

Sportscard photographers like kids in a candy store

Even for the best, being a sportscard photographer is still the ultimate fantasy for any fan or collector

By JEFFREY MORRIS

There is little doubt that the recent trading card boom has had significant impact on the economy. What was once a small niche hobby blossomed into a multi-million dollar industry that gripped kids young and old, as well as many sports fans who were not collectors. Suddenly, shops began appearing in local plazas, shows began taking place regularly at the community hall down the road, and Canadian kids were once again caught up in a craze that had all but faded away through the early 1980s.

And while collectors have viewed the increased interest in cards as a windfall, many sports photographers have also gained

from the boom.

With more and more companies producing more and more licensed trading cards, more and more sports photographers have been able to sell their work. As a result, sports photography has been a very lucrative market for some while for others, it has been a chance to establish an extremely credible portfolio.

One of the top sports photographers in the world is Bruce Bennett of Bruce Bennett Studios in Hicksville, New York, on Long Island. His hockey photography is world renowned, and any hockey card collector would immediately be familiar with his work. Last year alone, Bennett estimates he sold more

than 1,500 photos to trading card manufacturers for use on hockey cards.

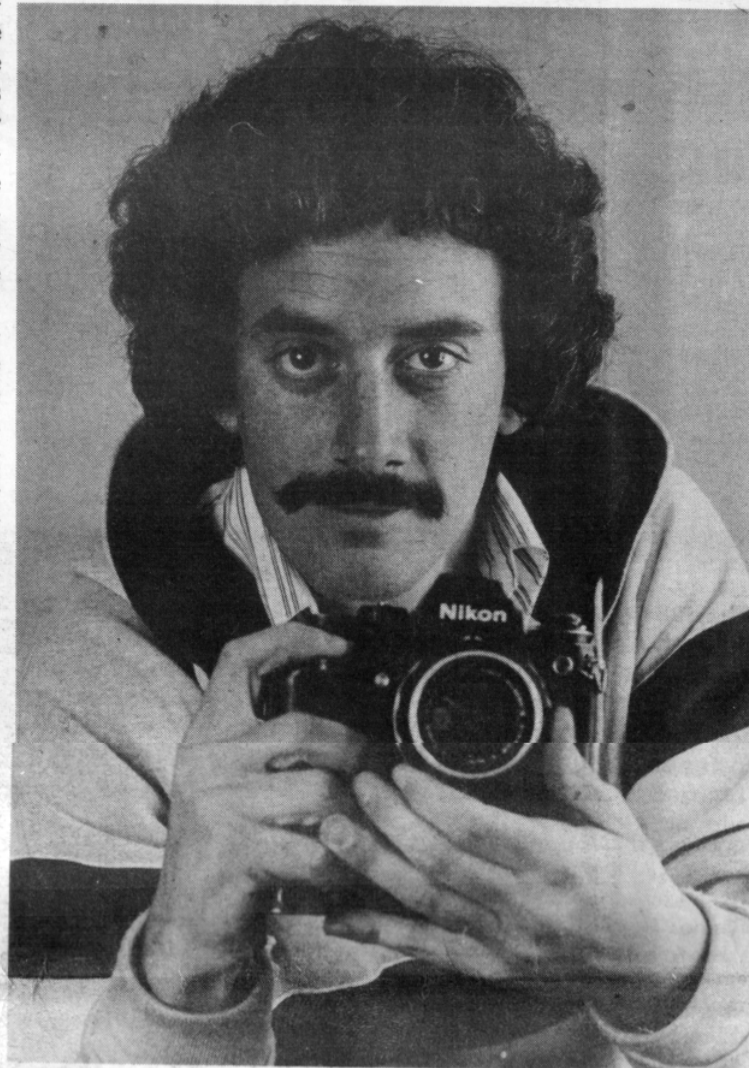
Bennett's start in photography almost came by fluke. As a 16 year-old hockey fan in Long Island, he snapped some photos

at an Islander practice, mounted them on cardboard, and sent them to The Hockey News, asking if they needed a correspondent in the area. The Hockey News replied back and offered him \$3 per photo, and

also got him an accreditation for the Islanders. Bennett shot 70 games that year and about 80 per year for the next couple of seasons. He was living at home and doing his own developing and making prints to save money.

However, as the Islanders won the Stanley Cup in 1980, business picked up. He got more business as people started re-

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Bruce Bennett started out as a 16-year-old fan snapping shots from the stands at Nassau County Coliseum. Now, he is the world's most acclaimed hockey photographer.

questing Islander photographs, and he eventually became the team's official photographer.

Now, Bruce Bennett Studios is a successful business specializing in hockey and corporate public relations photography. He has in-house developing and staff photographers, as well as a number of photographers who shoot hockey games in different cities for him.

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Kids in a candy store

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"We are probably the number one supplier of hockey photographs," said Bennett. "We always try to have a file of every player in the NHL — especially the guys that play only one or two games. If somebody needs a shot of some guy, we will have him."

"The cards have been a big boom for us," he explained, "but it's getting very competitive. There are a lot of part time photographers out there. For us, we have an advantage because we are very service oriented. It might take a part time guy a few days to get material."

"The card companies are also always wanting 'something different'. A rink is 200 feet by 85 feet, and there are only so many ways you can shoot things."

Bennet commented that many of the photos used on hockey cards in the 1980s would be unacceptable by today's standards. Instead of the traditional still shot of a player waiting for a face-off, Bennett is always looking for action and contact.

"We never used to shoot the pre-game warm-ups," said Bennett, "but now, with everyone wanting head shots for the card backs, we go crazy for them."

"We're also finding that companies want variety. Upper Deck, for example, is very action oriented. We also have to be careful about labelling our photos in our studio. We don't want to sell the same picture to two different card companies."

The most important thing in a hockey photo, says Bennett, is facial expression.

"We always try to get interaction with other players. What seems to be selling now is one player as the focus of the photo with action going on around him. But the bottom line is that we're more concerned with the face than anything else. We have to see at least three quarters of the face. Also, hockey is a game where the emotions and facial expressions are very strong. You have to be at ice level or you lose that."

Bennett now shoots about 140 games per year. He is the official team photographer of the Islanders, New York Rangers and Philadelphia Flyers, and he also shoots the occasional game in New Jersey, Hartford and Montreal.

"I like being a photographer because I am a fan first," said Bennett. "It's kind of hard when you are at ice level because you can't cheer."

The same problem is felt by most sports photographers.

Charles Kochman, the team photographer of the Toronto Blue Jays, is a big sports fan who must always be conscious of the fact that he is at the games on a professional level.

"When I became the official team photographer, it was near the end of the 1985 season," Kochman recalled. "On one hand, I was like a kid in a candy shop. On the other hand, I had to be very business like."

be successful."

The fact that Kochman has a studio and specializes in enlargements has helped him a great deal.

"We do a lot of unique things," said Kochman. "For Fanfest last year we did a lifesize team photo of the Jays. We had to do

it in panels. It's somewhere at the Dome right now.

It was the lab work that got Kochman involved with the Jays. Another photo company was doing work for the Blue Jays, who would in turn have System 4 do processing and printing. Eventually, the middle man was eliminated and Kochman became the team photographer. He is at almost every home game, some road games, and a number



Bennett estimates he supplied photos for over 1,500 NHL hockey cards last season. His favorite card with one of his pictures on it is this Upper Deck card of Quebec Nordiques goalie John Tanner.



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