Written by Mark Jaeger
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MEL BUCHHOLZ, co-owner of PJ's Field of Dreams Collectibles in Grafton, said the Green Bay Packers' Super Bowl run has been a real boon to business. Autographed items, like the helmet he held, are a specialty of the Grafton shop. At right, Port Washington resident Jakub Micca sorted through a stack of trading cards, looking for his favorite Packers, Clay Matthews and Jordy Nelson.

Photos by Mark Jaeger

Opening of Grafton collectors shop coincides with football fans' frenzy

Nothing sparks a surge in the market for Green Bay Packers memorabilia like an improbable run to the Super Bowl.

Just ask Mel Buchholz, co-owner of the newly opened PJ's Field of Dreams Collectibles, 1309 Wisconsin Ave., Grafton.

"The past couple of weeks have been crazy. Everybody wants something with the Packers on it. We're getting a lot of calls," Buchholz said.

"Replica Packer jerseys are especially popular. People want to wear them to their Super Bowl parties and we can't keep them in the store."

Well, that's not entirely true.

There is the replica of the Pro Bowl jersey quarterback Aaron Rodgers never got to wear over the weekend because he was busy preparing for the NFL championship game. And then there is the framed and autographed Reggie White jersey with a $925 price tag.

The timing couldn't have been better for Buchholz and his partner Larry Watry, who opened the memorabilia shop in December, just as the Green and Gold was making its playoff push.

Buchholz is no newcomer to dealing sports collectibles.

He ran a similar shop, Mel's Sports Cards, in Port Washington for 16 years. He sold the business in 2005 but never lost his passion for collecting.

After a hiatus of a couple years, Buchholz said Watry, a fellow sports collector, began pushing him to open a new shop.

The idea didn't seem out of line to Buchholz, who had continued to accumulate sports-related items even without a retail outlet.

"I guess the biggest push came when I bought part of the Packers collection from the estate of Joey Biever. He was the greatest fan. I would stop in at his appliance store in Port and talk for hours about the old Packers," Buchholz said.

It was from that collection he acquired what is probably the most unique, if not particularly valuable, piece of Packer history.

Buchholz pointed to a colorful bumper sticker that proclaims "Dave Roller Fan Club." Roller played for the Packers for four years in the 1970s and was known for his offbeat personality.

"Joey was the unofficial president of the fan club," he said.

"In Joey and Vern Biever, I think Port had the two biggest Packers fans around.

I really think Joey should be in the Packer Hall of Fame."

Even without a store, Buchholz said his own collection of sports collectibles continued to grow as people kept asking him whether he was interested in buying various items.

"Often the wife of a longtime collector would call after her husband had died and ask, 'Do you want this or I'm just going to throw it out?'" Buchholz said.

Although dealing in the same commodities, he said there is a difference between the Grafton store and his old shop on Franklin Street in Port.

“It seems like we have more high-end merchandise in Grafton. We used to have mostly sports cards, but now we have a lot of autographed items, too,” Buchholz said.

He said the Grafton location is exposed to a lot of traffic, although Buchholz said many neighboring businesses compete for the limited on-street parking.

Still, Buchholz said, he hopes the village’s booming downtown business district sends more traffic inside his doors.

“There were many days in Port when tourists weren’t in town that I spent sitting by myself in the store,” he said.

The days when young boys clipped baseball cards to the spokes of bicycle wheels are long gone, but collecting still appeals to generations of sports fans.

“Today, the young kids come in and all they want are cards of Clay Matthews, Ryan Grant or Aaron Rodgers. Their dads ask to see what we have of Brett Favre or Reggie White,” Buchholz.

“Then the old guys, like me, come in and ask about Bart Starr or Ray Nitschke. There is something about that team that appeals to everyone.”

The shop’s name is a tribute to the next generation of sports collectors.

The P in the name is a reference to Watry’s son Paul, who died in a traffic accident in 2007, and the J represents Buchholz’s grandson Jacob.

The store regularly offers selected merchandise for sale with the proceeds donated to the Paul Watry Memorial Scholarship Fund.

Buchholz works days as a jailer with the Ozaukee County Sheriff’s Department, and draws some parallels between the two jobs. He has been with the department for 27 years.

“It is all about being fair, whether they are a customer or an inmate. In the case of the store, you treat people with respect because they can always take their business elsewhere,” Buchholz said.

“As a jailer, I have just found that if you are civil to people, they are civil back to you. That makes their stay more tolerable for everyone.”

He said his fellow deputies are well aware of his sports collection, and are not shy about asking if he has desired items.

“Of course, they think they should get a law-enforcement discount,” Buchholz said.

Although much of the sports memorabilia trade has migrated to the Internet, Buchholz said he is comfortable with the brick-and-mortar approach to sales.

“One of these days I want to develop a Web site, but first I have to get comfortable turning the computer on,” he said.

Buchholz said the Packers’ championship season has done wonders for business.

“I expect that demand will be pretty strong for the rest of this week, and for a few weeks after the game when — not if — they win,” he said.

“Then, I think the focus will turn to the Brewers because it looks like they are going to have a good season, too.”

As for a Super Bowl prediction?

“Packers. I don’t think it will even be too close,” Buchholz said.