



James Cockington  
**COLLECT**

## Ruck and roll

The collecting of sporting memorabilia is a booming market which, judging by recent auction results, shows no sign of having reached its peak. Cricket attracts the greatest number of fervent collectors, with Bradmanalia the most popular subject matter in Australia, if not the world. Baggy Green caps are among the most prized items, their value subject to the significance of the original owner's head.

Rugby (union, not league) comes a close second in the sporting collectable stakes. Even Australian Rules (AFL), that sporting religion based in Melbourne, has yet to place such high prices on its history. As for other sports, it takes the presence of an icon (the recent sale of Pinar Lap's silks being one example) to create any significant interest.

This is not an area for those with a casual interest. Collectors of sporting memorabilia tend to be

### My collection Gordon Bray



"The difference with me is I'm personally involved," says Gordon Bray, the face and voice of rugby, currently broadcasting matches on 2UE. Bray has been seriously collecting rugby memorabilia for the past 25 years, largely inspired by weekly post-match "meetings" with ABC commentator Norman May at Sydney's Gladstone Hotel.

Bray's rugby collection is eclectic (he also collects cricket memorabilia); covering programs, stamps, photos and jumpers, the latter a mix of originals and

fuelled by passion rather than logic, although it's an economic fact that a well-edited and well-documented sporting collection is now worth big money, and escalating all the time.

The most recent significant sale of rugby memorabilia in Australia was the Edward Mandible Collection at Bombaris in Sydney in 2004. Mandible, who died in Perth in 1936, had been part of the Australian tour of New Zealand in 1907, then toured England in 1908-1909 with the first Wallabies team. Among a selection of mementoes was the jumper he wore on that English tour, originally white in colour, it had turned a symbolic shade of gold with age. It sold for a shade more than \$71,500.

A photo of the ship on which the Wallabies travelled, signed by all the pioneering players, went for more than \$4000. A souvenir program fetched \$7200. Such is the growth of this market that these amounts seem like bargains a mere two years later.

It helps to specialise. The sheer volume of material produced makes this a practical necessity. Former Wallaby international Peter Crittle concentrates on collecting rugby books and programs. For others, old jerseys, photos, stamps or trophies are the main attraction.



Shirt tale: this classic rugby jumper was worn by participants in the Greg Davis Testimonial match at Drummoyne Oval in 1978. Davis was the former NZ player who moved to Australia in the 1950s and was later selected as a Wallaby. To complete the memorial package, Bray also has a Greg Davis "playtime" bubblegum swap card.

Rugby programs are now so keenly collected around the world that there are several mail-order or internet businesses devoted solely to this niche market. Swapping is the most common form of exchange. Only extreme rarities, such as the aforementioned 1908 Wallabies program, can expect to be worth a fortune in the future.

The individual value of a single item may be relatively small, but a thematic collection covering the travels of a significant individual or team (for example, the 1924 Invincible All Blacks) will always be worth much more than the sum total. A signed portrait of the Invincibles was valued at \$2000 back in 1993. You could safely double that price today. A collection based around this team would really be worth big money, even in the enemy territory of Australia.

Although most sporting collectors are ruled by personal emotion (usually directed towards the team they followed as a kid), the sad fact is that there are some teams whose reputations will never be enhanced by the passing of time.

Autographed items are a sensitive issue. The signature of a modern player is not necessarily worth a lot because of the sheer volume of merchandise signed these days, often at organised "meet and greet" fan sessions. Rarely is the key. For a special occasion such as a testimonial or farewell match, it's important that the player has personally dated his signature or, even better, added a personal comment.

Talent-spotting is an art among collectors as well. Will that promising junior running around with the local Urbs ever become a Wallaby? If so, his first signature may well be worth a small fortune in 10 years.

The plethora of packaged modern memorabilia, especially the signed prints promoted during breaks in television matches, are another touchy issue. Will these escalate in value? Most collectors think not but admit to buying them anyway.