



“My Two Cents’ Worth”

by Ed Reiter



THROWING COLLECTORS A CURVE BALL

Brooks Robinson. Ozzie Smith. Joe Morgan. Don Sutton. Dave Winfield.

Those names might not mean much to some coin hobbyists, but they’re instantly recognizable to millions of American baseball fans. All five were outstanding ballplayers and all are enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

What does this have to do with coin collecting?

I pondered that question recently, when I learned that these former baseball superstars had been chosen to judge the entries in a public contest—open to one and all—planned by the United States Mint to obtain the obverse design for three 2014 commemorative coins honoring the Baseball Hall of Fame. (The common reverse will replicate a baseball, stitches and all.)

Next year is the 75th anniversary of Cooperstown’s pride and joy—an occasion at least as important as the 100th anniversary of the Lions Clubs International, for which Congress has seen fit to authorize a special silver dollar in 2017.

The Baseball Hall of Fame will get not one, not two, but *three* special coins: a half eagle (\$5 gold piece), a silver dollar and a copper-nickel “clad” half dollar. As usual, the Mint will add surcharges to the cost of minting and distributing the coins—\$35 for each half eagle, \$10 for each silver dollar and \$5 for each clad half dollar. This revenue—potentially as much as \$9.5 million—will be given to the Baseball Hall of Fame, perhaps to finance its soup kitchens for indigent former ballplayers.

Presumably, it won’t be long before the football, basketball, bowling and rock-and-roll Halls of Fame come calling on Congress for similar largesse. And now that the Lions have mined this same mother lode, it isn’t hard to imagine lobbyists for the Elks, the Moose, the Eagles and other animal-themed fraternal organizations queuing up at the Capitol to claim their pieces of the pie.

But I digress.

What really caught my eye was the Mint’s agreement to entrust the judging in the baseball design contest to five athletes who probably don’t know an obverse from a reverse, much less the difference



One design possibility for the Baseball Hall of Fame coin.

between a beautiful design and a beastly one. The least the Mint could have done was put Andre Dawson, a well-known coin collector who’s also a Hall of Famer, on the panel.

The decision simply underscores the utter disregard—if not complete disdain—that Mint officials hold for U.S. coins’ aesthetic quality. The “modern” commemorative coins of recent years have been relentlessly

dull, and even greater depths have been plumbed by the preposterously misnamed “America the Beautiful” quarters, which regularly attempt—half-heartedly and totally unsuccessfully—to portray majestic vistas on “canvases” just 24.3 millimeters wide.

I would feel quite comfortable having former baseball stars assess the dimensions of a new stadium, the “liveliness” of today’s baseballs or the relative merits of current ballplayers and those from the past. But why, in the names of the gods of baseball, would I care which coin designs they like.

Judging art is a job for artists, not athletes. But then, the Mint has distanced itself from the nation’s top sculptors, medalists and art organizations and has no apparent frame of reference on what constitutes beauty in coin design. Instead of marvelous artwork, we’ve seen a decades-long procession of technically superior but artistically sterile coins fashioned by overworked Mint engravers and less-than-exceptional outsiders “infused” into a highly flawed program.

The Mint arranged for two separate design competitions—one for entrants 14 and older, the other for children 13 and younger. The children’s contest seems to have been a feel-good exercise with no real point, since the youngsters’ designs were ineligible for use on the coins. Given the “artwork” on recent U.S. coins, could they really have been any worse?

One wonders how Brooks Robinson, Ozzie Smith and their fellow-judges would have felt about having medallistic artists calling balls and strikes when they were at bat.

All were great ballplayers in their day. But when it comes to coin design, all of them are way out in left field. ☺