

THEM CARDS IS SMOKIN'!

by
Don
Abood



It's not every day that a large corporation changes its policies due to a cry from one small voice. But it happened earlier this year, thanks to the efforts of Sammy Blum, a 7-year-old Houston boy.

Sammy comes from a family of non-sports card collectors. He and his older brothers—13-year-old Leon and 9-year-old David—collect cards depicting their favorite Marvel characters. Their father, Dr. Alan Blum, a physician and anti-smoking activist, collects tobacco cards. Actually, he says, "I collect ironies—tobacco cards with health-oriented themes, movie stars who died of cigarette-caused disease, first-aid cards, firefighter cards."

Like his father, Sammy doesn't care for tobacco products. So when he collected all 100 cards in the "Marvel Masterpieces" set produced by SkyBox International in 1992 and saw that five of the cards depicted characters smoking cigars and cigarettes, he complained to his father.

"Sammy said, 'Look at all these people smoking on these cards,'" his father recalls. "I asked him what he wanted to do about it. He said, 'Let's tell people.'"

Sammy decided to write a letter. He sent it, with his father's help, to the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Sammy's letter:

Dear Sir,

I collect Marvel Masterpieces. So do some of my friends and my brothers. I found 5 out of 100 cards that were smoking!! Some of them were villains and some were heros [sic]. Here are their names Blaze, Gambit, Kingpin, Nick Fury, and Red Skull.

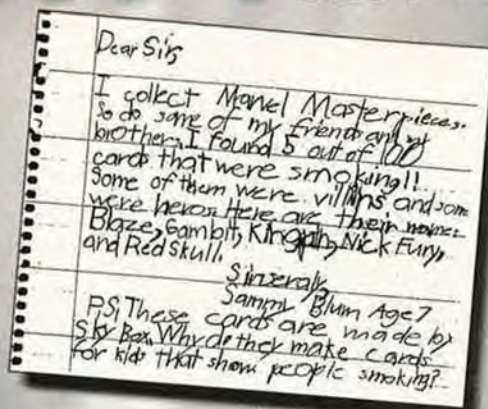
Sincerely [sic],

Sammy Blum Age 7

P.S. These cards are made by SkyBox. Why do they make cards for kids that show people smoking?

New England Journal's editors forwarded the letter to the offices of Marvel Entertainment Group, then printed the letter as written alongside a reply from Marvel president Terry Stewart in the May 5, 1994, issue of the magazine.

Marvel responded by establishing a new



policy: Henceforth, no Marvel characters will be depicted smoking on trading cards.

Marvel made the decision because Sammy's letter "has raised our awareness that these images might be subject to misinterpretation by young card enthusiasts," Stewart wrote.

Pamela Rutt, Marvel's vice-president of public relations, told *The Dallas Morning News* the same story. "Sammy's letter really did open our eyes and say, 'Here's a 7-year-old who's seeing this completely out of context and may be interpreting in a way we didn't intend,'" she said.

Rutt and Stewart offered no additional comment.

Marvel's response was something of a surprise to experienced anti-smoking activist Blum. "I had no idea this would be their reply," he says.

As for second-grader Sammy, he's happy with the outcome.

"I feel very good about it," he says. "I'm very excited."

He continues to collect Marvel comics cards; he's working on "Marvel Masterpieces 2"—SkyBox's last Marvel set, produced before the change in policy—and Fleer Ultra's "X-Men."

Sammy says his favorite Marvel character is Captain America "because he's the first Marvel guy ever to be made and he never smokes." ♦

Don Abood, a former news editor at The Evening Bulletin in Providence, R.I., is a freelancer who writes frequently about collectibles.

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