

# How Topps picked the pictures

An interview with former Topps Director of Photography, Butch Jacobs



*Comparing a 1973 in-action player card to a recent Topps card illustrates the significant improvements in technology that Butch Jacobs witnessed.*



By George Vrechek

Player images on sports cards today are clear, focused and often depict a player in game action. A card may show a pitcher just releasing a 90-mile per hour fastball, and you can count the stitches on the ball. The cardboard, coating and printing look top-notch; some might say they look too nice and shiny compared to older cards. A closer look at those vintage sports cards turns into a history of the development of photography and printing. The cards of yesteryear didn't look like the cards of today for a very good reason: the technology wasn't there.

In previous SCD articles I covered the development of Topps baseball cards through stories about Sy Berger and Woody Gelman, who first started working together creating the 1952 Topps baseball cards. During the 1950s, card images evolved from colorized black and white photos to true color photography. There were even in-action images used on the 1956 cards, although it turns out some of the images weren't who they were supposed to be. Hank Aaron's card shows an exciting slide at the plate – by Willie Mays.

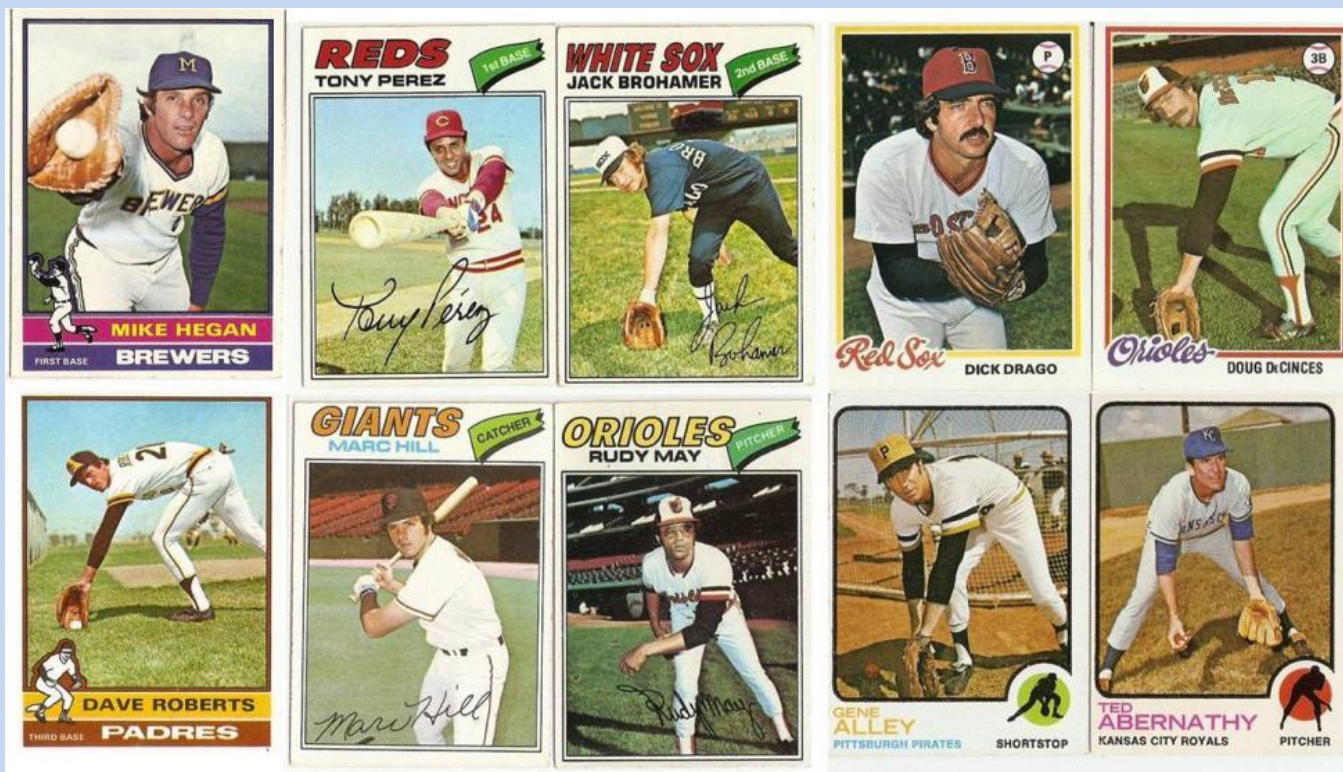


*Butch Jacobs in the 1970s when he joined Topps (photo courtesy of Butch Jacobs)*

**Butch Jacobs, Topps 1973-2007**

I interviewed Len Brown (SCD, Jan 23, 2015) who started working on the backs of the Topps cards in 1960. Brown explained who was responsible for the statistics, write-ups and cartoons as well as how occasional goofs could occur. Brown was hired by Gelman in 1959 and continued at Topps until 2000 writing descriptions for the player cards. My interviews of Berger and Brown led me to Butch Jacobs, 62, another long-time former Topps employee. Brown wrote the back of the cards; Jacobs picked out photos to use on the front of the cards. Jacobs started at Topps in 1973 and left in 2007. Jacobs provided a wealth of information as to understanding how cards were created and images selected.

Like many Topps employees, Jacobs came from Brooklyn; he lived in the Bushwick neighborhood. He was working on an associate degree in business at Staten Island Junior College and found a job in the mailroom at Topps delivering mail to executives like the late Sy Berger. Jacobs would take a look at the Sporting News before delivering it to Berger and then could chat with him about sports. Jacobs was a sports fanatic, played baseball in high school and collected Topps baseball cards in the early 1960s. He didn't know what he wanted to do for a career, but he wanted to get ahead and concluded that to get out of the mailroom, he needed to leave Topps. Fortunately for Jacobs, Topps had a philosophy of promoting from within, and a new position became available.





*Players struck a pose for Topps photographers simulating action. Fielders looked at the photographer rather than the ball supposedly heading for their gloves*

### **Berger's phone call**

Bill Haber (1942-1995) had been working at Topps handling both the statistics for the cards and the selection of photos. Haber was temporarily relocating, his job needed to be split in two and Sy Berger thought Jacobs might be the person to handle organizing the photography. That Jacobs had no prior experience or training in photography didn't seem to be an obstacle.

Jacobs remembers sitting at home with his parents watching a Mets game on television in 1973 when Sy Berger called him and offered him the new position. Jacobs grabbed the opportunity. He was given the extensive photo files organized for each player. His responsibilities evolved from initially a filing function to selecting the photos and ultimately becoming the director of photography, acting as a liaison between the art and the sports departments and staying with the company for 34 years. He learned photography and kept up on the ever-changing technology. In retirement, Jacobs and Berger lived a few miles apart on Long Island and remained in touch until Berger's death in December 2014. Berger's widow, Gloria, commented that, "Butch Jacobs has remained a good and loyal friend."

### **Topps photographers**

Jacobs explained that Topps hired independent photographers to take photos starting with spring training the year prior to a card issue. Photographers would send the rolls of film to Topps who handled developing the film. Often the images were just printed on contact sheets or remained as negatives. Jacobs remembered, "Sometimes you'd be surprised when the photos were printed or blown up to a larger size as to what you had." Photographers would shoot pictures of just about everyone who was in spring training including rookies who were unlikely to make the major league roster. The spring training photos became a baseline for finding at least some photo of everyone under contract with Topps. Photographers were instructed to get portraits with and without hats in the event a player was traded. They would have players pose swinging a bat, catching a ball or pitching; however it was pretty obvious that the players were not in motion but just standing there. Had they been in motion, the images would likely have been blurred given the film and cameras in use.

Photographers were sent out again during the regular season to photograph the players who had made the major league rosters. They were instructed to photograph any players who had been traded in their new uniforms. They would take posed photos before a game around a batting cage or a dugout and the film would be sent to Topps. Photographers would be used in cities that had both American and National league teams like Chicago, New York and Los Angeles. Consequently the stadiums in those cities wind up in the background of many player photos. Since the photos were taken before the games started, the players frequently looked like they were playing before a sparse audience of friends and family.

### **How photos were picked**

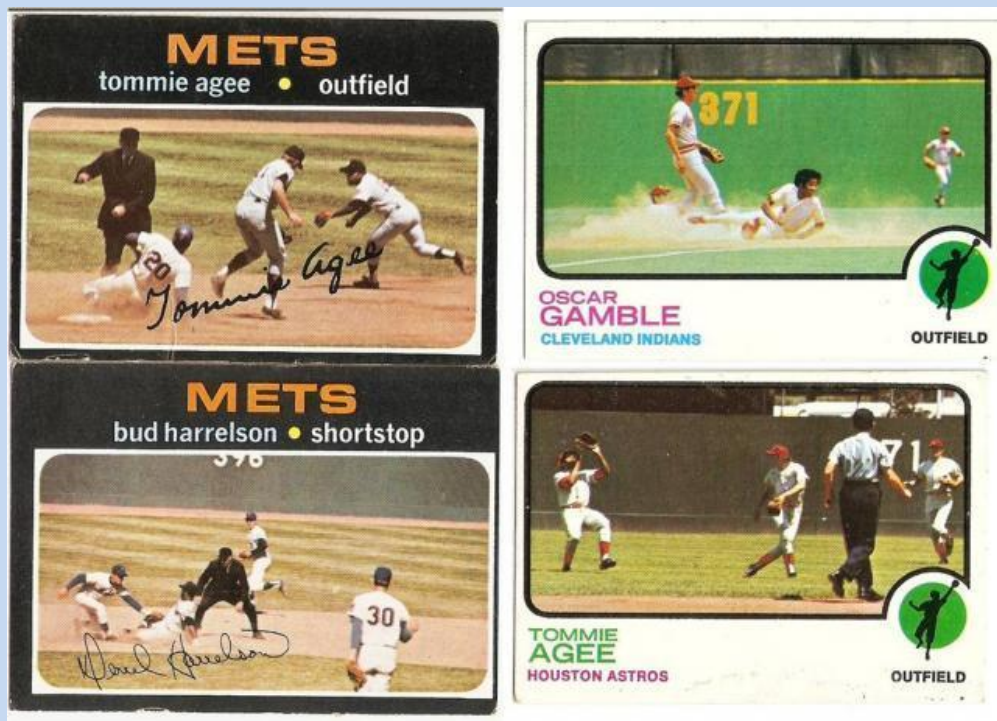
Jacobs would file the spring training photos by player and then wait until the additional photos came in during the season and file those in the player folders as well. There might be 10 or 20 images of each player each year. There were similar folders for the prior years. Once a production schedule was established, Jacobs would start picking out photos to consider for use in the set. He kept the player's prior year card on hand and tried to avoid duplicating a previous pose. The idea was to give the cards a new look, in contrast to Topps cards from the 1950s and 1960s when the same photo might be recycled for the annual cards of a few players.

Jacobs' first choice was likely an image taken at a major league ball park during the season. However, if the color and lighting were a potential problem, he would go back to the spring training photos or even the archives. The photo

selections were approved by several people before the cards went into production. Jacobs described several issues involved in selecting photos, and we will look at each of them individually, as well as some of the interesting 1970s cards.

### Standard poses

If you wanted to make sure you had photos of each player, the sure way of catching them was during spring training practices. The photographer asked the player to strike a pose batting, fielding or pitching. To get a little action, they might include a ball or have the player pretend they were moving. The results became pretty predictable after several years, and Topps wanted to get more game action captured by their photographers.

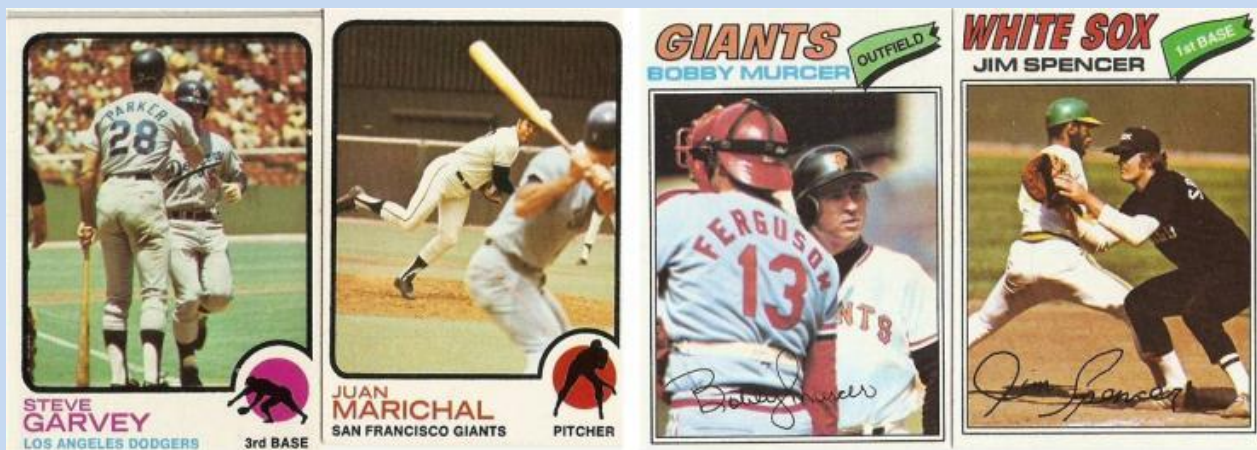


*The action wasn't exactly close.*

### In-action photos

The 1971 Topps set was the first to include some players in game action for their principal photo. Examining the results of that innovation, we find some cards that were close-ups and in focus that turned out well. However there were plenty of cards that demonstrated how limited film, cameras, motor drives and lenses were at the time. Some players were in action, but they were far away and it wasn't entirely clear who the featured player was in the photo.

In 1972 Topps seemed to adjust for this problem by creating a separate sub-set of in-action cards. A player would have a posed portrait card followed by an in-action card. The player in the in-action card might be distant and fuzzy, but at least he still had another card to show what he looked like. Star players could also then have two cards in the set, which Topps felt was appealing to collectors. In 1973 Topps went back to including some action photos as the primary card with mixed results. But in each subsequent year, the action photos seemed to get better. Portrait images also improved as photographers caught players looking more relaxed or even smiling. Jacobs called these the "candid photos" which were added to get more variety in the sets.



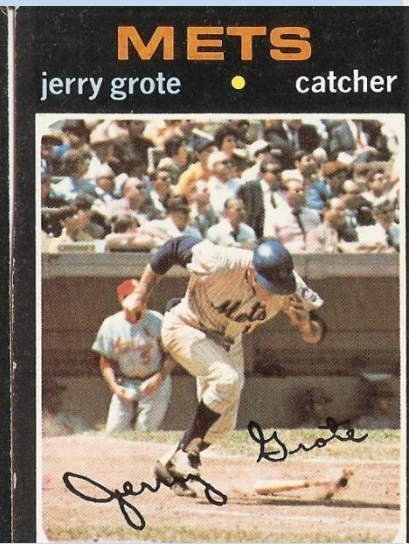
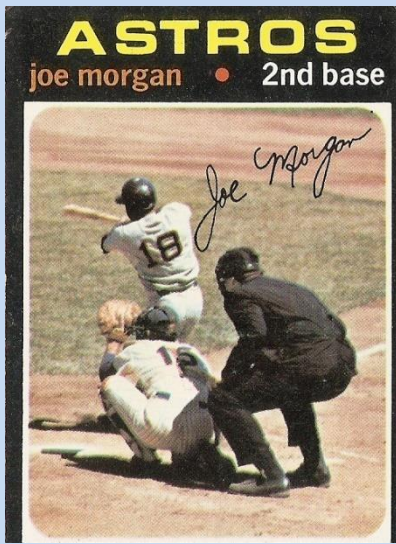


Sometimes it was hard to determine which player was being featured.

 <p><b>GEORGE SCOTT</b> MILWAUKEE BREWERS</p> <p>1st BASE</p>	 <p><b>WES PARKER</b> LOS ANGELES DODGERS</p> <p>1st BASE</p>	 <p><b>BOBBY BONDS</b> SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>
 <p><b>PAT CORRALES</b> SAN DIEGO PADRES</p> <p>CATCHER</p>	 <p><b>JIM FREGOSI</b> NEW YORK METS</p> <p>3rd BASE</p>	 <p><b>WILLIE STARGELL</b> PITTSBURGH PIRATES</p> <p>1st BASE</p>
 <p><b>JOE RUDI</b> OAKLAND A's</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>	 <p><b>DAVE JOHNSON</b> ATLANTA BRAVES</p> <p>2nd BASE</p>	 <p><b>GARY MATTHEWS</b> OF <b>SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS</b></p>
 <p><b>TERRY CROWLEY</b> BALTIMORE ORIOLES</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>	 <p><b>WILLIE MONTANEZ</b> PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>	 <p><b>ELLIE RODRIGUEZ</b> MILWAUKEE BREWERS</p> <p>CATCHER</p>
 <p><b>WILLIE DAVIS</b> LOS ANGELES DODGERS</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>	 <p><b>BOOTS DAY</b> MONTREAL EXPOS</p> <p>OUTFIELD</p>	 <p><b>TITO FUENTES</b> SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS</p> <p>2nd BASE</p>

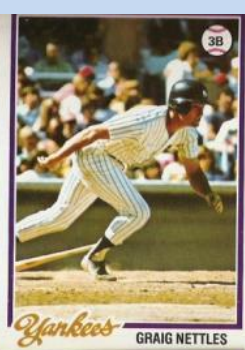
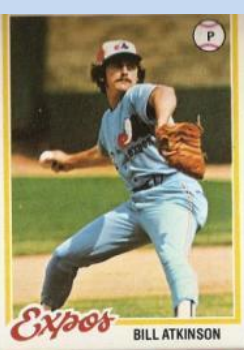
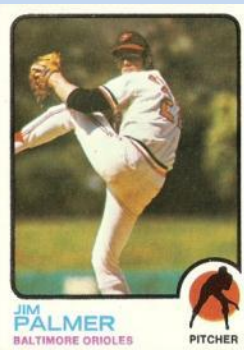
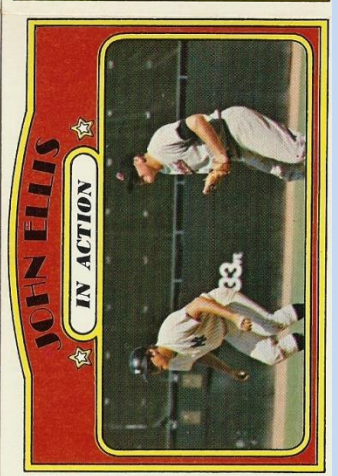
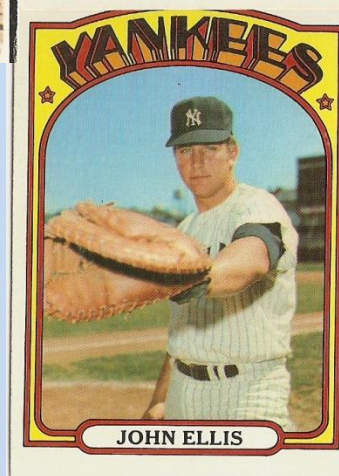
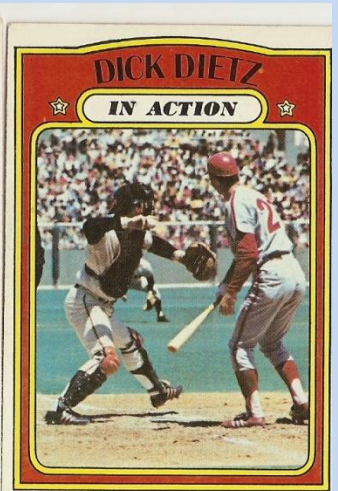
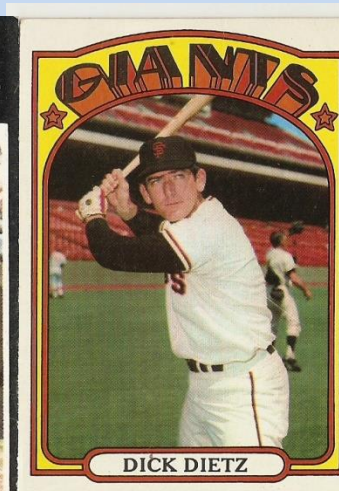
Some views were from behind "behinds."





Hard to tell what the player in-action looked like (above)

The solution for 1972: separate in-action cards



Action photos seemed to get better each year.





More natural player portraits worked well. Players started smiling for what Topps called their “candid” poses.

### Ballparks running uphill

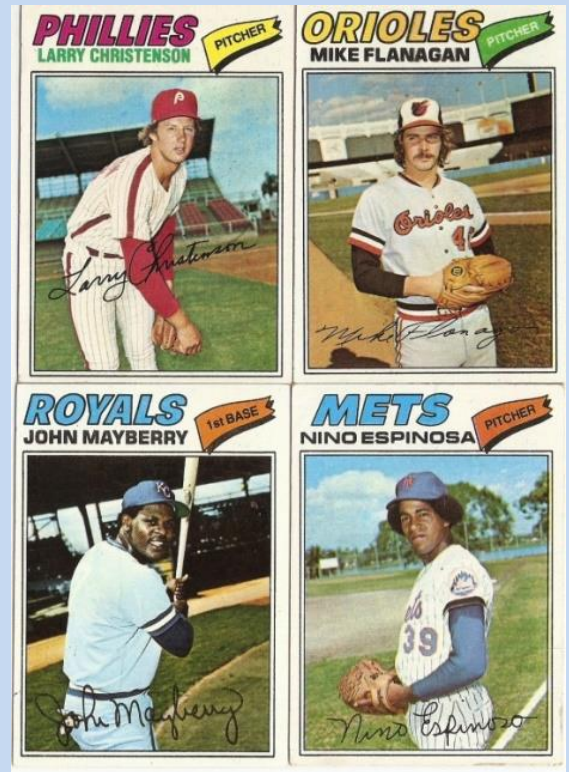
If you look at the backgrounds on some player photos, you get the idea that they played on fields that were on a 20 degree slope with fences and seats on an angle. Actually it was the player who was not entirely vertical, and the Topps art department used some artistic license to get the player to fit nicely into the card design according to Jacobs.

Players didn't always play on a level playing field apparently.

### Traded players and hat art

Topps always wanted to picture a player in his current uniform, if at all possible. If the player had been traded after the Topps photographers made their visits, hatless shots or shots showing the underside of the cap helped Topps select images that could be fashioned into cards with uniforms of a player's current team. If such hatless images were not available, Topps airbrushed the offending logo and created a corps of traded players wearing funny black hats. In the early 1970s Topps started painting logos on caps, but the artwork was fairly crude. In 1973 Topps showed Bob Locker without a name or number on the back of his (1972 Oakland) uniform since he was traded to the Cubs in November 1972.

Topps was licensed to be able to show baseball team logos which made life easier than it was for creating football and basketball cards. The licensing agreements for those sports did not always have such logo rights.







Topps went from blackout hats to airbrushed logos to get traded players in their current uniforms. Bob Locker, upper right, lost his name and number from the back of his jersey thanks to airbrushing.



Bright sunlight made faces hard to see.



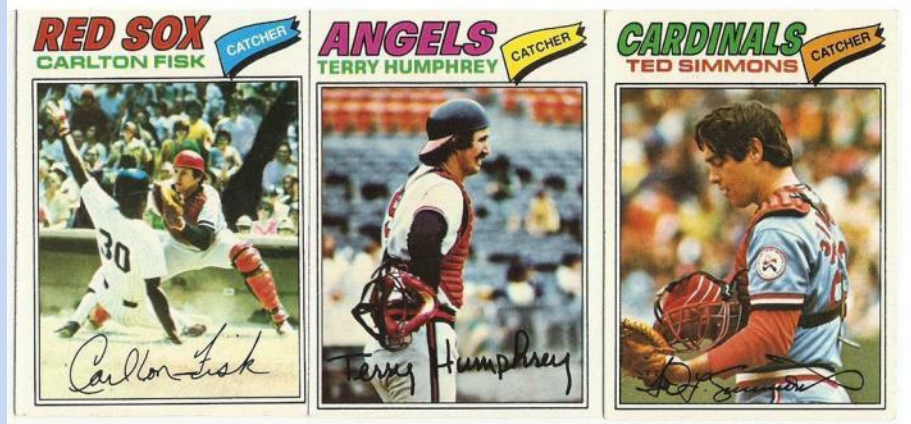
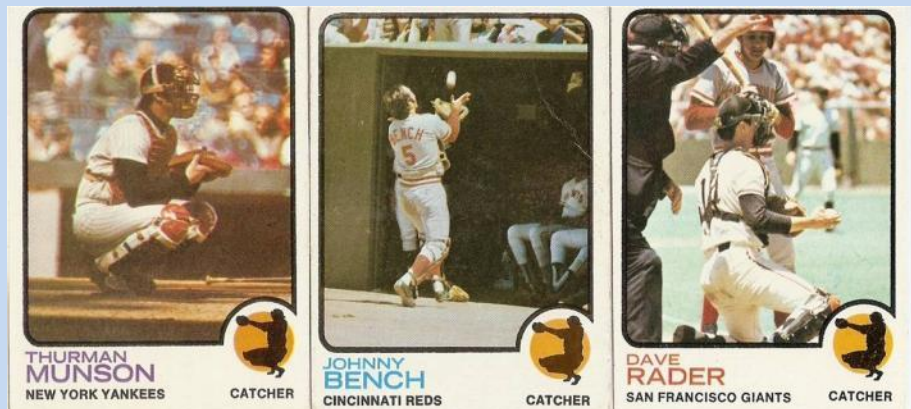
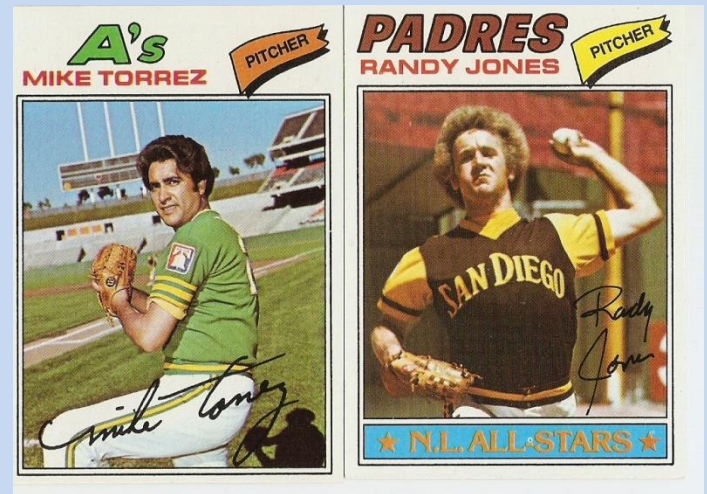
### Shaded faces, masked catchers

Sometimes too much sunlight can be an obstacle for photographers. An overcast day is often better for photographing a player wearing a hat. It was particularly challenging to get portraits of players with dark complexions on a sunny day. Flash fill is the approach used today to use a flash to light shaded areas on a sunny day for portraits, but didn't seem to be in use back then.

*One solution to the sunlight problem was ditching the hats.*

Catching catchers in action was challenging. If you wanted to see what they looked like, the photographer needed to wait until they took their masks off. Topps photographers apparently got the message after 1973 to skip shooting masked catchers.

*Photographers got more patient in 1977 than in 1973 waiting for catchers to take off their masks for an action photo.*



### Technology

Terry Corman is the CEO of Firehouse Image Center in Indianapolis. Their company has printed sports images and has seen the business evolve since the 1970s. Corman was asked to summarize the biggest changes he has seen that affected the card photos and

stated, "The 35mm film of the 1970s was not as responsive to sun light and low light conditions as the subsequent film and the digital cameras of today. But, the biggest difference was in the mechanical color separation process of the old and the new digital processes. New cards in comparison to the old cards, have a better white point. The paper is whiter and has a higher line screen. The dots on the new cards are smaller. Also Photoshop did not exist in the '70s, and so many problems with photography can be fixed in Photoshop."

### Identifying the players

By 1974, the photographers, cameras and film started to show improvement which was just about the time that Jacobs began working on the photo selections. As to in-action shots, Jacobs recalled that in general, "The photographer took photos of everyone who played. There were no specific instructions as to the number of players per roll. The photographer shot the game as it played out. If a batter had a long at bat he could occupy a roll by himself and vice versa, short at bat more than one player per roll. We required a minimum of 20 rolls per game. The



photographer would include team rosters for each team. He would assist in the identification process by shooting one frame of the player's back, otherwise I was on my own. I had tricks that I used to identify a player. Most players would have either their uniform number or name or initials on their equipment. I would study gloves, bat knobs, spikes, cap bills, belts, socks, anywhere on the player to find some form of identification."

### Topps photographer Doug McWilliams

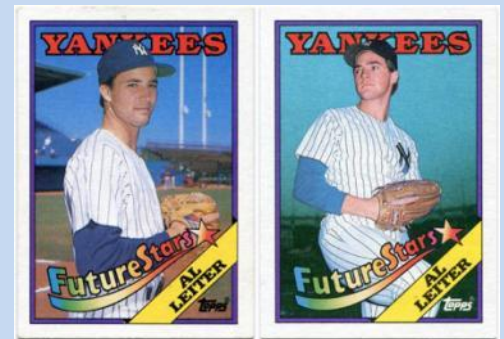
I was also able to interview long-time Topps photographer Doug McWilliams (78) who handled baseball photos for many of the West Coast teams and will be the subject of a future SCD article. McWilliams was hired by Sy Berger and was shooting baseball photos for Topps as early as 1971. McWilliams remembers, "I had to have my film processed locally (in San Francisco and ID'ed by me, for maybe the first 5 or 6 years that I worked for Topps. Later on, I was given envelopes and address labels for a lab in NYC, and I FedEx'd them to NYC every 3 or 4 days, along with my roster sheets that had the numbers of the players.

"I carried a clipboard with me that had along with my roster sheet, a pad of little sticky circles - with the team name and player number on it. After shooting the player, I peeled off and attached it to each roll of 120 size film I shot. I only was able to fit two players to a roll, so it was definite who was on that roll of film.... I have no idea how other photographers handled the ID'ing of players. I was not told how to do it, by Topps. What I devised worked for me."

### The Leiter variation and errors

Jacobs remembered that Topps thought Al Leiter was going to be a hot rookie and wanted to get a card of him in their 1987 set. Jacobs spent considerable time looking at photos of rookies and found who he believed to be Leiter. The clue that Jacobs used was that the player's glove had Leiter's uniform number of "56" written on it. Jacobs was quite pleased that he had dug out the photo he needed.

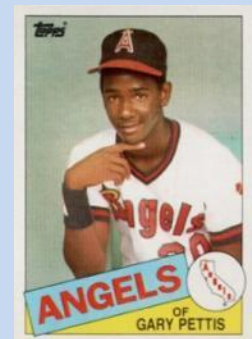
*Steve George and Al Leiter both appeared as Leiter.*



Unfortunately what Jacobs believed to be the number "56" was actually "SG", the initials of the glove's owner, fellow-rookie Steve George. Card #18 showing George identified as Leiter was issued before Topps realized the mistake. Because of the presumed importance of getting Leiter in the set, Topps corrected the card and reissued it with the correct photo. At least George got on a Topps card even though he never made the major leagues and was out of baseball after 1987. Leiter played in the majors for 19 years.

Since all cards were issued at the same time after 1973, there were very few variations created by Topps. There might be some printing differences each year for globs and blobs, but they seldom corrected a card after it was issued. For example, in 1985 Gary Pettis' much younger brother was photographed although he wasn't a player. He made it onto a card; Topps found the error but it was never corrected. Jacobs surmised that the younger Pettis may have "just hopped into the line of players being photographed by Topps." At that time manufacturers would set up in different corners of spring training sites and the players would rotate to their next station.

*Gary Pettis' much younger brother  
fooled the Topps photographer in 1985.*





Jacobs was already working on the football sets once he had finished the baseball photo selections, and he would have to get going on hockey and basketball as well. It wasn't like there was a room-full of employees scrutinizing each card. There were thousands of cards to get out each year. People like Jacobs had specific tasks and their worked merged with counterparts doing the stats, cartoons and back descriptions. There were going to be some errors given the enormous data that went into the sets.

### Spring training backgrounds

While spring training photos were plentiful, they didn't always produce great backgrounds. If a player was turned by the photographer so that the lighting worked, the background might wind up being property adjoining the ballpark. Al Kaline got lined up with a fence and a roadway. If the spring training site was in Arizona, you might get a mountain in the background.

*Spring training photos might also include parking lots, roadways, and mountains.*

### Hair

You can't help noticing the fashions of the day on old cards. The uniforms have changed, but not nearly as much as the hairstyles. Sideburns grew longer and hair got a lot longer. Popping a baseball hat down on top of a full head of hair produced some memorable cards. It was big news when Charlie Findley, owner of the Oakland A's, allowed his players to wear mustaches. Oscar Gamble and Jose Cardenal were probably the most hairy guys, but there were others.

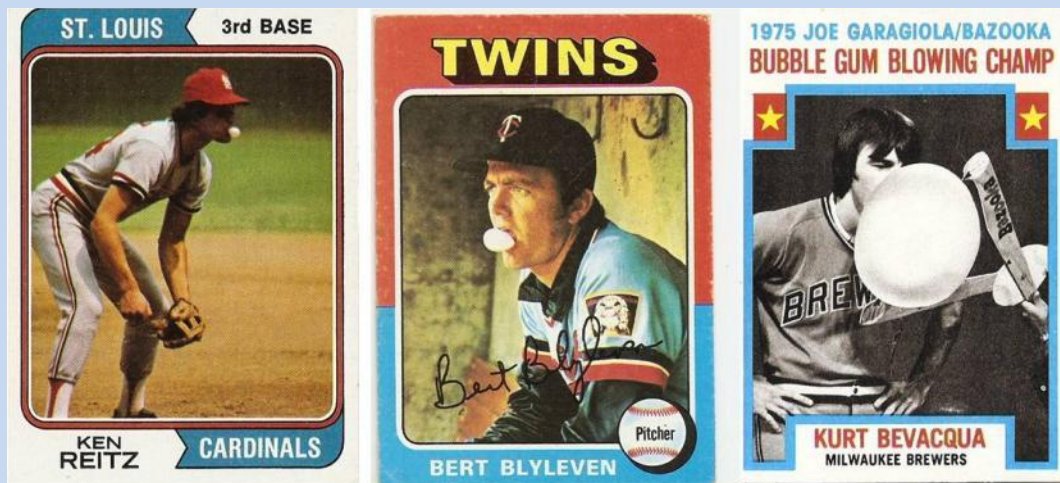




*Hair kept growing in the 1970s to produce some memorable fashion statements.*

### **Bubble gum cards**

According to Jacobs, Topps wanted to remind customers that they were selling bubble gum as well as the cards and dreamed up a contest to see which player could blow the biggest bubble. Kurt Bevacqua's 1976 card shows his winning form in the contest along with the official Bazooka calipers used to measure the effort. All teams participated in the contest other than the Pirates and Tigers, who must not have been fun groups at the time. Jacobs picked players blowing bubbles on a few earlier cards. The bubbles just keep growing.

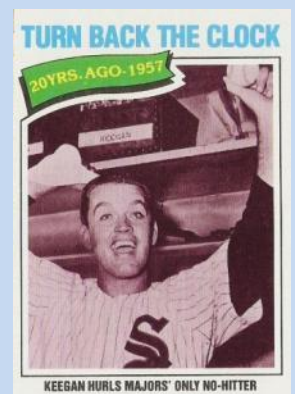


*The Bazooka bubbles kept getting bigger.*

### **Making up a sheet**

Since all cards were issued as one series starting in 1974, it really didn't matter which player was on any particular print sheet. What did matter though was that a print sheet not have conflicting color needs in order to achieve the best results. Jacobs would try to group the cards so that cards which had considerable gray or blue on them were printed on the same sheet versus cards that might need more red or yellow. He would group 66 cards together using rows of 11. Two boards of 66 would make up a 132-card print sheet. If Topps decided that a set should have 660 cards, there would be 10 boards of 66. Jacobs started making up boards using the good photos that he had in order to get them approved and moving along the production schedule.

Sy Berger would be involved in deciding which players would be selected, and several people got involved in determining what special cards would be produced. (It was not surprising that Berger's Bucknell College buddy, Bob Keegan, wound up on a 1977 card to commemorate his 1957 no-hitter.) There were 24 major league teams in the early 1970s. Topps would try to feature everyone on the regular 25-man roster, which would result in 600 cards. Therefore there was plenty of room to include more cards of star players. Topps came up with the idea of special cards for league leaders, team leaders and all-stars to get more stars into the set according to Jacobs. When MLB expanded to 26 teams in 1977, Topps increased their sets to 726 cards. However since Topps put together the 1977 set in late 1976, they weren't able to increase the set size until the next year when 11 boards were used for the regular set.





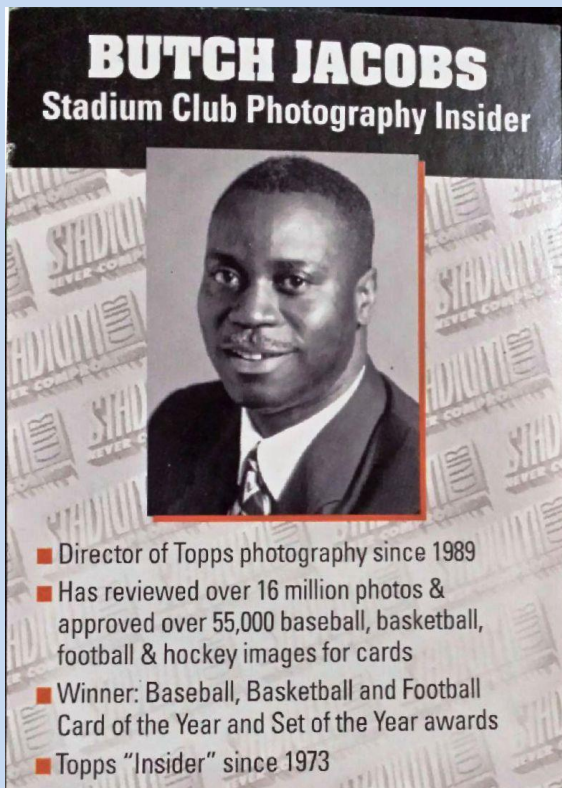
### Collecting through fires and “floods”

Daily work activities for most of us do not seem like opportunities to collect memorabilia. We deal with paper and work product, throw out that which is unnecessary and go on to the next task. Topps employees were no different. Their goal was to sell cards, not to keep them. It was Jacob’s impression that Topps destroyed unsold product rather than dumping it on the market. Archives including old photo files were sent off to a warehouse.

Jacobs did have a childhood collection of Topps cards but they were lost in a fire. He didn’t hang on to cards that he worked on. It wasn’t until the late 1980s when Jacobs thought he ought to buy some sets and retain them, an idea that occurred to many people and resulted in a flood of saved sets. He was able to pick up a few collectibles such as player autographs when the NFL or NBA had their rookie orientation days and Topps was involved.

### Fisk flying

Jacobs estimated that he looked at over 16 million photos while working for Topps and selected photos for 55,000 cards. He had to wade through a lot of images that weren’t that great to come up with photos to use. He is particularly proud of some of his choices. For example, the 1982 Topps card of Carlton Fisk was recognized as the card of the year through a hobby publication poll. The layout for the set was a vertical photo, but Jacobs thought the horizontal in-action shot of Fisk reaching for a ball was great. He pushed for including it in the set even though it meant that the art department had to fiddle with the design to accommodate the horizontal card. Jacobs was given the ultimate collectible by Topps with his own card inserted with 1998 Stadium Club cards as one of the Topps “insiders.” Jacobs described the Stadium Club issue as the “HD version of Topps cards” with their better paper, print and color quality.



**BUTCH JACOBS**  
Stadium Club Photography Insider

Director of Topps photography since 1989  
Has reviewed over 16 million photos & approved over 55,000 baseball, basketball, football & hockey images for cards  
Winner: Baseball, Basketball and Football Card of the Year and Set of the Year awards  
Topps “Insider” since 1973

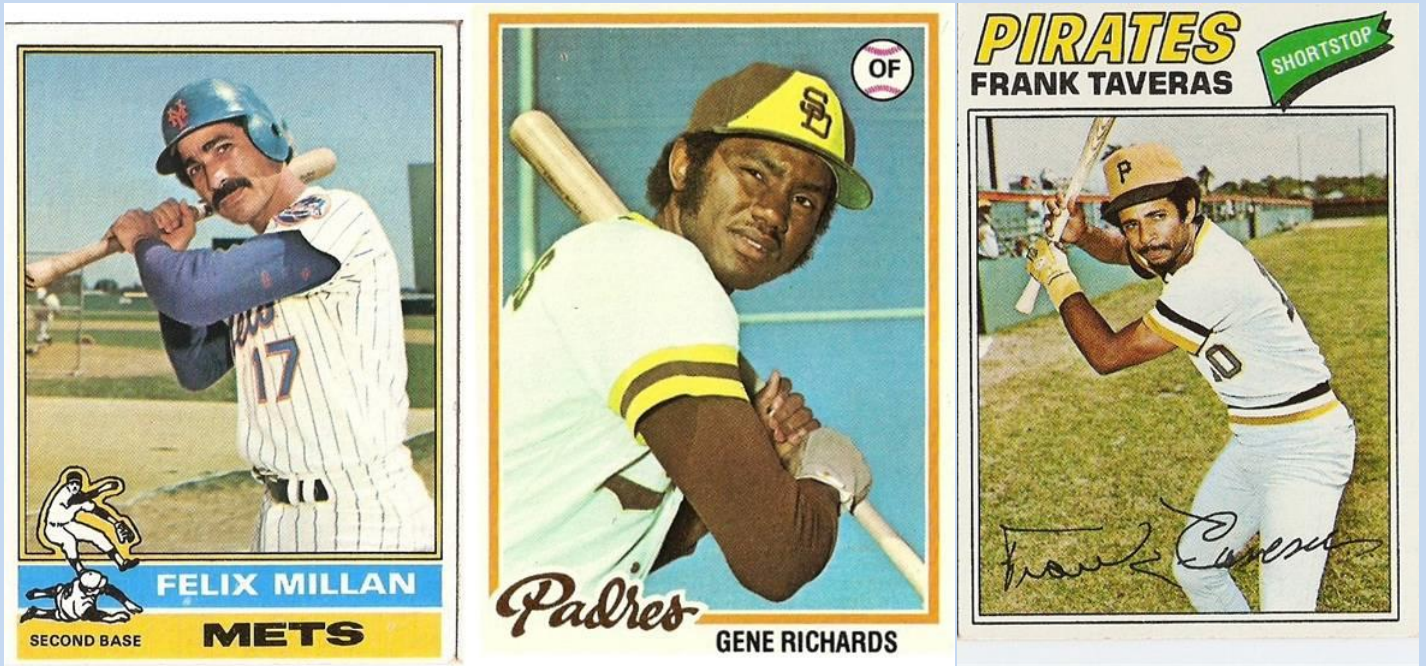


*Jacobs was proud of pushing to include this horizontal photo in the 1982 set.*

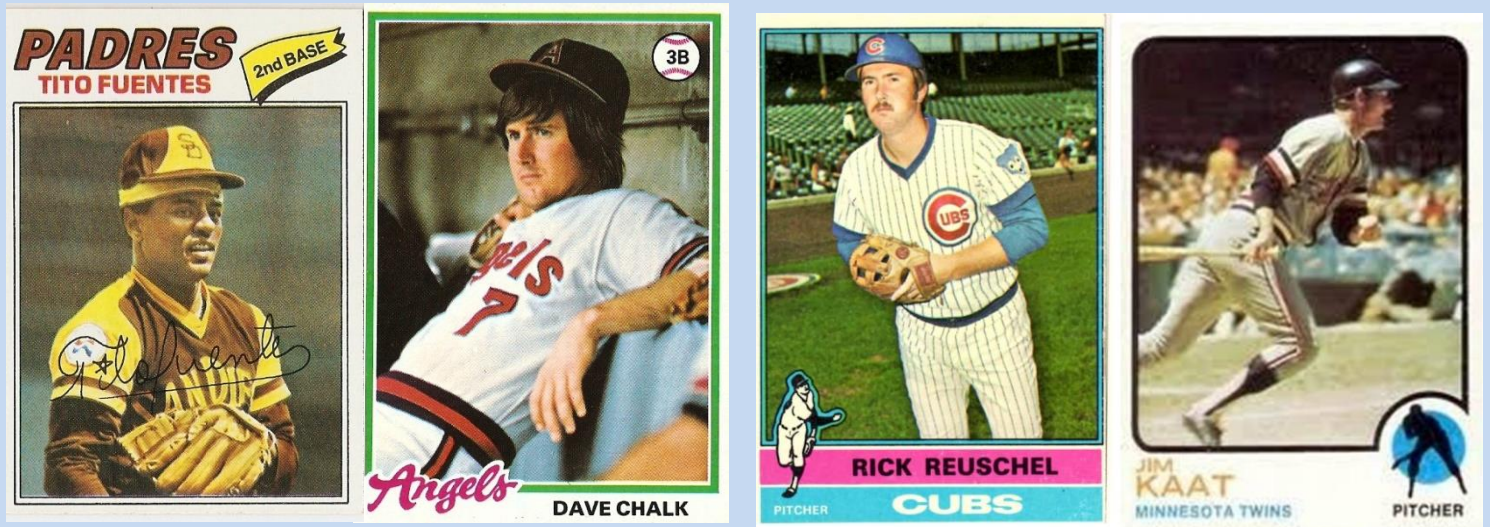
*The ultimate collectible: Butch Jacobs on his own Topps card.*

There will be opportunities to talk to Jacobs again about photos used on football, basketball and hockey cards. Jacobs is married with three grown children and lives in Baldwin, New York, not that far from the old Topps offices.





Some unusual choke holds.



Fuentes goes two-ply on headwear. Chalk probably wasn't expecting that this would be his 1978 portrait. Reuschel is pictured in his batting helmet. Kaat, who pitched for 25 years, is shown batting which he did once in 1973.

This article appeared in the August 7, 2015, SCD.

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