

Rare Bobby Orr jersey up for grabs

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VANCOUVER - When he was a teenager, Bob Joyce broke his leg playing baseball in his native Winnipeg.

To cheer him up, a family friend gave him a Bobby Orr hockey sweater. But not a store-bought sweater, a real one, worn by Orr in road games with the Boston Bruins during the 1968-69 season.

Joyce has had the sweater in his closet for decades. Last March, he heard about a sports memorabilia show at the Croatian Cultural Centre. A Montreal firm that had auctioned off Jean Beliveau's personal collection for over \$1 million US was going to be there looking for memorabilia -- and the same company had sold a game worn Bobby Orr jersey for \$150,000 US.

So Joyce went down to meet them. He went up to dealer's table, took the Orr sweater out of a bag and said "Can you look at this?"

The guy he handed it to literally started shaking with excitement. A buzz went round the room, and they were instantly surrounded by fans looking to see one of hockey's holy grails.

The dealer said the best way to sell it would be to put it up for auction, because Bobby Orr jerseys are incredibly rare and can command upwards of \$100,000 US. (From this point on, all figures are in US dollars.) Joyce signed a contract, and the jersey is now being sold online in the Oct. 24 Classic Auction.

The sweater has been online for a couple of weeks. Almost 1,500 people have checked it out, and 12 have put in bids. As of Friday, it sits at \$57,062.30.

Marc Juteau of Classic Auctions hopes to get between \$75,000 and \$100,000 for the Orr jersey. But it may fetch more: another Orr game-worn jersey sold in April for \$179,654.79, the all-time record for a hockey collectible at auction.

"Bobby Orr is still considered by many to be the greatest hockey player ever, and there aren't that many really good [jerseys] out there," Juteau said over the phone from Montreal.

There aren't many Orr jerseys available because there weren't many made. Orr came into the National Hockey League in 1966-67, but only played 12 seasons because of injury, and barely played at all in his last three years.

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In the late 1960s and early '70s, sports was a far less lucrative business, and hockey players would only wear one or two jerseys for the entire year. Joyce's sweater is a white road jersey from the 1968-69 season; there may be one more, or it might be the only one.

Orr originally gave it to the family friend, who worked for a company that operated a chain of pizza joints with Orr in the 1970s.

You can see why Orr gave it up. The jersey is quite hacked, with visible stitching where cuts have been repaired.

Ironically, this is one of the reasons why it's so valuable. Collectors like to have proof that something has been in game situations; the more repairs the better. Classic Auctions had researchers pour over old film footage and photos of the Boston Bruins in action to ascertain what year it was from. The description of the jersey on the Classic Auctions website goes on and on about the damage and repairs done to the sweater.

Jerseys like this never walk in off the street at a hockey collectibles show. Which is why Juteau's brother Claude started shaking when Joyce took it out of the bag.

"I think we've only ever had three real game-worn Bobby Orr jerseys in our hands in 10 years of business, and it's never happened at a show like this," said Marc Juteau.

"The two other ones we got were directly from collectors that we approached. So it's the first time that a real Bobby Orr jersey walked into a show for us and was pulled out of a bag like that."

Juteau also says it's one of the best jerseys his firm has ever handled. "It's not necessarily the best, but it's one of the top five for sure," he said.

"We had a Gretzky jersey that he wore in his rookie season; we had the last jersey Maurice Richard ever wore in the 1960 Stanley Cup [playoffs]; and we had a 1957 Gordie Howe Detroit captain's jersey.

"The Howe sold for around \$60,000, but that was a long time ago, and it would sell for a lot more today. The Richard was sold to the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau for around \$75,000. The Gretzky rookie brought in \$150,000."

Juteau said because the Orr jersey is so expensive, it will only attract a few bidders.

To put the price of Bobby Orr jersey into perspective, a game-worn Todd Bertuzzi Vancouver Canucks jersey is also available in the Classic Auctions auction, and thus far has received a bid of \$330.

There's another sports show at the Croatian Cultural Centre this weekend. Montreal Canadiens greats Guy Lafleur and Yvan Courmoyer will be on hand to sign autographs -- and dealers are hoping that somebody else walks in off the street with a \$100,000 hockey sweater.

The Bobby Orr jersey can be viewed on the Classic Auctions website at:

www.classicauctions.net/cgi-bin/site/Viewlot.cgi?lotnumber=124

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