

TRADING CARD EXPLOSION

Twenty-five years ago, licensing rights for hockey cards were a contentious issue during the players' strike

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE A TIME when people would line up outside a store to buy new hockey cards, especially to those who have never been collectors. It's also hard to fathom something seemingly as trivial as trading cards would become one of the main factors in a players' strike.

Hockey cards hit the big-time by 1990, evolving from fun collectible keepsake to valuable investment commodity. In 1982, Dale Weselowski, owner of Ab D. Cards in Calgary, sold Wayne Gretzky's 1979-80 O-Pee-Chee rookie cards for \$1.50 each. By 1990, he was getting \$500. "Everybody and his dog started collecting hockey cards," Weselowski said. "When Upper Deck hockey cards first came out in 1990, we had people lined up outside our door, waiting for our store to open."

Established players Topps and O-Pee-Chee were joined by Score, Pro Set and Upper Deck for the 1990-91 season. Those three companies modernized cards, with full-color printing on both sides, higher-quality cardstock, better photography, larger sets and wider player selections, including cards of recent draft picks and players who debuted that year. "These improvements brought a new generation into collecting cards, as well as bringing back adults who collected during their youth," said Grant Sandground, director of product development for Upper Deck. "It really cemented hockey as one of the four major sports in collectors' minds."

The new cards were well received not only for their aesthetic improvements. Speculators stockpiled rookie cards of players like Sergei Fedorov, Jaromir Jagr and Jeremy Roenick, hoping their first cards would one day match Gretzky's rookie card in value. To keep up with the demand, companies produced cards like a license to print money during the 1990-91 and 1991-92 seasons. Suddenly, royalties were worth fighting over, swelling to \$16 million per year. "Trading cards in the early 1990s was a really big business," said Adam Larry, director of licensing for the NHL Players' Association. "It brought in not just collectors but investors. When there's demand for a product, you will see more companies get into it."

According to reports published in 1992, the NHLPA received \$11 million of the \$16 million in royalties generated by cards that year. NHL team owners wanted a bigger share of that revenue, which the players weren't willing to concede. By comparison, the NHL made only \$5.5 million on their TV deal in the U.S. for the 1991-92 season.

Playoff revenue and free agency rules also contributed to the player strike in April 1992, but it was the disagreement over trading cards that really stalled negotiations. It wasn't just the money, either, but the question of who owned the players' likeness rights – the players or the league – when licensing new merchandise. After 10 days, the NHL and the NHLPA came to an agreement,

with the players keeping their share of the trading card royalties and gaining greater control over their likeness rights.

The following year, the NHL addressed the glut of cards in the marketplace and limited companies to making two sets each. When the 1994-95 lockout rolled around, one demand the players made was to increase the number of sets per licensee. As a result, companies were again allowed to produce more than two sets, including higher-priced, premium products similar to what was in the baseball card marketplace.

Today, not everyone – or their dog, for that matter – collects hockey cards. And rookie cards from the 1990s never did reach

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Cards were a big deal in the early '90s, and the NHL wanted to get a bigger slice of the NHLPA's pie.

Gretzky-like values. But there's no shortage of products to appease today's fan. "Licensing is huge now in hockey," said Rand Simon, a player agent with Newport Sports Management, Inc., and former editor of *The Hockey News* and *Collectors World*, which covered the card market. "Trading cards are just a small part of it now. Video games are probably the single-biggest item today. If the Players' Association didn't fight for likeness rights then, who knows where all of this would have ended up." – **SAL BARRY**

