

Olympic-size Hobby

Fargo man stuck on pin collecting...

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by Deneen Gilmour

There's more to the Olympics than the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. There's also the hunt for the hottest pin of the day and the barter for pins of Olympics past. Beyond the games--around the edges of the rinks and on the sides of the mountains--there's the world of Olympic pin collecting.

It's a game of its own kind...

Fargoan Mike Miller knows the world of Olympic pin collecting from the inside out. He caught pin fever at the 1984 summer games in Los Angeles and has since amassed a collection that probably numbers in the thousands, although for security reasons he doesn't like to discuss the size and value of his collection. While Olympic spectators are watching figure skating or hockey this week, he'll be wheeling and dealing in pins.

Mindboggling craze....

How big is the Olympic pin craze? Thousands of Olympic pins already are in circulation, and by the end of the Salt Lake Games, pin expert Mark Stewart of the host city expects 2,500 to 3,000 new pin designs will appear.

For each of those designs, anywhere from a couple dozen to tens of thousands of pins have been produced. All totaled, hundreds of thousands--if not a million or more new pins--will be in circulation throughout the city. The Olympic committee puts out official pins. And, it seems, every company, club and country does the same. Coke makes hundreds of pins. So do the TV networks, Kodak, the nations of Canada, Israel and hundreds of others. Miller, a North Dakota State University librarian, will spend much of the Olympics trading pins. He is one of about 10 serious traders who will set up booths at the Olympic Pin Show at Crossroads Plaza in downtown Salt Lake.

Wild West is hot....

Pins depicting cowboy boots or a cowboy hat will be hot, Miller predicts. He said Europeans love to trade Olympic pins and they especially go for items with a Western flair. As for value--the dollars and cents side of the craze--he expects team pins and security pins to be worth the most. But he and other traders won't know just what values pins will fetch until the games get rolling. Team pins are those produced for each nation's athletes. They are rare because so few are made, and they are given only to athletes who may choose to keep them, give them to friends or turn a profit by selling them, Miller said. Security pins are something new this year. It is a category of pin basically unheard of before the September 11 terrorist attack turned the world upside down and cast the threat of terrorism over the Olympics. The various security forces have joined the pin craze, Miller said, producing their own designs. He expects them to be hot, hot, hot because the pins will show respect and thanks for security forces and because the proceeds of some security pins will go for charitable causes.

Traders get serious...

This year's games are the 10th Miller has attended. At first, trading was done mostly at the games, he said. For most collectors, it was a hobby, helping forge friendships and common interests among spectators from all over the world. By the 1990s pin collecting had exploded--it became an obsession for some. Then along came the Internet, turning it into a 24/7 global business. Trading is no longer something spectators do just for fun. It's big money for some collectors who've transformed themselves into dealers. Sure, some folks still do it for pleasure and camaraderie--like Miller. But others do it for dollars, schillings or deutschmarks. "One of the reasons I'm going is to see friends I've developed through pin collecting," he said. At past Olympics, Miller said, traders and less rabid collectors typically have shown off their collection--and served as their own walking billboard--by wearing a long winter scarf laden with dozens of pins.

"But with all the metal detectors that may not be possible," Miller said. "This security mess will change pin trading."

Web rich with info...

In preparation for the Olympic pin show, he amassed hundreds of 2002 pins for wheeling and dealing. Miller says he doesn't know how many pins he shipped or carried to Salt Lake City. Judging by the piles on his living room floor, the number is well into the hundreds and possibly more than 1,000.

Miller said the new 2002 Olympic pins he will trade or sell at the show will range in value from \$7 to \$15. Or, two of his American cowboy hat pins might go for two European pins.

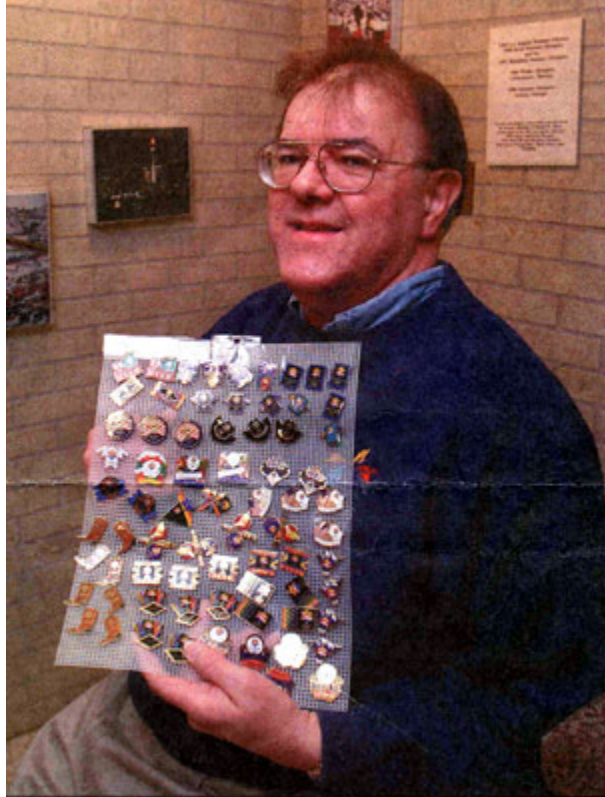
While pins are an integral part of Miller's Olympic experience, he won't spend every moment at the pin show. He wants to make sure he samples the pageantry, hoopla, competition and food.

Most serious pin collectors have launched Web sites. Miller's page (www.dakotapins.com) showcases pins from the current Olympics all the way back to the 1960 Squaw Valley games.

From Miller's site, there are links to other Olympic pin sites, including one written in Norwegian.

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Mike Miller of Fargo displays some of his Olympic pin collection.



Cowboy boots are some valuable Olympic pins in Miller's collection.

