

# Collectors and Sons



Photos courtesy Ted Mann

Ted Mann with son Charlie

There is a new app available for sports card collectors that solves a decades-old problem...finding out how much your sports cards are worth. It's called **CollX**, and the idea was hatched by a ten-year-old.

BY KURT SMITH



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**THE WONDERFUL THING** about young children is that no matter how overwhelming a problem is, they always see a simple solution.

And as any sportscard collector knows, finding the true value of cards is a pretty overwhelming problem.

Ted Mann, a former journalist, has just started his fourth technology company using visual search technology. It's an app called CollX, and it's an idea that is so obvious that adults need kids to help us see it.

Fortunately, Ted has just such a visionary living under his roof...his ten-year-old son Charlie, who saw how his father's technical skills could make the world a better place.

The CollX app does the most important thing apps do...it saves collectors lots of time. With CollX, you can dig out that dusty collection of sports cards from your attic, scan each card, and instantly see its approximate worth. (Incidentally, if your cards are worth anything, hopefully, you've been wise enough not to let them collect dust.)

No more poring through Beckett or Tuff Stuff guides, no more hauling your collection to a broker, no more countless hours on eBay. Ted and Charlie tried all those things with their collections until Charlie suggested a better idea.

Ted gives all the credit where it's due.

"When I was a kid, I ran into the same problem that Charlie had. Tuff Stuff magazine, listings and prices, I also used Beckett back then, looking things up manually.

"But the Beckett Guide has become like a phone book. It's super thick. It's really, really tough and time-consuming to look these things up, and even when you do, I was

finding that the prices in the Beckett Guide, probably the minute they're published, are out of date.

"We found some apps where you could look up cards, but they were really expensive, high-value cards, which sad to say, did not fit the description of my collection or Charlie's.

"We tried one thing after another, and finally Charlie's like, 'Dad, can you just build me something that would do this?'"

Cue the light bulb.

**CHILDLIKE VISION** works because adults can't believe some things can be easy, like finding the actual value of a Cal Ripken Jr. rookie card. As a result, many of us let valuable memorabilia collect dust in the attic.

Charlie provided the inspiration, but, as Jersey native Thomas Edison informed us, genius is 99% perspiration. Ted is well aware of this, and he's been putting in the sweat. CollX is all about making a difficult and tedious process easy...but developing the app itself has been anything but an easy process.

It's not the easiest to market research, for one.

"It's easy to go and ask people around town, 'Do you have any cards?' 'Yes.' Do you know what they're worth? 'No.' Have you ever sold a card on eBay? 'No.' Why not? 'I don't know what they're worth.'

"It definitely gave me optimism that there was something big here. But understanding how big a market it is was a challenge. We did assess that basically, thanks to eBay and other marketplaces. The current market size is about 5.4 billion.

"But what about all those people that have



## Image Recognition — The Key to CollX

Ted Mann is an expert at image recognition, a remarkable technology that CollX employs to determine what sports card it's looking at. His son, of course, was aware of this when he suggested the idea of using it for sports cards.

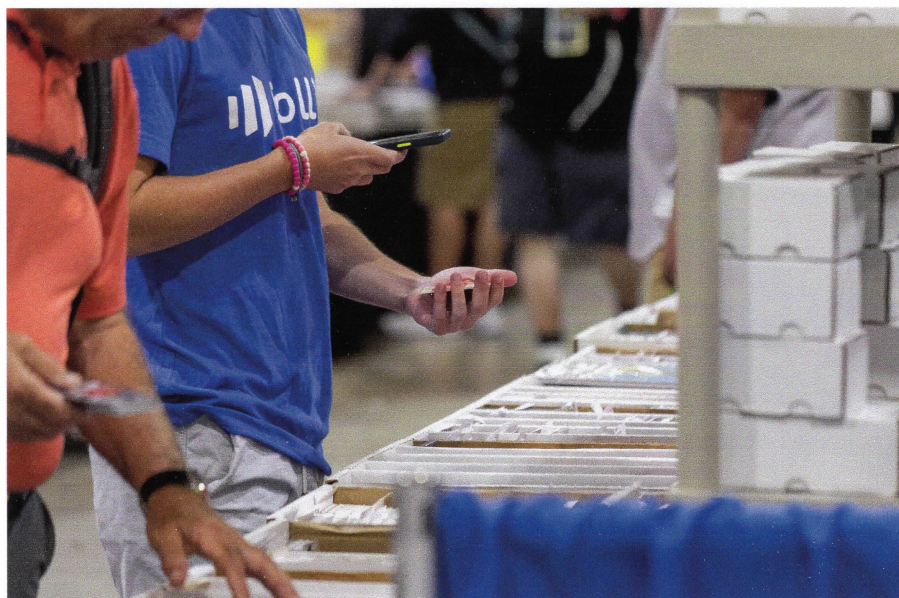
"What we're doing with CollX is a specific breed of image recognition that is sometimes called reverse image search, or reference image matching, where we have an existing reference image of a card. We're trying to match the picture of the card that somebody's taken on their smartphone to an image in our database.

"Think about it almost like matching fingerprints...when you're matching a fingerprint, you don't necessarily need to match everything about the fingerprint. You're looking for the little variations that kind of define it. We kind of do the same thing. We have a deep learning model that is trained to identify specific features within each card image, and then we're just trying to match up one-to-one.

"Imagine if the trading card itself was a QR code. And you're basically just identifying that and matching that to an existing one in the database to get that one-to-one match."

The explanation of the technology obviously goes much deeper, but Ted's happy to take care of that for you so you and your son can scan your cards.





never sold on eBay? Could you get them to do it? Could you get them reacquainted with their cards and back into the hobby?

"We actually had to conduct a pretty big omnibus study to get a sense of that...just this afternoon, another news outlet called New Street published the findings of our research. The big takeaway was that there are about 85 million American adults that own trading cards.

"It's a huge 33% of the population, and yet none of them, or I should say a small percentage of them, have ever transacted on any kind of market like eBay. The thing blocking them isn't necessarily getting the cards graded or having access to a place to sell them. There are still a lot of card stores, there are a lot of online sites. It was simply not knowing what the cards are worth, and not having a good

way to figure that out.

"If we can help solve that problem, then this huge addressable market can be unlocked."

There is also the sheer number of collector's cards...the CollX database features 20 million and most definitely counting.

It's an ongoing process, Mann says. No kidding.

"We still don't have every card by a long shot. There are a few cards in my collection that I still can't scan into CollX, because we haven't gotten those images or gotten that data into our database yet."

Spoken like a true entrepreneur...20 million is nowhere near enough. Just how, exactly, does a database of 20 million sportscards get constructed?

"We found a number of sites online, all publicly available sites, that have checklists. In the trading card world, you can build the set, right? And there's a list of every card in that set. We started building those checklists and then populating all the images for all the cards in those checklists.

"We started with baseball and then we added football, baseball, basketball, hockey, soccer, wrestling. Soon we're gonna add trading card games like Pokémon."

Mann says that they have also developed what he believes is a generally accurate algo-

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rithm for determining each card's worth.

"We've built up a ton of pricing data, most of which is coming from other auction sites. Again, publicly available and all readily searchable, eBay being the biggest. We're taking all of those transactions and mapping those back into the individual cards."

An arduous task, undoubtedly.

But the CollX app keeps improving, and its usage keeps growing.

**DURING OUR INTERVIEW** with Mann, a counter sitting on a nearby shelf occasionally made clicking noises and changed the number it was displaying. This counter, Mann explained, shows the number of people using the app at a given time. At that moment, the number was 232,408 and growing. There are plenty of curious collectors out there.

But Mann and Son's E-Z Sportscard Valuation Service has bigger plans...not just helping users find the worth of their cards, but also facilitating the sale process if they are inclined, and ultimately monetizing the app through commissions.

"We're a very early business," Mann says. "We aren't charging for the app. We know there are already users reaching out to other users to buy their cards...we see that hap-

pening in big numbers. We're going to help them do that better, so we've created a number of tools.

"The first big tool is our deals feature, where you can negotiate on multiple cards. You can create a deal with a bundle of cards and negotiate on the lot. We'll facilitate check-out and generate shipping labels, to ship the cards via the postal service.

"We want to help people make a lot of money on their collections. But the thing I think is really unique is, on CollX, you actually see what the buyer and the seller both have in their collections. That enables us to say, here are the areas where you have a shared interest. If you really like the Phillies, Bryce Harper, we're gonna surface those cards from my collection. When you add something from my collection, now here are a few other suggestions of other cards you might be interested in.

"We can build those recommendation systems in a really personalized way, and I think it creates a better experience."

**THERE ARE FEW** better opportunities for fathers to tell their sons about athletes of their era than when leafing through a collection of sports cards. Imagine building a business around it with your son. Charlie Mann

## The Collector's Community

Ted and Charlie and partner David Grzybowski recently attended a sports-card event in Atlantic City, where they were quite well received...and encouraged.

"I met probably a thousand people at the national in person who just really love the app. A couple of them came to me with a laundry list of features they'd love to see, which is great too."



Photo courtesy Ted Mann

Incidentally, the audience for Jersey-Man might find CollX right up their alley. "There's a high overlap rate of entrepreneurs and card collecting," Ted says. "It's actually kind of a funny, it's how a lot of them got started. I guess myself included."

To Mann, the enthusiasm for CollX is an opportunity to improve things in the app, such as the accuracy of pricing, which has limits coming from auction sites where prices can vary.

"A lot of our data relies on eBay transactions and a lot of eBay transactions are bogus, we've learned. So, when those happen, just helping us kind of prune those out. We're actually gonna have an app update pretty shortly that gives some of that functionality so that our users can help us with that.

"We've done our best to come up with ways to average the prices or estimate the prices if needed. But the truth is we need help and we have 232,000 users, many of whom don't mind putting in a little bit of extra effort to help us."

Entrepreneurs who listen should be valued. CollX's customer service is already an improvement over both of the TV providers in my area.

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## The Honus Wagner Card

As every baseball card collector knows, the T206 Honus Wagner card is the most valuable baseball card in history. In August of 2021, the card sold for a whopping \$6.6 million.

Why is it so valuable? According to Wikipedia, in 1912 Wagner was asked permission by the American Tobacco Company, who manufactured baseball cards at the time, to have his visage included on a card. Wagner refused for reasons that still aren't clear today, with theories ranging from his not wanting to advertise tobacco to kids to his being a tough negotiator who demanded greater compensation.

As a result, just 50 to 200 Honus Wagner cards were produced, and given his stature on a baseball field, this almost immediately made the card valuable.

Ted Mann well knows the value of scarcity in collecting. It was unintentional in the American Tobacco Company's case (then again, maybe it wasn't), but Mann says that card trading companies do intentionally create scarcity.

"The manufacturers of these cards create small print runs for certain cards. They'll say, there are only ten of these cards. It's like your golden ticket. Goldin Auctions sold, I think, a one-of-one Mike Trout rookie card for like \$5 million. There's only one of them, so that creates demand."

Mann doesn't believe a Honus Wagner card will be scanned on ColIX. He stresses that the app is more for "the rest of us."

"I don't think we'll see a lot of \$7 million Honus Wagner cards scanned in the collection. As much as I'd love to cater to the high end of the market and have them see the value on the app, I think it's really kind of the rest of us, the long tail of the collecting hobby that we're really appealing to."

The value of some cards brings to mind a potential problem that Mann is also working to address: potential forgeries.

"It's difficult. Forge[d] cards [are] a tough thing to identify with just a picture, especially if they're pretty much identical. Obviously, you wanna take a picture of the card and if for some reason you do receive a fake and you're able to see that, you can report that. And we would not release the payment to the seller if they were peddling fake cards."

"I think there's definitely some things that we can do to double verify it. But we will protect the buyer and make sure that they get the cards they paid for."

Something to remember just in case you find yourself seeing a Limited Edition Honus Wagner card for sale.



is getting a solid grounding in both...even if he still gets more stoked about interviewing Rickey Henderson, which he did at a recent sportscard event.

Charlie is obviously not old enough to remember baseball's greatest base thief, but as Ted says, he knows plenty about him.

"He was super excited to talk to him because that was one of the cards that he pulled out and he was like, 'Dad, is this one worth anything?' I was like, 'That might actually be the most valuable card in my collection. It's his rookie card. Let's go try and figure that out.'"

"And sure enough, it was one of the more valuable cards. So, when Charlie got to inter-

view him, he shared that story. Rickey was really nice. I was really impressed with him."

"I love getting to do this with Charlie," Ted continues proudly. "It's been a great way for us to bond and connect, and it's not just us. I've noticed and seen and heard from countless users on the app that it's been the same thing for them. Just fathers and sons, getting to bond over collecting cards and to do this together. I think for Charlie that was super gratifying too. To see it wasn't just him that had this problem."

"And he's helping all these people."

Sometimes, the kids really do have the answers.. ■



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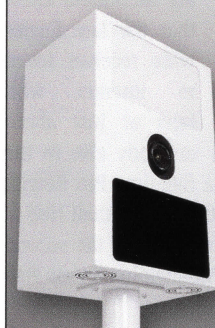


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