

Rocket Collect

Card Repair

The Collector's Path

1-8

*Memories-Mistakes-
Passions-Lessons-Growth*



My Journey

My name is Rob—though in the community, most people know me simply as Rocket. I’m a passionate TCG restorer and collector, and if I had to choose just one favorite, it would always be Eevee. My journey with Pokémon began back in third grade, the first time I tore open a pack of cards.

What I didn’t realize then was that this “simple childhood hobby” would become a lifelong passion—one that is still with me more than twenty-five years later.

Early on Without Games

I grew up in a family that didn’t have much interest in animation, trading cards, or video games. While other kids seemed to have a variety of cartoons to choose from, my family leaned more traditional. These things just weren’t really part of our household rhythm, and consoles definitely weren’t a priority. That’s not to say I grew up in a cave, or that I wasn’t allowed to watch tv or play video games. It was more that my family was always on the move, and I usually just went wherever they went. Because of that, I often ended up watching movies that were geared more toward the generation above mine—stuff my parents or older relatives were already watching—rather than the shows my classmates were talking about at school. The closest I ever got to that world was through my older brother. He had a Sega Genesis first, and later a Nintendo 64. The Genesis was strictly off-limits to me—his sacred territory. I wasn’t even allowed to hold the controller, but I didn’t mind as much as you’d think. I loved watching him play Sonic the Hedgehog, staring at the bright colors and fast-scrolling levels, listening to that energetic music that felt like a different universe compared to the quiet of our living room. The Nintendo 64, though—that was different. Whenever he wasn’t home, temptation got the better of me. I’d sneak over, pick up that strange, three-handled controller, and just start pressing buttons. “Mashing buttons” is the only way to describe it. I had no clue what I was doing. I couldn’t get past the levels he was already stuck on, but in a way, maybe that was a blessing—I could mess around for a while and put the controller back down without him ever knowing I had touched it. Looking back, I think those stolen moments of exploration planted the first seeds of what it meant to play.

The Arrival of Pokémon

But then, everything changed. One day, a kid in my class brought something new to school—cards with colorful creatures on them. Pokémon. None of us had ever seen anything quite like it before. The second those cards hit the desk, they drew a crowd. We leaned in, wide-eyed, and full of excitement. It wasn't just a fad—it felt like the beginning of something huge. Like any kid in the '90s,

I wanted in. That afternoon, I went home and told my parents the most important thing in the world at that moment: “Listen,” I said with total seriousness, “I need Pokémon cards.” The next day, my wish came true. Spoiled? Maybe. But to me, it was magic. I tore into those first packs like they were treasure chests.

My First “Mistake” Pack

At first, though, something seemed off. The cards were colorful, sure, but... strange. No attacks listed at the bottom. No abilities. No energy costs or damage numbers. Just artwork and descriptions. I remember staring at them, confused, thinking: How am I supposed to play a trading card game if the cards don't even tell me what they do? Later I learned the truth—they weren't Pokémon TCG cards at all. They were Topps trading cards, which were cool in their own right, but not the “real deal.” At school, everyone had Wizards of the Coast Pokémon cards with moves, damage, and that iconic layout. Mine didn't fit in. I knew right then that if I wanted to be part of the craze, I needed the authentic thing.

The Blastoise Moment

So, the very next day, I came back from school and on the table were three packs of Base Set Pokémon cards. I can still picture the wrappers—the artwork of Charizard, Venusaur, and Blastoise staring out like guardians of a new world. One by one, I opened the packs carefully, fingers trembling with excitement. And then, in the final pack, it happened.

A holographic Blastoise.

To a kid in the late '90s, this was everything. Anything shiny was automatically considered the pinnacle of cool, but pulling one of the original starters? That was legendary. I tilted the card under the light, watching the holofoil shimmer like a piece of treasure. In that moment, I was hooked. At school, the Blastoise made me an instant celebrity. Kids crowded around, asking to see it, offering trades that—even back then—I somehow knew not to accept. The card didn't just feel like a piece of cardboard. It felt like proof that I was part of something much much bigger.

The Storm of the '90s

From there, Pokémon completely took our generation by storm. Everyone had binders, shoeboxes, or even rubber-banded stacks of cards. We traded at recess, pretended to be Pokémon, and argued endlessly about which starter was best. Lunch became the mini marketplace time of day, where a shiny card could buy you bragging rights for weeks. And then came the Game Boy Color. I'll never forget the day I got mine—a green one that felt like it was glowing in my hands. Sliding in Pokémon for the first time, hearing that chiptune intro, seeing the pixelated sprites come alive—it was a whole new world. I wasn't just collecting cards anymore; I was stepping into the Pokémon universe itself. That sense of discovery, of catching something new, was pure magic.

Why We Collect

Looking back now, I realize there are countless reasons why people fall in love with collecting shiny cardboard. For some, it's pure nostalgia—a way of revisiting childhood and recapturing that spark. For others, it's about sharing the experience with someone new: a child, a friend, or a companion. Some people dive deep into the competitive side, mastering the TCG. Others chase master sets, hunting down every single card from a series. And many, like me, have grown to admire each card as a miniature work of art—grading them, protecting them, and treating them like timeless treasures. No matter the reason, Pokémon has become more than just a hobby. It weaves itself into our stories, shaping friendships, milestones, and memories. It's not just about the cards—it's about the journey we take with them.

My Path to Preservation

For me personally, I've experienced both sides. I've played and enjoyed the game itself, but over the years I found my focus shifting. I began to notice the artwork more—the intricate lines, the bold colors, the way each holo pattern caught the light differently. These weren't just game pieces anymore; they were art. And with art comes preservation. Back then, my cards lived in binders, sleeves, even shoeboxes. Like many kids, I didn't always know better. Cards ended up with creases, scratches, or whitening from endless shuffling. Some were traded away for things that didn't matter a week later. Now, decades later, I look back and realize those little choices shaped the collector I became. The more I valued the art, the more I wanted to protect it—pressing, cleaning, restoring, and preserving these pieces so they could live on. Because, in the end, Pokémon isn't just about collecting cards. It's about preserving memories.



I'm No Monster

When I first began experimenting with improving the appearance of my Pokémon cards, judgment was the last thing I expected. Preserving and enhancing them came from passion, yet many in the hobby looked down on it.

Those early days were full of excitement. I'd sit with a card in hand, testing, tinkering, and pushing small boundaries just to see what was possible. Each tiny breakthrough felt like discovery. At first it was subtle—changes so small that only I might notice. But as the results became clearer, the excitement grew.

Some nights I couldn't even sleep, lying awake with a card still in my hand, replaying the steps I had taken and asking myself:

What can I do better tomorrow?

The Early Fire

What started as a personal hobby soon grew beyond me. Through TikTok and Whatnot I connected with collectors, running streams packed with giveaways. Those shows were pure chaos, but the fun kind. The energy of the chat, the little games we came up with, the thrill of ripping packs and sending cards out—it was addictive. I'll be honest: I lost money more often than not. The giveaways outweighed the sales, but I didn't care. The joy of watching people get excited, of building a community around something I loved, was an amazing experience.

Then something unexpected happened. Friends and fellow collectors began noticing what I was doing with my own cards. They started asking if I could work on theirs, hoping I could replicate the same results. At first, the thought of handling someone else's prized possession was terrifying. With my own cards, mistakes were just lessons. With theirs, mistakes were risks—mistakes that could cost someone a piece of their childhood, or even a part of their identity as a collector. But it was also an opportunity. If I could apply the same process on their cards and succeed, it would prove this wasn't just luck—it was real skill.



Learning to Walk

It's pure facts: you crawl before you walk and walk before you run. At first, I hesitated. Many collectors admitted they didn't feel comfortable trying it themselves—and I understood why. For some, working with delicate tools isn't second nature. But for me, it was familiar territory. In my 9-to-5, I work with my hands and with instruments every single day. Metal, plastic, vinyl—materials that requires patience, precision, and a steady hand. Cardboard was different, yes, but the principles of care and craftsmanship were the same. So I treated it like any other challenge: test after test, adjustment after adjustment. Failure wasn't the end—it was just data. Slowly, step by step, I built confidence. We pushed boundaries too. At one point, we had cards at extremely low temperatures, and at another point we put them under very high ones. I joked that at this rate, the sky was the limit. If you could imagine it, we probably tried it. And while not every experiment was a breakthrough, each one taught me something new about the limits—and resilience—of cardboard.

The Sting of Criticism

But here's the part I didn't see coming: the criticism. At first, it hurt more than I'd like to admit. People who didn't fully understand what I was doing, labeled it as wrong. Some went so far as to suggest it was deceptive, or that it had no place in the hobby. For someone who poured time, money, and heart into the process, that stung. There were days when the negativity lingered. I'd find myself replaying comments in my head, questioning whether I should even keep going. It made me realize just how personal this had become for me. These weren't just cards—they were a reflection of my effort, my growth, and my passion. So when someone dismissed it outright, it felt like they were dismissing me. It took time to adjust. I eventually had to accept that no matter what you do in life, someone will disagree. It's impossible to make everyone happy. The best you can do is stay true to your values and your vision.

The Bigger Space

Now, years later, we're in a much larger space than when I first started. Back then, information was scarce—you had to invent your own methods through trial and error. Today, there's no shortage of videos, and tips floating around. That's a good thing, but it also comes with new challenges. The biggest concern I have now isn't whether it can be done—it's whether it's being done responsibly. With so much information out there, misinformation spreads just as quickly. And worse, some people push techniques too far, trying things that go beyond preservation and cross into manipulation. I'll dive deeper into that later, but even now, it weighs on me. The line between helping a card and harming the hobby is a fine one, and not everyone respects it.

Standing Firm

Through it all, one truth has kept me steady: I care about these cards. I care about the stories they carry, the memories they hold, and the joy they bring. That's why I do what I do. And while criticism will always exist, I know in my heart that my intentions are good. Because in the end, I'm no monster. I'm simply someone who loves this hobby enough to try, to learn, and to share. But passion has a way of drawing attention—both good and bad. As more people noticed what I was doing, curiosity wasn't the only reaction. Some saw it as innovation. Others saw it as crossing a line. And before long, the question wasn't just can this be done? but should it be done? That's where grading companies entered the conversation. These organizations hold incredible influence over the hobby, shaping values, standards, and perceptions. And while I respect their role, I also believe there's a misunderstanding—sometimes even a double standard—about what is truly right and wrong when it comes to caring for our cards. That tension would define the next stage of my journey.





Card Alteration? Card Restoration!

Let's first look at the word alteration. By definition, it means "to change or cause to change in character or composition, typically in a comparatively small but significant way." On paper, it sounds harmless enough: to modify, to make different. But in this hobby, alteration has become one of the most loaded words you can use—and, if I'm honest, one of my least favorite. Every time I see it thrown around casually, it stings. Because I know what people are really doing when they use it: drawing a line in the sand and placing me—or people like me—on the wrong side. The truth is, there is a line. I'm not denying that. When you truly modify a card in a way that changes its fundamental state, you've crossed it. But too often the word alteration becomes a blunt instrument, used to describe everything from trimming to simply cleaning dust off a surface. That's where the conversation needs more nuance.

What counts as an alteration?

If we're being precise, alteration comes down to permanence. If you add something to a card that wasn't there before—or remove something that was originally part of it—you've altered it.

Clear examples:

- **Adding ink - Introducing a foreign substance to mask wear. Alteration.**
- **Adding glue - Patching down the surface with adhesive that wasn't part of the card. Alteration.**
 - **Trimming - Cutting off edges or surface. Permanent loss of original material. Alteration.**

These are black-and-white cases. No debate needed.

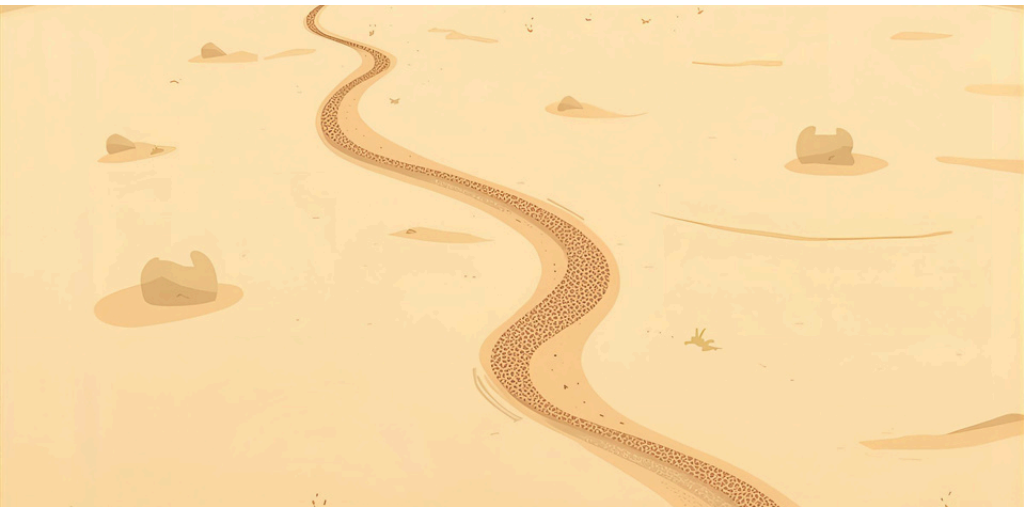
Restoration Practices

Now compare those with certain restoration techniques that, in my view, respect the original state of the card:

- **Cleaning.** You're removing foreign matter (dust, grime, residue) that was never meant to be there.
- **Humidity treatment.** You're temporarily adding moisture to the fibers; it dissipates and does not remain part of the card.
- **Pressing.** You're flattening fibers and smoothing a bend; you're not introducing anything foreign.
- **Polishing.** The most controversial. If a mild polish is used and fully removed, leaving no residue and stripping nothing, I see this as the same to cleaning. But if a heavy compound strips surface or leaves a coating, you've crossed into alteration.

My Line in The Sand

Everyone draws their own line, and I respect that. Some people want zero intervention—no cleaning, no pressing, nothing. Others are comfortable with careful restoration but stop short of surface work. My philosophy is simple: if the card ends up in its original state—nothing foreign left behind and nothing essential removed—then it's restoration, not alteration. I didn't arrive here casually. I wrote it out, tested the logic, and matched it against real cases. It's not just an opinion; it's a framework. Lumping everything under alteration blurs vital distinctions and misrepresents what's actually happening.



Why Distinction Matters

The line between alteration and restoration shapes how collectors see the hobby—and each other. Restoration, at its heart, is about respect. It's about preservation. It's about giving a card its best chance to survive and shine without pretending it's something it isn't. Alteration, on the other hand, is about deception. It's trimming to hide damage, inking edges to fake a cleaner corner, gluing a surface to conceal sepestration. The intent is to mislead. That's why the word carries so much weight—and why it makes people nervous.

The emotional side

What hurts is when honest restoration gets lumped in with deceptive tactics . I've been on the receiving end of that accusation, and it doesn't feel good. I know my intentions. I know the hours I've put in. I know the heart behind what I do. I'm not trying to trick anyone. I'm trying to preserve something I love—something that connects generations of collectors. But I also get the fear. The hobby has been burned before. There have been bad actors who trimmed cards, recolored edges, or glued cards just to turn a profit. There have been people who pushed too far and crossed the line without remorse. Those scars are real, and they've made collectors defensive. That's why education matters. If we can have open, honest conversations about what's acceptable and what's not, we can reduce fear and stop misinformation before it spreads. Clarity protects everyone: buyers, sellers, graders, and the cards themselves and why we disagree .

Personal conviction

Here's the part many people miss: two honest collectors can look at the same practice and come to different conclusions. That doesn't automatically make one of them a villain. In fact, this example reflects many areas of life, including faith. Two people within the same religion can read the same text and still interpret it differently. They may share the same core beliefs, yet their personal convictions lead them to draw the line in slightly different places. Our hobby works the same way. We stand in the same "tradition"—collecting, preserving, celebrating cards—yet we weigh the same facts differently. One person sees gentle cleaning as stewardship; another sees any intervention as too far. Both may be acting in good faith. Because of that, it's very important for anyone involved in restoration to dig deep and think seriously about what they see as right and wrong for card improvements. Not every technique belongs in every toolbox. There is a weight of responsibility around what we do—responsibility to the next owner, to the market, to the reputation of the hobby, and to the history the card represents. Your convictions should be considered, consistent, and communicated.

Responsibility in practice

What does that responsibility look like? A few principles guide me:

- **Intent: Am I preserving or disguising? Preservation aims to reveal the card as it truly is; disguise aims to mislead.**
- **Reversibility: If a method leaves nothing behind and removes nothing essential, it's far safer than a permanent change.**
- **Transparency: If I restore a card, I'm comfortable explaining what was done. If I feel the need to hide it, that's a red flag.**
- **Outcome: Did the card's authenticity or history get compromised? If yes, I've gone too far.**

These aren't laws; they're guardrails. They help keep me honest when the temptation to "push it just a bit more" creeps in.

The gray areas

There will always be edge cases: a stubborn bit of residue that only yields to a stronger solvent; a micro-scratch you can lessen but not remove; a light press that flattens a soft bend but risks overdoing it. In those moments, slow down. Reassess your intent. Ask whether the technique is necessary, reversible, and truthful to the card's condition. When in doubt, do less. And if you're a buyer? Learn the signs. Train your eye. Ask questions. Not to accuse, but to understand. Knowledge protects you from both bad actors and honest mistakes.

Community standards without the mob

We need community standards, but we don't need a mob. Standards give us common language and expectations; mobs shout down nuance. I'm all for guardrails set by the hobby: clear bans on trimming, recoloring, and gluing; caution around surface compounds; acceptance of gentle, reversible care. But I'm not for throwing the word alteration at every act of preservation. That kind of blanket judgment doesn't protect the hobby—it breaks it all down.

My position, stated plainly

- **Adding ink, glue, or trimming = alteration. Full stop.**

- **Cleaning, humidity treatment, pressing = restoration when done gently, transparently, and without leaving anything behind or removing original material.**

- **Polishing = case-by-case. If it strips surface or leaves residue, it's over the line. If it's a mild aid that's fully removed, it can fit within restoration.**

I believe these distinctions because, written out and tested against real scenarios, they make sense. They protect the integrity of the card while allowing honest stewardship.

Setting the stage

Words matter. Misusing alteration to describe every act of care confuses collectors and cheapens the term. It creates division where there should be clarity. Restoration and alteration are not the same. One is about preservation; the other is about deception. And it's on us—as restorers, graders, sellers, and buyers—to keep that difference clear. In the chapters ahead, I'll dig into how grading companies view this debate—because their stance, policies, and incentives shape the hobby more than most people realize. But I'll leave you with this: if we don't define the line thoughtfully, someone else will define it for us. And they may not draw it where we think it belongs.



To Grade or Not To Grade

If I had a dollar for every time someone asked me, “Should I grade this card?”—well, I don’t know exactly how much I’d have, but it would be a decent chunk of change. Honestly, I could probably retire early. It’s such a common question, and I don’t blame anyone for asking. Grading has become such a massive part of the hobby that it feels like every collector, whether they’re brand new or seasoned, eventually faces this decision. On the surface, the question sounds simple: Should I grade this card? But the truth is, it’s not simple at all. The answer depends on so many factors—what card it is, which grading company you’re sending it to, what your goals are, and how much risk you’re willing to take.

Subjectivity of Grading

Grading, as we all know, is highly subjective. You can’t read a grader’s mind, and even if you could, they haven’t looked at your card yet. At the end of the day, it comes down to one person’s judgment in that moment. That’s why the same card can score differently from the same company if you send it back a second time, or differently across companies altogether. Before I ever started grading cards myself, I used to believe that when you pulled a card fresh out of the pack, it had to be perfect. I mean, it was brand new—straight from the pack—so what could possibly be wrong with it? This couldn’t be further from the truth. Especially with modern prints, the quality has dropped drastically, particularly on the English side. I’ve seen pack-fresh cards with whitening on the corners, rough factory edges, square corners, even holographic flaking. Let’s face it—grading can be a letdown. I’ve had more than a few customers pull what they thought was a “pack fresh” vintage gem, only to discover it wasn’t so fresh after all. That notorious silvering edge on older holographics has crushed many dreams. It’s a painful reminder that “new” doesn’t always mean “perfect.”

Crack and Re-Submit The Collector's Trap?

And then there's the phenomenon that almost every collector has fallen to: the "crack and re-submit" cycle. If you've never done it yourself, I guarantee you know someone who has. The card comes back with a grade you're not happy with. You look it over again. Maybe, just maybe, the grader missed something. Maybe if you try another company—or even the same company—you'll get that elusive higher grade. Hey, I'm not judging. I've done it too. But here's the difference: I'm very particular about which cards I crack and why. You have to know your cards, do your homework, and trust your own judgment. Blindly cracking every nine in hopes of chasing a ten is a dangerous game. If the grader doesn't offer subgrades and you see any flaw whatsoever, you're sitting at that nine score, my strong advice is this: don't crack it. That one flaw could be the reason it never makes it to a ten. Now, if the company uses a point system or provides subgrades, you've got more traction to work with. But even then, weigh your options carefully. The way I see it, the biggest mistake a collector can make is putting too much faith in the graders and not enough in themselves. At the end of the day, you should be the first expert on your own cards.

Tools of the Trade

When it comes to evaluating cards, people often assume you need to run out and buy the fanciest microscope available. I can't tell you how many times I've heard someone say, "I can't even start until I get a microscope." Don't get me wrong—microscopes are useful tools. But in my experience, the naked eye paired with a strong light source is your best weapon. If I had to choose between a microscope and a good light, I'd pick the light every single time. A microscope can show you things you'll never notice otherwise, but it can also trick you into obsessing over flaws that may or may not actually affect the grade. Light, on the other hand, reveals the true surface, the gloss, the edges—everything you actually need to judge condition. When I started really studying cards, I trained my eye under light. It took practice, patience, and countless hours of looking at different issues—centering, whitening, edges, corners, scratches. Over time, my eye became sharper. That's something no microscope can give you.

The Emotional Side of Grading

Of course, grading isn't just technical—it's emotional. And this is something a lot of people overlook. For some collectors, grading is about value. They want to maximize their return, and a higher number means more money. For others, it's about security. Encapsulation gives peace of mind, knowing their card is safe and verified. And for many, it's sentimental. They want their card graded not because it's a ten, but because it represents a moment—pulling it with their kid or finally acquiring that piece of childhood they always wanted. I've seen all sides of it. And honestly, none of them are wrong. Grading means different things to different people, and that's okay. The only mistake is thinking there's just one right reason to grade.

Expectations vs. Reality

What I try to remind people is this: grading is not the finish line. A grade doesn't define the true value of a card—not emotionally, not historically, and not even always financially. Yes, a higher grade generally means more money, but the market changes, preferences shift, and companies evolve. What holds value is the card itself, the story behind it, and your own connection to it. That's why, whenever someone asks me, "Should I grade this card?" my answer is always: It depends. It depends on your goals, your tolerance for risk, and your connection to the card. Because in the end, grading is a tool—not a verdict. It's a way to add structure and security to the hobby, but it isn't the hobby itself.





Grading Company This Grading Company That Hit My Card With That Grading Ball BAT

Another question I hear all the time is: “Which grading company should I choose?” And honestly, the answer often comes down to preference. What I’ve noticed is that collectors tend to choose a grading company like they’re picking a football team. Once they jump on the hype train or buy into the culture, they’re usually committed. That loyalty can run deep—until, of course, a grading decision goes so sideways that they just can’t get over it. It’s fascinating to watch. Some collectors pick a grading company for one simple reason: who is going to hand me the most 10s? If a company seems more lenient, that’s where they send their cards. And hey, I get it—there’s nothing like seeing that “Gem Mint 10” pop up on your label. But for me personally, I want my cards graded within their true range. That way, when I do get a 10, it actually means something. It feels earned.

My dad used to say, “Life ain’t fair,” and man, is that ever true.

Grading is no different. No grading company is perfect. Some are closer to fair than others, but at the end of the day, these companies are only as good as their employees. And those employees are only as good as the training they’ve been given. Everyone has off days—graders included.

Centering, Fluctuations, and Expectations

One of the biggest complaints people have is about centering. They’ll send the same card twice, and it comes back with slightly different grades. But here’s the thing: that’s normal. If the fluctuation is within half a point, I think that’s pretty acceptable. A card isn’t going to magically shift its centering, but perception, lighting, and human judgment all come into play. Of course, not everyone sees it that way. Some collectors expect absolute consistency every single time. And while I understand the frustration, I also think it’s unrealistic. These are human eyes making human judgments. Even with training, grading has an element of subjectivity that just won’t go away.

Different Companies, Different Standards

It's also true that each grading company has its own "scale." Some are tougher on vintage, while others are a bit more forgiving. Some are especially strict on surface scratches, while others seem to care more about corners or edges. This variation rings true across every type of trading card game, whether Pokémon,

Magic, or sports. Collectors start to build their identity around a grading company. PSA people will swear by PSA. BGS diehards defend subgrades like they're sacred. CGC fans point to consistency and transparent scoring. SGC has its own loyal following, especially in sports.

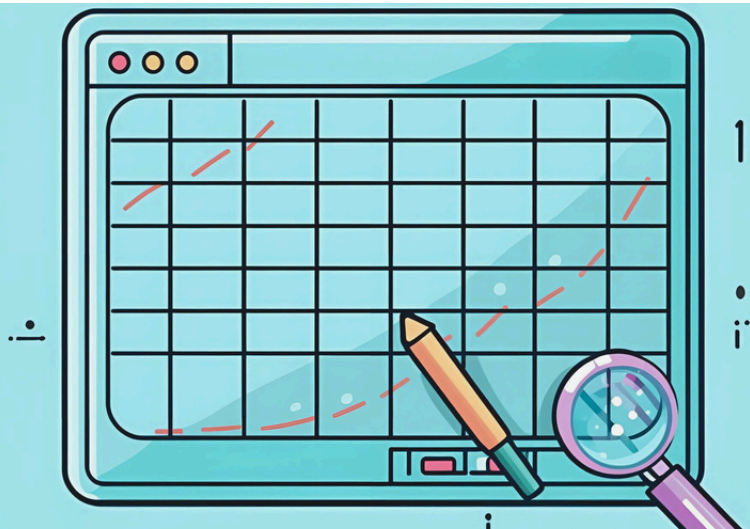
It's less about absolute truth and more about which "team" you feel lines up with your values, expectations, and goals.

My Perspective

Me? I like honesty in grading. I don't want a free ride to a 10. If my card has a flaw, I want to know it. If it's off-center, call it what it is. Because at the end of the day, grading isn't just about inflating value—it's about knowing what you really have. That's what makes the high grades meaningful. But here's the paradox: collectors often want it both ways. They want strict grading when it's on someone else's card, but lenient grading when it's their own. It's human nature. We all want the best outcome, but deep down, we know the process isn't perfect.

Looking Ahead

In the end, choosing a grading company is about matching your expectations with their approach. Do you want the highest possible numbers? Pick the company known for leniency. Do you want precision and transparency? Go for one with subgrades. Do you value reputation above all else? Choose the one that dominates the market. There isn't a single "right" answer. And maybe that's the real lesson: grading companies don't define the worth of your card—you do





Setting Goals

Realistic Expectations

Have you ever noticed how some people seem to carry higher expectations than others? I've thought a lot about this, and I'm not sure there's a single explanation. For some, it seems to be a personality trait—they're naturally harder to please. For others, it comes from experience. They've been through life in ways that taught them to expect more, or maybe less, depending on how things played out. It works in so many different ways. Some people have a hard time being pleased by others. Some people have a hard time pleasing themselves. Some people are easily pleased with what others do for them but aren't very capable of returning the favor. In my view, it's a blend of personality, upbringing, and the situations we've faced in life. Maybe I'm going too deep, but the point is this: expectations matter, and they shape everything we do.

Importance of Realistic Expectations

In cards, as in life, realistic expectations are essential. Without them, you set yourself up for constant disappointment. With them, you leave room for growth, improvement, and genuine joy. Think about it this way: in the 1950s, it would've been laughable for scientists to talk seriously about sending humans to Mars. The technology simply wasn't there. But today, it's a real possibility. Why? Because people kept an open mind. They didn't limit themselves to the expectations of the past. The same applies to card work. If you expect perfection every single time, you're setting yourself up for frustration. But if you expect progress, effort, and the occasional breakthrough, you're more likely to keep pushing forward.

The Struggle With Perfection

This is where I personally struggle. When I'm working on a card, I want the repair to be perfect. And sometimes it is. But just as often, it isn't. Every card is different, and what looks like an easy fix can turn into one of the most stubborn, time-consuming challenges I've ever faced. Then the reverse happens: a repair I expected to be impossible ends up looking great with minimal effort. That unpredictability can be maddening. And like most people, what bothers me the most is when I can't deliver the exact result I was aiming for—especially when the card belongs to someone else. But here's the funny thing: sometimes I'll hand a card back, disappointed in myself, only to see the friend or customer thrilled with the result. In a few cases, the card even graded higher in the exact subgrade where I thought the repair fell short. To me, it was a failure. To them, it was a huge success. That's both humbling and haunting. It reminds me that my personal expectations don't always line up with reality—or with the expectations of others.

Being Hard on Yourself - Can Be a Gift

As frustrating as it can be, I've come to see my high expectations as a blessing in disguise. When small flaws bother me, it pushes me to give my very best. It means I don't settle for "good enough." It means I take each task seriously, whether it's a small cleanup or a major repair. But it's a double-edged sword. High standards can make you improve, but they can also leave you in constant conflict with yourself. That's why balance is so important.

Balancing Self-Criticism With Perspective

If you're someone who tends to be hard on yourself, here's what I've learned: don't judge your work by one repair, one project, or one card. Step back. Look at the body of work across the board. Measure progress over time, not perfection in the moment. That's not easy advice to follow—I still struggle with it myself. But it's the only way to stay sane in a craft where the variables are endless and perfection is rare.

Goals in the Hobby

Expectations and goals go hand in hand. Setting goals gives you direction. But those goals have to be realistic, or they turn into traps. If your goal is "every card I touch will grade a 10," you're going to burn out fast. But if your goal is "I'll improve my technique each month," or "I'll handle each customer's card with the care I'd want for my own," then you have something achievable, measurable, and motivating. In grading, and restoration, realistic goals might look like:

- **Learning each new technique one at a time**
- **Trying all grading companies before choosing which "team" to join.**
- **Striving for customer/personal satisfaction rather than chasing perfection.**
- **Keeping perspective: even if I improve the card the grader will still have a subjective opinion.**

Lessons Beyond Cards

The truth is, this isn't just about cards. It's about life. Expectations shape our relationships, our work, and our sense of fulfillment. Goals give us purpose, but only if they're grounded in reality. I've seen this lesson play out over and over—at my job, in the card community, even at home. The times I've set impossible goals for myself, I've ended up discouraged. The times I've aimed for progress rather than perfection, I've grown the most.

Closing Thoughts

So yes, setting goals and managing expectations is a constant struggle. For me, it's daily. But I'm glad for that struggle, because it keeps me sharp. It keeps me motivated. And it keeps me honest about where I am and where I want to go. If you're hard on yourself, don't let that be a curse. Let it be a guide. Let it push you to do better, while remembering to step back and see the bigger picture. Perfection may never come—but progress, growth, and satisfaction are always within reach.





I Love You You Love Me We Are a Happy TCG Family

There are a lot of reasons I fall into my hobbies. For me, they've always been a little escape hatch—an exit door from the noise of life. When the news cycle feels overwhelming, when the world is screaming at itself, when my mind won't quiet down—Pokémon is an excellent reset button. It's something simple, colorful, and endlessly nostalgic that lets me step away from the chaos. For the longest time, I thought of gaming/collecting as my safe haven. No matter what disagreements people were having in real life—politics, religion, personal drama—Hobbies was the one thing that cut through all that. Pokemon if you liked it, we had something in common. It didn't matter if we were completely different people outside of that space. If you and I were talking about Pokémon, we were talking as friends. And for me, that is everything. But recently, I saw a crack form in that safe little bubble. And to be honest, it shook me.

When Negativity Creeps In

I came across an influencer video not long ago. He's got a pretty big audience, and he was cleaning cards on camera. Nothing controversial, nothing harmful—just someone doing their thing in the hobby. But when I glanced at the comments, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. “Unfollowed.” “Wow, this is disappointing.” “This is gross.” It wasn't a debate—it was a pile-on. People weren't just disagreeing; they were shaming, turning their backs, walking away in disgust as if he'd committed some crime by doing something a little different. And I'll be real: it felt gross to me too—not what he was doing, but how people responded. Pokémon has been my refuge from exactly this kind of ugliness. When the world outside felt like it was tearing itself apart, I could count on the community to be different—to focus on joy, collecting, and nostalgia instead of division. Seeing that negativity creep in hit hard, because it made me wonder: is there anywhere left where people don't fight over everything?

Why The Hobby Needs Us

Now, don't get me wrong—Pokémon is stronger than any internet comment section. And honestly, for every negative voice, there are a dozen positive ones. In fact, not long before that experience, I had the chance to film a group video with some incredible people on Instagram—people who bring energy, creativity, and good vibes to the hobby. That reminded me there's still a lot more light than darkness here. During that video, I said something that, at first glance, could be misinterpreted: “grading companies need us.” Now, if you take that literally, it sounds absurd. Grading companies make millions every year. They're doing just fine. They don't “need” me or anyone else to survive financially. But what I meant was bigger than dollars—it was about the health of the hobby. Think of it this way: cleaning and repairing cards doesn't just make individual pieces look better—it keeps collectors engaged. It gives people more reason to stay in the hobby, more pride in their collections, and more enjoyment in the long run. If that didn't exist, if innovation didn't happen, the hobby might already have fewer people in it. In that sense, yes, grading companies—and everyone else—benefit from us. Because the hobby isn't one-dimensional. It's a party, and the more people who bring their own flavor to it, the better it is for everyone.

A Party of Vampires, Werewolves, and Ghouls

Here's how I see it. Picture the hobby like a big house party. In one corner, you've got the vampires, sipping their fancy drinks and being dramatic. Over in the other corner, the werewolves are howling and getting a little rowdy. The mummies are upstairs, bumping into walls and unraveling themselves. And the ghouls—well, no one really knows what they're doing, but rumor has it they're in the basement doing something weird. Do all these groups get along? Probably not. But does their presence make the party more interesting? Absolutely. That's how Pokémon feels to me. You don't have to love every part of the hobby. You don't even have to like every group of people in it. But the fact that they're there—the fact that the party is alive with different energies and ideas—makes the whole thing better. A hobby thrives when it has many corners, many flavors, and many ways to enjoy it.

Adaptation Is Inevitable

And here's the bigger truth: hobbies evolve. You can fight it, you can complain about it, but you can't stop it. When cars first rolled off the assembly line, they weren't built for joyrides or races. Their purpose was simple: get people from point A to point B faster and more comfortably. Racing wasn't part of the plan.

Drag strips and circle tracks weren't part of the plan. But as soon as cars existed, people adapted them. They found new uses, new thrills, new communities around them. Then, as cars aged, they started breaking down. They rusted. They needed repairs. And out of that came a whole new world of restorers and mechanics. None of this was in the original blueprint, but it was all inevitable. Pokémon, like cars—or honestly like anything humans get passionate about—can't stay frozen in time. Once it exists, it will branch, morph, and adapt. New niches will form. New ideas will flourish. Sometimes, people won't like the changes. Sometimes, people will fight about them. But the truth is, innovation is unstoppable.

My Hope for the TCG Family

So yes, seeing negativity sneak into the community stings. It makes me sad to think that even here, in this space that's always felt like family, people are starting to draw battle lines. But when I zoom out, I see the bigger picture. I see the collaborations, the creativity, the friendships being made daily. I see people pouring their time, talent, and heart into making the hobby better. I see collectors old and new, each finding their own corner of the party. And most of all, I see the same truth that's always kept me here: Pokémon brings people together. It doesn't matter if you're a vampire, a werewolf, a mummy, or some basement ghoul. It doesn't matter what your day job is, what your politics are, or what stresses you're running from. When you sit down with someone and start talking about your favorite Pokémon, you're talking the same language. You're sharing joy. You're part of the family. And that's what I hold onto. The disagreements, the negativity, the occasional ugliness—they'll never outweigh the core of what makes this hobby special. Because at the end of the day, we're still just people who love little creatures on cardboard, and that love will keep finding ways to adapt, survive, and grow.



Don't You Be Snorelax'ing on Me

If you've ever played Pokémon, you know the frustration of running into Snorlax asleep in the middle of the road. You can't go forward. You can't go around. You're stuck until you find a Poké Flute and wake him up. That's funny in a game—but in real life, being a Snorlax isn't cute. It means staying stuck, planted in one spot, letting opportunities pass while the world moves around you. And trust me, in hobbies and in life, it's easy to slip into Snorlax mode without even realizing it. I don't want that for myself, and I don't want it for you. So if nothing else, I hope that reading this has been your Poké Flute—something that shakes you a little, wakes you up, and gets you moving again.

Don't Get Rooted in One Spot

We all hit points where it feels easier to just stay still. Maybe it's stress. Maybe it's doubt. Maybe it's the sheer weight of responsibilities. For me, Pokémon was always an outlet—but even within a hobby, you can get stuck. You can stop growing, stop exploring, and just stay “rooted” in one familiar spot. That's where the Snorlax metaphor comes in. It's not just about sleeping—it's about not moving forward. And when you're stuck like that, even things you love start to feel heavy. The truth is, growth takes intention. You need people around you who will nudge you forward, who will play the Poké Flute when you've dozed off in your own comfort zone. Surround yourself with people who encourage you to try new things, to adapt, to stay awake to the possibilities in front of you.

The Burnout Trap

Let's be honest: even in something as joyful as Pokémon, burnout is real. And I think a big reason for that is financial. Pokémon isn't slow anymore. They're releasing sets faster than most collectors can keep up with. Sometimes it feels like before you've even opened the last pack, there's a new expansion out. It's overwhelming. Then there's the prices. Vintage? Sure, I get it—limited print runs, condition sensitivity, cards surviving decades of wear. But modern? We're seeing cards explode in price before the ink is even dry. Some of them are still in print, and yet they cost as if they're made of gold. It's absurd. So what happens? Collectors feel like they can't keep up. And when you constantly feel like you're falling behind, or like you need to drain your savings just to participate, the joy starts fading. That's where burnout is born.

Choosing Your Lane

Unless you've got unlimited money—and I certainly don't—you can't "catch 'em all" anymore. That's just reality. At some point, you have to pick your lane. And even then, it can be brutal. If your favorite Pokémon is Pikachu, Charizard, or Gengar, you know what I mean. The demand is insane, the prices sky-high, and the competition relentless. Even me, with Eevee—my absolute favorite—struggles with this. Eevee isn't just Eevee. It's Eevee plus all the Eeveelutions. It's like I chose one Pokémon but accidentally signed myself up for nine. So I had to make a decision: stick with Eevee. That's my lane. It doesn't mean I don't admire the other cards or sometimes feel the tug to expand—but it means I don't drown myself chasing everything. And honestly, that choice has saved me from a lot of stress.

Patience Is the Poke Flute?

If there's one piece of advice I want to leave you with, it's this: patience. Patience is the key to collecting. Patience is the key to money. Patience is the key to enjoying the ride instead of burning out halfway through. I've seen it in the stock market. I've seen it in the hobby. Whenever a new set comes out, the prices spike. Everyone scrambles to grab cards before they disappear. And then, like clockwork, things settle down. Supply catches up, demand cools, and the market balances itself. If you rush, you overpay. If you panic, you lose money. But if you wait? More often than not, patience rewards you. It's not glamorous advice. It's not flashy. But it's what keeps the fire burning long term, instead of burning you out.

Why We Keep Going

I bring all this up because I want you to know you're not alone if you've felt that burnout. We've all been there. We've all asked ourselves, How can I possibly keep up? The truth is, most of us can't—and we don't have to. Pokémon isn't about catching everything. It's about finding joy in the part of the hobby that speaks to you most. For me, it's Eevee and restoration. For you, it might be vintage packs, or modern binders, or simply enjoying the art without ever spending more than a few bucks. The point is, don't let the pace of releases or the price tags of scalpers rob you of the joy that brought you here in the first place. And definitely don't let it turn you into Snorlax—lying down, overwhelmed, and stuck.

Waking Up

When Snorlax finally wakes up in the game, he's not just an obstacle anymore—he's a powerhouse. He's strong, dependable, and worth the trouble it took to rouse him. That's what I hope for you. If you've felt stuck, if you've felt weighed down, if you've felt the burnout creeping in—I hope this book has been your Poké Flute. I hope it reminded you why you love this hobby, why you love your passions, and why it's worth pressing forward even when it feels hard.

Don't you be Snorlax'ing on me.

Because the world's waiting for you to wake up
and show what you're capable of.

