

Honus Wagner as Mona Lisa

by Jeff Figler

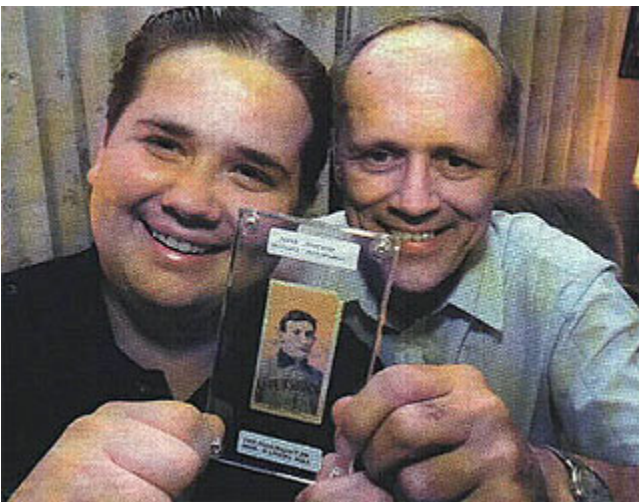
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Every six months or so an auction will feature a T206 Honus Wagner card. Most collectors, and even non-collectors for that matter, are familiar with the "Holy Grail" of sports cards, the T206 Honus Wagner card with a tiny portrait with the allure of Mona Lisa to collectors. That one card which has a width of only 1 7/16 inches and a height of 2 5/8 inches has been the hope and dream of many collectors, the pinnacle of a baseball fan's collecting journey, and to some, the means to luxury. But through the years the Wagner card has been the subject of a great deal of controversy.

Retracing history, Honus Wagner was an all-star shortstop for the Pittsburgh Pirates. He is regarded by many as being the premier player in the Major Leagues prior to the 1920s. Indeed, his crowning achievement came in 1936 when the Baseball Writers Association of America selected him, Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, Christy Mathewson and Babe Ruth for the Baseball Hall of Fame's inaugural induction.

From 1909 to 1911 the American Tobacco Company issued the T206 (the T was for tobacco) set of cards on two major brands of cigarette boxes, Piedmont and Sweet Caporal. It is estimated that only 35-50 authentic Wagner cards exist today. There are two prevailing reasons for the scarcity of the card. The first theory is that Wagner requested that the production of his card be stopped because he did not want children to be influenced into buying tobacco products to get his card. The other theory is the tobacco company did not pay him for the use of his image, and Wagner requested that they stop production. When production was stopped it was estimated that a maximum of 200 cards had already been produced.



Joe Strong (left) found this rare 1909 Honus Wagner baseball card in a box of cards he purchased for \$800 at a yard sale in Hamilton, Ontario

The fact remains that a minimal number of cards exist today, and the value of the scarce Wagner cards continue to escalate. A bit of history about the Wagner values illustrates its trajectory. In 1933, a card collector from Syracuse, New York, Jefferson Burdick, published "The American Card Catalog" which was the first attempt to organize trading cards. Most cards were valued at less than \$1, while the Wagner card was \$50.

In 1985, Bill Mastro, a sports-collectibles dealer bought a Wagner card, the only one known to be in mint condition, in a private sale from Alan Ray for \$25,000. This card was later sold in 1987 to a West Coast collector Jim Copeland for \$110,000. Four years later Copeland offered the card for auction on Sotheby's.

Hockey Hall of Famer Wayne Gretzky and Los Angeles Kings owner Bruce Mc Nall purchased the card for \$451,000. Later that year, recently formed Professional Sports Authenticator, Inc. (PSA) of Newport Beach, California graded the card as a "PSA NM-MT 8." The high grading of this card set it apart from other vintage cards, and from that time on it has unquestionably been the most desirable trading card in the world.

In 1995 Gretzky sold his card to Wal-Mart and Treat Entertainment for \$500,000, to be used in a promotional contest. A Florida postal worker, Patricia Gibbs – who needed to sell the card to pay the taxes on it – won the contest. Christie's auctioned it for \$640,000 to Michael Gidwitz of Chicago. In 2000, Gidwitz sold it on eBay to Brian Seigel for \$1.265 million, who in 2007 sold it for \$2.35 million, and six months later it was sold to an anonymous California collector for \$2.8 million.

Naturally, the escalation of the one card (often called the Gretzky T206 Wagner card) has also raised the values of the other 35 or so Wagner cards which are in a lesser condition.

The controversy surrounding the "Gretzky card" is whether it has been trimmed and "doctored," which to many card collectors is a vice. There is speculation that the pristine Wagner card was part of a T206 uncut sheet that Mastro helped cut. There are even allegations whether the PSA authenticators acted in good faith when they graded the card, as its policy is not to grade cards from cut sheets, as well as cards that may have been altered.

Yet even another controversy surrounded the Wagner card as recently as 2005, when two men – John Cobb and Ray Edwards – claimed they had an authentic Wagner card in excellent condition. After doubts surfaced about their card's authenticity it was pulled from both an eBay sale and a later eBay auction. Cobb and Edwards alleged racial discrimination.

Despite recurring controversies surrounding the Wagner card, and in particular, the "Gretzky card," it is the "Holy Grail" of trading cards. It is likely that the full truth of the Gretzky card will never be known, and rumors will always persist.

For more about the Wagner card, and its controversy-filled history, read the book "The Card" by Michael O'Keefe and Teri Thompson.