth the walk and crawl under the table.

You didn't have to go more than a few feet from the entrance to find SCD's Tom Bartsch and Steve Madson passing out free sample SCD issues and selling catalogs for \$10. They did pretty well since they had nothing to lug home.



SCD's own Tom Bartsch

Convention Promoter Mike Berkus was rarely alone or away from the action at the convention entrance.

Berkus and NSCC

Mike Berkus and John Broggi of SMI worked on promoting and organizing the National all year. They were hands-on during the convention. I caught both Berkus and Broggi while they were on duty, responding to questions or issues and taking a few minutes to answer my host of questions about how all this worked...so well. Berkus is easy to spot as the guy in the suit, a nice looking suit I might add. You could tell that the business plan was well organized, and that Berkus took his responsibilities for running and promoting the convention seriously. They even had a media contact available in Ray Schulte. I recalled prior years of post-convention reports commenting on debates about future locations, the selection of promoters, the size of the facilities, and the process for promoting the convention. I didn't hear major complaints on any of those topics this year.



The National Sports Collectors Convention, Inc. (NSCC) is a not for profit entity run by a 12-person board selected by dealers who vote and have held space at a minimum of two Nationals. The NSCC first hired SMI about 8 years ago to handle promoting the convention. The NSCC is responsible for continuing to monitor that selection and paying the bills. Unlike some of the other convention organizers hired in prior years, Berkus understood the event, promoting the very first convention and participating as a table-holder in later years. The result has been that in recent years the convention is held in facilities with adequate space, in accessible rotated locations, and with less risk of financial difficulties. There are many decisions that need to be made, risks to be understood and minimized, and the long-term image of the National to nurture.

The fat wallet story

Unfortunately pilferage is a problem in all retail establishments including the National. Dealers were ever on the watch for light-fingered discounts. However there is at least one positive story to report. A collector sat down at a table and noted a big, fat wallet left near card binders at dealer Roger Neufeldt's table (Sports Memories, Inc.) (right). The wallet was turned over to Neufeldt for safekeeping. Minutes later the frazzled wallet owner appeared and reclaimed his lost wallet, thankful that he could now spread his money around the various tables rather than leaving it all in one place.



Final thoughts

There were no seminars like those held many years ago, but there were gatherings by collector groups such as Net54 and OBC after show hours. There seemed to be good crowds without crowding each day of the show.

There were millions of cards and collectibles all arranged and packaged ready to take home. Collectors had to visually sort through the sea of items to find the few hundred items on their want lists. Collectors diverted from their lists to acquire other items as well. Time was at a premium and it was much easier to find cards if they were organized. However, if you had the tenacity to dig further and had some luck, there were also diamonds in the rough waiting to be discovered under tables and in boxes of stuff.

Collector Larry Tipton of Hilliard, Florida, spent five days at the convention and summed it up as follows, "I thought the venue was great. I wish the aisles and table numbers were more clearly marked. I bought more cards from sellers who had their stuff organized, in order, and priced. Snack bar hot dog was poor to fair. Overall it was a great experience!"

Once you made it back from the National, you found your want list had shrunk a bit, but had not disappeared. Now, if you could only put your hands on those remaining 1949 Bowman high numbers, and maybe some of those 1966 highs, and..... The search continues.

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The OBC gang below at their swap meet during the 2013 Chicago National

