

Getting Pinned

These Winnipeg collectors are stuck on their colourful hobby
Saturday, January 14th, 2006 Gear / By David Sanderson

ACCORDING to Dave Cobb, the biggest draw at next month's Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy -- outside of the two-man luge -- looks to be pin-collecting. Cobb is an executive member of the organizing committee behind the Vancouver Games slated for 2010. "Pins are one of the most popular, accessible and collectible products associated with the Winter Olympics," he said in a recent press release. It announced that pins bearing the Vancouver insignia had gone on sale a full four years before the first controversy involving a French judge.

In truth, pin fever has been running a close second to Olympic fever for almost a century, the first souvenir pins having been produced for the 1912 games in Stockholm. While primitive examples from that era now command upwards of \$150 -- give or take a krona or two -- the rarest and most sought-after ones are those manufactured for the 1940 Games in Japan. Those Olympics, of course, were cancelled due to the Second World War.

In his release, Cobb mentioned that the International Olympic Committee officially sanctioned pins as Games memorabilia in 1988. He went on to state that more than 30 million pins are expected to change hands at the pin trading centres in Turin, come February.

"The biggest event I've ever been involved with was the 1999 Pan American Games right here in Winnipeg," says Ron Boily, the president of the Winnipeg Pin Collectors Club. Boily and company took up residence at The Forks for the duration of those games, welcoming visitors to stop, shop or swap. "We had people coming by from all over Canada, the United States and South America; if they weren't pin collectors before they arrived, they were after," he says with a laugh.

Boily, a self-employed photographer, is one of the founding members of the 17-year-old club. He has been collecting pins for almost two decades. "A friend of mine got me started with some provincial pins," he says. "I kind of liked the look of them and started showing them off. I got a lot of comments and I thought, 'Jeez, this is a good, fun way to meet people.'"

When the 58-year-old Boily first took up the hobby, he wasn't nearly as discriminating as he is today. "In the beginning, I collected absolutely everything but I found out rather quickly that wasn't a particularly good idea. There are literally millions and millions out there." Boily now specializes in movie star pins (specifically Marilyn Monroe or Elvis), media pins, CFL pins, and those from restaurant chains like Hooters or the Hard Rock Café.

Boily's methods of acquiring pins are almost as varied as the thousands and thousands that adorn his equally impressive cork-board collection. "Besides trading, I've also bought them at flea markets, stores, online, you name it. But I'll tell you what -- we have some members in our club who, to this day, swear that they have never bought a single pin."

That degree of luck will come in especially handy should one chance upon some of the more uncommon ones on the market. "Oh yes, people will pay big dollars to get certain types," says Boily. "Curling pins made by Birks in the '40s and '50s for example. They were very well made and they were made in very small quantities: a serious collector would easily pay in the thousands for something like that."

Boily, who also edits his club's quarterly newsletter, says that there are currently 85 members in the local chapter, many of whom will never set foot or lapel in Manitoba. "We have members from across Canada, the U.S.A., Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Romania, France and Australia. One of the main reasons people join is to get a membership list which can be used to trade with others by mail."

The biggest perk associated with the \$15 annual fee, he points out, is a yearly for-club-members-only collectors' pin. Boily says that every September, the group gathers to choose a design for their next year's pin. He adds that, as a rule, the winning pattern should emphasize something local. And while past commemoratives have featured an ox-cart, the Golden Boy and the Mint, the club prez says that there are no plans afoot (yet) to adorn a future pin with a mosquito.

The Winnipeg Pin Collectors Club meets on the second Tuesday of every month (save July and August) at the Vince Leah Recreation Centre, 1295 Salter St., from 6:30 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. The general public is always welcome. For more information, visit their website at ... www.winnipegpincollectorsclub.com