

ShowReport

FanFest soars to new heights in Houston

BY ROSS FORMAN

The 14th annual John Hancock All-Star FanFest will go into the record books as one of the best ever, said Major League Baseball officials, who were thrilled with the five-day attendance of about 85,000 which not only met, but exceeded expectations.

Held July 9-13 at the George R. Brown Convention Center in downtown Houston, FanFest attracted about 35,000 fans during its first two days (Friday and Saturday) and had a 71,000 total heading into the final day.

"Everybody was thrilled," said MLB's Andrew Schwartz, coordinator of special events. "I'm so happy this event was such a success."

How much of a success was it? "I think a lot of our bigger guys, the MVP (booth holders) who come back year after year, those who know the business and who know the history of this show, I think a lot of them would put this show in the top two of all time; I feel very comfortable saying that," he said. Schwartz placed Houston's FanFest in the same company with the Philadelphia and Seattle shows of year's past.

One of the keys to this year's show, Schwartz said, "was increasing the MVP booth size, from 10-by-20 feet to 20-by-20, which helped make the show floor a lot cleaner and helped traffic flow through the aisles."

There were 35 MVP booths this year, such as Dick Gordon Sports, Hunt Auctions and Impact Marketing, among others.

"FanFest definitely was on everyone's destination (before the game)," Schwartz said Tuesday. "This place would not be as successful as it is if the Astros' Minute Made Park was 15 minutes away. We were blessed with a prime location," Schwartz said. FanFest sat less than five minutes from the stadium and connected to one of the main area hotels (Hilton) and was within walking distance of several others.

"The dealers are thrilled. A lot of them are surprised with the enthusiasm of the fans. They never expected it to be like this," Schwartz said. "The attendance numbers were great."

Roger Clemens appeared at the show for nearly four hours Sunday, where he hosted a baseball fundamental clinic with his four sons and signed

autographs (\$50 apiece) at the Roger Clemens Foundation booth. He also visited the Tristar Productions booth, posing for pictures with select Tristar customers and admiring various Tristar pieces of memorabilia. Clemens also appeared at Tristar's Monday night party (\$99 admission ticket), which was held downtown at Zula's Restaurant and proved to be an autograph haven for collectors.



An aerial shot of George R. Brown Convention Center (at right) and Minute Maid Park in downtown Houston.



Roger Clemens signs memorabilia during FanFest at the booth benefiting his foundation. Clemens was a prominent figure throughout the five-day event.

Photos by Ross Forman

"A definite highlight was Roger Clemens making an appearance at the Tristar booth," said Tristar's Mandy Fuerst.

A Q&A session with former Astro great Nolan Ryan highlighted the activities on Friday at FanFest.

The autograph lineup at the FanFest Legends Pavilion featured Luis Aparicio, Bob Feller, Fred Lynn, Earl Weaver, Juan Marichal, Enos Cabell, Larry Dierker, Gaylord Perry, Mike Scott, Jimmy Wynn and Bob Gibson, among others. Lines for autographs reached 3 1/2 hours on Sunday, Schwartz said. "Just the chance to meet a baseball hero or Hall of Famer was enough incentive to wait in line," he said. "I've never seen anything like this in 10 years."

Upper Deck, Fleer, Donruss/Playoff and Topps each participated in a combined wrapper-redemption program that drew rave reviews from all of the participating card companies, dealers and collectors alike. A 12-card, limited-edition set included four premium game-worn jersey cards. Cards in the set include Jeff Bagwell, Craig Biggio, Jeff Kent, Roy Oswalt, Andy Pettitte, Richard Hidalgo, Lance Berkman and Clemens. There were also four different Ryan/Clemens dual player cards.

"I think the show was outstanding. We had huge success, with lines wrapped around our booth all show," said Upper Deck's Jake Gonzales. "The wrapper-redemption program went great. In fact, the whole show has been a lot better than we expected. I'm really happy with the lines we have here."

Upper Deck also had a radar gun at its booth for the first time, clocking collectors from its make-shift mound. In addition, Upper Deck displayed a timeline of its past cards and, on Monday, unveiled the Wingfield Collection of photos. "This show has really proven to be successful," said Gonzales, who noted a large turnout of female fans/collectors, many of whom were interested in photography, design and how cards are made. "I can truly see new collectors entering our market from this show, and that's great to see."

Topps had one of the loudest booths throughout the event with regular pack wars. It also had success selling a commemorative 2004 Topps set (\$49.99), with a special Astros box and five bonus cards of Houston prospects, such as Chris Burke. "Those sets sold very well. We sold an awful lot of them," said Topps' Clay Luraschi. Topps also sold Topps Total team sets of the Astros, and was sold out on Sunday. "We've had a ton of traffic, much better than expected."



Fans and collectors eye the action at the FanFest Card Flipping Challenge booth.

In addition to Clemens, who signed autographs for the public for about 30-45 minutes, Tristar's party featured appearances by Brooks Robinson, Fergie Jenkins, Harmon Killebrew, Juan Marichal, Bob Feller, Robin Roberts, Gaylord Perry, Fred Lynn, J.R. Richard, Dom Capers, Tim Redding, Raul Chavez, Brad Lidge and several other Astros.