

US NEWS

# 90 PERCENT OF SPORTS COLLECTIBLES MAY BE FAKE: FED PROSECUTOR

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A federal prosecutor said yesterday that up to 90 percent of sports memorabilia sold in the United States is fake – and the more popular the athlete, the more likely the souvenir is bogus.

“The sports-memorabilia business is so bad that it is no longer a question of ‘let the buyer beware,’ but, rather, let the buyer have their head examined,” said Phillip Halpern, an assistant U.S. attorney in San Diego.

He spoke after 20 people accused of forging memorabilia and then wholesaling it to stores across the country pleaded guilty in a California court.

They were arrested in an FBI sting, “Operation Bullpen,” which is continuing in cities around the country.

“At least half – and as much as 90 percent – of the sports-memorabilia business is counterfeit,” Halpern. “People shouldn’t question whether the item they purchase is fake – but whether they can actually go out and purchase a real one.”

Halpern said the top five phony items from living heroes are autographs of Mark McGwire, Sammy Sosa, Joe Montana, Michael Jordan and Muhammad Ali. The dead celebrities whose autographs are most frequently faked are Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ty Cobb, Christy Mathewson and Princess Diana.

The 20 defendants admitted to copying and mass-producing legitimate autographs and shipping them to stores around the country.

Prosecutors confiscated \$500,000 in cash and \$10 million in fake memorabilia, including 10,000 forged baseballs. They even confiscated a baseball that sellers claimed had been signed by Mother Teresa.

Officials taped 1,000 conversations in which the alleged forgers plotted their strategy.

In one conversation, according to government papers, Stan Fitzgerald, who runs Stan's Sports in West Caldwell, N.J., spoke of receiving millions of dollars in bogus goods from Wayne Bray, one of the 20 charged. Fitzgerald, named as an unindicted co-conspirator, allegedly hounded Bray for additional shipments.

Fitzgerald boasted that he fielded 300 calls a day and had 20,000 customers for the memorabilia, according to the papers.

Fitzgerald could not be reached for comment.

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