

## Retailer Adam Martin talks about how to open a card shop, getting help from Dad, and being called "Dave." by Pepper Hastings

If good guys wear white hats, Adam Martin might be a saint. Most hobby observers never have seen Martin without one of his now trademark white ball caps on his head. But as Chief Operating Officer of Dave & Adam's Card World in suburban Buffalo, N.Y., Martin wears many hats – employer, buyer, seller, trade show whirlwind, and deal maker. Martin recently talked with *Beckett Dealer Direct* about how to open a card shop, getting help from Dad, and being called "Dave."

**Beckett Dealer Direct:** Adam, you've spent thousands and thousands of hours and dollars at collectibles shows over your professional life. Looking way back, do you remember the first card show you ever attended? Where was it and who did you go with?

**Adam Martin:** The first show I ever attended was in late 1985 at the Buffalo Airport Radisson Hotel. Mattingly was smokin' hot and everyone was searching for 1984 Donruss boxes. I grabbed a couple of collecting friends and drove up with \$40 burning in my pocket. I bought a 1985 Topps wax box for \$25 and was mad I didn't get an Eric Davis Rookie.

**BDD: How did you and your partner, Dave Silver, meet each other? At what point did you decide to go into business together?**

**AM:** I met Dave in 1988 at a show in Rochester, N.Y. At the time he was attending R.I.T. and would do weekend shows to get extra money to live off of. Since we were by the far youngest exhibitors there, we tended to hang out together. Boy, those Rochester shows were great. I can remember walking the show buying Jordan Fleer Rookies for \$10 and having the dealers laugh at me.

A couple years later, unsure what I wanted to do with my life, I decided it would be fun to open a store. I didn't have any money, just a bunch of cards, so I went to some of my best friends who were just out of college and hitting the job market to see if they wanted to be my business partner. No one did. Discouraged and ready to give up, I mentioned it in passing to Dave and he jumped at it.

**BDD: Some businessmen avoid partnerships, yet you and Dave seem to have flourished together. What are the different strengths that each of you bring to the business?**

**AM:** Dave is pretty laid back and levelheaded. I'm pretty aggressive and intense. It's a combination that probably shouldn't have worked, but it did. Dave also had a background in accounting, which really came in handy. I'm asked all the time what makes us good business partners, and the answer is that we stay out of each others' way. I trust what he's doing, and he trusts me. Over the past 12 years I don't think we've had one serious argument.

**BDD: Was there ever any consideration that the name be "Adam & Dave's Card World?"**

**AM:** Oh yeah...before we ever discussed opening the store we

### ADAM MARTIN

**Name:** Adam Martin  
**My Position:** Chief Operating Officer, Dave & Adam's Card World, LLC.  
**I was born in:** Buffalo, N.Y.  
**My Family:** My wife, Remia, and everyone who works with me everyday.  
**My Hobbies:** Hockey, traveling, and a little PlayStation 2.

**Favorite Pro Team:** Bills and Sabres.

**My Favorite all-time pro athlete and why:** Michael Jordan – he was it. The best.

**People I'd most like to sit with at a dinner party:** Hmmm...Jordan, Bill Gates, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Lou Gehrig, and Marilyn Monroe, and of course Dave – He's the only who would believe me.



**Early indications of success: Adam (left) and business partner Dave Silver geek out at the 1993 National in Chicago.**

*(photo by David Silepka)*

decided to run classified ads in hobby publications to buy Pierre Turgeon Rookie cards. He was selling great locally for about \$8 and I figured we could get them for \$3. I approached Dave about splitting the ad cost and the cards we bought. I told him we would call it Adam & Dave's Hockey World. Well, some discussion began about whose phone number to put in the ad – we both wanted to take the calls and make the deals. By the end of the day, my number was in the ad, and the new name of the company was Dave & Adam's Hockey World. A few months later we began buying Jim Kelly cards and the name changed to what it is today...Dave & Adam's Card World. Needless to say, everywhere I go, I get called "Dave."

**BDD: You now operate both a storefront and a distribution/warehouse site. Talk about the first day you opened your first store in downtown Buffalo. Do you remember when you turned the lock open?**

**AM:** We opened the 450 square foot Dave & Adam's Card World retail store May 15, 1991. We had \$120 in cash, and \$145 in the checking account. Every nickel from three month's worth of shows we did to raise money was pumped into showcases, inventory and all the other minor costs of opening a store. We had four sets of those flimsy metal shelves with pack boxes in rows, and a few showcases full of rookie cards. On our first day, the place was packed with kids and we did \$600 in sales. Friends and well wishers stopped in all day long. I remember thinking it would never get any better than this.

**BDD: Who were some people behind the scenes who were instrumental in supporting you and Dave when you first got started?**

**AM:** We tried to get banks to loan us money, but none of them

would. We ended up having our fathers co-sign a \$3,000 loan for us which we used almost entirely for rent. The owner of the property had seen the last three tenants skip out on him, so he made us put up almost four months rent in advance.

So our families were very important. Our friends pitched in helping us move as well.

**BDD: What are the 5 DO's and 5 DON'Ts you would offer as advice to a hard-working person who says he's going to open up a collectibles shop later this year?**

**AM:**

**DO:**

1. Load it up with unopened boxes: No one ever walked out of a card store and complained that the store had too much of a selection of unopened packs and boxes. If you don't have enough money to put into fixtures, singles, or memorabilia, that's okay. If you don't have enough money to load your store with an impressive display of packs and unopened boxes, then you probably shouldn't open yet.

2. Treat every customer like he is your last: I don't care if you had a rough night and are in the worst mood of your life. If someone comes in, greet him, ask him if he needs help, make conversation. If you don't have what he is looking for, but are genuinely pleasant to be around, he will probably come in again.

3. Make your store a nice place to be: Keep it clean, don't let neighborhood kids use it as a hangout, don't have stacks of commons piled on your showcases, don't smoke or eat in front of customers, put on a clean shirt, etcetera. If you're a slob, and you know if you are, keep it away from your store. You are a reflection of your business. Fake it if you have to.

4. Spend your money wisely: First of all, the market shifts up and down. Sometimes buying direct or from a distributor is the best way to go. Sometimes buying off the Internet or at shows is best. Deal with a lot of sources and find the best prices. Also, don't buy big deals of single cards or other slow moving inventory if you can't sell them quickly. If you continue to move through packs and boxes at fair margins and at regular intervals, you will find yourself making money.

5. Travel: Almost right from the beginning we began to travel to larger shows. You can sell off extra inventory, buy new inventory at decent levels, and make connections you can't make from home. This philosophy is the single most important thing we did to grow the business. The more contacts you make and the more friends you have in this industry, the more money you will make.

**DON'T**

1. Think it will be easy: The 5-day, 40-hour work week is over. I worked 80-hour weeks for five straight years. I had no wife or children so I was able to be 100 percent dedicated to growing the company. If you have a family to support you might not want to open this or any other business that requires a lot of work and self-sacrifice.

2. Open your store where no one will see it: "Location, location, location." Rent the biggest store, in the most well traveled area you can afford. Strip plazas are my favorite as malls are often too high-end rent-wise. If you can't afford a big sign, then window paint will do nicely. Plus, don't forget about parking.

3. Trust others blindly: People will steal from you, so get used to it. Keep your expensive packs and valuable items under glass or out of arm's reach.

4. Make your margins too high: Every card dealer has an idea of what size margins are right for them. My answer is to make your margins as high as you can without hindering sales. It's one of the hardest things to do. You are not only competing with the Internet and other dealers, you are competing with Toys 'R' Us and any other place that people can spend their extra money.

5. Give up: It's a long road, but the rewards are great.

**BDD: Dave and Adam's is known for its steady stream of effective advertising in trade and consumer hobby publications. Explain why advertising is so crucial in this business.**

**AM:** To really grow a business you have to look beyond your region. Whether you want to buy or sell, it really helps to get your name out there. It took us a few years before we could afford to do all the advertising that we wanted. Now, it's the single most important thing we do. When people know you and recognize you as a company that won't defraud them, they naturally feel more comfortable dealing with you.

**BDD: Many shop owners feel they are too small to advertise. What are your thoughts on this?**

**AM:** We started with small ads that were very effective. Many local newspapers have great rates for classified ads and they work. E-mail is free, so take advantage of it for both local and national contact. If you feel that collectors would embrace something about your business, then you have to advertise it.

**BDD: Was there any particular "find" or "big lot buy" that really helped to catapult you all to the next level of success?**

**AM:** We sank a lot of money into 1992 Bowman Football and Hockey unopened boxes. Following the popularity of Bowman Baseball we started buying as many boxes of Football and Hockey as we could afford. When Baseball was at \$150, Hockey and Football were still at \$60. In the summer of 1993 at our second National in Chicago we had 60 boxes of each and sold out at \$300 and \$400. After that, we had enough money to open a much larger store in the suburbs.

**BDD: What's the biggest lot of stuff you've ever purchased?**

**AM:** We've been fortunate to buy some pretty large deals. One purchase we made last year filled up four 18-wheel trucks, top to bottom. We had two teams of workers off loading and storing inventory for almost 40 straight hours.

**BDD: People in our industry know you as a gregarious, sales-oriented dealmaker. What would people be surprised to learn about Adam Martin?**

**AM:** I have a staff of 35 excellent people who make life much easier for me. I travel quite a bit, a lot of which is unrelated to business. I still collect Shoeless Joe Jackson and Roberto Clemente cards as well as a few Pre-WWII sets such as the Goudey Sport Kings. I only attend a few shows a year, although I still really enjoy them. Most importantly, I got married last year and we are expecting our first child this fall.

**BDD: Are there any people in this industry you would consider mentors or who took the time and effort to help you learn about the business?**

**AM:** Sure, I worked in a card store called 7th Inning Stretch in Buffalo in the mid '80s. The owner, Paul Holbrook, taught me a lot. He's still going strong today.