

Trading cards: Stock market for working men



If you have ever felt that the stock market was too risky or required too much money—yet you have longed to build an inheritance for your son—Billy Bennett may have an option for you: Sports Trading Cards.

While his shop on South Main Street in Blackstone is small and lacking in sophistication, it is not too different from a stock exchange where investors gamble on the rise and fall of giant corporations.

Here, a workingman can come with a few dollars from his weekly pay check and bet on the future of some unknown rookie. That ten cent baseball card might be worth hundreds when that rookie becomes a famous athlete.

Bennett's best example of how trading cards pay off is the 1970 rookie card of Kareem Abdul Jabbar, which he got in a trade some 20 years ago. Today, it's worth \$1,000.

As a part-time businessman, he strives on this exercise of prudence. "You can't trade your good cards away for something you're going to hold onto for a while." Needless to say, Kareem is going to stay in Bennett's collection box at home.

Like vintage wine, these cards are not handled or even tasted with the eyes occasionally. "I'm not going to even open this box so 50 years from now, everything will still be in mint condition." Said James Davis, who had stopped in after work to invest in his son's future.

"If my boy holds my collection until he retires, he'll be able to live until they ripen into a rich maturity. I'm getting a complete set of cards every year until he's old

enough to collect his own,” he said, putting a box containing cards of all the 1990 baseball players on the counter. It cost \$26.

Deano Queensberry, who had come in with Davis, wanted to trade an Ozzie Smith card for a Cal Ripken, Jr. Each card was worth about \$50 and it would be an even trade. But Bennett didn't have this one and Queensberry kept looking over alternatives, not wanting to leave the shop without buying something.

Queensberry said he spends a fortune on cards, which he had been collecting since 1978. It was playing in Little League that got him hooked, he said. And he didn't know how many cards he had or how much they are worth, but that didn't mean he didn't know what cards he had, even though they were all in boxes carefully protected at home. Some boxes, however, were at his grandmother's and he confessed he didn't know what was in them.

Then he laughed. He did know that his girlfriend hated his collecting. Obviously, this was a man's game.

Bennett kept moving among his customers' questions with fluid ease. He kept the annual list of card values on his counter in case his memory failed—but it rarely did. This was, after all, his love, which had never died since childhood. Opening the shop last November seemed a logical outgrowth for his hobby, which had come back full force six years ago.

And the market has been good. Some 200 to 300 people drop by each month, some just passing through who are looking for certain cards. And some are regular customers. But everyone seems to be looking for cards that will enhance their collection.

“Right now the baseball card world is above increasing—it's exploding,” he exclaimed. It used to be just kids, but now older people are looking at it as an investment. Baseball cards give a better return on your money than diamonds or gold, he said, quoting an article he had read.

In fact, so many companies are getting into the card production business they are having to regulate the number of cards printed each year in order to keep their value up. “See those cards over there?” Bennett said, “That box is worth \$80 because of low production.”

None of the customers in the shop or Bennett himself cared to analyze why this fascination, if not addiction, for collecting, saving, and trading cards.

Perhaps the hobby was keeping the flame of their youth alive. Or maybe it was the pure joy of trading a world all too regulated by standardized prices. In this market, people remained people and even the object of barter had human faces on them.

And there must be the pleasure of watching the rookie on your card become a star athlete. “I've got that guy's card,” you'd say with satisfaction and next year you'd check the list to see how much in value your treasure had increased.

Why, it would be like having stock in Apple Computers bought back when that giant computer was a mere basement operation.