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# A Hero a Minute: the Manufacture of Aura and Rarity in the World of Sports Memorabilia and Rapid Commemoration

Roger C. Draeger

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

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A HERO A MINUTE:  
THE MANUFACTURE OF AURA AND RARITY IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS  
MEMORABILIA AND RAPID COMMEMORATION

by  
Roger Draeger

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## ABSTRACT

### A HERO A MINUTE: THE MANUFACTURE OF AURA AND RARITY IN THE WORLD OF SPORTS MEMORABILIA AND RAPID COMMEMORATION

by

Roger Draeger

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016  
Under the Supervision of Professor Richard K. Popp

This is a study of the contemporary sports memorabilia industry and its surrounding culture through the analysis of a pair of its biggest providers. The following research explores the business model of Steiner Sports and examines its methods concerning pieces of game-used memorabilia and personal artifacts. The workings of Fanatics Authentic are also evaluated through the analysis of its specific line of In-Focus photographs and its sports memorabilia show held in the spring of 2016. The examination of both companies reveals techniques of manufacturing both rarity and aura that exist in the sports memorabilia industry. Steiner's focus on providing intimate artifacts to collectors has resulted in a largely diluted market, leading to the development of tactics to generate aura while also rapidly removing game-used relics to produce maximum revenue through commemoration. The study of Fanatics also reveals customization to be an important aspect of collecting that its shows can arrange for attendees. Fanatics' events provide the opportunity for participants to transform their collectibles into a vessel for creativity and personal memory from within a controlled environment. The workings of the sports memorabilia world help to better understand today's consumer culture in a variety of ways. The manufactured scarcity that exists throughout the industry is reflective of several products within consumer culture that present the feature of limited edition

as an avenue to renew individuality through the purchase of goods designed to sell exclusivity. Steiner's manufacturing of aura concerning its artifacts seeks to generate a living power that is reflective of advertising's ability to elevate products into status markers for owners. Fanatics' ability to offer personalization outfits show attendees with the agency to transform a commercial object into a humanized representation of the purchaser that is typical of several high-end branded products. Ultimately, the sports memorabilia industry serves as an exemplary model of the ability of commercialized objects to be converted into valuable commodities that represent a living mystique, status, and expression to a rarity seeking world.

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To the people who helped bring me back.

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## **Chapter 1: *Introduction***

On September 21, 2008, the final game was played in one of American sports greatest cathedrals, Yankee Stadium. The heralded grounds would then be purchased by Steiner Sports CEO Brandon Steiner to take apart and sell to collectors. The deal took 2 years to negotiate and cost \$16.5 million to finance (Conner, 2014). Steiner has reached similar deals with other sports meccas but the purchase of Yankee Stadium is the most eye-catching. Steiner Sports also enjoys an exclusive partnership with the Yankees that allows Steiner access to exclusive game-used artifacts from the New York franchise to further set the sports memorabilia empire apart.

Steiner Sports produces gargantuan amounts of mass-produced items, but what really sets the memorabilia provider apart are its relics. Steiner seems to recognize the value of objects with patina, or goods where age is an essential element of the objects high status, but the age of the relics alone can't generate associations without proper context (Appadurai, 1993, p.75-76). When objects are taken from professional sports stadiums, ballparks, and arenas, the heroic and mythical context surrounding these objects can also take on a mythological power for collectors. Steiner recognizes this capability. These types of objects can provide special "credentials" to the owner by providing a relationship to something scarce, or in the case of Yankee Stadium, gone forever (Appadurai, 1993, p.76). Steiner identifies that people want to be a part of history whether they were present or not (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 197). Steiner's commodification of intimate relics that once decorated the hallowed shrines of American sport cathedrals provides, for collectors, a perceived ability to purchase the power and history these articles represent and encapsulate.

Steiner Sports has company atop the sports memorabilia landscape. Fanatics Authentic is the official partner of the NFL, MLB, NBA, and the NHL. If a customer purchases a sports

collectible from any of the 4 major professional sports leagues' websites, the item will most likely be purchased through Fanatics. This partnership, or perhaps monopoly, helps create trust in a sports memorabilia industry littered with counterfeit autographs. This confidence in the authenticity and genuine nature of sports memorabilia is essential to collectors and their peace of mind. Fanatics' partnerships supply the consumer with extra assurance, not only from Fanatics, that the item and specifically the autograph the collector purchased is authentic, but also indirectly from a specific professional league. Fanatics also conducts sports memorabilia shows year round entitled, Fanatics Authentic Sports Spectaculars. These shows are similar to baseball card shows of the past, but have much more of a focus on autographed memorabilia than sports cards. Fanatics' shows allow for a public spectacle where collectors are able to personally acquire signatures from athletes. These shows also provide collectors with more freedom to choose specific details regarding what item to get signed when compared to purchasing an item from a website.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine two major players in the sports memorabilia industry today, Steiner Sports and Fanatics Authentic. How do these memorabilia titans commodify the nostalgia that lives in relics and autographed items? What are the different techniques regarding how mass-produced items are manufactured to maximize value and appeal? How do the two brands distinguish themselves? What are the potential ramifications of an unlimited willingness to commodify everything and construct narratives of rarity regarding mass-produced items? What happens to the truly rare when everything is rare?

This work will also examine the sense of control the act of collecting provides for those who accumulate sports memorabilia. In the same vein as Jonathan Gray's (2010) work on paratexts providing the opportunity for fans to express themselves in powerful and unique ways,

so too does the paratext of sports collectibles. When examining sports card connoisseurs in the 1970s and 1980s Bloom found that the majority of collectors worked in occupations that allowed for little creativity or self-expression. Collecting provides the avenue for fulfilling these creative aspirations. Collectors are able to create a “homemade universe” with their collections (Stewart, 1984, p. 162). This universe is custom to a collector’s thoughts, emotions, and creative desires. Collecting and peer acknowledgment can also provide collectors with dignity albeit a commodified and manufactured form.

So why study sports memorabilia? Sports has long been an avenue for escape while also serving to unify. Fans often identify with a team or player which can provide a sense of belonging and meaning, while helping to construct an identity through nostalgic personal memories or moments watching games. Sports often further a sense of belonging by connecting fans to a region or place, creating an imagined community, while also applying meaning to lives (Crawford, 2004, p.52-53). Fandom of sports has also become a civil religion complete its own set of values, symbols, holy days, chapels, relics, and gods (Serazio, 2013).

The immediacy of sports is more relevant today than ever. In a media society where little television is still watched live and the major network “can’t-miss” programs are disappearing, or significantly scaled down in viewership, sports is different. Sports are one of very few programming options that is still primarily enjoyed live which extends a higher value both financially for advertisers and culturally for viewers than ever before. According to Kantar Media, 2014-2015 sports programming created \$8.47 billion in sales revenue for ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox. This financial return accounted for one-third (37%) of the \$8.47 billion in ad dollars generated by the four major networks. This elevation marked a 35% increase from just five years ago (Crupi, 2015). Sports are one of the few truly “can’t-miss” live media programs left.

As Microsoft managing director, Tony Emerson states, “Sports is one of those last things that makes people still want to watch TV in a linear fashion” (Metz, 2015).

Sports has long generated heroes and celebrities, but today’s social media and TMZ focus on 24/7 coverage has created a more significant blurring of the lines between celebrity and athlete than ever before. This merging of sports and popular culture transforms sports into the ultimate equalizer, or familiar cultural province, for discussions that nurture and maintain relationships. Sports serve as a common ground where wins, losses, and statistics are not all that generates dialogue around the water cooler, but personal details are also fair game. The intense focus on seeing live sports and being engaged in the social lives of athletes has made sports the ultimate cultural congregate.

Given the power of the sports industry it would be valuable to examine the understudied world of sports memorabilia paratexts. Specifically, this study will focus on the autographed sports memorabilia and relics that dominate the industry today. Just as paratexts like action figures and video games are imperative to truly understand the appeal and impact of the massively budgeted film franchises that dominate the big screen, so too with the yearlong sports blockbusters that dominate the cultural terrain. Evaluating Steiner Sports and Fanatics Authentic, two of the largest providers of sports memorabilia in the industry, will help to better understand the contemporary media landscape.

My analysis of the sports memorabilia industry will draw on several works. I will examine the value of rarity within the sports memorabilia industry and collectors’ community in relation to ideas discussed by Philipp Blom, Werner Muensterberger, Russell Belk and Arjun Appadurai. First, I will draw on work from Belk and his observations regarding the act of collecting within consumer societies. Belk maintains that collectors desire rarity because it

allows for a greater challenge, a higher feeling of accomplishment, and increases status among other collectors (Belk, 1995, p. 74). Ruth Formanek contends that collecting and the pursuit of rarity resembles hunting with the final prize ultimately being displayed as the symbol of one's ability (Formanek, 1991, p. 277). Belk furthers this analysis of pursuit maintaining that collectors don't merely see the objects acquired, but also the memories that accompanied the acquisition (Belk, 1995, p. 92).

Blom contends that mass production led to a loss of authenticity while rarity allows for a re-establishment of uniqueness for collectors. Muensterberger discusses phallic-narcissistic personality and the ability of possessions to act as substitutes for people themselves as fueling the desire to own rare objects. Muensterberger also contends the passion to own rare objects is rooted in a craving for power with relics delivering the perceived movement of an intrinsic force to the collector (Muensterberger, 1994, p. 13, 59).

Lastly, Arjun Appadurai's discussion of patina will be examined in relation to the commodification of relics. Appadurai contends that the patina of objects provides owners with a special status and a relationship to something gone forever. The ability to provide this relationship is what makes patina so rare and companies that provide it so profitable (Appadurai, 1996, p. 76).

The above works, which focus on rarity, will be merged with the practice of manufacturing scarcity. In addition to the above, Igor Kopytoff's discussion of singularization will be examined in relation to the practice of manufactured scarcity within the world of sports memorabilia. Kopytoff contends that goods are produced to be singular thus presenting collectibles as positive investments with the ability to grow in value (Kopytoff, 1986, p.75, 81).

## **Method**

This work employed a mix of methods. First, this study consisted of a textual analysis of products and copy found on the Steiner and Fanatics websites. The sheer volume of both websites made an extensive examination of each difficult. To combat the size of the sites, this study focused on select products the websites offered and how these articles were designed and promoted. The examination of Fanatics also included ethnographic research of its March 19, 2016 show at the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center in Rosemont, Illinois. Two personal interviews with individuals currently or once involved in the sports memorabilia industry also factored into this research. Lastly, an industry analysis focused on the structure of the sports memorabilia industry was conducted using a combination of all the materials listed above.

## **What's to Come**

Chapter Two will largely focus on Steiner's use of relics as a tool to commodify history, nostalgia, and aura. As Lowenthal (1985) contends, people want to be a part of history whether they were present or not (p. 197). A popular way to become part of the past is through purchasing commemorative objects. Relics represent the most prestigious and intimate forms of this commemoration. Steiner has become the face of game-used artifacts within the sports memorabilia industry. The high desire for historic relics has led Steiner to engage in practices aimed at manufacturing history and attaching aura to objects where little exists.

Chapter Two will also focus on the historic relics themselves that Steiner presents for purchase. Not only is Steiner famous for buying Yankee Stadium and gutting it to sell off the nostalgic pieces for prices that are far from tender and sentimental, but Steiner also provides other personal relics. Even a page from the notably private baseball legend, Joe DiMaggio's diary is not immune to Steiner's commercialization. A trade that began with baseball cards has

morphed into an industry that pushes the envelope where rarity is the most valuable commodity of all. Steiner proves in the world of memorabilia everything is for sale.

Chapter Three will focus on Fanatics Authentic and how it creates rarity by incorporating scarcity into its production and shows. In addition, this chapter will examine how Fanatics' shows offer the opportunity for collectors to construct a rare and singularized item while also offering the opportunity to engage with a like-minded community. Part of this chapter will focus on the objects that Fanatics offers. Fanatics' primary focus on selling mass-produced items can aggravate collectors' desire to distinguish their collections. To create increased desire for its mass-produced items, I will examine how Fanatics often generates a constructed rarity by only producing a limited number of specific items. That scarcity is then presented as a valuable feature of the item itself. Often to further generate individuality with these pieces unique inscriptions and statistics are added to signatures for sale on the Fanatics' website, which shapes a hierarchy for a specific collectible. Fanatics excels at creating a mystique regarding its different autographed items and product lines that is completely manufactured through celebrity athletes, imagery, memory, and rarity to entice collectors.

In addition to the objects themselves, I will also focus on the ability of Fanatics' shows to further generate scarcity regarding its collectibles along with the opportunities these shows provide for collectors to generate a customized rarity of their own. Fanatics' shows create a more tailored experience for attendees by providing the avenue for collectors to strive to achieve the singularization that Kopytoff discusses from within a controlled environment. Collectors attending shows are given a level of agency not available to online purchases. The show attendee has the ability to choose a specific item to bring to the event and have signed, where the signature will be placed, and what color the signature will appear. In addition, if collectors are

willing to pay extra, a specific inscription can be placed on the item to provide further singularization.

### **Cardboard Genesis:**

An examination of the sports memorabilia industry of 2016 reveals a market consisting largely of pricy autographed memorabilia and relics. A 2012 study by sportsmemorabilia.com revealed the autographed sports collectibles market to be a \$1.5 billion industry with an average price tag of \$180 (Ozanian, 2014). How did this realm become such a lucrative giant? It's difficult to articulate the current state of sports memorabilia without examining the innovations and techniques that positioned the strategic workings of the trade today. In fact, the emergence of this extravagant world was actually the result of cheap, flimsy, cardboard. The sports memorabilia industry's current structure is the result of the most basic type of sports collectible, baseball cards. The rise and fall of sports card collecting influenced modern sports memorabilia immensely. Specifically, the impact can be felt regarding authentication strategy and improved tactics of generating scarcity.

Perhaps no component has driven the sports memorabilia hobby more significantly than speculation. The perceived advent of the hobby's affair with speculation can be traced to an auction conducted at the George Washington Motor Lodge in 1980. The prized items of the auction were multiple 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle rookie cards. After collectors observed how Mantle rookie cards skyrocketed in value from mere pennies, to \$3,000, in 30 years, collectors' tryst with rookie cards began. Collectors hoped rookie cards of players in the 1980s would see similar growth (Williams, 1995, p.52). In addition, many who had not previously collected saw the investment value of cards and decided to enter into the hobby. The narrative of financial



achievement the Mantle card provided was all the encouragement needed to produce the phenomenon of “Rookiemania” (Williams, 1995, p.52).

The problem with comparing the 1952 Mantle to the modern rookie cards of the 1980s is the failure to account for basic supply and demand dynamics. The 1952 Mantle is one of the rarest post World War II cards produced (Williams, 1995, p.46). The Mantle was part of a staggered release strategy Topps had implemented until 1974 (Williams, 1995, p.52). In 1952, Topps released new cards in March, May, July, and late summer. By the end of summer collector focus shifted to football cards and store owners refused, or accepted limited stock, of the fourth Topps Series resulting in a Topps warehouse full of series four product. The final series was the only to include the 1952 Mantle. Topps then made the unfortunate decision of filling two garbage trucks with its 1952 line and dumping the product into the Atlantic Ocean (Williams, 1995, p.53). This decision resulted in endless cards, including the 1952 Mantle, congregating in a watery grave at the bottom of the sea. Topps decision to destroy its product reveals why the Mantle card is so rare. The fact that the now treasured card could have once been obtained for so little also contributes to its narrative. For several collectors the Mantle card represents the one that got away.

The 1952 Topps Mantle definitely opened the door to more collectors and was the genesis of Rookiemania, but as James Beckett III, a professor of statistics at Bowling Green University, proved, the interest in the investment value of cards likely existed prior to 1980. Beckett began conducting research polls in 1976 and would eventually launch *Beckett Baseball Monthly* magazine which employed ten full-time card analysts to travel to card shows, card shops, examine auction data, and major-league box scores to determine appropriate card values (Jamieson, 2010, p. 149). Ultimately, Beckett did as much as anyone to turn the card collecting

hobby into a billion dollar industry (Jamieson, 2010, p.151). Beckett provided the tool needed for financial measurement for sports cards that helped establish standards and value not unlike metrics and rating systems for other media like TV and film.

Card dealers were delighted to capitalize on the newfound adoration given to rookie cards. Dealers began purchasing cases of cards and dividing them into player lots (Jamieson, 2010, p.173). This process enabled an investor to purchase card lots of one specific player in hopes of cashing in. This process mimicked Wall Street by essentially turning rookie cards into penny stocks (Jamieson, 2010, p.174). This rookie card phenomenon began as merely dealer hype, but drove sales of new product for years (Jamieson, 2010, p.154).

The intense demand for rookie cards resulted in the market being flooded not only with an overproduced number of cards, but also with counterfeit versions. Counterfeit cards were not the only unsettling element that emerged regarding the industry. Machines that cut and sorted cards from manufacturers typically put cards in the same order; therefore, card dealers with poor ethics could memorize the order of the cards and replace superstar players with common cards. This process was made simpler by the easily manipulated wax packaging the packs of cards arrived in (Jamieson, 2010, p.162). In addition, the quality of cardboard manufacturers used to print cards was susceptible to bending at the corners. These industry problems resulted in the 1989 launch of Upper Deck.

### **The White Light**

Upper Deck was the vision of Paul Sumner, a printer who had conducted cutting edge work using white-light-projection holograms (Jamieson, 2010, p.161). Sumner proposed using higher-grade cardboard and ink to improve design and prevent bent corners while also creating a new machine to randomly shuffle cards to avoid identical card sequences in cases. In addition,

Sumner decided to package Upper Deck cards in a tamper-proof foil packaging (Jamieson, 2010, p.162). All these advancements provided great appeal to collectors, but Sumner's key innovation was the white-light-projection hologram affixed to every card to prevent counterfeiting (Jamieson, 2010, p.161). The holograms were essentially the first certificates of authenticity (COA) to enter the hobby, which are essential today with autographed memorabilia. Despite their high cost, Upper Deck cards offered more security for collectors combined with higher quality and a more aesthetically appealing cards.

In 1989, Upper Deck baseball cards were released to the public. In addition to its innovations, Upper Deck also broke tradition with its marketing. Upper Deck's early advertising motto proudly boasted, "Upper Deck: For the kid on the street and the Wall Street investor" (Jamieson, 2010, p.166). Upper Deck's head of sales, Jay McCracken, viewed Upper Deck's target primarily as adults, motivated by investment, over fun and nostalgia (Jamieson, 2010, p.164). This strategy marked a shift from the targeting of children, which had been the industry norm largely since its inception. Other manufacturers soon followed.

The industry's strategic shift towards marketing that embraced the investment motivated approach was the source of great dissention within the hobby. A famous collector within the card industry, Michael Gidwitz, discussed his belief that under almost no circumstances should a collector sell his or her cards which is essentially an investor's goal. He also expressed his disdain that a hobby that once provided him a transport back to childhood now mirrored adulthood with the investment approach to collecting resembling a job (Jamieson, 2010, p.47). This resentment continues today. As Tom, a lifelong collector in his mid-70s stated, "As a collector, I frown at investors. I don't think they are true collectors. I see people come into the

stores and rip cases [slang for opening cases of cards with the sole intention of selling them as soon as possible] or rip boxes just to turn them over. They don't keep a card" (2015).

Purveyors of hype and speculation even made frequent appearances on various home shopping networks. Shop at Home Network often brought in the animated pitchman, Don West, to market baseball cards and sports memorabilia to viewers on the late night circuit. West would often hint at the financial reward collectors who called in and purchased a product would retain and stressed the urgency of the deal at hand (Jamieson, 2010, p.185). West's mainstream appeal and personality became so popular it was parodied by Will Farrell on *Saturday Night Live*.

Another TV-based peddler of sports memorabilia was QVC. QVC was a valuable avenue for Upper Deck and its Upper Deck Authenticated (UDA) autograph division. Similar to the hologram that Upper Deck featured on its cards, UDA implemented a similar technique to ensure autograph authenticity. UDA affixed a tamper-proof hologram with a unique number and letter combination to all its autographed memorabilia along with a corresponding hologram attached to the certificate of authenticity (COA). This technique was done to ease collectors' minds about the genuine nature of the autograph, but it also turned the COA into a collectible itself. QVC viewers were encouraged to call in immediately as its items were available for a "limited time only" and QVC was the only place to score Upper Deck and UDA deals, constructing the message that QVC was an exclusive broker for collectors in this investment motivated hobby (Williams, 1995, p.10).

The Upper Deck and QVC narrative of exclusivity and insider deals had company in the sports memorabilia industry. Bill Mastro, owner of Mastro Auctions was also skilled at generating demand through powerful narratives. Between allegations of doctoring cards to improve their condition, auctioning counterfeit memorabilia, and shill bidding, Mastro Auctions

excelled at exploiting the psychology of collectors for massive profit. Mastro's psychological appeal to collectors was not only through his catalogue's images, but in the history of the featured collectibles themselves. Mastro was one of the first to hire seasoned researchers and copywriters to create the extensive narratives featured in his catalogues concerning what collectibles would be available at Mastro's next auction. Mastro's catalogues were so popular that they became collectibles themselves (Jamieson, 2010, p. 202).

Mastro's most powerful contribution was to the narrative of the Honus Wagner T206 card. Mastro considered the T206 Wagner the only card that could propel the hobby into the mainstream, so he perpetuated the legend always (Jamieson, 2010, p.195). With fewer than 60 known to exist, the Wagner card is not the rarest, but various mythical stories exist as to why the card is so rare (Bertrand). It is this mythology combined with rarity that produces maximum value for collectors. Mastro's catalogues had the ability to transfer similar mythical powers to rare objects, making collectors feel possession was essential (Jamieson, 2010, p.204).

Mastro's skills helped him broker the 1991 deal that sold the most famous version of the Honus Wagner T206 card to Wayne Gretzky and then Los Angeles Kings owner Bruce McNall (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.72). This specific Wagner card was already famous prior to the sale due to its pristine condition which inspired rumors, later confirmed, that the card was altered by Mastro himself after he purchased it in 1985 (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p. 4, 72). The fact that the card sold to the famous Gretzky increased the card's legend so powerfully that it would be known as the "Gretzky T206 Wagner" from the moment Gretzky purchased it (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.72). This renaming of the card expressed how prior owners of collectibles can often be treated like original artists (Belk, 1995, p. 96). In addition, Gretzky was not a

collector, but saw a savvy investment opportunity which gave the hobby instant financial credibility along with the notoriety of Gretzky's stature (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.72).

Media reports soon surfaced that the card may have been doctored. Doctoring a card is a huge taboo in the industry, yet this allegation seemed to only add to the myth and narrative of the card and strangely didn't hurt its value (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.85-86). In fact, previously mentioned collector, Michael Gidwitz, who acquired the card at an auction in 1996 for \$640,000 became the first to sell the card for over a million dollars (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.140). Although Gidwitz believed it was altered, he relished the idea of being part of the story (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007 p.127). Some memorabilia, like the Wagner, allows collectors the ability to establish a link with fame attempting to transpose the mythology onto themselves. Gidwitz proudly acknowledges that he was once, "Top guy on the hill" within the hobby and having owned the card for a brief time he "increased the story" (Keeffe & Thompson, 2007, p. 140).

### **One with Baseball**

The idea of association can be powerful for individual collectors like Gidwitz, but also for companies like Upper Deck. In 1993, Upper Deck pitch man, Reggie Jackson, spent the majority of his actual MLB Hall of Fame speech pushing Upper Deck products. Jackson even praised Upper Deck for returning baseball to America's children. Jackson then went on QVC later that day to sell UDA products he autographed, such as a signed jersey for the non-childlike price of \$359.95 (Williams, 1995, p.252). This shameless marketing ploy was one of a series of events where Upper Deck attempted to attach itself to the perceived "purity" of baseball.

Upper Deck's attempts to brand itself as wholesome and righteous occurred just after the "Nostalgia Boom" of the 1980s. This boom was felt in several entertainment avenues, but

marked a landmark for the industry of baseball. Films like *Field of Dreams* presented baseball as mythic and unchanged from the “golden era” of the game (Bloom, 1997, p. 5).

Bloom’s study of baseball card collecting in the 1970s and 1980s displayed this embrace of the “golden era” of baseball. During this period baseball cards evoked a longing for boyhood and a recapturing of the innocence and playfulness associated with the white middle-class game. Bloom’s research revealed a largely white and predominantly male hobby (Bloom, 1997, p. 7, 35). Despite the shift in the sports memorabilia market from card collecting to autographed memorabilia and game-used artifacts this demographic still remains. The Fanatics’ show I attended, along with the memorabilia shops in which I conducted interviews, were dominated by a demographic of white males of various ages.

The fascination with baseball’s past soon resulted in retro MLB ballparks like Camden Yards and The Ballpark in Arlington being constructed to pay homage to this special era of the boyhood game. As the fictional writer featured in *Field of Dreams*, Terence Mann, stressed, “It [baseball] reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again” (Field of Dreams, 2011). This tale displays how the memory of the past can be constructed by a subjectivity of the present which can be irrational (Megill, 2011, p. 196). The game of baseball was good for whites during this romanticized period, but not for those the game excluded. This favorable way of looking at the game is tied to the narrative constructed by white, conservative, middle-class values designed to reward and praise conformity to a mythical standard of purity, class, and whiteness.

The fascination with a nostalgic mythical era of baseball extended beyond the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*, nostalgic ballparks and baseball card collecting. The 1980’s focus on nostalgia exhibited the capacity of the feeling to be used as a profitable marketing tool with its potential to romanticize the past and mold a specifically tailored financially motivated narrative. This ability

likely influenced the still infant company Upper Deck to join the nostalgic fray. Whether real or imagined, Upper Deck wanted the feelings of nostalgia and purity associated with baseball attached to it. Today, Steiner Sports relishes a comparable sentimental link through its partnership with the Yankees.

Upper Deck's marketing shift was calculated. After the 1990 season, Upper Deck began sponsoring the "Equitable Old Timers Series" which featured retired players in games at MLB ballparks. According to Upper Deck documents, the objective of the sponsorship was to generate local and national publicity by sponsoring a program that "has enough meaning and authenticity to gain wide acceptance among media, public and players." Upper Deck also believed that renaming the game "Upper Deck Heroes of Baseball" would reinforce Upper Deck's image and position as inseparable from the fabric of baseball (Williams, 1995, p.143).

Remember, Upper Deck was established in 1989. Upper Deck's sponsorship decision was aimed at constructing a sentimental narrative that transformed Upper Deck's still infant and investment motivated tradition into a deep, lengthy, and storied tale that collectors could feel nostalgic about. Upper Deck even conducted "Heroes" games on the same diamond and location featured in the *Field of Dreams* film. Upper Deck's "Heroes" games were an example of how a tradition that claims to be old and established is often fairly recent and sometimes even invented (Hobsbawm, 2011, p. 271). Upper Deck wanted to mold the public's perception of an emerging company that merely sold expensive rectangles of cardboard to a company that generally cared about the game and was part of MLB beyond a financial aspect.



## **Hit the Deck: The Fall of Upper Deck and the Sports Card Industry**

The irony is that while Upper Deck shifted its focus to becoming synonymous with baseball's heritage it failed to realize its best days, and the best days of all manufacturers of sports cards, were ending. The sports card industry peaked in 1991 with \$1.4 billion spent on wholesale cards and has swiftly declined since (Jamieson, 2010, p.174).

The problems for Upper Deck extended beyond the fleeting sales of sports cards. By 1994, several lawsuits were pending against the card producing giant (Williams, 1995, p.263). The biggest allegation was that it frequently re-printed high value cards. Despite re-printing cards being legal, as Upper Deck owned the copyright on the product, the action violated an unwritten rule within collectors' culture. The value of cards and trust of collectors is based on a limited production (Williams, 1995, p.176). According to former company executives the reprinting of cards actually occurred with the company's first 1989 baseball series (Williams, 1995, p.175).

In addition to Upper Deck's alleged flooding of the market with reprinted cards, the market was also immersed with error and insert cards. The number of "error" cards grew fivefold during 1989 and 1990 (Jamieson, 2010, p. 177) leaving collectors skeptical about the authenticity of the errors (Bloom, 1997, p. 23). Regardless of whether the error is real or manufactured a market saturated with "rare" error cards fails to have the same impact on collectors' desires if the errors are commonplace.

Insert cards also made a comeback in the 1990s. Insert cards were around since the 1960s in the form of temporary tattoos or peel-off stickers inserted into random packs of cards to stimulate demand. When re-introduced in the 1990s the insert was intended no longer to be the "sideshow" featured in random packs, but the coveted prize for collectors to chase. Card

manufacturers attempted to create the illusion of scarcity regarding insert cards by referring to the articles as “prizes” implying that any card that is only in a small number of packs should hold high value. By 1996, an excessive eight hundred insert sets were distributed by card manufacturers’ per year all touted as being high value collectibles (Jamieson, 2010, p. 187, 188). Insert cards, along with error cards, illustrated a failed industry strategy that attempted to manufacture scarcity with entirely too large and broad of an execution.

Prior to a 1980 court ruling that decided Topps was in violation of anti-trust laws for attempting to monopolize the hobby, Topps had actually enjoyed a monopoly on the production of baseball cards. This monopoly began in roughly 1956 when Topps purchased Bowman (Jamieson, 2009). During the first half of the 1990s the number of companies that manufactured sports cards increased fivefold (Jamieson, 2010, p. 181). In 1959, card collecting pioneer, Jefferson Burdick stated his concerns with overproduction in a letter when only three nationally distributed baseball card sets existed. The sets included, Topps, Bowman, and a Fleer set that solely featured Ted Williams, who Topps could not acquire exclusive rights to. By 1994, the number of sets available to collectors grew to 350 (Jamieson, 2010, p. 185, 186).

Other than overproduction and market saturation another popular theory for the decline of card collecting blames the MLB strike of 1994 that ironically was assisted by the purchase of baseball cards. In 1992, more than \$60 million was available for players in a strike fund prior to labor discussions largely from the purchase of baseball cards. Since the Topps monopoly was busted baseball cards accounted for 90% of the MLB union’s licensing revenue (Jamieson, 2010, p. 177).

The argument of the strike causing the fall in baseball card collecting is problematic. In mid-October of 1994, Joseph “Papa Joe” Chevalier, a syndicated talk-show host, urged upset

fans to send in their prized baseball cards to be destroyed in an on-air mass burning. Chevalier's expectation was roughly ten thousand cards, but he received close to half a million proving the fall of the hobby likely occurred prior to 1994 (Jamieson, 2010, p. 177, 179-180). Fans freely discarding cards, often of superstar players, displays that scores of collectors once romanced by a narrative of financial prominence realized the financial motive of collecting baseball cards was as durable and reliable as the cardboard the players were printed on.

### **The 2016 Sports Memorabilia Industry**

The mistakes made in the 1980s and 1990s regarding overproduction and market saturation have led to today's sports card industry restructuring itself around scarcity. This strategy also migrated to the autographed memorabilia realm. Today's cards and autographed memorabilia are produced to be limited in order to capitalize on collectors' desire for rarity while creating memorabilia that feels less like a commercial product. These attempts to singularize mass-produced objects are made in hopes of creating the perception that the item is sacred within the collectors' community (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 73-75).

Today's sports memorabilia providers often produce limited numbers of autographed items to generate a singularization impact aimed at creating an aura concerning the collectible. For instance, sports cards are generated of popular athletes, but other singularized cards of these players are also produced. These articles typically have the specific print number located on the card itself. For example, a card featuring and autographed by current NFL wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. may be a limited edition of 5 total cards produced. The card will have a number something like 2/5 (meaning this card is the second of five total cards that exist) printed on the actual card. This numbering exists to remind the collector of just how rare and sacred the item truly is. For the card's owner this numbering means that only 4 other collectors have this

particular card. The result is an increased demand for these rare articles, feeding the investment narrative by presenting the value of the collectibles not to be terminal, but capable of growth. Creating an artificial scarcity and presenting the feature through numbering also extends to autographed memorabilia, especially regarding Fanatics. The visual reminder of scarcity provides reassurance for collectors that the item they covet is very rare, which further increases demand. This reassuring boost can lead to a looser wallet for a collector who feels more justified spending massive amounts of money to get a truly rare piece of memorabilia that could increase in value. Manufactured scarcity also provides collectors with the ability to increase the narrative of rarity for their collection and themselves. Owning a unique item makes an assemblage of collectibles that much rarer, and collectors often consider their collections an extension of themselves, making the owner also distinct (Belk, 1995, p. 89).

Today, Upper Deck no longer occupies a large role in sports card manufacturing other than the production of hockey cards. Despite its absence in the card market, Upper Deck's impact can still be felt in the autographed sports memorabilia realm. Just as Upper Deck developed the hologram to prevent counterfeiting to ease collectors' minds, UDA created a similar comfort level with autographed memorabilia that became today's industry standard. Without proper holograms and corresponding COAs, it is very difficult for a sports memorabilia dealer to establish the trust needed to compete on a national level.

UDA is still in the athlete signature market, but despite its innovations, is not the biggest player. Steiner Sports, Fanatics Authentic, and TRISTAR Productions represent today's major players all of which display several of the early techniques and strategies UDA helped spearhead. The industry's merchandise today consists largely of 2 categories. The first category centers on relics which are often taken from stadiums in the form of seats, signs, dirt, bases, etc.

This category also includes players' jerseys and equipment. Basically anything that is game-used is assigned to this category. In addition, other unique items such as a high school yearbook signed by a pro athlete before he or she turned professional would also qualify. The second category concentrates on mass-produced items largely consisting of photos and replica equipment. Autographs on both types of items are typically desired to provide the item with maximum allure. Autographs are placed on a vast array of high-end products from game-used items, stadium relics, mass-produced baseballs, bats, full-size and mini football helmets, etc. Virtually nothing is off limits. Today's popularity of signed mass-produced items is surprising considering the early criticisms UDA received when shaping the modern sports memorabilia industry.

When UDA was launched many were skeptical. UDA autographed memorabilia was billed as counterfeit-proof. To ensure this level of authenticity every autographed item was said to be witnessed by a UDA employee and then assigned a hologram with a specific letter and number combination affixed to the item along with a matching hologram on the COA. The item's hologram information was then cataloged by UDA. Today, the hologram's text can be verified and the item's authenticity confirmed with UDA's online database. Currently, a similar process is a part of many national retailers authentication system.

One initial criticism of the affixed hologram was that having a hologram on an autographed item defaced the piece. This complaint didn't hinder UDA. UDA even branded its company with the slogan, "If it's not Authenticated, it's just a souvenir" (Williams, 1995, p.238). This slogan essentially tells collectors that even if they observe an athlete signing an item first hand that a hologram is still needed to complete the process of owning a highly valued, authentic collectible versus an ordinary and lowly souvenir. Like Beckett establishing a standard for

value, the UDA hologram and COA established a premium level for authenticity in sports memorabilia and positioned UDA as the gold standard of the autograph industry.

Once established, UDA swiftly moved to negotiate exclusive contracts with stars. Retired Yankee players, Mickey Mantle and Reggie Jackson were first and soon UDA had exclusive deals with over 30 athletes (Williams, 1995, p.236-237). Today, this practice of signing stars to exclusive agreements has become the norm for any nationally established provider of sports memorabilia. In the 1980s Joe DiMaggio and Mantle were among the first to refuse to sign bats at card shows which increased the demand and value of signed bats from the former Yankee greats. UDA was keenly aware of this increase in demand and included details in its contract with Mantle that he would sign bats again, but only for UDA. This strategy created a manufactured scarcity concerning Mantle bats. Similar strategies are orchestrated in today's industry. Many purist collectors did not see the value of paying \$1750 to own a bat signed by Mickey Mantle that Mantle had never actually used in a game (Williams, 1995, p.239). Despite the early concerns, UDA was successful and greatly influenced the autographed memorabilia market today.

## **Chapter 2: A “Dirty” Religion: The Real and Manufactured History of Sports Artifacts.**

Nothing is more beloved in the sports memorabilia industry than game-used items and personal artifacts that an athlete interacted with. As famed collector Grant DePorter said of sports and its game-used relics, “It’s a religion...these are the holy relics that are part of that religion” (2013, 60 Minutes). If sports memorabilia collecting does have a religious connotation, then Steiner Sports CEO Brandon Steiner has written the financial creed. Steiner has largely pioneered the game-used and artifact market that profits off the saints and cathedrals of sport. In 2004, Steiner Sports began a joint venture with the New York Yankees regarding the sale of Yankee game-used memorabilia. The deal opened the door for the 2009 agreement that organized an \$11.5 million payment from Steiner to New York City for the rights to disassemble Yankee Stadium and sell off the historic remains (Sandomir 2014). The sale further transformed the already popular game-used market by making almost anything from a famed baseball temple available for purchase.

Today, nearly anything that a player comes into contact with is available for purchase under the tag “game-used” from jerseys, line-up cards, bases, bats, balls, and even dirt. Players don’t even have to touch the artifacts in a traditional sense as the sale of various forms of stadium seats still available from Steiner’s 2009 purchase illustrates. The financial key to profit is for the game-used item to have a perceived aura attached to it. Steiner excels at providing items with an aura while also manufacturing the feeling in the process.

As of 2014, Steiner is on its third contract with the Yankees. The agreement includes an annual rights fee which neither party will disclose. In addition, the Yankees also receive a share of the profits generated from Steiner’s Yankee memorabilia. Steiner has reached other deals with various historic franchises. The majority of those agreements are no longer active and

failed to generate the success of the Yankee Deal (Sandomir 2014). For Steiner, the Yankees are the centerpiece of its game-used memorabilia empire.

This chapter will focus on the relationship Steiner Sports enjoys with the Yankees, in addition to examining specific memorabilia pieces Steiner offers. The purpose of this work is to examine Steiner's ability to capitalize on collectors' desire to be unique by offering various game-used and personal artifacts that present, and partially manufacture, a consumable history, that is not just displayable, but also transferable.

Collectors' passion for game-used relics and intimate artifacts regarding sports was not always such a lucrative endeavor. At the conclusion of the 1973 season, the New York Yankees allowed season ticket holders to remove seats as keepsakes to help prepare for the upcoming renovations. In addition, a few individuals with connections to the Yankees were given the opportunity to survey the stadium and purchase items they uncovered at remarkably low prices. The late sports historian and boxing writer, Bert Sugar, even managed to procure a pair of Babe Ruth's underwear he discovered in one of the many "rooms that hadn't been opened in years" (Andon, 2013, p. 139-140). The Yankees, as well as other clubs, did not realize the value of the items their sports meccas housed.

As Andon (2013) discussed, the result of clubs like the Yankees' inability to correctly preserve and appreciate their history has resulted in current stadiums and ballparks reliance on the artifacts of private collectors to properly display franchise history for appreciation (p. 140). When examining the profit motive concerning today's relics, it becomes clear this inability to protect and properly nurture history will continue. The failure to preserve a team's history, once the result of ignorance, has transitioned into a calculated industry aimed at manufacturing and commercializing history more than guarding it. The following artifacts strive to provide an



illustration and cultural analysis of Steiner's business model within the sports memorabilia market.

### **A Seat in History**

Relics, such as seats from famous sports venues, are filled with the qualities of patina and aura. The term "patina" was coined by Grant McCracken to define objects where age is the key indicator of an item's high status (Appadurai, 1996, p. 75). Appadurai contends that the patina of an object bestows a powerful status to the owner and a relationship to a presence that is gone forever. This status is crucial. In today's consumer society highly demanded products that relate age to high status become susceptible to a faux quality. This condition is observed in products like new furniture made to look antique or designer clothing created to look distressed and aged.

Appadurai argues that the "gloss of age" is not enough to establish the strong associations some have with articles that absorb patina, but also the scenes that unfold around the objects perform a role (Appadurai, 1996, p. 76). Some of the most patina filled and popular items Steiner offers include seats from famous venues like Yankee Stadium and Madison Square Garden that represent the pinnacle of cultural happenings. In addition to the patina that fills these objects they can also represent a spiritual aura to collectors. Where patina can be connected to age, aura can be connected to the uniqueness and power of an object. As Blom (2003) discussed, relics are alive with an "aura" of something greater than we are while also being carriers of a "living force" (p. 152). The mythical power and age these objects hold exposes a significant reason why demand and price remain high.

Steiner is aware of the compelling way collectors view relics. The commercially motivated copy on the Steiner website regarding two bleacher seats from the original Yankee Stadium describes the \$724 pair as "pried from within baseballs cathedral in the Bronx" (Pair of Bleacher Seats (One Bench, 2 Seats) From The Original Yankee Stadium). This description

implies that some mystical or supernatural force resisted during the extraction process in an attempt to keep these seats in the historic sports temple where countless followers have shared adoration. The copy implies Steiner Sports embarked on an arduous expedition to retrieve these highly regarded pieces of cultural monuments to satisfy collectors' desires. It is difficult not to picture Brandon Steiner, in full Indiana Jones style fedora, leading the charge to capture these artifacts in a crusade for towering profit. The copy attempts to announce to collectors that the high profile, historic moments that the seats witnessed are only part of what generates the high price to own these objects. Steiner seems content to shape collectors' senses by encouraging them to consider the difficult campaign Steiner endured to acquire these game-used artifacts when pondering the cost of owning a historic place to sit. Perhaps collectors should consider themselves not only as beneficiaries, but sponsors of the journey.

The role of history and mysticism are key when examining objects holding patina and aura, but other elements also encourage a desire to own these relics. When considering the desire to own stadium artifacts the influence of status and symbolism are also crucial. As Muensterberger (1994) discussed, the phallic-narcissistic personality, or someone who is highly concerned with self-image, combined with the ability of possessions to act as substitutes for people themselves are both crucial elements that fuel the desire to own rare objects (p. 13). Steiner is aware of its target market of high-end collectors. Steiner's proclaiming that the pair of bleacher seats from Yankee Stadium represent, "the most talked about and sought after collectible on the sports market today," is aimed at the ego of the phallic-narcissistic collector (Pair of Bleacher Seats (One Bench, 2 Seats) From The Original Yankee Stadium). Muensterberger's argument that collectibles like these act as surrogates for the collectors themselves is telling regarding this specific copy. The goal of the egocentric collector is to own

items that represent fame, excitement, and success in hopes that these designations will transfer to the owner. The collector not only wants to own the “most talked about” collectible on the market, but be the most talked about collector in his or her own cultural market. Steiner is providing that opportunity for the collector willing to part with \$724 plus shipping.

When discussing status, Appadurai contends, “membership in elites is partially constructed through patina” (p. 76). When considering the competitive culture of collecting sports memorabilia, it would be difficult for a collector to boast the tag of “elite collector” without owning any of the patina breathing artifacts that Steiner provides. As Steiner’s copy reads in the description for a pair of seats from the Nassau Coliseum, the relics are, “A must have for any memorabilia collector” (Nassau Coliseum Crimson Seat Pair). Steiner bypasses telling the customer that these seats separate a “true” or “elite” collector from the “amateurs” by implying that to even be considered a collector of sports memorabilia at all the collector must own this pair of patina-enriched Coliseum seats.

Steiner’s copy regarding the Nassau Coliseum seats is revealing. What is disclosed is that not all patina is created equal. Although Steiner included copy, one could argue it was not a necessity to sell seats from Yankee Stadium, but the Nassau Coliseum’s chairs presented a more difficult sale. A large portion of the reason is that the Nassau Coliseum does not generate the same aura as Yankee Stadium. The rationale centers largely on the history of the venues. The Coliseum has 43 years of game experience, including housing the twice ABA champion New Jersey Nets in the 1970s and being home to the 4 time Stanley Cup champion New York Islanders for all 43 years.

The Coliseum’s past is impressive, but fails to compare to the history of Yankee Stadium that housed the Yankees from 1923 to 2008, with the exception of the 1975 and 1976 years that

were played at Shea Stadium due to renovations (Yankee Stadium History). The Yankees are the winningest franchise in American sports and have a long association with their stadium. The name of the Yankee franchise is even included in the title of the venue which the Coliseum cannot claim.

In addition to the emotional appeal of the Coliseum's copy, which will be discussed shortly, what resulted was Steiner's implementing of the basic strategy of telling egocentric collectors that to be taken seriously in their craft they must purchase a chair from the Coliseum. This strategy is no different than a film enthusiast being told by advertisers that a film is a "must see," implying that their film knowledge is incomplete without experiencing it. Similar to maintaining the status of "expert" being an active process, being taken seriously as a collector remains continuous. The constant and competitive nature of collecting encourages susceptibility to pitches designed to question the ability of the collector and capability of a collection. Steiner took advantage of both to manufacture additional aura regarding the Coliseum seats.

The difference in aura surrounding artifacts from various sports cathedrals reveals that the context and history surrounding relics is an important feature regarding demand. What also must be considered are the personal terms in which collectors interact with the relics. Snyder's (1991) study of nostalgia in relation to sport hall of fames and museums discussed collective and private nostalgia. Private nostalgia allows for collectors to maintain personal interpretations and meanings from their sports collectibles by applying them to a portion of their own life (Andon, 2013, p.137). This process relates to how people remember. As the research of Rosenzweig and Thelen (2011) provided, people remember a shared past on highly personal terms. It is common for individuals to put national events into familiar stories and personal narratives rather than into broad and collective terms (p. 269).

This personal form of remembering can provide added benefits for Steiner by using the collectors own experiences to increase the emotional appeal of the object. As additional copy for the Coliseum seats claims, the pair allows the buyer to, “Relive the last forty years of the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum.” The copy then goes on to discuss how the seats can help the owner, “relive some of the amazing moments that took place within the Coliseum walls” and lists some of the sporting events and concerts that have taken place in the venue to help trigger memories in the collectors’ psyche (Nassau Coliseum Crimson Seat Pair). These recollections could be collective, personal, or both. As the web copy explains, these seats allow for the owner to “relive” memories from, “even all the way back to the days of Dr. J and the Nets” (Nassau Coliseum Crimson Seat Pair). These reflections could be of the collective experience of Dr. J’s games that took place in this venue or could become personalized. A collector could remember a specific game that Dr. J played partially for the experience of seeing the superstar in person, but the chairs could also take on a more personal and sentimental recollection within the collector’s mind. Perhaps of the first basketball game he or she ever saw with a late grandfather. This reflection allows the collector’s mind to generate the majority of the emotional appeal regarding the objects. This appeal then creates a strong desire to own the Nassau chairs that equates to fiscal value for Steiner.

This notion of private nostalgia and personal remembering is interesting when considering the extended demand for these objects. The above discussed collectors who actually attended the venues and the impact this physical presence had on their desire to own the relics, but the majority of collectors have not been to Yankee Stadium or the Nassau Coliseum. This lack of physical experience, which could hinder the desire to own these articles, can actually provide the relics with added demand and appeal. These games provided the emotional stimuli

which Boivin (2008) contends are better recalled than unemotional stimuli. A collector, who never attended Yankee Stadium, and will never be able to sit in the now destroyed park, could still hold a pair of bleacher seats in high regard. This reverence despite never savoring a victory from a similar pair of seats. A Yankee fan living in Idaho could have experienced countless emotional games on television that he or she now associates with these relics. In addition, Boivin discusses the ability of intensely experienced emotions to not only be better remembered, but also cause some details to generate better recollection than others (p. 118). This process can result in a Yankee fan potentially viewing the bleacher seats and experiencing significantly more of the victories than the defeats. This notion of selective reflection is largely what composes feelings of nostalgia and the feeling's power does not discriminate based on first hand, in-person experiences.

Nostalgic feelings also don't discriminate based on fandom. A collector does not even have to be a Yankee fan to desire these expensive pieces of steel. The collector could even be a supporter of the Yankee's hated rivals, the Boston Red Sox. Yankee fans may look at the bleacher seats and see a symbol of success and reminisce over past victories they observed in bleachers just like the pair purchased, but a Red Sox fan may view the relics as a symbol and silent witness of the perceived impossible. A Sox fan may view the seats as an emblem of when his team completed one of the greatest comebacks in baseball history in 2004, against the same New York Yankees, in Yankee Stadium, where the artifacts once lived. The same object can have entirely different meanings to different collectors, with different fandoms and cultures, but the seats can still remain powerful (and expensive) symbols regardless of the rooting interest. This versatility expands the market for Steiner's Yankee relics from just immediate Yankee fans

to essentially all baseball fans who collect and want representations of specific memories to occupy and individualize their collections.

The personalized association collectors enjoy with relics also extends to private time. When examining “Trench Art,” which is an all-encompassing term used to describe objects made out of various war materials from 1914 to 1939, Saunders (2002) draws on Stewart’s (1994) discussion of souvenirs and contends that artefacts that are taken home to exist in a domestic space move history into a private time by positioning the history within a “personalized present” (p. 197). Steiner’s selling of relics is essentially providing the opportunity for collectors to do the same. As Blom (2003) contends, “few people are immune to ancestor worship and the magic of physical closeness across time.” Many collectors are attracted to objects that incorporate a survived past and still live as “mute witnesses to history” (p. 151, 153). Steiner provides the opportunity for collectors to present a tangible link to this history from the warm and relaxing environment of their personalized fan cave. As Steiner contends in its copy for the Yankee Stadium bleacher seats, the pair is “available for fans to take a seat in history within the comfort of their own home” (Pair of Bleacher Seats (One Bench, 2 Seats) From The Original Yankee Stadium). These seats allow for the perceived consumption of history which can be enjoyed by the owner and displayed proudly to visitors who explore the collector’s private world. A world created and controlled by the collector which also imparts the architect with a perceived authority over the history represented by the objects presented in the collection.

The authority provided to collectors is an important aspect of collecting. When examining the acquisition of relics, it is useful to assess collectors as personal curators of their own private museums. Collectors are able to select what items they want to feature and exactly what type of story they want to create. These powers are imparted to all collectors, but relics can

provide a more exhilarating authority. As Pearce (1994) contends, the “power of the real thing” which stimulates and thrills viewers, is the greatest force a museum can have (p. 20). Pearce specifically discusses objects having the ability to function as signs when they serve as a representation of the entirety of which they are an essential part (p. 23). Pearce uses the example of a military jacket worn in battle as an example of the “power of the real thing.” This power comes from the ability of the object to function as a sign that carries meaning because “unlike we ourselves who must die, it bears an ‘eternal’ relationship to the receding past, and it is this relationship that we experience as the power of ‘the actual object’ ” (p. 25). This “power” of preservation is largely what Steiner is selling. Steiner provides relics that can not only serve as representatives of history, but also as emblems of the power of collectors themselves. Collections make the past available and relics can provide a readily accessible connection to a particular moment in time (Banash, 2013, p. 64). This potential to navigate the past is essentially given to the owner of the collection and serves to represent how well-connected the collector is to the vivid and compelling history of the past.

Owning and controlling objects that encapsulate “the power of the real thing” is not the only sacred ability provided to collectors of relics. Belk (1995) contends that collectors are creators which allows them to play God by acting as the possessor, controller, and even savior of the objects in their collections (p. 70). Belk argues that acting as a savior for objects is often used by collectors to alleviate the guilt of self-indulgence that comes with high cost acquisitions (p. 81). Given all the religious synonyms that can be found in the world of collecting sports relics the role of the collector as savior seemed destined to materialize.

Steiner seems well aware of the impact of godlike powers on collectors’ egos and buyer justification. In the copy for a pair of traditional fold-down seats (not the bleacher seats



previously discussed) from Yankee Stadium the copy calls the pair “Demolition Survivors.” Given the \$1534.99 cost of these particular chairs, Steiner seems to expect some buyer apprehension and has decided to use this sentimental appeal to encourage purchase (Authentic Seat Pair From The Original Yankee Stadium (MLB Authenticated). This appeal provides the opportunity for collectors to not only distinguish their collection through the owning of these pricey resting places, but also provides the collector with a narrative of his or her contribution to the preservation of these sacred relics. This allure slightly resembles the commodity activism culture that exists today. Similar to making a purchase that advertises supporting a specific cause, the purchase of a pair of these chairs provides the avenue for the collector to display and vocally articulate his or her contribution to history preservation.

### **A Hand in History**

Pomian (1994) defined a relic as any object that came into contact with a character from sacred history and whenever possible became part of the individual’s body. When discussing religious relics, Pomian maintains that no matter how minor the contact was, the object was believed to preserve all the grace the saint acquired through his lifetime. This capability is why a relic could purify the place it was situated just as a visit from a saint would have done (p. 167). Muensterberger argues that the desire to possess objects has its origins in a longing for power which corresponds with the desires of some collectors. Specifically, he maintains the impulse to own objects with a record of belonging to someone famous being rooted in the belief that owning the item permits the passage of an intrinsic force to the collector (Muensterberger, 1994, p. 59).

The game-used industry is based on artifacts believed to have the powerful appeal of direct contact with players. Steiner offers a variety of game-worn items, but the items worn by Derek Jeter prove the most interesting. The Yankees have long been associated with “buying”

the star players of other franchises through free agency with the exception of few “homegrown” players that ascended through the Yankees minor league system. Jeter is one of the most successful homegrown players to ever play for the Yankees. Jeter paid dividends for the Yankees immediately in 1996. That year he won the Rookie of the Year award and helped the Yankees win a World Series. Jeter went on to be the face of the Yankees during their late 1990s and early 2000s dynasty and thereafter. In 2003, Jeter also became the 16<sup>th</sup> Yankee team captain. An honor that Yankee GM, Brian Cashman, believes should and may ultimately end with Jeter who retired in 2014 (Matthews 2015). These accolades impart Jeter with an aura that provides value for Steiner. For this reason, I choose to analyze the marketing of a 2013, game-used, Jeter batting glove.

Jeter has an exclusive contract with Steiner which entitles the memorabilia company to Jeter’s game-used items. These items include anything, within reason, that is part of Jeter’s uniform and equipment he used during games. As Belk (1994) contends, objects like game-used equipment and uniforms are considered sacralized because the items have been “contaminated,” in a positive sense, by coming into contact with famed people (p. 321). To provide an idea of the price scale for these “sacred” materials, a game-used Jeter uniform retails for roughly \$25,000, an autographed Jeter game-used cleat sells for approximately \$4,000, and a game-used Jeter batting glove sells for anywhere between \$600-\$900.

A popular game-used artifact Steiner sells are Jeter’s batting gloves. The current Jeter glove inventory includes gloves used during the 2005-2013 seasons. Steiner also offers Jeter shadowboxes each featuring a 2013 game-used batting glove. The shadowboxes have a somewhat eerie 3D effect that constructs the glove to appear as though a hand is actually still inside. The copy from this piece highlights the “illustrious Yankees career” of Jeter by listing

his many accomplishments (Derek Jeter Game Used 2013 White/Blue Batting Glove Shadowbox w/ 3 Nameplates (14x20 7535) 2016). What fails to appear in this list of achievements is any mention of the 2013 season in which the glove was worn. The item itself also fails to reference the specific year Jeter wore the glove. A likely reason for this lack of information is that the 2013 season was the worst of Jeter's career. Jeter had a terrible .190 batting average and was littered with injuries leading to him only playing 17 games (Sports Reference LLC). By Jeter's own admission the season was a "nightmare" (Span 2013).

Belk's notion of an item becoming positively "contaminated" when contacting the famous is certainly conceivable, but leaves out one possibility. What happens when the contamination of an item could be perceived in a more literal, negative light by collectors? How does Steiner deal with the active nature of Jeter's career? Jeter's performance could also have negative consequences on the financial value of his memorabilia. Just as Steiner had to use copy to generate appeal and value while creating demand for the Nassau Coliseum chairs, a similar strategy can exist with game-worn items.

Steiner's strategy for salvaging profitability regarding Jeter's 2013 memorabilia starts with reliance on his past performance. Including copy that extensively lists Jeter's pre-2013 accomplishments strives to fasten a successful aura to the glove while positioning the piece of equipment as being a memorable artifact of Jeter's storied career. This positioning despite the glove being manufactured and worn long after the majority of Jeter's achievements that Steiner advertised in its copy. In reality, the glove is an artifact from a season that Jeter, and Yankee fans, would like to forget. In order to stimulate demand for an item associated with a season Jeter's fans prefer to omit from their memories, Steiner relies on the nostalgic aura of Jeter's past

to manufacture a commanding mood regarding the glove. This positioning of the glove as being representative of Jeter's storied career also extends to the physical presentation of the item.

The design of the shadowbox serves as a commemoration of Jeter's entire career rather than the specific year the glove was used. Directly under the batting glove a gold plate is mounted that reads, "New York Yankees – No. 2 [Jeter's jersey number] 1995-2014" (Derek Jeter Game Used 2013 White/Blue Batting Glove Shadowbox w/ 3 Nameplates (14x20 7535) 2016). Positioning this timeline with the glove provides the needed context to salvage the profitability of the artifact. The 1995-2014 plate surrounds the miserable 2013 year with the aura filled and successful years of Jeter's career. It should be noted that all non-2013 Jeter batting gloves are sold without framings. These gloves also limit the amount of career reflective copy used to sell the artifact. Other than the 2013 gloves, these relics need little verbal packaging, and no physical packaging, to generate demand. In addition, roughly half of the Jeter batting gloves Steiner sells retail for \$859, but despite all the aesthetic appeal that went into framing the 2013 glove, it sells for only \$40 more than an unframed glove. This small price difference provides evidence of how challenging the sale of 2013 Jeter gloves must have been for Steiner.

Just as the previous section discussed all patina not being created equal, neither is the perceived "intrinsic force" of relics and the ability of artifacts to "purify" their location as Pomian and Muensterberger discussed. The Jeter 2013 shadowboxes did eventually sell out, but Steiner had to completely repackage the narrative of the item. Steiner needed to establish an aura that could convince collectors to allow a relic from the worst year of Jeter's career to "purify" their fan cave. In addition, collectors had to be convinced to accept a lower level of "intrinsic force" when compared to other gloves from Jeter's career.

## **A Brief History**

The previous relics discussed seemed to offer genuine game use, but what about some of the other relics that Steiner provides? Dant (1999) discusses Marx's notion of "commodity fetishism" and the notion that the "real" value of a particular commodity is "analysed as a social relation determined by the amount of labour that has gone into its production; it is nothing to do with the material form of the commodity" (p. 45). This conviction concerning "real" value is interesting when considering the price of game-used items. It seems logical that the "production" that equates to value regarding relics would not be the physical effort and time that goes into making something like a base, a stadium seat, a jersey, etc, but rather the physical game activity that occurred in the vicinity of the actual object. After all, the value the objects seem to warrant is based largely on the items' history as the Steiner copy to this point represented, but the actual history of the item becomes interesting when examining other game-used items and just how historic and momentous these items truly are.

The title "game-used" seems to imply that the item is used for at least one whole game, unless it becomes broken or defective and cannot perform its function properly, but that is not always the case with Steiner's game-used artifacts. It is difficult to know exactly how often, but frequently, the grounds crew at Yankee Stadium rushes onto the field of play and replaces faintly used bases with brand new replacements. Scott Krug, the chief financial officer of the Yankees contends, "Pre-Steiner, we had two sets of bases for the season, and we'd repaint them and put them back on the field. Now we use at least three sets a game" (Sandomir 2014). The frequency seems to depend on what types of events or milestones are imminent such as Jeter approaching 3,000 hits. When asked how often the bases are changed Brandon Steiner responded, "Usually twice a game, but every time Jeter gets a hit, we take first base. We do everything to commemorate that" (Sandomir 2014). The bases are then authenticated by Steiner and MLB

using tamper-proof holograms, typically by an off-duty police officer who observes the process of removal and applies an individually numbered hologram. Often the objects are signed within hours of removal by a specific athlete. In the case of the 2013 season, Steiner created bases for Yankee home games that were specially imprinted with a logo to commemorate Yankee superstar closer Mariano Rivera's final season which were then signed by Rivera and sold shortly after by Steiner (2013, 60 Minutes). This practice begins to resemble more of an assembly line of mass-produced items, which will be examined in the next chapter, than the preservation of relics.

This frequent removal of bases is interesting largely due to the equipment getting such little use. When examining the high demand for signed bases by Rivera during his final season this process becomes quite curious considering what Rivera actually does for a living. Rivera is a closer, meaning that he generally only appears in the 9<sup>th</sup> inning of games when his team has a lead. Rivera also never runs the bases. In fact, Rivera holds the record for most games played without a hit (Costa 2013). Steiner is transparent in this particular copy about the object only being used during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> innings of play. In addition, the authentication number on the item can also be verified on the MLB website which provides similar information.

This available information begs the question of why a collector would desire a base from any inning other than one that Rivera actually pitched in. For example, the title copy for one Rivera base reads, "Mariano Rivera New York Yankees Autographed & Inscribed Astros vs. Yankees 9-29-2013 Game Used Second Base." The significance of this base is that it was used during the final game of the Yankee's season and of Rivera's storied career. In addition to his signature, Rivera also inscribed "final game" on the base (Mariano Rivera Signed & Inscribed Astros vs. Yankees 9-29-2013 Game Used Second Base (MLB Auth) (Innings 5-6) (EK887392)

2016). The astonishing element of this object is not just its \$2,510 price, not that additional copy reveals that the base was used in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> innings of the game, a time Rivera would not have been in the vicinity of the base, but rather Rivera did not play in this game at all. Rivera, who many consider to be both a baseball and Yankee god, opted for the biblical practice of rest on the final day of his career. Despite being clear about the innings the base was used for, Steiner's copy fails to mention Rivera's inactivity for this game anywhere in the copy.

As Hoskins (1998) contends, certain events, "can attach themselves to ordinary objects and fix them in memory as markers of the extraordinary" (195). This attachment of the remarkable to an object is essentially what Steiner is attempting to accomplish with its autographed Rivera bases regardless of Rivera's level of interaction. The commemorative and autographed bases are meant to function as a representation not just of a game, but of Rivera's entire career.

Steiner's ability to capitalize on the commemoration of the career of Rivera is also largely increased through media. Steiner could not achieve its financial success without sports media being the massive cultural juggernaut that it is. Sports networks continuous coverage of the farewell tours of iconic players certainly benefit the networks by encouraging more media consumption, but the commercial power of sports media also extends to Steiner. Steiner enjoys a symbiotic relationship with sports media. A collector viewing media packages commemorating Rivera's final season and career on a sports network could become inspired to visit the Steiner website to own a piece of the Rivera narrative. In the same sense, a collector visiting the Steiner website considering owning a Rivera relic could consult sports media to be reassured of Rivera's greatness prior to purchasing the item. In addition, after owning the Rivera piece, or any memorabilia item, the collector then has even more incentive to consume sports media to follow

his or her investment. This relationship mimics the relationship between fantasy sports and sports media consumption. A collector who maintains engagement in sports media represents a valuable resource to Steiner sports. Steiner's ability to rapidly stock inventory with trending players' memorabilia is essential to its success. Steiner's awareness of its limited window to capitalize on collectors' desire to own commemorative artifacts results in the manufacturing of rapid turnaround and production to increase the number of units available to the consumer while profiting off the career of Rivera until its final conclusion.

Steiner's practice of capitalizing on collectors' desire to own relics of trending players and moments is not limited to Rivera bases, but also continues to the dirt that lies beneath these square objects. Brandon Steiner once stated, "My goal is to sell 100 million dollars' worth of dirt. The margins are unbelievable and underneath that dirt is more dirt." Steiner then went into a sales motivated pitch and stated, "Great players have walked on that dirt. Lou Gehrig, Mickey Mantle, Derek Jeter. Think about who's walked on this dirt. And now you own a little bit of it. It's just a nice thing. It's a nice spiritual thing to have I think" (2013, 60 Minutes).

Brandon Steiner's delight over the "spiritual" nature of game-used dirt seems rooted more in the substance being an easily renewable and cheap resource for Steiner than who has actually walked on it. In addition, his assertion that old Yankee greats like Gehrig and Mantle walked on the same frequently changed dirt that Steiner sells today seems highly unlikely. Game-used dirt for Steiner is largely a form of pixie dust to be sprinkled on various collectibles to provide an added, and hopefully magical, appeal. Steiner Sports uses this dirt for various collectibles including adding the substance to coasters, pens, dirt capsules, and various framed signed and unsigned photos. Where Steiner seems to excel is at using the dirt to enhance an otherwise ordinary item. For example, a pen that includes authentic dirt from Kauffman Stadium



used during the 2015 World Series commodifies an everyday instrument by turning it into a living commemoration of the Royals championship season that is transferable to the owner. The use of dirt provides the avenue, and perhaps justification, for Steiner to inflate the cost of an inexpensive everyday item to a \$24.99 piece of history (Kansas City Royals 2015 World Series Champions Dirt Pen w/ Game Used Dirt from Kauffman Stadium World Series Game).

The use of dirt as a renewable resource to maximize value goes beyond Steiner's simple novelty items. The brown matter is sometimes used as an added incentive to pricey autographed pieces. For Example, after current MLB infielder David Wright became the all-time hits leader for the Mets, Steiner began selling a framed 20x32 David Wright autographed collage that commemorated Wright being the newly minted Mets' hit king for \$610. In addition to the piece being autographed by Wright it also included "game-used dirt from every ballpark Wright has hits in." The piece is referred to as a "Steiner Original Dirt Map" (David Wright Framed New York Mets All Time Hits Leader w/ Hit Totals vs Each Team Signed 20x32 Collage (MLB AUTH). Given how frequently this dirt seems to be taken from these fields of play one has to question whether Wright actually stood near or played on any of this dirt featured at all. The piece also displays the specific number of hits Wright has at each opposing team's ballpark along with team logos by each capsule of dirt. Another interesting wrinkle is that the item claims to have dirt from every park in which Wright has achieved a hit, but this statement also seems to be false. Dirt was included from Nationals Park, but the piece failed to incorporate dirt from Washington's previous home in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, despite Wright having recorded hits in that ballpark. The question of how much of a role this dirt played in Wright's career to generate the high price seems highly justified.

When asked in an interview about his thoughts on collectors' obsession with stadium dirt, Steiner Sports exclusive athlete Derek Jeter stated, "My thought was people really want that? You know what I mean? That's what you think about." Jeter then seems to realize what he said could be deemed offensive to collectors, or perhaps hinder the profitability of one of Steiner's most profitable and unlimited assets. The result of this realization is the Yankee star going into a damage control mode stating, "I get it though. Especially with our organization. History, tradition, those are big parts of our organization and if people can have even a small piece of it they want it" (2013, 60 Minutes). Jeter's response, although sounding slightly like a sales pitch for the perceived history and tradition that Steiner makes available, is not inaccurate. Whether the collectible is a signed base used during a game Rivera actually played in or not, or a "dirt map" of Wright's career that may include dirt not actually christened by Wright, these items still provide what Hoskins (1998) calls, "markers of the extraordinary," whether the insignia is warranted or manufactured (p. 195). As long as collectors accept these items as symbols of the exceptional, with the ability to act as substitutes for collectors themselves, Steiner will have a healthy market.

### **The Not So Scandalous History**

The majority of the sports relic industry consists of objects related to the field of play, but not always. The focus on owning rare items can provide a transition outside the game and into the personal lives of athletes. In 2007, Steiner purchased the diary of Yankee legend Joe DiMaggio. DiMaggio, who turned down millions to write a tell-all book, kept a diary from 1982 to 1993, which consisted of 29 binders which totaled 2,500 pages. Shortly after the sale, Brandon Steiner announced plans to either list the collection at auction for a starting bid of \$1.5 million or perhaps he would sell it off piece by piece like a corporate raider of personal words,

thought, and emotion. Steiner believed a page of DiMaggio's thoughts would be worth between \$2,000 to \$5,500 each (Sandomir 2007). This belief was not unfounded considering the general pricing structure of the industry which attaches the highest costs to the most sacred and intimate items.

Individuals expecting to hear intimate details about DiMaggio's time with Marilyn Monroe or the wild lifestyle of one of the most iconic and famous baseball players of all-time were only to be disappointed. Each page followed a similar format that consisted of events and details such as when DiMaggio woke up, dinners with friends, flight numbers and boarding times, with each page usually concluded with DiMaggio's expenses for the day. As DiMaggio's lawyer, Morris Engelberg stated, "These writings really show who he is. He's just a plain old Joe" (Sandomir 2007). Ironically, some of the most interesting details involved DiMaggio becoming aggravated at the number of autographs he was asked to sign even by professional players and managers at DiMaggio's public appearances. DiMaggio expressed his annoyance that many would not just have one ball for him to sign, but multiple. DiMaggio also writes about the demands that were accruing in 1991 to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his epic 56-game hitting streak. DiMaggio even penned, "If I thought this would be taking place due to the streak," he wrote on Jan. 14 with sarcasm (or was it disdain?), "I would have stopped hitting at 40 games" (Sandomir 2007).

Despite the pages of DiMaggio's diary containing little "dirt" by today's standards the collection still represents an artifact with great cultural meaning. Time is the most valuable item anyone owns and DiMaggio spent a significant amount of his own composing these pages. Despite these pages presenting DiMaggio to be "a plain old Joe" they are still likely more personal than any other DiMaggio relics that exist. The diary as a whole displays who DiMaggio

truly was as an aging man rather than simply what he did on the baseball diamond. What could be more personal than that?

The greatest irony of DiMaggio's diary is not his expression of dissatisfaction with all the autographs he was asked to sign, but rather that one of the most private personalities in the history of sports actually had his diary sold and re-sold after his death. The man who rejected millions to write a tell-all book was having his thoughts pillaged, examined, sold, and displayed as an expensive trophy of accomplishment and distinction to separate the collection and its owner from fellow collectors. Steiner's copy even boasts of the pages ability to "provide entrance into the unique world in which he [DiMaggio] lived" (Joe DiMaggio Diaries Unframed in Jostens Folder). This strategy presents the pages as more than mere ink, paper, words, and thought, but rather a commanding force that can affix the life of the collector with that of the Yankee legend. The private nature of the pages is not lost on Steiner as its copy states, "Imagine owning an entire page hand written by the Yankee Clipper [DiMaggio's nickname] containing his inner-most thoughts" (Joe DiMaggio Diaries Unframed in Jostens Folder). Steiner even attempts to treat DiMaggio's private life as a Google-like apparatus encouraging potential buyers to "Find out what DiMaggio was doing on your birthday or your anniversary" (Joe DiMaggio Diaries Unframed in Jostens Folder). Joe DiMaggio's life is being commodified and treated like a piece of memorabilia timeshare for others to divide in order to amuse themselves. It appears that in the industry of sports memorabilia not even the dignity of a legend is sacred.

This invasive process highlights the rules governing the industry of sports collectibles which continually reveal almost nothing to be forbidden. In fact, typically the more intimate an object is, the more value it holds which reveals more about the consumer than the memorabilia trade. When considering Steiner's role within today's memorabilia culture it becomes clear that

with its rapidly sold genuine relics, like articles from the original Yankee Stadium, its ability to provide truly bona fide artifacts is beginning to diminish. The company that is largely responsible for bringing the truly genuine artifacts of sports to collectors is also responsible for extinguishing sports history. As the market begins to dwindle Steiner has to shift its strategy to bring rarity to collectors. The result can be a transition away from the field of play and into the private. Steiner's focus on DiMaggio's personal life within the world of sports memorabilia reflects our TMZ centric culture regarding celebrities today. A culture that demands the private and exclusive information of the prominent regardless of what ethical values it may violate.

Steiner has various items available that feature a sheet from DiMaggio's diary. From pages that also feature high-end framing which retail for approximately \$1,000 to an individual unframed page that costs roughly \$300-\$350. These prices are a far cry from the \$2,000 to \$5,500 price Brandon Steiner envisioned when he purchased the firsthand accounts of the late baseball superstar. This lack of demand for the DiMaggio diary is intriguing. Are the sheets of DiMaggio's documented thoughts not selling because collectors realize and respect DiMaggio's private disposition, or is the reduced market a sign of the current celebrity cultural appetite that desires the sensationalized, the sexual, and the grimy. If DiMaggio had reflected on the details of his private trysts with Marilyn Monroe the requirement for collectors to own these pages would likely increase, but hearing tales of early dinners and relaxing in hotel rooms doesn't meet the narrative of stardom as it exists today. Perhaps because DiMaggio was not a writer, but a baseball player, the appeal of his words did not generate the same allure as would his bat and glove. Regardless of the reason, DiMaggio's diary was not the financial draw that Steiner envisioned.

How comfortable should we be with Steiner's role as both preserver and pillager of history? How is it that a company feels so entitled to profit off any historic article regardless of any privacy it may violate? The mostly uneventful ramblings of an old baseball player are a far cry from the selfie obsessed culture of today, but the reflections still belonged to DiMaggio. DiMaggio's thoughts were not put on a blog, a Facebook wall, or even tweeted. The decision of whether or not to profit off the pages should have been made by him. DiMaggio's private thoughts fell victim to a culture that puts a premium price on the most intimate articles without regard for individual privacy.

### **Closing Thoughts on Steiner's Model**

Steiner's reliance on restockable dirt to sell collectibles is indicative of the current state of the relic market the company helped create. A climate where storied relics like bases that were used for longer than a few innings are truly rare. Items with an authentic connection to history are not renewable commodities. When Steiner sells its last artifacts from the original Yankee Stadium they, like the stadium, are gone forever. The Yankee Stadium seats are one of few true relics still remaining in Steiner's inventory. With a market that is willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money for anything game-used Steiner's plan moving forward seems focused on generating new volume. Steiner accomplishes this through the rapid manufacture, positioning, and removal of relics as the Rivera base helped illustrate and by using language and design to attach an aura to these barely used items as the Jeter glove provided. The result is a market where collectors in various financial situations all have the opportunity to own a piece of individual history at the cost of preserving the collective history of American sport.

Brandon Steiner's love of dirt is not surprising. As Steiner contended there is always more of it. This multitude of dirt provides a material that Steiner can continuously replace in

stadiums and incorporate the previously used material into a variety of items. This strategy is crucial to Steiner moving forward in regards to manufacturing a game-used aura concerning some items where little truly exists. In order to continue to thrive Steiner must discover new ways to revive the market for relics, a market it helped diminish, by creating new ways to sell aura and locating unconventional items that possess it. The most uncomfortable element of this strategy is that dirt may only be the beginning. Steiner's selling of the DiMaggio diary serves as a microcosm of the entire industry. An industry willing to push the envelope regarding rarity. When Brandon Steiner stated, "underneath that dirt is more dirt" perhaps he is not being completely literal. My concern is that if Steiner's current strategy of flooding the market with composite relics further dilutes demand, items like diaries will no longer be the outlier, but the standard. Perhaps the memorabilia industry will soon resemble a scandalous gossip website where collectors compete to occupy personal artifacts much more shocking than the stale ramblings of an aging baseball legend.

### **Chapter 3: *The Fanatical Manufacture of Rare Sports Memorabilia***

The world of sports memorabilia is as competitive as the sports and athletes the industry manufactures and sells. All collectors want to distinguish themselves through their collections and no better avenue exists to disengage from the pack than to own collectibles where rarity is a key feature. As chapter 2 discussed, a popular strategy for collectors to purchase rarity is through relics believed to be endowed with a mythical power.

Similar to all patina not being created equal, neither is rarity. A collector who attends a sports memorabilia show with a mass-produced object is met with the challenge of singularizing that standardized item. Fanatics Authentic provides options for the collector to manufacture scarcity regarding these mass-produced objects while also selling its own limited edition items. This chapter examines the strategy of this leading memorabilia provider and how Fanatics is able to develop rarity which enables the company to compete with those who commercialize fabled relics.

This chapter will examine the strategic workings of Fanatics Authentic and how it uses scarcity as a marketing technique to capitalize on collectors' desire for uniqueness to sell its memorabilia. The focus of the chapter will be on how Fanatics manufactures scarcity using its Fanatics Authentic Sports Spectacular shows and its In-Focus line of autographed memorabilia as examples. In addition, the value of currency and hype will be examined when assessing the demand and cost of autographed sports memorabilia created to be rare.

A company with the ability to manufacture rarity is representative of the consumer culture of today that contends "originality" is a purchasable moniker. In the industry of mass-produced sports memorabilia some concerns are evident. What is truly exceptional when so much is endowed with the caption of rare? If everything is limited, that's too much. With so much rarity in an industry what becomes the standard?



## **Manufacturing a Spectacle of Singularity**

Fanatics conducts several Fanatics Authentic Sports Spectacular shows every year held in various cities and at events like the Pro Football Hall of Fame inductions. The shows are a spectacle for the memorabilia connoisseur. Attendees can interact with like-minded collectors and autograph vendors, but the primary purpose the shows serve for collectors is the opportunity to acquire autographs from sports stars past and present from within a controlled environment. Despite Fanatics governing these shows, collectors are given agency and power. Fanatics' shows allow collectors the ability to exercise creative authority over what they get signed along with any luxury features they opt to include. As long as the show attendees follow the rules Fanatics enforces, the collectors can play the part of producer and director concerning their collectibles, with the athlete playing the starring role. Through these shows, Fanatics is able to further generate scarcity by limiting specific ticket options and providing the avenue for collectors to create and experience their own personal moments with athletes. Fanatics' shows allow for the creation of collectibles and memories unique to the individuals themselves when juxtaposed with purchasing sports memorabilia from a website.

On Saturday March 19<sup>th</sup> I attended the Fanatics' show at the Rosemont Convention Center in Rosemont, Illinois. The atmosphere was one of excitement. Walking through the endless hallway leading to the specific Fanatics' convention hall further fueled this anticipation. I frequently passed collectors leaving the show with their hands filled with freshly inked memorabilia and noticed passing collectors scanning a fellow hobbyists newest addition. I finally reached my convention hall. Please forgive the wordplay, but the hall was the size of a football field.

Upon entering the convention, I kept hearing a man on a microphone making announcements like “now accepting tickets one through twenty-five for Jim Brown.” The purpose of this announcement was to inform those attendees with tickets to get an item signed by (1957-1965) NFL Hall of Fame running back Jim Brown that anyone with tickets containing the numbers 1-25 would now be permitted to enter his specific autograph line. When attendees purchase tickets to the show each ticket is given a number based on when it was ordered. The incentive being that the earlier a collector purchases a ticket, the lower the number the ticket will have, and the less time the collector will have to wait to enter the autograph line. Announcements like these occurred continuously throughout the show which created an intoxicating atmosphere that was constantly shifting from one athlete to another. The show’s character was never stagnant, constantly active and advancing.

A collector who wanted the shortest wait time possible could purchase a VIP pass for \$99. This status provided the advantage of an attendee not having to wait for his or her number to be called by issuing primary access to the autograph line to those who possessed the pass. This pass allows its owner to elevate their standing among other attendees. VIPs still function within a controlled environment, but their improved position grants them privileges not given to standard attendees. The VIP status is equivalent to flying first class. When waiting for autographs all attendees will get to their destination of obtaining their autograph, but VIPs are given special benefits.

The floorplan of the Fanatics’ show consisted of several aisles of tables and display areas where memorabilia providers, smaller in size than Fanatics, sold various forms of memorabilia. The majority of the vendors, like the attendees, were white males of various ages. Several tables had unsigned items consisting of baseballs, bats, and other items featuring teams associated with

autograph guests for sale. Two popular tables consisted of Professional Sports Authenticator (PSA) and James Spence Authentication (JSA) which provide the avenue for collectors who have something signed, that may or may not be authentic, to have an authenticator examine the item and provide authentication documentation if they believe the item to be genuine. Fanatics' shows offering on-site, third-party authentication services, is a calculated decision. A collector attending the show for the sole purpose of getting an item authenticated still must pay admission and could easily become captivated by the excitement of the show and purchase an autograph ticket.

When walking through the aisles what could not be avoided were several championship-style banners that featured athletes that were under exclusive contract to Fanatics hanging from the rafters above. The interesting element was that in addition to the photo of the athlete the banners also presented the likeness of each athlete's signature. All the signatures on the banners looked attractive. It was as if a designer or artist worked with each athlete to master the perfect calligraphy to represent the athletes brand, aura, and spirit. A signature worthy of a high price tag.

Finally, I arrived at the autograph pavilion located in the back of the hall which featured a massive line to purchase autograph tickets. In addition, several lines of attendees could be observed featuring collectors who already had tickets and were in route to get a signature from a specific athlete after their number had been called. It was interesting to observe the reactions of those waiting to hear their number. Often it was as if attendees were waiting to begin an athletic race and hearing their specific ticket number called was the equivalent of a gunshot that signaled the commencement of the contest. A sprint that featured an athlete waiting to sign their item at its finish line. Lastly, after getting their item signed all the attendees had the option of paying the

added cost of \$10 to have the item authenticated with a Fanatics' numbered hologram that can be verified on its website similar to the process established by Upper Deck Authenticated decades prior. This authentication is highly important should the collector envision a time when he or she may sell the item. If collectors neglect to get the Fanatics' authentication at the show they could end up at a future Fanatics' event getting a third party authentication as mentioned above.

Fanatics' shows largely function as a showcase for its exclusive stars. As previously stated, when walking around the massive convention center countless banners could be seen elevated above that proudly displayed Fanatics' exclusive athletes. These banners were displayed whether exclusive stars participated in the current show or not. Fanatics wants attendees to know that it is the sole provider of autographed memorabilia for these exclusive players. As Quinn (2009) contends, fans exhibit a specific "brand loyalty" to their favorite sports stars and teams which can rival religious devotion and addiction (p. 115). The hope for companies who pay for endorsements by professional athletes is that this devotion will extend to its brand. In the same vein as fans actually seeing a team live contributes to this homage, sports fans actually going to a Fanatics' show and observing athletes signing autographs in-person for Fanatics can also contribute to this loyalty. In addition, the exclusive financial relationship Fanatics enjoys with several players is displayed throughout the show, which presents these athletes as members of the Fanatics' team. This presentation can prove powerful for collectors. In an industry where the authenticity of memorabilia providers is always a question, Fanatics provides visual proof of its relationships and authenticity by providing a live credibility spectacle for fans to witness and embrace.

Now that the physical layout of Fanatics' shows has been established we can discuss the internal workings of these events. What these affairs exhibit is that Fanatics does not merely rely

on its website to manufacture and sell items that are designed to be scarce, but the company has also strategically ingrained scarcity as part of the production strategy of its shows. One implementation of created rarity involves the use of inscriptions. An inscription in the sports memorabilia industry is typically a statistic or a nickname of the player whose signature is featured on the autographed item. In addition, Fanatics also uses the objects the attendees present to have signed at these gatherings in a similar lucrative and strategic fashion. When collectors decide to purchase an autograph ticket they are given options. Similar to other consumer items, affording options to potential buyers distributes a level of control and customization that makes the item unique to the buyer. For example, (1983-1998) hall of fame basketball player Clyde Drexler was an autograph guest at the show I attended. For Drexler to sign an attendee's flat (flat photo of any size) or mini basketball the price of the ticket was \$79. A premium item signed by Drexler, which would encompass anything other than a photo or mini basketball, was \$99. If the collector chooses, he or she can also purchase an inscription ticket of up to 3 words for an additional \$20.

This pricing strategy allows for a standard object to be more singularized to the individual by providing options to differentiate the item through a specific inscription or choosing a unique premium item to get signed. Despite the environment of the shows being controlled, opportunities like these offer creative advantages to the collector. For example, a collector could purchase a piece of wood from The Summit arena in Houston, where Drexler won a championship prior to the floor being deconstructed, to have signed. This selection would provide the collector with an item not available to other collectors on the Fanatics' website. In addition, the collector could decide to purchase an inscription ticket and opt to have Drexler put his nickname, "The Glide" or perhaps, "1995 World Champions," on the item in addition to the

signature. A Drexler fan could even go deeper and conduct research on Drexler's career and find a stat or record that is unique to Drexler and have it inscribed on his or her item. All of these options serve to make the item more original while also allowing for the exercise of the collector's creativity. This opportunity is not provided within the traditional controlled environment of the Fanatics' website. Even a fan who only purchased a standard basketball to have signed could go to the extreme and purchase several inscriptions for one ball, typically called a "stat ball," to further singularize his or her item. These creative decisions could provide a social reward and recognition from other collectors similar to the reward given to inventive posts in the province of social media.

This tailoring process provided to collectors exhibits that collecting is not only an act of consumption, but also production (Belk, 1995, p. 55). Collectors being provided the opportunity for personalization is similar to fan activities that allow followers to play the role of not just audience members, but also producers and performers. Fawbert (1997) discussed replica football shirts being sold in a homogenized fashion, but some fans took it upon themselves to customize the material by including the names of their favorite players on their shirts. (Crawford, 2004, p. 117). The inscription process is not unlike this productive execution. The inscription can transform a piece of standardized paraphernalia into a unique collector's item.

Although collectors are offered a higher level of agency when deciding how to customize their items it is important to note the limitations that show attendees choices are given. For example, a collector who feels his or her creativity beginning to flex to Picasso-like levels in thinking of something magnificent to get inscribed on a collectible must also create the inscription within the controlled atmosphere that Fanatics provides. As previously discussed, Drexler, and almost all other attendees have a 3-word limit on their inscriptions. Should a

collector think of something unique that has an additional word, two inscription tickets would have to be purchased. It is worth noting that every athlete signing autographs at Fanatics' shows has a Fanatics' employee accompanying them at the autograph table. This practice is administered so the employee can collect the tickets from the attendees and facilitate the transaction to ensure that all Fanatics' guidelines are followed. It is also worth mentioning that Drexler is pretty open regarding what type of items and inscriptions he will sign. As I will discuss, that openness is not the case with all the participating athletes.

Belk (1994) discussed limited finances being one hindrance of collectors. One solution to this problem involves collectors continually modifying items in their collection by "trading up" (324). Fanatics' shows not only allow for collectors to deal with financial limitations, but also space restrictions while further singularizing their items. One strategy could include getting an already signed item autographed by another athlete according to a theme. For example, the Fanatics' show I attended not only had Clyde Drexler in attendance, but also (1984-2002) hall of fame center Hakeem Olajuwon. The pair were on the Houston Rockets' championship team of 1995 and both played for the University of Houston's famous "Phi Slama Jama" team that engulfed the early 1980s. The relationship between the two players could inspire an attendee who already owns a Clyde Drexler autographed ball to bring it to the show and purchase a ticket to have Hakeem Olajuwon sign the same ball. This decision allows the collector to save space and money, while also, and perhaps most importantly, individualizing the collector's item. This opportunity to "trade-up" and further attempt to individualize their items is great for collectors, but just as with inscriptions, this process can also be problematic.

When examining 1985 Heisman trophy winner Bo Jackson's pricing schedule for the May 14-15 Fanatics' show in Rosemont, Illinois, the limitations regarding the ability of

collectors to “trade-up” in an effort to personalize their collectibles becomes apparent. In addition to Jackson having an extensive list of items he won’t sign, which includes his iconic Nike poster that featured the former NFL and MLB star in football shoulder pads while holding a bat on his shoulders, Jackson also won’t sign any items already signed by Cam Newton and/or Pat Sullivan. The significance of Jackson and these two men is that they are the only three players to win the Heisman trophy, which is given to college football’s most outstanding player, while attending Auburn University. It is not unlikely that a collector would want to acquire the three stars on an Auburn helmet, or something Auburn related, with each including their Heisman inscription to further separate the item from others, but this is not possible for the collector. At least not yet.

A significant function of Fanatics’ shows involves commemorating superstar players’ careers, at least for the retired athletes who attend. The autograph market allows for players’ careers to live on. Casey (1987) discussed commemoration serving to prolong the ending of a career by providing it with a “species of afterlife” (Casey, 2010, p. 186). The strategy of staggering what a star will and won’t sign is merely about trying to do the same for the fiscal life of the retired athlete’s autograph career.

Maximizing the longevity of demand for athletes on the memorabilia circuit is essential to success. The exclusive contracts Fanatics owns don’t merely offer the memorabilia powerhouse credibility. These contracts also provide Fanatics with more control over both price and availability. The Fanatics’ May 14-15 show had six Fanatics’ exclusive clients in attendance with three of these stars being “big ticket” items in the memorabilia industry. Fanatics is aware of the demand for these athletes and is also responsible for adding to the craving. In the case of active MLB stars Anthony Rizzo and Kris Bryant, along with the recently retired NFL



quarterback Peyton Manning, Fanatics has manufactured a limited ticket option for collectors who attend the show in hopes of adding the perfect luxury item to their wardrobe of collectibles. Fanatics limited the number of autograph tickets available for these three exclusive stars to only 300 total tickets. In addition, inscriptions were also restricted to only 50 tickets available for Rizzo and Bryant, while Manning had 75 inscription tickets available.

This strategy of constricting the availability of three of Fanatics biggest assets is calculated. Manning's autograph contract was absorbed when Fanatics purchased Dreams Inc. for \$183 million in May of 2012 (Brohan, 2012). In January of 2014, when Manning reached the Super Bowl after a record setting season, current Fanatics President of Retail, Ross Tannenbaum discussed Manning signing items for Fanatics in four or five hour autograph sessions which is unusual during the season. Tannenbaum discussed Manning's passing of so many career milestones during the 2013-2014 season as increasing demand for Manning's autographed products (Rovell, 2014). This logic of increased demand during periods of accomplishment and relevance is not a surprise. When a big budget adventure film is released the sale of its action figures and video games will be higher than a year later. Hype and performance sells. The audience, the consumer, the fan, and the collector all want what is "hot" and trending within the cultures they belong. Fanatics' Manning contract provided the control needed to capitalize on the surging demand for Manning items.

At the time of the show Bryant's 300 available tickets were sold out. Fanatic's decision to place a ceiling on tickets for active exclusive players like Rizzo and Bryant seemed designed to maintain demand for young players that have not saturated the market. If Fanatics keeps the desire high for any active player contracted with Fanatics by staggering the availability of

autographs, it can control price and demand because few, if any, other legitimate autographs of these players exist.

Prior to the Fanatics' May 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> show, I received a postcard advertising the event that only featured the two previously mentioned players, Kris Bryant and Anthony Rizzo, who both currently play for the Chicago Cubs and are both exclusive clients of Fanatics. One reason to feature the pair could be that the show is in Illinois making the decision to use both Chicago sports stars a logical option to stimulate demand for the event. The interesting element is that several hall of fame players, some who played in Chicago, were also at the show, but Fanatics still relied on two players in the infancy of their careers to sell the event. This strategy proves the importance of currency in our culture today and the success of Fanatics' carefully crafted strategy of limiting the availability of its most in-demand athletes. Both elements have influenced the financial and image value of Fanatics' younger exclusive athletes which enhances the brand and revenue of Fanatics. In the same way that athletic apparel companies typically structure their marketing campaigns around active players, with high relevance and cultural capital, so too does Fanatics when structuring its events.

Another reason to structure the direct mail marketing of the show around two young stars could deal with the charismatic view of youth in our society. The Cubs stars are in the prime of their career with the majority of the media content featuring the two players airing in the form of live games rather than reruns on classic sports channels. Fanatics is able to use the two young stars to sell the excitement and energy of its shows. If someone receives the piece of direct mail with a perception that sports memorabilia shows resemble the baseball card shows of old that took place in dusty halls and bowling alleys they are reminded that these shows are anything but

mundane. Fanatics' shows are such big events that major league players at the height of their careers have opted to attend and be seen.

Lastly, the excitement that accompanies the risk and speculative motives of collecting cannot be ignored in the decision to feature Bryant and Rizzo. The players resemble two of the latest and most publicized stocks on the sports memorabilia market. In addition to the players being extensively hyped, the Cubs are also among the favorites to win the 2016 World Series. Collectors are able to inject themselves into the narrative of the budding stars' careers through owning a piece of either players' memorabilia. This ownership can provide a costly symbol of the early faith a collector had in the future success of either athlete. In fact, the higher the cost for the autographed item the more faith in the player's impending greatness the collector can claim.

Whether Fanatics limits its ticket sales or not, it is still manufacturing rarity for collectors who attend its shows. As Blom (2003) contends, "Every collection is a theatre of memories" (p. 191). Meaning that every item that encompasses the gathering of objects tells a tale. The account can be minor or major, but nevertheless a narrative for the collection's owner.

What makes Fanatics' shows unique is the ability they provide for attendees to not only purchase an autographed item, but also a specific memory concerning an admired professional athlete. As Belk (1995) discussed, elements collected are not limited to physical material, but can also include experiences (p. 66). These experiences can ultimately be what makes items significant to collectors. In Joy's (2002) work that examined the biography of her grandfather's war medal, she found that he felt little attachment to the award largely because there was no formal presentation involved. When her grandfather lost his medal and was given a replacement replica, and her family held him a private ceremony, that's when the item was injected with a

significant value and power to her grandfather. Joy found that the presentation of the award was the key event in the life and history of the medal. (p. 135). Fanatics' shows facilitate a similar type of presentation to collectors.

Fanatics' shows hold open the gate for attendees and broker an exchange with a famous person that is not an everyday occurrence. Only a limited number of individuals have experienced this type of encounter. In addition, every exchange has a subtle difference, even if only evident to the collector. A collector can detail the rare experience while providing an eyewitness account of what the athlete was like during this small window of interaction. This account is specific to the collector and is represented by the signed object which commemorates the occasion. A collector can proudly boast of meeting Kris Bryant when he was only in his second year of professional baseball and how all the tickets sold out, but he purchased one of the only 300 available. The ability of Fanatics' shows to provide the clay for collectors to sculpt a specifically tailored memory for themselves is a powerful and valuable commodity. A collector could get the most common item signed, with no inscription, or anything unique about the object, but the item will still be different in the eyes of the collector than other identical articles. This appeal is something the Fanatics' website cannot offer on a comparable level. Perhaps the ability of live shows to create unique moments is why Fanatics expanded its online strategy to include limited edition items as I will discuss shortly. If a purchase from the website cannot generate the singularized narrative appeal of live shows on its own, the individualizing of items on the website can attempt to act as a substitute.

Fanatics' shows allow collectors to singularize items and experiences, but the shows still represent a controlled environment. The banners previously discussed exhibit the prevalence of marketing at these events. In addition to the banners, Fanatics' shows offer advertising aimed at

conditioning collectors' desires to remain active with an eye towards the next experience and addition to their collection. This marketing strategy was made very apparent after I first walked through the entrance of the convention hall to purchase admission. Immediately, I was met with a poster advertising who was at this show. The interesting element was that in addition to this final bit of promotion for the athletes at the current show an additional poster was displayed for the next Fanatics event, in the same building, on May 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>. In a similar strategy, the postcard advertising the same May 14-15 show that I previously mentioned also revealed that the next Fanatics' event would be November 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> followed by a phone number and the [Fanaticsaauthenticshows.com](http://Fanaticsaauthenticshows.com) website to find further information.

This marketing technique is valuable for a variety of reasons. First, Fanatics' marketing strategy proves that even sports memorabilia is not immune to today's endless fashion cycles that Appadurai (1996) contends attempts to make Christmas a year round occurrence (p. 70). Fanatics' shows are not a once a year occasion, but a constantly traveling official US tour of consumption. The continuous stops provide the opportunity for collectors to see stars live while also creating new memories that coincide with purchases.

Fanatics constant marketing of the next acquisition could target collecting's relationship to fantasy. As Belk (1994) argues, collections are tools for their creators to express fantasies they may harbor (p. 322). Fanatics' marketing strategy that always presents the possibility of future obtainment can capitalize on collectors' imagination. Collectors are similar to fantasy sports players who enjoy imagining themselves in the role of general manager of their own teams. Collectors are the architects of their collections from within a competitive space. A space that mimics the competition of athletics while providing an escape into a world similar to

fantasy sports. A collector could imagine these shows from the mindset of a front office executive attending a business trip aimed at improving his or her roster of collectibles.

Fanatics never wants collectors to feel completely successful and content with their collections. As current New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick is famous for frequently stating in his post-game press conferences when asked about the game just played, “We’re on to (insert whatever team the Patriots play next).” Fanatics attempts to establish a similar mindset for collectors. Fanatics wants show attendees to purchase memorabilia at the current event, but also maintain the collectors’ mentality of intense focus on adding additional objects to their collection at future events. As Blom, (2003) contends regarding the collectors psyche, “The most important object of a collection is the next one” (p. 157).

### **Rarity In-Focus**

Fanatics’ events provide collectors with several luxuries, but in an industry that puts an inflated value and price on rare game-used items, the Fanatics’ website needs to find a way to compete. Fanatics seems to have found the avenue. In addition to the mass-produced items the memorabilia titan offers, it also manufactures several limited edition pieces. These items are not rare by nature, but are instead designed to be restricted to a compact group of owners.

The Fanatics’ website features countless autographed items from every major sport. The majority of these items are mass-produced to an unknown number. Fanatics also offers alternatives. One example of Fanatics ability to create rarity concerning a mass-produced item can be seen with its In-Focus line of memorabilia.

Fanatics’ In-Focus line of autographed memorabilia currently consists of 183 autographed 20" x 24" framed photographs featuring a single athlete who also signed the image (In Focus (183 items)). These photos are not like the typical images offered by sports

memorabilia providers which often feature athletes in real-life environments. The In-Focus line takes the players out of reality and positions them in a mystical world. The images present players in an outer-space type realm, if the tone and atmosphere of space matched the featured athlete's team colors. The In-Focus line is representative of the Photoshop culture that exists in America today, but rather than eliminating flaws, this line attempts to manufacture strengths by presenting the athletes in another galaxy reserved for those with heroic powers and ability.

The visual appeal of the In-Focus line does not rest solely on the athletes featured environments. Of the 183 items in the In-Focus line, 108 are limited edition (Search results for: "in focus limited"). A staple of many of the limited edition, In-Focus items, are inscriptions which appear in addition to the autograph of the athlete. Often times Fanatics will offer two versions of an In-Focus item for each player its website features. The images of the athlete are typically the same, but the standard In-Focus item will usually only feature an autograph and occasionally one inscription. The limited edition version will present multiple inscriptions that apply to the featured player. This strategy essentially creates the opportunity to purchase an elevated version of an autographed item similar to an upgraded model of an automobile compared to the basic stock version. The goal being for a collector to believe that typical collectors purchase the standard version of the item, but the remarkable collectors need to purchase the flamboyant, esteemed, and limited version of the piece.

Fanatics' limited production strategy is a clear exhibition of Kopytoff's (1986) argument regarding strategic manufacturing of goods to be singularized which positions these items as collectibles with a positive investment value. Kopytoff discussed a particular selling strategy that coerces an audience to believe that goods purchased for consumption are not always terminal in value as the goods are used or engaged with (p. 75, 81). Kopytoff uses the examples

of certain expensive cars presented as having a “high resale value” or oriental rugs being seen as positive investments despite being used as instruments by consumers as illustrations of this singularization impact. As Maquet (1993) discussed, things that are made to be viewed by others, like sports memorabilia, also have instrumental use called “intrinsic visual instrumentality” (p. 34). Maquet argued certain objects with instrumental value can also have signs ascribed to them (p. 30). Maquet contended, it is not the manufacturer or designer that ascribes meaning to objects, but the group of people who deem the object to be relevant; however, those who produce the item still have the ability to suggest meanings (p. 35).

Durkheim (1912) discussed the need for societies to distinguish certain portions of their environment by making them sacred. Singularization was a method for establishing this uniqueness (Kopytoff, 1986, p. 73). Fanatics seems to be implementing a similar strategy aimed at making these limited items sacred in the collectors’ community. In addition, positioning items this way creates another possibility for collectors to constantly improve their collections or “trade up” through the purchase of these distinctly manufactured items. Through its creation of limited edition items, Fanatics allows a collector the option to always upgrade. For example, a collector could purchase a standard In-Focus piece, featuring current Packers quarterback, Aaron Rodgers, without any inscription or limited edition qualities, and find themselves more financially secure a year later and purchase an upgraded, limited edition, inscription fused version. Like DVD and Blu-ray releases of films that constantly improve upon the previous version with new features and fancy packaging, which can result in a movie collector owning several copies of the same film, Fanatics executes a similar strategy. Fanatics making several versions of a collectible available with slightly different features creates the opportunity to always improve on a collection and show your devotion to the practice of collecting.



To ensure this manufactured rarity is obvious to viewers, and potential buyers, Fanatics does not solely explain the uniqueness of the item in the product's copy, but positions the rarity as a visual component featured on the item itself. Typically this numbering is not shown on the stock photo the website provides, but is presented in the lower right hand corner of the image when the customer receives the item to display. This numbering process borrows from art prints and lithographs which also feature numbering as an element of the collectible. For example, an In-Focus photo of (1969-1981) NFL Hall of Fame defensive tackle Joe Greene, only has 24 total In-Focus pieces manufactured that spotlight him. A purchasing customer will receive a random number between 2 through 23. Therefore, the items numbering could read anywhere from 2/24 to 23/24 in the lower right hand corner of the item. This visual element further serves as a reminder to the collector, and the viewer of the collectible, that this item is unique along with the collection that houses it and the collector who owns it.

You may find yourself asking what about numbers 1/24 and 24/24 of the series? Fanatics is aware of collectors' demand to own the first and last items of the print run; therefore, those items are listed for purchase separately with an inflated price tag. The limited edition, Joe Greene In-Focus piece sells for \$349.99. If a collector wants to purchase the first (1/24) or last (24/24) item in the print run the cost is \$399.99 (Search results for: "joe greene in focus"). Again, it is worth noting, the photos are exactly the same with the exception of the numbering displayed on the item. In addition, the player's jersey number is also taken into account regarding pricing. Joe Greene's jersey number was 75 making his number irrelevant in this case, but if his jersey number was 10, the 10/24 number of the series would also have its price inflated. Through this numbering strategy, Fanatics is able to not only manufacture items to be limited, but also further singularize specific items within that already limited production series.

Fanatics' strategy of restricting production is about more than merely squeezing extra currency out of a couple objects in a limited print run. Fanatics seems to recognize the competitive nature and desire for uniqueness that exists within collectors' minds. This competition has placed immense value on rare items whether the item is truly rare or created that way. The desire to own distinct things could be the expression of the collectors' impulse to dominate the sport of collecting (Danet & Katriel, 1994, p. 229). I use the term "sport" deliberately. When Jonathan Gray discussed the fans of specific texts like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* going into a verbal battle concerning why their particular beloved text is the best, Gray contends the battle is partially due to Hollywood conditioning the audience to process these elements with an emphasis on competition (Gray, 2010, p. 130). The same connection is definitely applicable to sports and collectors of sports memorabilia.

The 24/7 sports news landscape can impact the psychology of sports memorabilia collectors. Current sports news programming doesn't merely cover sports, but encourages debate concerning sports topics. One show even declares a debate winner at the show's conclusion. Given this competition and rivalry continuously presented, not just with news, but the sports exhibitions themselves, it is not a stretch to conclude that a competition motivated mindset would extend to collectors of sports memorabilia. This notion may not apply to every collector, but likely applies to most collectors willing to dispense with the large sums of money several of the In-Focus items require to own. In particular, spending the extra money to own a specific printed number of an otherwise identical object. The Joe Greene item previously mentioned is relatively small scale compared to other In-Focus items. If a collector wants to be the Michael Jordan of collectibles, and dominate collecting, Fanatics provides the resources, but the financial dedication required is relentless.

The competitive nature of sports culture is not alone in conditioning collectors' desire to occupy a position atop the collectors' summit. Baudrillard's discussion of "The System of Collecting" contends that the image of the collector is "extended to the very limits of the collection" and collectors do not merely collect objects, but rather collect themselves (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 12). This system is telling when examining collectors' desires to target rare and unique items for their collections. After all, what collector wants to perceive themselves, or his or her collection, as ordinary? Durkheim (1995) discussed material culture in optimistic terms as a tool allowing us to express our ideas and better understand ourselves by offering a physical avenue to reinforce our values and attitudes (Woodward, 2009, p.59). If a collector values being perceived as distinct, In-Focus, or similar memorabilia lines, with emphasis on rarity, provide the opportunity for collectors to purchase unique items. This ability provides the avenue for individuality to be purchased and transposed onto not just collections, but the collectors themselves. The perceived ability to acquire originality through purchase is not limited to the world of sports memorabilia, but is representative of a broader range of culture that treats possessions as mythical objects with the ability to temporarily extinguish insecurities and extend feelings of individuality. The number of opportunities to feel renewed and original through consumer activity extends as far as the purchaser's bank account or credit limit permits.

When discussing mass production, Blom contends the industrial practice has resulted in a loss of authenticity while rare objects allow for collectors to reinvent their own uniqueness (Blom, 2003, p. 167). The irony is that in the world of sports memorabilia, Fanatics is responsible for much of the mass-produced items that surround the industry while simultaneously attempting to establish uniqueness for collectors through the limited production of additional items it manufactures. With collectors viewing objects as extensions of themselves,

Fanatics is able to use its strategy of limited edition to present a quickly closing window to own just the right piece of memorabilia to make a collection, and the collector, feel unique again.

Banash (2013) contends that consumers don't recognize themselves as collectors until an object is no longer available for purchase (p. 63). Although Fanatics can't present items as both available and unavailable simultaneously to encourage consumers to become collectors, its strategy is not far off. Fanatics sells urgency. This strategy is representative of today's consumer society that capitalizes on a fear of loss. No consumer wants to live with the idea of having missed out on a special item or epic deal. Representative of the sport that consumption has become, it is not uncommon to see websites that specialize in providing deals to consumers to include a ticking clock on the webpage of the deal. This strategy establishes in the consumer's mind a fleeting opportunity accompanied by the possible loss of satisfaction that making a brilliant purchase provides.

Similar to the limited-release strategy concerning Bryant, Rizzo, and Manning at the Fanatics' show, Fanatics online strategy also creates the feeling of imminent unavailability to encourage the collector that time is a pivotal factor in owning a rare item. In addition to the limited number of items being presented in the title of the website listing, Fanatics also makes use of orange image tags placed across the website's photo of the item announcing this object has only "Few Left!" Fanatics is declaring to hungry consumers and collectors that this exclusive item, and the power it possesses, is still in grasp, but time is dwindling. It is interesting to note that of the 108 In-Focus items that are produced in limited quantities, 71 included this tag (Search results for: "in focus limited"). This limited availability is not necessarily based on commercial movement, but limited production. When considering limited In-Focus products, like that of (1971-1987) hall of fame basketball star Julius Erving, which is limited to only 12

total, I have to believe the “Few Left!” tag was applied from the moment the item was listed on the website (Julius Erving Philadelphia 76ers Fanatics Authentic Framed Autographed 20" x 24" In Focus Photograph with Multiple Inscriptions - #2-11 of a Limited Edition of 12).

Fanatics’ strategy of limited production can also correlate with the value of currency and hype. To illustrate this point let’s examine arguably the most popular athlete in sports today, NBA superstar, Stephen Curry. Curry has a limited edition, In-Focus piece that has 30 total units constructed for the price of \$1999.99 each (Stephen Curry Golden State Warriors Framed Autographed 20" x 24" In Focus Photograph with Multiple Inscriptions - Limited Edition #2-29 of 30). It is worth noting that the first (1/30) and last (30/30) units are no longer available on the website. I can only assume that the 30/30 piece fetched even larger returns than the 1/30 article because the number 30 is also Curry’s jersey number.

When comparing this Curry price to the previously mentioned In-Focus item featuring Julius Erving or “Dr. J” an interesting facet becomes evident. Despite the Erving In-Focus product actually having three more inscriptions and being limited to only 12 pieces its list price is still significantly lower than Curry at \$799.99 (Julius Erving Philadelphia 76ers Fanatics Authentic Framed Autographed 20" x 24" In Focus Photograph with Multiple Inscriptions - #2-11 of a Limited Edition of 12). This case is not unique. Ultimately, active professional athletes tend to generate higher prices than comparable retired players. This disparity is curious from an investment stability standpoint. After all, Erving’s legacy is safe while Curry’s is still being constructed. Perhaps that is the grand appeal of the Curry piece. His narrative, both literal and financial, is still being built while Erving’s book and the financial value of his autograph is largely completed.

One argument for the price difference between Curry and Erving lies with each signature's availability. Erving has been retired for decades and spends a great deal of time on the autograph circuit making his signature much more obtainable to collectors than a Curry autograph. In addition, Curry is an exclusive athlete to Fanatics allowing the company to exercise control over the availability of Curry's autograph. This difference in autograph accessibility creates a higher demand and price for the Curry signature. Curry's signature is limited not only on the In Focus piece, but on the whole market, while Erving's is only limited on this one specific product.

When examining the ability of Fanatics and other providers to inflate prices regarding the memorabilia of today's stars the role of hype is crucial. Gray discussed the function of "hype" not as pure promotion, but as a tool for establishing frames and filters for viewing a text (Gray, 2010, p. 3). Considering that hype can impact how a text is viewed, I would argue hype can also establish value for objects like collectibles on a temporary basis. Considering the endless sports news climate of today, which spends the majority of its time covering active players, it is not surprising for this coverage to equate to financial value. Just as a topic or person that is trending via the social media sphere can have a cultural value, in the case of athletes, that cultural value can be extended to the fiscal variety. The root word of memorabilia is "mem" which means to remember (Hall & Simons, 2001, p. 158). This process of remembering is made effortless based on the continuous coverage of current sports stars' achievements through various media outlets. It's no surprise that Fanatics' realized the fiscal value of a society that has become prisoners of the moment. For \$1999.99, Fanatics provides the avenue for anyone to own a Stephen Curry limited edition piece, to attempt to keep Curry's dominance during this period of time safe, secure, and viewable for years to come.

Similar to fans becoming “prisoners of the moment,” Wann (2001) contends that estimates of future performance of teams are highly influenced by their play in the game immediately witnessed. This notion also bodes well for the short-term value of current professional players’ memorabilia who are members of a winning team. When considering someone like the previously mentioned Curry, who is not only winning games, but also recently won his second consecutive MVP award, this influence is likely extended even further. It is not difficult to picture an investment motivated collector consumed by the combination of hype, media influence, and restricted availability, purchasing the Curry piece believing if it can generate a \$1999.99 price now it will only rise in demand as Curry’s career and success continues.

The purchase of this Curry item, or any item featuring an active sports star, allows for fan association to be aided by what Wann (2001) called the “Eustress Motive.” Eustress concerns positive forms of arousal and stimulation that occur through watching sports; therefore, those motivated by eustress enjoy watching sports because of the exhilaration they experience while watching (p. 38). A way to increase this feeling of eustress is to include the possibility of financial reward which is typically achieved through gambling, but sports memorabilia also provides similar avenues. Similar to a gambler who enjoys having that extra bit of financial risk on games to increase the “thrill of the action” so too for the collector with investment in mind. In fact, collecting sports memorabilia provides an additional narrative advantage that gambling does not.

When a collector decides to invest in a player’s memorabilia, the thrill and fun of the experience is similar to gambling, but the rewards and lengths of vindication are different. Gambling provides a largely financial reward for the savvy of the risk taker. The reward is

disposable and soon fades along with the gambler's opportunity to bask and display the financial symbol of wisdom. Collecting allows the potential to exercise what Tashiro (1996-1997) calls the "I told you so" phenomenon (p. 13). This phenomenon contends that a collector choosing to add an unpopular item to his or her collection could result in the collector having the privilege of displaying to fellow collectors their "prophetic powers" should the financial narrative of the item improve. Experiencing the feeling of justification regarding what sports memorabilia a collector chose to invest in can serve as the purest expression of the collector's personality while later providing "social vindication" of the selection which becomes a confirmation of self for the collector.

As my interview with Jeff Price, owner of Price's Sports and Collectibles revealed, collecting sports memorabilia is different from other forms of collecting because it allows participants to monitor their hobby by watching exciting sporting events which is different from comic book or stamp collecting. This practice allows for collectors to receive added stimulation from viewing sports while also becoming more knowledgeable the more they watch. This knowledge is useful when pondering the next addition to a collection. In addition, like fantasy football players imagining themselves as general managers of their own real team, Cross (2015) argues that collectors fancy themselves as sharp and speculative brokers (p. 36). Investment motivated collectors view players as stocks. If a stock's availability is limited, its hype grows. These added pleasures of watching sports could be a response to the perception of sports fans as inactive bystanders while collecting permits a guilt-free and productive feel while consuming sports.



## **Singularization Fanatics**

Akin (1996) examined the motivations of those who collect. She argued that the popularity of unconventional collections and unique items is greatly linked to the high value Americans put on individuality. She contends that people don't only define themselves, but are also partially characterized by others regarding what they collect (p. 109). It is interesting to compare her research in 1996 to 2016 where the culture of social media has not only increased the opportunity to present yourself as unique to the world, but in some instance has exacerbated the pressure to do so. Today people are judged less by similarities and more by differences. Everyone wants to be seen as unique. Both collecting and social media involve various communities often consisting of like-minded people with shared passions which can also lead to competition and strategies of differentiation. In a similar way as vehement social media participants constantly facing internal pressure to post the funny and sarcastic meme, so too do collectors feel the pressure to add useful content to their collection to distinguish themselves.

Branding was once a term reserved for business, but now it is part of the strategy of human beings looking to differentiate themselves. An individual may want to be known as the collector of only limited edition items, an accomplished predictor of future performance when deciding who to add to a collection, or the collector who always has an interesting story about interactions with athletes at shows. In addition, the social media participant may want to be known as the witty meme author, or the YouTube user may want to be viewed as a mash-up superstar. These targets all share similar motivations. The quest to be singular. This desire to be original is omnipresent in our society and Fanatics is a resource to achieve this feeling in the province of sports memorabilia. Fanatics is successful not only at manufacturing items that appeal to collectors' desire to be part of the sports narrative, but also at providing opportunities

for collectors to associate themselves with the recent glory of the moment. Fanatics' strategy of limiting items and experiences capitalizes on the American desire to be different. Fanatics positions this quality as a purchasable characteristic. As I have discussed in the world of sports memorabilia, everything is available and that accessibility does not merely apply to products, but also the identity those articles can provide.

## *Conclusion*

This study of the sports memorabilia industry reveals findings related to memory, consumer culture, and media. My research reveals a field that is largely concerned with finding new avenues to bring rare objects and artifacts to collectors. The industry uses these limited products to capitalize on a desire for uniqueness that is reflective of today's consumer culture. The market's intense focus on rare historical items also provides an illustration of the tension between commercialization and preservation of memory. The popularity and success of sports memorabilia exhibits the dominance of professional athletics within media and culture which is assisted by the symbiotic relationship sports enjoys with various forms of media and products that position athletics as an inescapable element of culture within our society.

Manufactured scarcity exists when a limited number of commercial items are generated despite resources existing to increase production. An object manufactured to be rare is unique based largely on production and design strategies. Fanatics' approach regarding lines like In-Focus, along with limiting availability at its shows, illustrates a company that wove scarcity into its marketing and production plans. This assembling of products that feature scarcity as a largely fabricated characteristic is not only representative of sports memorabilia.

Limited production strategies have become a staple of today's consumer culture impacting products in nearly every area. Industries related to fashion, electronics, and even the most basic types of indulgences all include practices than manufacture rarity. Even the simple pleasures of beer and Oreos are not immune to this limited edition phenomenon. If consumers want to experience the creamy taste of cookie dough flavored Oreos they must act quickly or risk missing out on these limited edition cookies (Oreo Cookie Dough Limited Edition Cookies (Cookie Dough) 12.2 oz).

A limited-release strategy has the ability to treat an item of simple gratification as something bigger. As products like microbrews have illustrated, limited distribution has the ability to generate a culture that romanticizes and fetishizes a relationship with these commodities and brands known largely for their exclusivity. In the case of rare microbrews the limited availability can create a passionate consumer base, or cult following, that is willing to go to great lengths regarding finances, time, and distance to acquire these commodities (Schreiber 2016). The enthusiasm of these beer followers is not unlike memorabilia collectors. Both groups venture to different events to participate in the hunt for their passion products. These travels can result in powerful cultures and communities built around that journey and passion. The excursion itself can become a powerful part of the experience and consumption process.

Exclusivity is a characteristic of several of today's commercialized objects. The goal of limited-release strategies is often to generate an urgency to encourage purchase while often communicating additional qualities about, and to, the buyer. As the previous research discussed, when examining the commercialization of rare products not all commodities offer the same level of uniqueness and status. The level of patina and aura, along with the ability of the object's perceived "intrinsic force" to sanctify a fan cave, and increase the status of the collector, varied based on the object or artifact. This variation is typical of consumer culture and usually relates to price. A consumer who purchases a rare DVD is likely going to experience a different level of elevated status than the purchaser of a limited edition Rolex watch. Ironically, regardless of the length and level of the appeal, any consumer stimulation, like the product, is only available for a limited time. Like collectors who are constantly fixated on the next addition, consumers seeking articles to provide the feeling of exclusivity often seek the next unique item. For both, the feeling of individuality must constantly be renewed through additional acquisitions.

The memorabilia industry takes limited edition articles even further by allowing customization. This approach allows collectors to play a role in the narrative and construction of their collectibles. Personalization has become a feature of articles that represent status. New vehicles, electronics, and fashion all allow for the distinctive shaping of products. A pair of shoes worn by one of the biggest superstars in basketball is only the beginning of the operation. The consumer is now able to tailor the shoe's details to create an item that feels much more exclusive and worthy of the high price (LeBron XIII iD Basketball Shoes. Nike.com 2016). A popular phrase when a shopper views a product matching his or her preferences contends, "That's so me." This notion seems to assign human attributes to commercial merchandise. What customization offers is the ability enhance these human qualities. Consumers see themselves in the product because they helped shape it. It embodies and reflects their own preferences and desires.

This project reveals the high demand for historic relics within the sports memorabilia industry. The game-used and artifact market resembles the heritage industry with its focus on products that serve as markers of a bygone era. Unlike the standard forms of the heritage trade that are concerned with generating visitors to experience the enduring remains of the past, Steiner's commercial function relies on packaging and selling historic articles to collectors. Steiner provides visual reminders that allow the possessor to appreciate and admire collective and personal history through owning a piece of the past. Blom (2003) contends that removing relics from their authentic atmosphere keeps them alive in the mind of the collector, but essentially makes them "dead to the world" (p. 152-153). This death seems contingent on what happens to the objects after they are removed from their memorable locations, but the conflict between history's commercialization and commemoration is evident. In addition, the demand

for these artifacts has led Steiner to expedite the commemoration process which could provide additional conflict moving forward.

Lastly, this work confirms the massive cultural and financial impact sports maintains in America. Sports attendance has declined in recent years. Many blame the economy, the high costs associated with attending live games, and improving technology for the fall (Koba 2016). This decline could be seen as problematic; however, the live gate only represents one avenue of the sports industry's health. Despite traditional attendance not generating the numbers of past years other modern avenues of sports consumption are thriving.

One way to measure the reach of sports is through the media avenues and merchandising that have directly resulted from the broadcast of athletics. Today, sports are represented in various fantasy games, burgeoning new networks, video games, apparel, social media, and memorabilia. These avenues don't represent stand-alone industries, but a harmonious production that encourage maximum consumption of all things sport. A player of fantasy games, or a collector of sports memorabilia, has a greater incentive to increase viewership of sports programming. In response, an avid watcher of professional athletics will likely have a higher desire to play fantasy sports or collect memorabilia. Sports is certainly necessary for its offshoots to continue to thrive, but these secondary industries also provide avenues to keep sports in the consumer consciousness which can lead to increased viewing and consumption.

The resulting impact of sports, media, and merchandise convergence is cultural as much as commercial. Sports in today's society represent an inescapable element. Fandom is not necessary to follow professional athletics. Sports has always enjoyed a mass cultural appeal, but the rise in avenues for sports promotion has increased its reach and profitability. As the advertising model has shifted to reflect changes in media, sports consumption should be

approached in a similar vein. Although still highly profitable, attending live sporting events, or viewing games through television, no longer represent the only major way to consume sports. The untraditional media formats also provide additional reach helping to advertise sports to the casual or previously less reachable target.

This examination of the sports memorabilia industry reveals a highly competitive marketplace where vendors must consistently find new strategies to compete in order to maximize demand and appeal. Two strategies found to be consistent involved the manufacturing of rarity and aura. The result is an industry that offers historic and manufactured articles for purchase that capitalize on consumer demand to feel unique and renewed through the purchase of artifacts and products relating to the culture of sports.

The cultural power of collecting also extends to memory and creativity. As *Fanatics*' shows illustrate, collecting can foster creativity and expression despite restrictions that may exist. These shows allow for collectors to unite around a shared passion while creating their own collectibles and memories in the process. These collectibles will eventually find their way into what Blom (2003) called a collector's "theatre of memories" (p. 191). This theatre can serve not only as a spectacular visual of the collector's passion and creativity, but of the memories of each acquisition. These specific memories can transform the experience of collecting. The activity becomes less about accumulating commercial objects and more about remembering. The collectibles can become not just sports memorabilia of a specific athlete, but personal memorabilia of a specific moment and time in the collector's life.

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