

Collector's Corner by Arnold Bailey: Softmotion receives NHL card license

01:00 AM EST on Sunday, February 19, 2006

In keeping with winter's icy theme, here's a collection of cold facts that sports collectors should know about what's going on in hockey:

ONE EQUALS TWO: At the start of the hockey season, Upper Deck had secured a virtual monopoly as a manufacturer of NHL trading cards. The company's exclusive agreement with the NHL lasted about four months. Now, a competitor has gained an NHL card license because its product will be larger and feature a so-called "lenticular" format.

Softmotion, a Quebec-based producer of 3-D lenticular images, will release two new NHL Replay card sets that focus on the game's action and attempt to re-create it through multiimage photography. It's a 3-dimensional effect that some compare to the Sportflics cards of the mid-1980s. It was the size of the cards -- slightly oversized at 3 inches by 4 inches (Upper Deck's are the standard 2 inches by 3 inches) -- that opened the door to a second NHL license, allowing Softmotion, the league and the players association to get around what had been Upper Deck's trading card exclusivity.

Softmotion's first series of 30 cards featuring action photography was released in Canada this month and will enter the U.S. market next month in the form of one-card packs with a suggested retail price of \$1.98 (U.S. collectors can also buy the cards on the company's www.replaycards.com Web site). A second series of at least 72 cards, due in September, will show players in highlights from the 2005-06 season. Also available next month will be larger versions of the cards, 12 by 18 inches, priced at \$39.95 each. Even with the cutback in the number of licenses, collectors won't be lacking for new cards sets. For example, Upper Deck can produce up to 20 new hockey sets under its various brand names.

CREATE A CARD SET: Hockey fans and collectors have a chance to vote for their team's greatest player and predict who would win a game between the 1983-84 Edmonton Oilers and the 1953-54 Detroit Red Wings and then see the winners featured in a trading-card set to be released later this year by Upper Deck.

The cards will be named "All-Time Greatest Collection" and the series will include one player from each team, plus six of the top rookies in NHL history and a card picturing the best single-season team. Voting continues on the www.TheAllTimeGreatest.com Web site through the end of April.

To encourage participation, 16 NHL teams spanning seven decades are opposing each other, via computer matchups, in a weekly bracketed tourney format. Winners will be announced during this year's NHL playoffs. The card maker is providing hints of what the "Greatest" collection will look like by distributing five-card promo packs at selected NHL games and in three of its new hockey-card products.

SEARCH FOR SIDNEY: Upper Deck is also hyping its exclusive relationship with heralded rookie Sidney Crosby with a promotion called "Where's Sidney?"

The program invites fans and collectors to search for Sidney icons in several locations including the company's 2005-06 NHL products and in its Web advertising. The contest continues through the end of the season in April, with the winners announced in May. Details are available at www.WhereIsSidney.com on the Web.

Prizes include a trip for two to the Stanley Cup finals, a full set of Crosby rookie cards, and boxes of Upper Deck hockey cards. If you can spot all 26 Crosby icons, you'll also win a special collection of special non-numbered, non-autographed Crosby cards.

CHANGING UNIFORM: The NHL swung back into action this year with a whole lot of changes including another season of wholesale changes of jerseys worn by players.

It's not just that so many players have switched teams and will be wearing different jerseys after the season-long lockout. This quick change program was devised by a company called the MeiGray Group and is designed to make hundreds of game-worn jerseys available to fans and collectors. That will be done through a formula that allocates three sets of home and road jerseys for the 22 NHL teams that have signed up for the program. And up to two alternate sets of uniform shirts will be worn by 17 of those teams. Some players may even end up with two jerseys per set.

If that's not enough, the program includes jerseys worn during special events such as the sixth annual Hockey Hall of Fame game, and the final series of the Stanley Cup playoffs. Not included this year are jerseys worn during preseason games.

The Boston Bruins are among the teams participating in both programs. The MeiGray Group was founded in 1997 by two collectors from New Jersey, Barry Meisel, a New York Daily News sports writer, and Bob Gray, who operates several businesses including Star Trucking and Delivery Systems.

This is the third season that the Branchburg, N.J., company and the NHL have worked together on a game-worn jersey-authentication program. The company's Web site (www.themeigraygroup.com) will eventually include a price list for the game-worn jerseys. Meanwhile, the authoritative Beckett publishing group has suggested that prices will range from \$195 to as high as \$10,000 per jersey.

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