

## IN THIS CHAPTER

- » The psychology behind why we collect
- » Why cards can be considered investments
- » What to do when you rediscover your collection

# Chapter 1

## Sizing Up the Sports Card Craze

It's hard to narrow down when humans first started collecting things, but evidence suggests it could have been more than 500,000 years ago with the recycling of discarded stone tools.

There's evidence humans may have also collected things like shells in caves that date back 40,000 years, and of course, there's evidence that items were collected and placed in temples and tombs in regions like ancient Egypt.

Humans, it seems, have long been collectors of all kinds of things. Through the years, items like coins and other currency have gained additional worth beyond the original value, artwork from classic painters and sculptors regularly stars in the most exclusive auctions, and even classic cars are chased to fill garages of the rich and famous.

Today, it's fair to call sports cards some of the most popular collectibles, and the sales track record backs that up. Million-dollar sales for important cards have recently become a regular occurrence, and the popularity of cards sold through retailers like Target and Walmart grew so fast and furious during the COVID-19 pandemic that many stores were forced to limit sales to specific

hours, if they didn't halt them completely. For some stores, the sales weren't worth the Black Friday–like chaos.

In this chapter, we explore why we collect sports cards and why the trend has gained popularity again in the 21st century.

## The Psychology of Collecting

Humans have a long history of collecting things, but why do we do it at all? A research study investigating 500,000-year-old tools speculated that they were collected to preserve the memories of their ancestors. Another study in the 1980s found that some adults collect for reasons such as wanting to complete a series or creating a visually appealing display.

The research shows that sports cards seem to check all the boxes.

### Why we collect sports cards

The different eras of sports cards are covered more in Chapter 2, but the Library of Congress considers the earliest known card to be one commemorating the Brooklyn Atlantics baseball team from the 1860s (see Figure 1-1). From there, sports cards have evolved from simple marketing materials during the tobacco era to luxurious items that feature high-end game-used memorabilia and autographs.

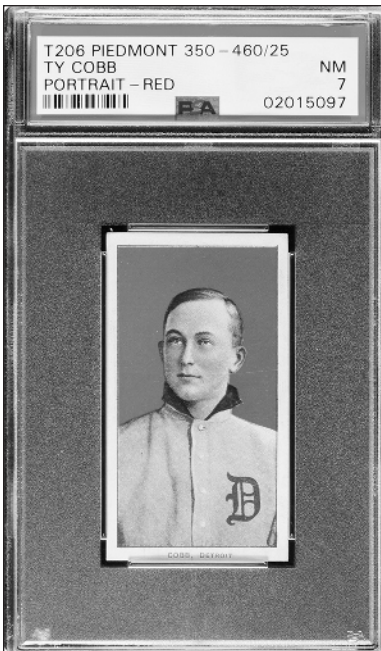
Regardless of their physical attributes, sports cards have almost always provided all the makings of a great collector's item. First and foremost, trading cards help chronicle the past. Most cards feature the player's stats from previous seasons and may even offer a short story about an important moment in their career. Want to reminisce about past seasons of glory? Take a trip down memory lane with a binder of cards, and you can easily lose hours.

The best cards are often visually striking, too. Iconic sets like the 1909–1911 T206 are beloved today more for their design than anything else (see Figure 1-2). Some are rare, but many can be easily found cheaper than you'd expect. Cards are then conveniently organized into numbered sets, just asking to be completed.



United States Library of Congress

FIGURE 1-1: 1865 Brooklyn Atlantics card



Courtesy of Heritage Auctions

FIGURE 1-2: T206 Ty Cobb PSA 7

What likely makes sports cards especially collectible, however, is their ability to bring fans closer to the teams and players they love so much, and this has only gotten stronger since autographs and game-used memorabilia were introduced during the modern era. According to a 2023 Statista study, 75 percent of Americans considered themselves to be sports fans, and buying a little piece of cardboard with a player on the front is an easy and gratifying entry point to demonstrating one's fandom.

## A new (not really) kind of investment

The sports card hobby is typically associated with collecting cards for fun, but there is also a long history of using cards to make money as an investment. We cover more about buying and selling cards for profit in Chapters 14, 15, and 16. Although some collectors can almost be described as hobby purists — they buy and collect *strictly* as a hobby — a large percentage of the community regularly sells cards for a variety of reasons using a variety of methods.

It's also important to know that, despite what many collect-first hobbyists may argue, investing and selling for a profit is not a new concept introduced during the Ultra-Modern Era. Some of the most basic concepts within the hobby prove this is wrong, too, and you don't need to look any further than card shops and card shows. These businesses certainly may have been founded out of passion, but it's hard to argue that people are committed to that extent while losing money. Although selling cards as a business may be more prevalent today than in the 1970s, it's hardly a novel concept.

One could argue, however, that cards used as high-end alternative investments have increased in popularity in recent years. Again, savvy industry people have bought and sold cards for extreme profits for decades, but the introduction of cryptocurrency and the rise in other digital assets as investments have made investing in alternative assets more popular than ever before. For some, it's better to have a 1952 Topps Mickey Mantle on their desk than an Andy Warhol above their fireplace, and the definition of what is considered “art” has evolved to include more than what you'd find in the Louvre.

# Getting Lost in the Cardboard. (It's a Good Thing.)

From the nostalgia and the fandom to the thrill of completing a collecting goal, there are so many reasons to collect sports cards. And one of the most fun things you can do with collecting is to get lost in it. If you've collected before, dive into a stack of cards and run wild with the stories and memories they bring back. If you're new to the hobby, consider going online and spiraling down a rabbit hole of stunning Instagram accounts and interesting YouTube videos. After all, that spiral is often what keeps so many collectors hooked.

## Rediscovering your old collection

The sports card hobby is cyclical, both in its overall popularity and in how collectors individually participate. The hobby tends to go through phases of extreme popularity before dying down for one reason or another and reemerging later. For example, after a long run of popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, the hobby stalled after the Junk Wax Era — a period we cover more in Chapter 2. Decades later, the hobby exploded to arguably the height of its popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic because many were forced to spend more time indoors and stumbled upon their old cards.

Individual collectors experience cycles, too. Many are introduced to the hobby as children, and after years of collecting, they may take a break to pour their time and money into different things during their late teens and 20s. The disposable income that sometimes comes with mid-career success or introducing the hobby to their children can restart the cycle.

If you've recently rediscovered your collection, these next tips are just for you.

### The lay of the land

Getting back into collecting can be extremely overwhelming if you've just dusted off your old collection. There's a chance that it's been years since you've looked through it, and some of the faces you once collected may have been mostly forgotten.

Depending on how long you've been away and whether you're still following the same sports and players you used to collect, you may need to read up on the game's current stars or do some research on some of your old favorites and how they panned out. You'll use this info to get organized later.

You can take two routes to determine the value of your old collection. First, you can put the time in yourself using data tools like our own Market Movers, which we cover more in Part 4. You can also look at completed auctions on marketplaces like eBay to see what something recently sold for. If doing it on your own isn't the best route for you, consider visiting your local card shop and asking if they'd help organize or appraise your collection. Some shops offer this, and some don't. The ones that do may still want an idea of what you have before dedicating time to it. Many will also only appraise your collection if you have a legitimate interest in selling some or all of it.



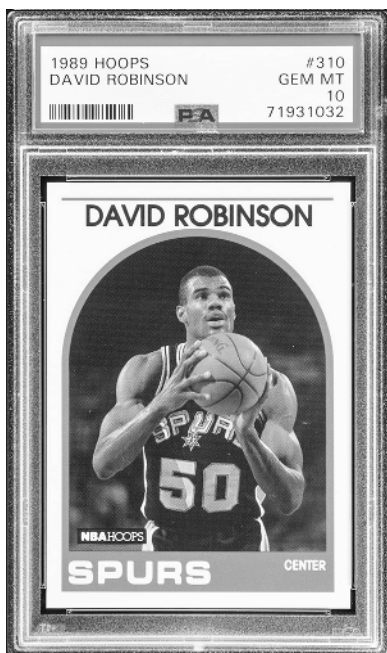
TIP

We cover how to properly value your cards more in Chapter 16, but it's important to know now that price transparency has come a long way in the last few years alone. Although magazines like the *Beckett Price Guide* ruled for decades, there's now a variety of tools you can use on your own.

The disappointing news for many collectors is that most cards, aside from the rarest copies of the best players of all time, aren't worth much. Unfortunately, those Hoops David Robinson rookie cards you stockpiled in 1989 won't be your ticket to early retirement (see Figure 1-3). Nevertheless, rare gems are rediscovered daily in old childhood collections. So, while the odds may be long that you're sitting on a goldmine, it can pay off big if you're holding something in high demand.

## Get organized

Many who dive back into collecting often find that their childhood version of themselves didn't exactly follow the playbook for preserving the value of their cards. Whether it's poor organization or, even worse, poor storage practices, things often go wrong when the person running the show is 12. Now is either the time to fix things or give yourself a pat on the back for thinking ahead early on. If you're new to the hobby, consider this an opportunity to start the *right* way.



*Courtesy of Heritage Auctions*

**FIGURE 1-3:** 1989 Hoops David Robinson PSA 10

Reorganizing may seem daunting, but many collectors look forward to it. We cover collecting for nostalgia purposes in the previous sections. This is where it comes into play. Ideally, you'll be sorting your old collection into new categories as you sift through it. Players that were once stars may now go in a "commons" box while some of those top prospects have now earned a penny sleeve and top loader. Organizing your old collection may be the most time-consuming part of the process, but there's a very real chance that it's the most fun.

If you're thinking about a collection reorganization, consider flipping to Chapter 8, where we cover the different types of collectors. It might be too early in the process, but there's no better time than now to sort your collection properly if you know you will prioritize a certain team, player, or sport.

## Keep building or start selling

Once your old collection is sorted and reorganized, it's time to determine what to do with those cards. Keeping them all and just putting them back into proper storage, which we cover more in Chapter 9, is perfectly fine. You can continue building your collection on top of what you've previously owned or shift gears completely. This is also when you should consider selling cards you no longer want. If you have something in mind to buy, these old cards could be put to better use as a starter fund for your new collecting goals.

## Tips for finding cards you will (or won't) love

We cover the different types of collectors extensively in Chapter 8, but you can start exploring all that's out there whenever you're comfortable or feeling inspired, if this is your first experience with the hobby. If you see something appealing, don't hesitate to do a little research and spiral down the rabbit hole with that card and others like it. If you're diving back in, you're bound to fall in love with a design again when sorting your collection, and we encourage you to explore whenever you're excited. Along with your old cards, below are a few places to get you started.

### Card shops and shows

Searching for cards online will yield a much larger selection, but there's more than enough to get you started at your local card shops and card shows. Navigating card shows is covered more in Chapter 10, but one tip to know now is that they are great resources for things you haven't seen before.



WARNING

Be sure to keep a death grip on your wallet until you know exactly what you want to collect, how much those things should cost, and how much you can reasonably spend. If you wander into a card show like a babe in the woods, some dealers there will happily lead you to the slaughter.

If you see something cool, ask the dealer what they know about it. Card shop owners and card show dealers are often some of the most knowledgeable people in the hobby, and they are typically

happy to share some info with you. Even if you aren't sure what you're looking for, feel free to visit these places early on to see what inspires you. Don't worry about specifics; simply allow your eyes to draw you to something exciting.

## **The web and beyond**

Exploring the hobby online can really help you find your focus. We cover card communities in Chapter 11, but right now, you can just get lost in the photos. New and returning collectors alike will find a whole new world of cards once they get online. Whether it's Instagram or Facebook, there are collecting communities for just about every team and most of their key players. There will, of course, be plenty of collectors with tips for buying or selling stars like Tom Brady, but for every superstar, there will be someone with a shockingly good Seneca Wallace collection.

