

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

*Dan Morey*

### **Trading With Mr. Baseball**

**W**hen I was in sixth grade, a new kid came to school. He was blonde, a little chubby, and liked the Cincinnati Reds. He wore Reds jerseys, Reds caps, Reds headbands, Reds wristbands, Reds socks, even some kind of weird Reds sneakers.

On his third day, he showed up in a Reds batting helmet.

"Uh-uh," said the teacher. "Take it off."

Soon everyone was calling him "Mr. Baseball," after Pete Rose, though not to his face. It was one of those nicknames where you're standing in the hall with your buddies, and the guy walks toward you, and you say, "Oh, brother, here comes Mr. Baseball."

There was an empty desk behind me in Math, and the teacher stuck Mr. Baseball in it. All through class he'd be tapping me on the shoulder, saying things like, "Didja see the game last night? Barry Larkin hit two homers." Or, "Hey, you think the Reds'll take the pennant this year?"

This was Erie, PA. We liked the Pittsburgh Pirates or the Cleveland Indians. "Cyndi Lauper has a better chance of taking the pennant," I said.

I ended up becoming pretty good friends with Mr. Baseball. He was jolly and fun and always up for playing Indian Ball in my back yard. Plus, we were both obsessed with baseball cards. I'd just gotten into them, but Mr. Baseball was an old hand. He already had a bunch of vintage rookies, including Roberto Clemente, Ernie Banks and, of course, Pete Rose. I was still working on a set of 1987 Topps.

One afternoon, Mr. Baseball took me aside after Social Studies and spoke in a conspiratorial tone: "Bobby Bowers got a 1980 set from his uncle. I think you can rip him off."

Mr. Baseball wasn't talking about robbing anyone. "Rip him off" was card-trader lingo. It meant that I could acquire the set for considerably less than market value. Baseball cards were a brutal business back then. We were like a bunch of junior stockbrokers, trying to screw each other over any way we could.

Mr. Baseball did the negotiating, and I purchased the 1980 set for what he called "a frickin' steal."

The next day at school, I noticed a lot of guys grinning at me. I asked Kyle Jeffrey what was going on, and he told me Bobby Bowers had ripped me off. "You overpaid big time," he said. "Those cards all had corners." He was referring to bent or rounded corners, a condition that reduces the value of collectible cards. How much they reduce the value I did not, at that time, realize. "Bobby gave Mr. Baseball a cut of the profits," he said. "They set you up."

I confronted Mr. Baseball in the lunch line. He laughed and said, "All's fair in war and baseball cards."

When I got home, I took the cards out of the box and went through all 726 of them. Most of the cards did have some kind of corner wear, but

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the best one in the set, a Rickey Henderson rookie, was, miraculously, in mint condition. Henderson was hitting lead-off homers, scoring runs, and stealing bases at a record-setting pace. His rookie alone was worth double what I'd paid for the set.

I called up Mr. Baseball and told him he blew it.

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"The Henderson rook is mint."

"Bull," said Mr. Baseball. "I looked at those cards. They were beat."

"Did you look at all of them?"

The line went silent, then he said, "What do you want for the Henderson?"

I didn't want anything for the Henderson. Not yet. First I had to take it to school and show off. "I knew about the Rickey all along," I bragged. "Those chumps never looked past the first fifty cards."

I was so thrilled by this reversal of fortune that I became a Yankees fan, just so I could watch Rickey Henderson. He was an exciting player, and very good at stealing, a highly respected attribute in our card-collecting circle.

The Henderson card changed hands many times that year. I traded it to Mr. Baseball for a Steve Garvey rookie, who traded it to Bobby Bowers for a handful of Eric Davis rookies, who traded it to Kyle Jeffrey for a Reggie Jackson second year, who traded it to Mr. Baseball again for a George Brett. On and on it went, each swap declared a rip-off by one party or the other.

In the end, I got the card back, put it in a fancy screw-down protector case, and stashed it away in my permanent collection. I still have it, and Rickey Henderson is still my favorite baseball player.