

Game-Used Gear

by Kevin Glew

A league of their own

These game-used enthusiasts are in "a league of their own."

Smaller in number than player collectors but every bit as passionate, these hobbyists have set out to obtain a jersey from every team in a certain league.

"I think it's human nature to collect sets, and people view leagues as sets," says Jay Miller, president of From The Game and www.netcollectibles.net.

John Upshaw, a collector based in Henryetta, OK, is attempting to amass a sweater from every Central Hockey League franchise.

"I'm a Tulsa Oilers season ticket-holder, and I thought it would be neat to get a jersey from each team in the league ... It's the thrill of the hunt for them that keeps me going," he says.

This thrill is something that hobbyist Toby Malbec can relate to. The Germantown, Maryland native is attempting to acquire a gamer from all of the National Hockey League teams.

"I'm a huge hockey fan and thought it would be an interesting pursuit - and in the

'early' days it was a more difficult endeavor," he says.

Some say the recent proliferation of major league (e.g. NHL, Major League Baseball, NBA, and NFL) jerseys on the market has resulted in more people focussing on these types of collections turning to minor leagues.

"I think when collectors start out they are more likely to collect the major leagues because ... jerseys are more readily available," says Ryan Johnson, a Wausau, WI native, who is trying to collect a gamer from every team in the Western Collegiate Hockey Association (WCHA). "However, I think this is also what drives people to eventually collect minor league items. They begin to realize that anyone who has money and spends half an hour looking can get something from the major leagues."

But Johnson also concedes that minor league gamers are not always cheaper than their major league counterparts.

"I think the fans are the biggest factor in pricing. This is especially true when the jerseys are auctioned by the team," he explains. "Very often dedicated fans bid with their heart, not their wallet in mind. I've



Toby Malbec of Germantown, Maryland is collecting a set of National Hockey League game-worn jerseys.

seen jerseys from colleges and minor league teams sell for three or four times what you would pay for a solid NHL player."

So while league collections can be interesting and impressive, having the money to complete them can be a challenge.

"I've seen people start up (league collections), but after awhile, the costs begin adding up and they realize they don't have enough money to finish," says Brad Moore, owner of Fairmore Sports Inc. in Guelph, ON. "If you have money, you can buy almost any jersey."

To get around breaking the bank, league collectors often buy a common player's jersey from each team.

"These collections can be less costly to complete if you're able to find commons for a song," says Jim Yackel, president of Jim's Jerseys in Manlius, New York.

But even common gamers can cost around \$300 each.

"If you're trying to collect one jersey from every team and they're \$300 each, if there are 30 teams, then that's \$9,000," says Moore.

Another obstacle for league collectors is that some franchises' jerseys are not readily available. Roy Siviero, an Ottawa-based hobbyist who has collected a complete run of CFL jerseys, says sweaters from the league's short-lived U.S. franchises were the most difficult to find.

"The American-based CFL teams were the hardest to get - especially Birmingham and Memphis - because they were only in existence for one year each," he says.

Springfield, IL native Jason Noyes has had similar experiences in trying to track down jerseys for his North American Hockey League (NAHL) collection.

"Some teams only do live auctions, so I try to contact them ahead of time and either make an offer or place a bid," he says.

Another hindrance is teams changing

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uniform styles. Sticklers insist that hobbyists must own one of each style to have a truly complete league collection.

"I can see it (changing uniform styles) being frustrating for collectors because teams are changing styles more now than they ever have," says Miller.

But, perhaps, the greatest test for league enthusiasts is staying focused on their mission.

"It takes a lot of self control to collect just one jersey from each team in a league. And if there are a couple of teams in the league that are hard to acquire then it becomes even tougher to keep one's focus," says Johnson.

Miller concurs, "Some people start out collecting one jersey from every team and then after that they will collect one road and one home from each team. From there the collecting addiction usually sets in."

Hobbyists say the best sources are eBay, team auctions, and getting to know other collectors.

"The best sources are networking with other collectors on websites like www.gameworn.net. The marketplace and

swap tables are great sources for making deals ... I've traded over 30 jerseys in my time in the hobby," says Malbec.

Johnson has also added to his collection through networking.

"I would say more than 30 per cent of my collection was acquired from people who found my website (www.johnsonsjerseys.net) and wrote to tell me about a jersey they had, to see if I would be interested in buying it," he says. "Also, as I meet more people in the hobby, that network of other collectors has always been very helpful to me. To put a twist on an old saying, 'You are no more than six people from any jersey you could ever want to find.'"

Some feel that the diversity of these collections not only makes them fun and attractive to display, but also a solid investment.

"I think trying to collect different teams in a given league makes good sense financially if you ever plan to sell your collection down the road. If you hope to have your collection hold its value over time, you don't want all your eggs in one basket,"

says Johnson.

But Yackel, a veteran dealer, says that collectors shouldn't plan on making money from collections like these.

"Selling a group of approximately 30 jerseys in one fell swoop may be tough ... Buy the jerseys because you're passionate about them ... Don't buy them as investments. In this over-saturated, eBay-driven marketplace, you may be disappointed by the dividends," he says.

As for completing their collections, some hobbyists aren't confident they will succeed.

"I don't think I will ever truly complete the collection since teams keep coming and going and jersey designs change," says Noyes. "The league (NAHL) overall has been around for 27 years now, so I have a very long way to go."

Johnson, on the other hand, is more optimistic.

"I don't have the complete WCHA set I want yet, but I hope that within a couple of years I'll have it completed," he says. □

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Ryan Johnson of Wausau, WI collects college game-worn hockey jerseys. He is trying to complete a set of Western Collegiate Hockey Association jerseys - that is one gamer for each team.

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