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Marketing Baseball Cards: Bubble, Boom or Bust?

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Posted by [Neal Leavitt](#) on October 30th, 2015 at 5:54 pm

“Say it ain’t so Joe!”

Those words were supposedly uttered by a small boy outside the Cook County (IL) Courthouse to ‘Shoeless Joe’ Jackson. He had just finished testifying to a grand jury; one of eight Chicago White Sox baseball players who allegedly took bribes allowing the Cincinnati Reds to win the 1919 World Series. Jackson was banned from baseball after the 1920 season but was found innocent in 1921 by a jury.

Debates have raged for 90+ years on Jackson’s guilt or innocence; his baseball cards, however, have stood the test of time. Currently on eBay, for example, you can buy a 1909 E90-1 American Caramel rookie for

\$10,999.95. If you've got some spare change hidden in the sofa, you can grab a 1952 Mickey Mantle Topps Rookie RC #311 for only \$38,795, also on eBay (with free shipping!). And in late April, a T206 Honus Wagner card sold at auction for \$1.32 million.

While the market for certain types of baseball cards is still strong, a paucity of children and even teenagers at major baseball card shows in recent years appears to be the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Baseball card prices have been falling in recent years in relation to their scarcity. In response, *The Economist* reported that "seeking to entice new generations of buyers, card manufacturers have experimented with new formats, including cards with pieces of game jerseys and scraps of used bat embedded: gimmicks, true, but tempting ones to those with a desire to commune with actual heroes of the diamond."

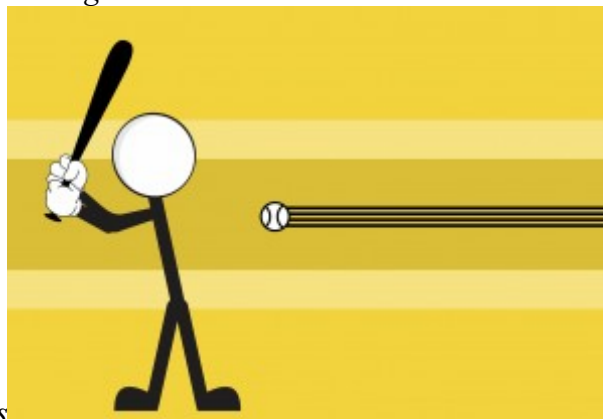
And some companies ratcheted it up even more. Back in 2007, Upper Deck tried to convince collectors to buy its packs by including a card with a World Series ticket signed by Babe Ruth in one of them.

Fast forward to 2015 – Upper Deck doesn't even offer baseball cards for sale – it now focuses on basketball, football golf, hockey and soccer.

Venerable Topps (established in 1938 as a family gum business in Brooklyn) is capitalizing on its history to lure more customers. The company even has a [Rediscover](#) tab on its website with a nice catchphrase – "Rediscover Topps. The story of collecting lasts a lifetime."

There's also a cute 30-second commercial featuring San Francisco Giants catcher Buster Posey. A bunch of eight-year-olds are haggling over his card and what they could get for it. Posey isn't happy with any of the trade choices until he's offered a 1969 Johnnie Bench rookie card that had been stored in a shoebox by the father of one of the kids. Posey immediately accepts.

The *Rediscover* section also has a welter of subsections that provide a lot of useful information for budding collectors. Some of these include *Start Collecting* and *Your Vintage Cards*. The most relevant of these for kids



in today's digital society is probably the all-important *Apps*. One popular app is Topps BUNT®, a real-time Major League Baseball digital trading card game "where the cards you own and collect earn points based on how your players perform on the field each day."

I still have my 10,000+ collection of baseball cards; I hope all of the card manufacturers can reel in the next gen of collectors – but it will be an uphill battle.

Nonetheless, it's a great hobby that lends itself to a lot of youthful camaraderie, best summed up by Jefferson Burdick, a renowned baseball card collector and cataloguer whose massive collection is now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City:

"A card collection is a magic carpet that takes you away from work-a-day cards to havens of relaxing quietude where you can relive the pleasures and adventures of a past day – brought to life in vivid pictures and prose."

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1. [Baseball Cards](#) says:
[October 30, 2015 at 9:49 PM](#)

Upper Deck can't offer cards because Topps has an exclusive with MLB through 2020. All four major sports have gone the exclusive route with their trading card partners.

Game-worn jersey (relic) cards aren't new. They've been a part of some card packs since the late 1990s.

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