

Sports talk etched in cardboard, ink

Elmwood card shop keeps hobby alive for collectors, kids

IT'S going to be a busy year for sports card shops across the country and two words sum up why: Connor McDavid.

A hockey phenom such as McDavid always spawns a new generation of sports card collectors, said Mike Bergmann, owner of Lower Level Sports Cards and Collectibles.

Who won't be tempted to lay down a few bucks for a shot at a McDavid rookie card? It would be like winning the lottery. His rookie card in an Edmonton Oilers jersey comes out in

November, although there are already cards of him in Erie Otters (OHL) and Team Canada junior team jerseys.

"I'm expecting to see a lot of new faces in here," Bergmann said.

Bergmann sees a lot of faces as it is, at his shop at 189 Henderson Hwy. It's a brick-and-mortar store in downtown Elmwood where you can still drop in to talk sports as much as to buy sports cards and collectibles.

At any given time, the shop talk is last night's game, the game coming up, the next star, the fading star, trades, free agents, injuries, what the home team needs, and "did you see the hit last night?" multiplied across four or five sports.

You can't *not* jump in and agree, fake agree, disagree, allow, interject, interrupt, wonder when he'll stop, or



BILL REDEKOP

Neighbourhood Joints

They're in every corner of the city: the weird little store that stocks exactly what you're looking for, or that mash-up of a place that carries a little bit of everything. It could be that little diner with the crusty owner that makes the best burgers in town. Or maybe it's that odd little store, café or restaurant that's been around forever and caters to a mysterious clientele.

A Neighbourhood Joint can be just about anything, but more often than not, it's what makes your neighbourhood unique.

But the reality of keeping these Neighbourhood Joints in business is a struggle.

In this summer series, Free Press reporters shine a light on some of these under-the-radar spots.

ask yourself, "Who does this guy think he is? Don Cherry?"

"That's the neat thing about sports is you can have sharp disagreements," said Bergmann, 40. "You can have a strong opinion and that's OK."

Bergmann is more like an understanding bartender than a regular shopkeeper, and you can almost picture him compulsively wiping the counter while he follows the conversation.

He started collecting cards when he was seven and still has the first card he opened on display in his glass showcase: an NHL penalty minute leader card with a photo of Jimmy Mann, of the Winnipeg Jets first edition. Mann had 287 penalty minutes that year.

Bergmann displayed street smarts



Mike Bergmann, owner of Lower Level Sports Cards and Collectibles, in his shop at 189 Henderson Hwy.

early, renting his first table at a card show at 14. He took a break from collecting when he married and started a family, then got back into it and opened his shop three years ago.

It's a tough racket. He's seen three other card stores open since he started, and two of them are already closed.

In the early 1990s, there were more than 100 card shops in Winnipeg, Bergmann said. One strip mall in North Kildonan, off Henderson Highway, had two card shops alone — one owned by former Winnipeg Jets forward Pat Elynuik and Tony DaCosta, former Jets equipment manager and now equipment manager for the Minnesota Wild.

Now, there are eight card shops in Winnipeg, by Bergmann's count. People started dropping out from collecting in 1993-94. "I think a lot of people still want to collect, but they had a bad experience collecting," he said.

Part of the problem, says Bergmann, is the industry became over-represented by speculators who buy and sell cards like small-cap market stocks. Buying cards as a money-making scheme, albeit a poor one, has driven the price way up and squeezed children out.

Bergmann even misses the bubble gum that used to come in a pack of cards, so flat it looked like it had been

driven over by a steam roller, and as hard as peanut brittle from sitting in the pack for years. "That's how I was introduced to cards. They were in the candy section."

It's almost a blur to walk in to a card shop today and see all the different sets of cards. There are 18 different sets of hockey cards alone. They are all owned by one company, Upper Deck.

The top series, Artifacts, sell for \$12 a pack, with only four cards per pack, or \$100 for a box of 10 packs. Those are specialty series that include player autographs and pieces of the player's jerseys.

At the other end of the scale are four series that sell for less than \$4 a pack, typically with eight cards per pack, including two, O-Pee-Chee and MVP cards, that sell for \$2 a pack.

Bergmann, with five young children of his own, tries hard to promote sports cards to kids, and to the kid in grown-ups, to collect for the love of it.

He runs promotions such as a recent party to watch the 2015 NHL Draft.

Also in June, he offered cards at the discount price of \$1 per pack for the first 10 packs. He has a room dedicated to rows and rows of individual cards that people can flip through and buy for 25 cents to 50 cents apiece.

"My goal is to get back to where card collecting is fun for everyone, like in

the '90s when everyone had cards."

Many people try to fill a set or collect for their favourite team. But there are unusual niches. One customer only collects former players from the Regina Pats and Brandon Wheat Kings who went on to the NHL.

Another collector was born in 1966 and collects cards not just from that year but cards No. 66 in other years, too — just that one card, not any others.

(It's not just sports cards. I bought a set of Vietnam War cards from him only because I couldn't believe such a thing existed.)

You don't usually get people's names, but in recent visits I met a Chinese student interested in obtaining the card of Andong Song, the first Chinese-born player drafted by the NHL (172nd overall by the New York Islanders in 2015).

Another customer explained to the room his job is to be the guy at Winnipeg Blue Bombers games who runs onto the field and twirls the red chamois cloth to indicate a commercial timeout.

Someone joked he should have a montage of his greatest moments up on Youtube. Yes, run in slow motion, with Carly Simon's *Nobody Does It Better* playing in the background.

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