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# THE UNLIKELY SHOP OWNER



SELLING HOCKEY CARDS HELPED PAVE HIS PATH TO THE NHL. NOW, **GEORGES LARAQUE** HAS FOUND A SECOND LIFE IN THE HOBBY.

BY BILL HOPPE





**In the early 1990s, Georges Laraque would sometimes offer his friends at school a deal they couldn't refuse: a pile of the shiny, new Upper Deck hockey cards so many collectors coveted in exchange for their old cardboard that could be riddled with dinged corners, creases and wax stains.**

Other times, the future NHL tough guy would make one-for-one trades, like when he swapped his 1990-91 Upper Deck Wayne Gretzky Art Ross Trophy winner card for a 1979-80 O-Pee-Chee RC of The Great One.

Laraque's trading partners at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf in Montreal thought he was crazy to part with the premium cards.

"Nobody wanted the old cards. They wanted the Upper Deck, the new cards that looked great," said Laraque, who became a partner in Ultime Sports Collection, a card store outside Montreal in Laval, Quebec, earlier this year.

Laraque would stay up to date on the latest prices by purchasing *Beckett Hockey Card Monthly*. Even as a kid he grasped that, while older cards might not look as nice as the hottest new release, they possessed value and could be resold for significant money.

So Laraque would often ask his friends if their fathers had any old cards and he'd gladly deal his new Upper Decks in exchange for what others regarded as junk. "I was the only one of all my friends who knew the value of cards," said Laraque, the son of Haitian immigrants.

He would sometimes see what his friends were offering him, look at his *Beckett* and start shaking when he realized the value.

When Laraque, who often resold Gretzky and Mario Lemieux rookies,

started bringing the cards to a local store to sell, he received some low-ball offers. "The guy would look at me and he'd say, 'I'll give you five bucks,'" Laraque recalled. "And I'd say, 'No, no, this is worth, like, \$200, and I know. I'd have the *Beckett* with me."

"They always tried, right?"

Laraque was often asked how he obtained old cards. He told them he traded with adults. "I didn't want to say my secret," he said.

Laraque had a special reason for staying quiet. Since he was one of three children, his parents often purchased him a cheap hockey stick featuring a straight blade. "With my size and my weight, it would break," said Laraque, who would grow to 6-foot-3 inches tall and become one of the NHL's most fearsome fighters. "It'd be the worst stick ever."

So Laraque parlayed his hockey card earnings into the quality equipment he coveted.

"I made a killing with that and then I was able to buy a hockey mask to play outside, get sticks," said Laraque, who traded and sold cards for three years. "You should see the amount of stuff I was getting when I was a kid, and I wasn't even working."

If not for that early business acumen, he wonders if he



would've ever made it to the big leagues.

"Selling them was able to get me so much equipment. [Without that] who knows where I would've been today?" he said.

After playing 12 seasons with the Edmonton Oilers, Arizona Coyotes, Pittsburgh Penguins and Montreal Canadiens, Laraque retired in 2010 and immersed himself in a slew of businesses and other endeavors.

Right away, Laraque started working on a book. Growing up, he drew inspiration from reading a kid's version of Jackie Robinson's autobiography. "It gave me the strength to make it to the NHL,

because like him, I grew up with a lot of racism," he said.

In 2011, his autobiography, *Georges Laraque: The Story of the NHL's Unlikeliest Tough Guy*, was published in English and French.

Laraque, of course, made his name with his fists. In 645 regular-season games, he amassed 1,126 penalty minutes, fighting a whopping 131 times, according to hockeyfights.com. But in 2009, he noticed people started developing a different perception of him when he became a vegan. "I don't eat meat but I fight," he said. "I defend animals but I fight people."

Then his book helped dispel more of the typical tough guy stereotypes – "Not smart, too many hits to the head, concussions," Laraque said – and changed his life. It created an opportunity for him to become a public speaker and travel all over the world telling his story. "If you don't do anything in society, people will just know he's a fighter," Laraque said. "And ... when you changed that image and you're vocal and people get to know that actually you're smart and you're a businessman, then things change."

Laraque has built a diverse resume in his active post-hockey life. He hosts



a two-hour French-language radio show weekday mornings in Montreal. He's also a business owner and is active with several charities.

He's also dabbled in acting. Laraque has seven acting credits listed on IMDB.com, including a role he knows well, an enforcer named Huntington in the hockey comedy "Goon." He has also starred as the Ghost of Christmas Present in a theater production of "A Christmas Carol."

"We only live once, right?" Laraque said of acting. "Why not try it? Acting, it's fun. I love memorizing [lines]."

Laraque's businesses often promote a healthy lifestyle. He owns Delicieux Veg Fusion, a vegan restaurant in Montreal. Oraki, a sportswear brand, makes its products from recycled plastics. He often handles the marketing for the companies.

And now he has the card store.

The genesis of his involvement with the shop started with some calls to his radio show a few years ago. A sports card dealer in Montreal, Johann Benarroch, would phone in and argue with Laraque while he was listing items on eBay. Laraque often texted him following the show to thank him for calling in.

When Laraque held an event for listeners, Benarroch showed up and they hit it off. Today, they're best friends and partners in Ultimate Sports Collection.

"It's crazy how this world sometimes turns out to be, but I would've never guessed the first time that I decided to argue with him that Georges Laraque would've been a partner on my floor one day," Benarroch said. "The story is just insane."

Last December, after Benarroch opened his store with another partner, Sebastien Hamelin. Laraque visited and, as he likes to say, "went nuts."

"I bought every box in the store," he said.

Seeing so many cards brought Laraque back almost 30 years to his childhood. He tore through box after box, experiencing the same rush he felt selling Gretzky rookies.

"He wanted to open boxes, boxes and boxes nonstop," Benarroch said. "He was freaking out and I was trying to stop him. I



  
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said, 'You're going to go bankrupt like that.' Every time he would leave the store, it would be a \$5,000 bill. I told him, 'OK, chill out.' But then he said, 'Yeah, but it reminds me so much of my past and what I used to do.'

Not only was Benarroch billing Laraque at cost, killing his profits, he had less inventory on the shelves for his customers. So Benarroch offered his friend a business proposition that would allow him to channel the passion the store had rekindled.

"He looked at me, he said, 'Since we're friends, you're going to spend way

a \$60,000 purchase. 'I've seen him do things which, honestly, a former NHL player would never do,' Benarroch said.

Laraque has some rules. He will never ask a current or former player to autograph an item for the store to sell. He also wants customers to know he won't try to low ball or take advantage of them if they want the store to buy their collection. He didn't become involved in the store for money.

While Laraque has created more work for himself, he finds the hobby relaxing.

"People talk about how they started to collect, the time they put into it, the

it's an experience that other stores can't do, right?"

A customer who recently purchased a box of 2005-06 Upper Deck Series 2 hoping to pull an Alex Ovechkin Young Guns asked Laraque to open a few packs with him. While the box had zero notable hits, Laraque pulled his own card, a common, #322.

"Then he shows the guy, 'Oh, look, I found a card, but it's worth nothing,'" Benarroch said. "The guy gets more excited than if he would've pulled an Ovechkin rookie."

Laraque signed the card and put it in



***"Where can you get an experience like that? A former hockey player pulls his own card, he's opening cards for you and then he takes that card and signs it and gives it back."***

too much money if you [keep opening boxes]. Why don't we just go partners?" Laraque said.

He officially joined Ultime Sports Collection in January and jumped right into the fray. Benarroch handles the day-to-day activity. Laraque visits the store at least twice a week. "I didn't realize that Georges was going to put that much passion into it, to be honest with you," Benarroch said. "I mean, he's a busy man."

Laraque has in many ways become the face of the store. Customers call ahead to see when he will be in. They bring cards, photos and other items for Laraque, who gladly signs it all.

The NHL veteran has kept busy buying up collections. He recently spent four hours examining cards at a house before returning the next day to close

energy they put into it," he said. "It's just awesome to see that, to hear the passion."

Benarroch started laughing when he heard Laraque said the cards help him relax.

"Georges is never relaxed, OK?" he said. "He's a passionate guy. He's always into something at 200 percent. It's like a Ferrari that has the accelerator full blast."

Clearly, Laraque understands his involvement running Ultime Sports Collection offers something unique. He loves breaking boxes with customers, offering them a high five or grabbing a top loader for the latest gem they pull.

"A lot of people come to us because I'm there," he said. "So then we talk about hockey, we have fun, they take pictures, they bring their kids, because

a top loader for the giddy customer.

"Where can you get an experience like that?" Benarroch said. "A former hockey player pulls his own card, he's opening cards for you and then he takes that card and signs it and gives it back."

The customer's excitement made Laraque, who joked he would've put the card in the recycling bin, feel like he pulled a superstar's rookie.

"It's worth five cents, right?" he said. "But people are so excited. They ask me to sign it, take a picture holding it up. Man, [it's] like I [pulled] a [Connor] McDavid or a [Sidney] Crosby Young Guns."

The card might be worth five cents. But the experience of meeting the hobby's unlikely shop owner? That's priceless.