Collecting Celebrity: The Meanings and Process of Collecting Sports Memorabilia

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Abstract
The sports memorabilia marketplace has experienced exponential growth since the advent of Internet auction sites such as eBay. While collectors were once constrained by local encounters with personal collectors, the Internet now facilitates buying and selling on an international scale. This study explores the phenomenon of collecting sports memorabilia as it has been transformed historically as well as more recently. Scholarly literature suggests that fascination with the famous may have begun in ancient Greece, although contemporary studies of celebrity examine a broader scope of subjects in addition to an odd array of items collected.

This study specifically addresses the following: first, what are historical and contemporary meanings of fame and/or celebrity; second, how do sports collectibles accrue value; and third, how do Internet auctions impact the sports collectibles marketplace? To explain the phenomenon of collecting sports memorabilia, one author offers a four-stage model known as the Sports Collectibles Commodity Continuum. This model draws upon concepts from previous literature: “singularization” (items may be set aside for special purposes) and “commoditization” (intersection of time, culture, and society) (e.g., see 4, 12, 20, 33). The model also introduces previously unarticulated notions of “culturalization” (consumer identities and norms set by social, cultural, economic, and/or political forces) and “marketization” (singularized needs drive market prices). After assessing prices of sport collectibles offered on eBay, the authors conclude that the escalating use of online sport auctions will likely continue to impact the sports collectibles marketplace in ways that merit further study.

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The collecting of sports memorabilia grew rapidly in popularity and became more profitable. It became a beckoning opportunity for fraud from unscrupulous dealers and many unsuspecting and unaware collectors were quickly parted with their money by un-authenticated items and promises. This became a matter so serious that in 2000, the Federal Bureau of Investigation mounted a huge anti-fraud campaign.