

SHARING THE WEALTH

One Hobbyist Transformed A Gift
For Himself Into A Treat For Many



Avid collector Seth Swirsky displays his impressive memorabilia collection which includes the Bill Buckner ball from the 1986 World Series and a 1969 Tom Seaver jersey.

By Doug Koztoski

With the Yankee Stadium crowd chanting “Reg-Gie, Reg-Gie, Reg-Gie,” the pinstriped slugger Reggie Jackson watched his first pitch from Dodgers knuckleball hurler Charlie Hough flutter toward home plate. Seconds later Jackson had his third homer of the night, all on first pitches, in Game 6 of the 1977 World Series.

Almost twenty years to the month after that historic third home run ball came to a stop over the centerfield wall, it popped up in a Christie’s auction and collector Seth Swirsky snagged the sphere for \$25,300.

“This is one of the gems of the last 50 years of baseball,” said Swirsky. “That ball made Reggie “Mr. October.” Each panel of the ball is inscribed by Jackson in some way.

“On one panel you see the number 3 with a circle around it,” said the collector.

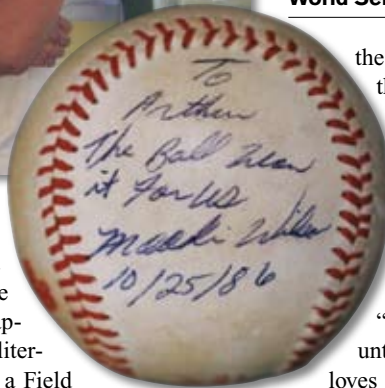
Swirsky feels a higher-level link to the 1977 “Reggie” ball because his dad Steve

sat in the right field stands and witnessed the homers as they happened. “It was literally like being in a Field of Dreams,” said the elder Swirsky, “When he hit the ball everybody lit up,” he said. “That night Reggie was a giant playing amongst men.”

Top of the Charts

A musician and songwriter who has penned hits for Taylor Dane, Celine Dion, and Al Green, among others, Seth placed the 1977 Series “Reggie” ball in his “Top 3” from roughly 1,000 baseballs in his collection, which also includes a variety of other artifacts.

The other two favorite baseballs both share roots with Shea Stadium, the former home field of the New York Mets. One is the horsehide that trickled through Red Sox first baseman Bill Buckner’s legs in Game 6 of



the 1986 World Series, which helped the Mets narrowly escape elimination in a Fall Classic they later won. Then there is The Beatles ball, signed by John, Paul, Ringo and George from their Shea concert in 1965.

“That Beatles concert changed the music business,” said Swirsky. “Bands weren’t playing stadiums until then.” The hobbyist not only loves Beatles music, but he is finishing up *Beatles Stories*, a feature-length documentary on several people who have met one or more of The Fab Four.

Other baseballs from his stash, many of which can be seen on www.seth.com, include a ball that outfielder Ty Cobb actually pitched with in the big leagues; one dropped some 700 feet from an Ohio tower by a Cleveland Indians player in 1938 that was caught by a teammate; the 1971 All-Star Game home run ball launched by Reggie Jackson.

“I have owned the ’71 All-Star ball about four or five years,” said Swirsky. “A ball like that I heavily researched. I interviewed the people who had the ball, who put it in the auction. I ask my friends at the Baseball Hall of Fame, “Do you have this?” If not, I say “Okay, this might be the real ball,” he said.

One Small Step, One Giant Leap

The hobbyist started collecting as a nine-year-old in 1969 and with much affection he remembered the Topps baseball set with the bubblegum pink card back borders. "It was all about flipping the cards," he said. "It was really fun to collect. I think I had them all."

Also that year, the Mets upset the Orioles in the World Series. Seth, who grew up in the Long Island, New York area, attended Game 4 of the matchup. Years later, Swirsky obtained a 1969 Fall Classic game-worn jersey of Mets star pitcher Tom Seaver.

Fast-forward to the summer of 1994 and something caught Swirsky's eye while channel surfing. "I saw a QVC promotion for a 25-year anniversary autographed ball of the 1969 Mets," recalled the current resident of Beverly Hills. "It was \$300 and it was just a present for myself. When I got it in the mail, it was like magic. It gave me a visceral feeling," he said.

Soon after the Mets ball arrived, Swirsky visited a local sports memorabilia shop. "They had a 1951 Yankees team ball with DiMaggio, Mantle and Ford on it for \$1,000," he said. "I thought \$1,000, that's a lot of money, but I bought it anyway." The fun, of course, was just starting.

Like many fans, Swirsky's baseball spirit that summer was dampened by the MLB strike. But, the hobbyist tossed the situation his own curveball.

"When the baseball strike started on August 12, 1994, I thought 'What if baseball doesn't come back?' I knew it would, but just imagined if it didn't," he said. With his son Julian about a month from being born at the time, Swirsky contemplated a certain gift for the coming baby. "I thought that getting a few letters from those who had played long ago, and even some current players, might someday give him a sense of the way baseball used to be before money -- not the game itself-- became the driving force behind baseball," he said.

The response was tremendous

"Before I knew it, heartfelt, handwritten answers to my letters started arriving in my mailbox from Ted Williams, Cal Ripken Jr., Whitey Ford, Duke Snider and hundreds of others," he recalled. That "Q and A" morphed into the collector's first book, "Baseball Letters" in 1996. "Letters" wound up on the



Swirsky's collection also features a signed baseball featuring all four members of the Beatles and the "Color Ball" with each ball player signing the ball in the ink color of their own name.

New York Times bestseller list. Two more similarly-themed and well-received books followed.

I Went To A Garden Party

Another strong influence with Swirsky's collection began in 1994, as well.

"I met a woman at a party and she said, 'I know a guy named Barry Halper,' (the well-known sports collector who died in 2005) and that if I was going back east, and I was, she thought I'd love to see his collection," recalled Swirsky.

The pair of baseball fans met in December of that year. "Barry said he would give me a half-hour, but I went down into that famous basement and that 30 minutes turned into seven hours, with lunch in between," said the hobbyist. "He saw in me a kindred soul. That really sparked me into collecting at a much deeper level, he was very much a mentor."

Have Ball, Will Travel

On occasion, Swirsky allows some of his baseballs to go on public display. Which orb has logged the most miles as of late? "The Buckner ball," he said.

"That ball spent the entire year (2010) at Citi Field (the Mets new home as of 2009)," he said. "The Mets fans voted it the most important play at Shea Stadium. The Mets executive offices were fantastic, top of the line."

"Way down the line" describes how Swirsky thinks with respect to many of his items.

"I really enjoy being creative with my col-

lection, having something to leave to the next generation," he said. For example, Swirsky's collection includes signed balls he started or perpetuated such as one by the handful of major leaguers to play all nine positions in a single game; another with the players who replaced Lou Gehrig and Cal Ripken after their consecutive games streaks ended; and the "color" ball, signed in the color of the player's name, as in Dick Green, Joe Black and John "Blue Moon" Odom.

Whether it is a well-known piece or something more obscure it is safe to say the overall "shade" of Swirsky's collection is "passion." As Seth's father stated: "There's no 'gray' with Seth. He's either into it or he's not."

"I try to have fun every day. To finish these projects is a great joy," said Swirsky. "I like to create history as much as the collecting," he emphasized. "I hope in 200 or 300 years, somebody looks at some of these baseballs and says, 'Who did that?'"

And the hobbyist emphasized that collecting on a budget can equal very good times. "I think you can have a fantastic collection for not a lot of money," he said. "You can have a real nice piece for \$75 or less."

Who would have thought Swirsky's treasure trove of sports memorabilia largely began during and partially because of a baseball strike? True, while many "got the shaft" in the short term as a lot of games were cancelled in 1994-95, several fans ultimately "struck gold" in the long run with Swirsky, his books and his amazin' baseball collection. **SCM**