



No Bonus for Honus

A dispute over authenticity has stalled the sale of what could be a \$1 million baseball card **By E.M. Swift**

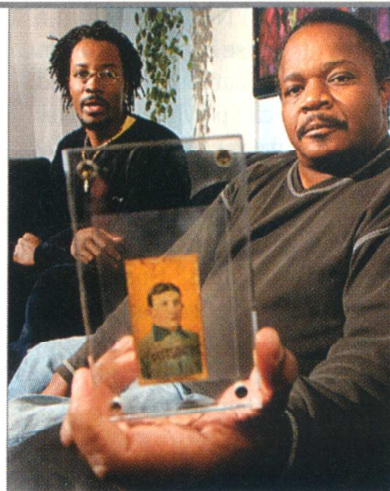
THE SILENCE was deafening. When a baseball card purporting to be an exceedingly rare Honus Wagner T-206 came up for bid last Saturday at Bob Connelly's Sports Memorabilia Auction in Binghamton, N.Y., no one in the house uttered a sound. The Web, too, offered nothing, since eBay had removed the item from its auction on Friday afternoon. The minimum bid of \$300,000—Connelly had appraised the card at \$850,000—went once . . . twice . . . it could have gone a thousand times. No sale.

The card is owned by two Cincinnati men, a former musician named John Cobb and Ray Edwards, a store owner. Cobb says he bought it in 1983 or '84 for \$1,800 from a broker whose name he remembers only as Bud—now deceased. If genuine, it would be one of three known 1909 T-206 Wagner cards with a Piedmont cigarette backing. Why so rare? Because Wagner, an original Hall of Famer, supposedly told the American Tobacco Company he didn't want to encourage kids to smoke, and to remove his image from packs of cigarettes.

A T-206 Wagner card in near-mint condition and once partially owned by Wayne Gretzky sold for \$1.265 million at auction in 2000. That card had been graded an 8 on a scale of 10 by Pro Sports Authenticators (PSA), the leading authenticator of cards. Cobb and Edwards have had their card checked by a paper expert in Appleton, Wis., Integrated Paper Services (which judged it to be of pre-1916 stock), and a printer in Cincinnati, Arnie Schwed (who, using a 100-power microscope, said the printing was circa 1909). They have never had it checked by PSA because, say Cobb and Edwards, they don't want to let the card out of their sight, and PSA won't grade cards with the owners present.

"If the card were real, they'd be leaving tons of money on the table by not having it certified," says Joe Orlando, president of PSA. "Certified goods sell for a lot more than uncertified ones."

Statements like that have convinced Cobb and Edwards that PSA has already made up its mind about their card. Orlando says at least three things about the card



REALITY SHOW? Experts for Edwards and Cobb (right) say the materials are vintage.

are troubling. Below Wagner's image, PITTSBURG is spelled in all uppercase letters, whereas in the Gretzky only the P is capitalized. There's discoloration and staining on Wagner's image, but the edges and corners show no signs of wear—an inconsistency. And the image itself looks dull and washed out, "like a photo of a photo."

Orlando says that "the paper and printing may be old, but that doesn't tell you it's real. Old

On the Air

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paint and old canvas doesn't make a painting the *Mona Lisa*. The bottom line is their two experts are not qualified to render an opinion on the authenticity of the card."

Steve Wolter, a Cincinnati-area dealer and collector who examined Cobb and Edwards's T-206 seven years ago, also discredits the card. "It was a reproduction," Wolter says. "I'd seen a number of them in the 13 years I've been in business. This one was so easy to spot, you didn't have to put it under a microscope. I will drop dead if someone buys that card for \$300,000."

So far no one has offered that sum, a bargain price if the card were real. (Connelly blames the lack of bids on eBay, which pulled the listing the day before the auction. It was the sixth time eBay has done so since 2002, citing the card's lack of authentication.) But Cobb and Edwards say they are confident in their appraisers. "This is a big dagger, but it's all good," says Edwards, who says they will continue to try to sell the card without PSA certification. "We've been going at this for five years, and we'll just keep going. You'll be hearing from us again." □