

HOBBY TAKES HOLD IN YANKEE STADIUM

By Chris Olds | *Beckett Baseball* Editor

There's an old saying that location is everything when it comes to real estate, and for one dealer there's nothing more prime than the spot he's got.

Where? Inside Yankee Stadium.

Talk about home-field advantage.

For Vintage Sportscard Club's Andre Chiavelli that's a reality as he is an official vendor of the Yankees, setting up shop in Section 210 inside the new stadium next to the New York Yankees Museum where he sells cards, memorabilia and more focusing on the Bronx Bombers.

The deal came into place last year with Legends Hospitality Management, giving Chiavelli yet another feather in his cap after decades in the hobby. And it certainly doesn't hurt that the national pastime's natural pastime, collecting, is going strong in a down economy.

But location is not ultimately what it's all about for Chiavelli. It's about getting baseball cards and memorabilia back into the mainstream, getting cool stuff into the hands of those who may have left the hobby in the past, educating them about its evolution. And it all takes place in the biggest baseball mecca of them all, the home of the 27-time world champions, which in essence means that the biggest team in the biggest market has endorsed the hobby once again.

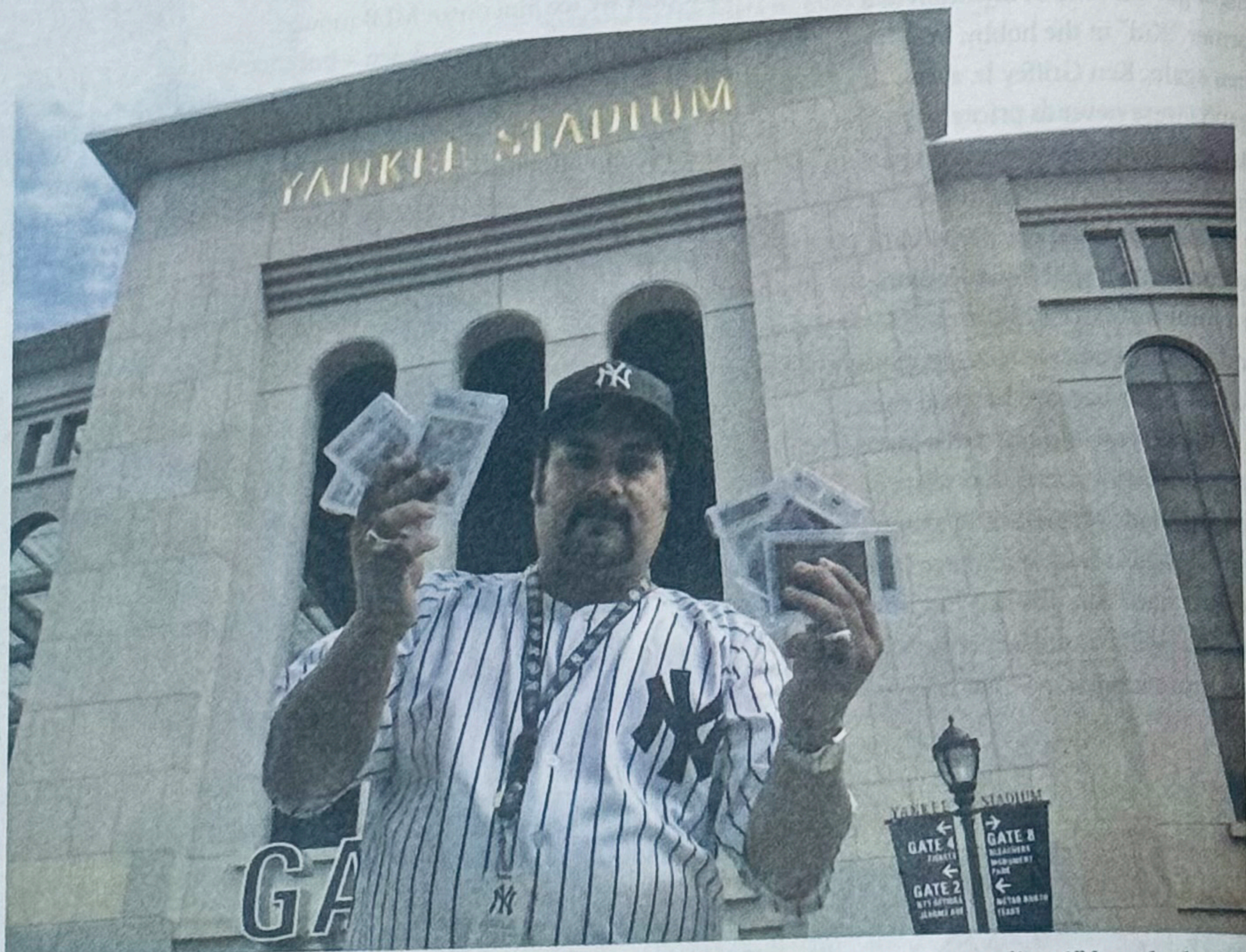
"Being in Yankee Stadium is a dream come true," he said. "As far as getting in, I could take up the full *Beckett* magazine explaining it, but it was nothing short of a miracle. I do have to thank Legends. They had the vision to enhance the fans' experience."

And, of course, being inside the stadium means there's one thing on the minds of many a customer — all those players in pinstripes, past and present.

"Yankee fans love baseball cards — we all grew up with baseball cards — and by bringing [us] in, it really shows what a great concession company Legends can provide to the fans," Chiavelli said. "The GM Mike Loparo gave us the chance and we came through with flying colors. We have a huge fan following there, the fans love baseball cards and we have even supplied the players with cards as well."

Chiavelli's business isn't an overnight success, either, and he's embraced the technological advances — those away from the ballpark — that can't hurt.

"We have been online-based with our eBay store, website, Facebook and Twitter accounts under the name of Vintage Sportscard Club for a few years and have done extremely well," he said. "Last year, we



went right from the Yankees to working with the Nets, Jets, Giants, Rangers and Knicks. This year we are in the process of expanding and working with the Dallas Cowboys."

So, what does one's inventory inside the stadium entail?

"[It's] dominant in vintage baseball cards as well as current players," he said. "We also have team sets, full sets, vintage wax packs, vintage yearbooks, scorecards, ticket stubs and newspapers, etc."

"But we really focus on the cards. As far as our best-selling current items, Derek Jeter is king, A-Rod has made a nice jump after home run No. 600 and Mariano Rivera you can't keep in stock. The "core four" always goes well. For vintage, it's always Mantle, Ruth, Gehrig, DiMaggio, Berra, Maris, Mattingly, Reggie and especially Thurman Munson. He has an incredible following."

But what's the absolute No. 1 with all that to choose from? A simple item only found at the Stadium, a Beckett Grading Services custom-slabbed Derek Jeter baseball card that has a piece of jersey attached inside.

"Our No. 1 seller has been the custom BGS Jeter cards," he said. "[We've had an] incredible customer response — and after that, it's Jeter rookies."

And what about opposing teams — any Red Sox in the mix?

"Are you crazy, at Yankee stadium?" he asked. "The fans would kill us!"

And being an official vendor comes with other privileges, too.

"[The Legends staff] have made us part of the Yankee family," he said. "We even sport 2009 World Series rings!"

And it doesn't stop there. Interacting with players is somewhat common, and their families often pick up items.

"Meeting Jorge Posada, Andy Pettitte, A-Rod, A.J. Joba and Joe Girardi [were memorable]," he said, "also having Babe Ruth's granddaughter at our booth as well as some of the DiMaggio family buying DiMaggio cards."

But do any of those encounters really stand out?

"The best was a guy looking really close at a Roger Maris Rookie Card. I said, 'Sir, that's a 1958 Maris Rookie Card' and he said, 'I know, that's my dad. I'm Kevin Maris!'"

But, again, it all comes down to location and nothing helps sell memorabilia more than a good game or a memorable moment, a fact not lost on Chiavelli. And, of course, it's passion from fans who become collectors that fuels the hobby.

And tapping back into that passion is his mission.

"The fans can see the history," he said, "and then they buy a piece to take home."