



SlantyCouch.com Interview with Henry Yee

Whether you are a current collector of baseball photography, or simply have an interest in sports images, **Henry Yee** is a name with which you should be familiar. Widely regarded as a foremost authority in the field, Mr. Yee has been a collector of sports memorabilia and sports photography for over two decades. In addition to conducting regular [eBay auctions](#), Henry's recent achievements include authenticating photographs for [PSA/DNA](#), and co-authoring [A Portrait of Baseball Photography](#) - a book which has helped bring an unprecedented level of standardization to the world of sports photographs. Recently, Henry was kind enough to take time out of his schedule and answer a few questions for us.

1) Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became involved in collecting baseball photographs.

My first exposure to the world of collecting was photography. After taking photo journalism and photography in high school, I became fascinated with old images. I became interested in images of historical figures from Presidents to movie stars and of course sports figures. Being based in New York City at the time, which was the heart of all the major news services (Associated Press, United Press International, New York Times, etc). I was able to meet many folks who worked at the services back in the days who provided insight into the world of news service photography and how things were before the advent of the digital age.

2) What in your mind makes collecting vintage photographs so appealing?

The photograph is a time machine. It is a way how history has been preserved through images. They say a photo is 'worth a thousand words'. Every photograph tells a story. That is the appeal of the photograph.

Vintage original photography has just started to be appreciated by many of the major auction houses. People are finally starting to realize that many of the true original 'period' news service photos are extremely rare. One must remember that these are pieces that were never issued to the public and only used among the media/news industry. In other words, they are limited to begin with (it is estimated that approximately 25 of each photo were made off the negatives. They were distributed to various news bureaus across the country). Over time, many were lost, destroyed, or squandered and in a many cases, ONLY 1 or 2 surviving original specimens of a particular image might exist today. That in itself is the key to the potential that lies ahead for the future of collecting photography.

3) Collecting vintage photographs is still a "wild-west" of sorts. Tell us how your recently published book, [A Portrait of Baseball Photography](#), can benefit a new or even experienced collectors.

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Baseball photography has long been one of the most popular and yet least understood sectors of sports collectibles. Unlike cards and memorabilia, which have been documented, analyzed, and evaluated ad infinitum, baseball photographs are often overlooked. They can seem confusing and disorderly—not quite so black and white as their hues might suggest. There are no numbers or sets. There are no production runs. No price guides either. Without any concrete standardization and overarching guidelines, hobbyists have had to improvise on what they knew, or at least thought they knew. Myths and misconceptions have reigned supreme, not for lack of determined interest in baseball photography but for lack of definitive research.

The book is the first exhaustive account of baseball photographs—their inception and evolution, their collecting criteria, and their key news agencies and photographers. This landmark volume has corralled the wild and unwieldy subject of baseball photography, arming both beginning and advanced collectors with the necessary tools to make informed, knowledgeable decisions in the marketplace. Additionally, for those whose interests may lie outside the realm of baseball or even collectibles, the book proves itself a worthy work of scholarship from which historians of photography and/or mass media will no doubt benefit.

4) You co-authored [the book](#) with Khyber Oser and Marshall Fogel. Take us through the research and development process. Was it hard to choose which photos should or should not be included in this volume?

The book was over 10 years in the making. Much of the research was gathered independently by myself, my co-author, Marshall Fogel, and Khyber Oser from Mastronet (now Mastro Auctions). We came together because we all shared the same interest, baseball and photography. The hard part was combining our research, confirming facts and of course begging for interviews and information from the industry itself ;)

Two major factors that really put the book over the top was:

(1) assembling the 'fossil record' of the stamping histories of each major news service. This involved analyzing over a million photographs and recording the dates and stamp styles and confirming with the services. This allowed us to be able to date virtually any news service photo / wire photo on the stamps alone.

(2) Gathering information on those who took or issued the photos (the major news services, the studios, the teams and of course the photographers). Information on the services that are still functioning (The Associated Press, New York Times, etc) was available but the defunct services (Acme, Cosmo-Sileo, etc) was a major challenge. Another challenge was getting information on the famous photographers. We were able to track down relatives and friends of many of the photographers. There were a few times where the family members and friends of these great masters were even surprised at how much interest and appreciation we collectors had for their works. One such family was those of the great Carl Horner who shot many of the images for the T-206 set including the most famous of cards, the Honus Wagner.

5) Of the celebrated photographers of early baseball (Charles Conlon, George Burke, Carl Horner, etc), do you have a favorite? Any particular reason?

Of the pioneer photographs, in my eyes, Conlon is the king. If you look at his work, his use of the 'light and shadow' technique is unmatched. Most of his photographs have contrast that are so distinct that it makes you wonder how long did he have a player pose until he got the right shot during a session. My other favorite is Paul Thomson. While it is rumored that not all the shots that

carry his stamping credit was taken by he, the photos that came from his studio are nothing short of exceptional.

Of the Post-WWII photographers, I particularly like Malcolm Emmons and William Jacobellis. Of course Jacobellis had close relationships with many of the players which allowed him to have a player pose in a certain manner despite how hot it was outside or how little time a player might have. Maybe that is why many of his photos appeared in many of the magazines and the Topps and Bowman baseball cards of the era.

6) In addition to [A Portrait of Baseball Photography](#), can you offer some "must-have" resources, online or otherwise, for a collector of baseball photographs?

Unfortunately there is not a whole lot out there on baseball photography. Marshall and I are working on several projects with individuals and organizations that will hopefully promote this sector of the hobby. One such project is with PSA/DNA which we recently just announced the photo authentication service.

7) Of the photographs found on eBay and offered as "genuine" or "vintage", what percentage would you say are the real deal?

Other than when I [sell on eBay](#), I don't spend much time seeing what others have to offer. I do get many emails inquiring about whether this photo is vintage period or printed later or just a copy. That is why PSA started the PSA/DNA Photo Authentication Service so we can properly date the photos with a special 'Type Classification System' that Marshall, Khyber and I came up with.

Improperly dating a photograph is the biggest problem in the hobby. You can have two photographs of say Babe Ruth with an identical image but if one is printed in the 1920's and another printed say after his death in 1948 (either a second generation photograph or one printed off the negative at a later date), the 1920's example would be worth a whole lot more. The goal of the PSA photo Authentication Service is to solve all this and give the buyer as much information on a photograph before a purchase.

8) As the owner of HY Ventures, LLC, you run numerous auctions as [hyee auctions](#) on eBay. In doing so you have established yourself as a reputable dealer, and knowledgeable source for information. As a result, have you had individuals come to you with extremely rare or formerly unknown photographs?

All the time. I am still amazed at some photos that are presented to me.

9) What do you see happening to the market for vintage photographs over the next 10 years? 25 years?

I believe that this sector of the hobby is still in its infancy stage and with the [PSA/DNA Photo Authentication](#) Service I believe it will take off like we have never seen before. We are exactly where we are with Pre-1968 baseball cards back in the early 1990's.

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