

The Future Is Not In The Cards

When you think about Major League Baseball, you begin to realize that the sport is more of a memory than a constant and consistent reality. Baseball fans smile and remember the old days when you could go to the ballpark, have some peanuts, maybe some cracker jacks and collect cards with the players pictures on them so you knew who they were and what their averages and statistics looked like. Those kind of lasting memories seem to permeate out consciousness as we experience the current system of baseball with its fantastic arenas, high prices and synthetic cards in front of us. As time goes on the special memories begin to fade, and baseball cards may be lost in the balance. The sport is different. Baseball and photography actually were cousins who grew up together as pastimes in the late 1800s. Both became so prominent in American understanding that it seemed natural the two would eventually find their way together. Cigarette companies were the first to market baseball cards with pictures of favorite players as promotional items to get people to buy their brand of cigarettes. As baseball began to grow in popularity, teams began to understand the people liked to know something about the people who play the game. What was better than to print pictures on cheap card stock of favorite players, numbers positions and statistics? Put that in a pack with a stick of gum and you have a hit. The best payoff was if you could catch your favorite player after the game and get him to sign your card. Baseball is different now. Locker rooms have bodyguards and players are multimillionaires who are not always willing to stop and talk to the simplest fan or sign an autograph. Kids are different. As America shakes its head amid concern about childhood obesity rates, one thing is certain. Kids are no longer playing sports at the level they used to and in fact, they are not watching sports either. When kids do engage in being a fan it is usually at the behest of the parent who is trying to create a memory that was once created for them with a new generation who likes things fast, loud, colorful and frenetic. Baseball offers none of those attributes. Kids are more likely to collect video games and play baseball from the couch than have use for a piece of laminated card stock with a picture on it. The card market became so aware of the trend away from cards they stopped packaging them with gum and raised the price to an adult level. Collecting is different. Investment advisers, collectors and auctioneers will all tell you that the act of collecting is different than it's ever been before. There is great value in traditional or classic baseball cards, particularly from the 1950s or earlier. Our baseball cards for this generation are not collected the same way. The fun of having to find the one missing piece that you are looking for in your collection and the efforts you go through to get it is gone. Baseball cards can be bought at Target and come in the full series in wrapped plastic boxes. Card collecting speculators who have almost no love for the game and rarely look at the cards simply by them and store them have added to the devaluation of the card market and baseball card collecting as a whole. The joy is simply not there. Many still love and hold cherished cards of times gone by, but baseball cards both as a part of the sport and as a major collectible are in danger of losing their identity to a fast-moving, speculative, cynical time.

About the Author

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Source: <http://americanahost.com>