

# School Sisters of Notre Dame score a grand slam collectible

The Honus Wagner baseball card is the Holy Grail for sports memorabilia collectors.

Millions of dollars have been spent trying to get one, but the School Sisters of Notre Dame got it for free.

Now the card is being auctioned.

Bidding for the online auction was scheduled to close Nov. 4 and could bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars for the order and their global outreaches.

The card depicts the member of the first-ever class in the National Baseball Hall of Fame and is believed to be one of 60 known to exist. The card was part of a series called T206 that was produced in 1909 by the American Tobacco Company.

Rumors about why so few were produced include Wagner opposing the promotion of tobacco to children and financial differences.

Texas-based Heritage Auction Galleries has handled the card's potential sale. One of the more pristine cards sold for nearly \$3 million in 2007.

"It's a great story," said Michael Gibbons, executive director of Baltimore's Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards and the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum. "It's great for baseball and great for the sisters. It shows you how baseball continues to resonate in our culture."

The Associated Press wrote that a brother of a School Sister, who died in 1999, left all his possessions to the order when he died earlier this year. The man's lawyer told School Sister of Notre Dame Virginia Muller that the man owned one of the Honus Wagner cards and that it was in a safe-deposit box with a note that said, while damaged in several spots, the card would increase in value with age.

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"It just boggles your mind," Sister Virginia told The Associated Press. "I can't

remember a time when we have received anything like this.”

A School Sister of Notre Dame communications director told The Catholic Review that Sister Virginia was not speaking to the media about the card any longer.

## **Chasing History**

Earlier this year, the Babe Ruth Birthplace and Museum began displaying a rare 1914 Babe Ruth Baltimore Orioles rookie card. Gibbons hopes that the person who wins the Wagner auction is willing to donate it to the museum to be displayed next to Ruth’s card.

The two men are in a picture together in the museum for their induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1936.

“It’d be a win-win for everybody,” said Gibbons. “My job is to bring these priceless sports mementos together. I’d love to have those cards side-by-side. People would like to look at that, maybe the most valuable of all sports collectibles together.”

Gibbons said he almost had a Wagner card to display at the Babe Ruth museum.

A woman approached him several years ago saying that her father had died and left her the card. She was willing to loan the card to the museum to ramp up interest in the card for potential sale. Gibbons sent photographs of the card to four authenticators across the country. Three said it was the real deal. On the day of the news conference announcing the card, the fourth called to say it was a fake created by the woman’s father.

Forgeries became commonplace in the collectibles market, which boomed in 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the need for authenticators.

“It just shows you the allure of these cards,” Gibbons said.

Gibbons said baseball’s historical roots in the U.S. play a huge part in clamoring for memorabilia. The School Sisters’ story just adds a new dimension.

“Baseball, probably more than any other sport, lends itself to this kind of phenomenon,” Gibbons said. “I think we tend to look at baseball with more

nostalgia. It's almost romantic."