

Hobby Odds and Ends



Sy Berger (left) and Bob Keegan were snappy dressers for their Bucknell University Reunion representing the Class of 1944 circa 1994. Photo courtesy of Maxine Berger



Remembering Sy Berger, when a card show is not a card show, and playing with Arnie and Alex

By George Vrechek

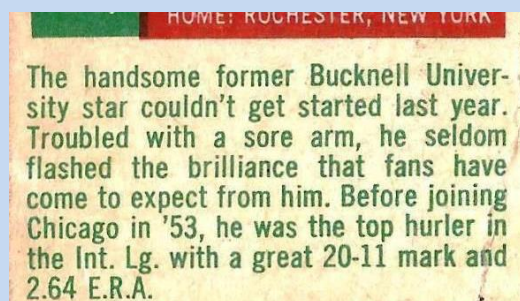
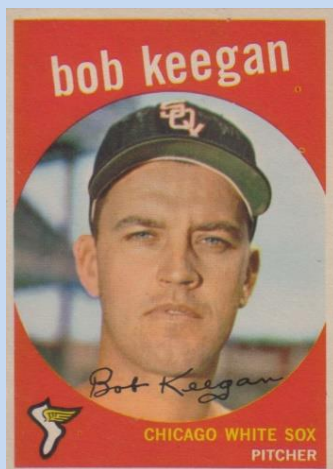
Remembering Sy

Sy Berger, the long-time Topps legend, died on December 14, 2014, a few months after the last time I talked to him. Sy was a great interviewee and was not what you would call cautious. He would tell you everything, sometimes off the record. I easily saw how people would have fond memories of him, even if their contact was brief. You remember Sy and smile.

Sy was involved in some way with most vintage sports cards created by Topps. If you want to remember Sy's influence, take a look at the cards of Bob Keegan, who pitched for the White Sox from 1953 to 1958. Keegan had one great year in 1954 when he went 16-9. In 1957 he pitched a no hitter when he was 37 years old. Otherwise his stats were modest: 6 years with the Sox and a lifetime record of 40 wins and 36 losses.

However, Keegan was featured on Topps cards every year he was in the majors as well as in 1959 and 1960 while in the minors. He even had a Topps card in 1977 to commemorate his no-hitter from 20 years before. The upbeat bios on Keegan's cards described him as a good-looking guy who had been a standout basketball and baseball player at Bucknell University.

Wait a minute, didn't Sy Berger attend Bucknell at the same time as Keegan? You can read between the lines and see that Keegan was one of Sy's many friends from Bucknell along with fraternity brother Joel Shorin. Shorin's father was one of the four brothers who ran Topps. Berger joined Topps a few years after Bucknell. The Topps bio writers must have known the connections. Keegan is called the "handsome ex-Bucknell basketball and baseball star." Keegan only signed with Topps, never appearing on a Bowman card. Berger remained good friends with Keegan, who died in 2001.



Keegan was always the "handsome former Bucknell University star" on the Topps cards even in 1959 and 1960 which he spent in the minors.

Card shows, they are a-changing

Sports memorabilia collecting is almost by definition stuck in the past. We might collect things to preserve memories, and many of us have memories that go pretty far back. However, in recent years, there have been dramatic changes in technology, science and sports. It should be no surprise that there are changes in our hobby as well.

I recently attended a Chicago sports memorabilia show that I assumed would be much like the shows I have attended since the early 1980s. I expected to find dealers, cards, memorabilia and probably a growing group of autograph guests and their supply-line vendors. The large, periodic show was in the same location it has been for the past 25 years or so, Rosemont, Illinois. The show promoter had morphed from George Johnson/Sun-Times to Mounted Memories/Fanatics Authentic recently, but it had all pretty much looked the same. Admittedly the autograph area at such shows was growing and the card dealer area was not.

I walked in the door to the two-day show and was greeted by the familiar sight of Mr. Mint, Alan Rosen, manning the first table. It was good to see Al again, who has been a fixture at most large shows, asking everyone who comes in the door if they have something to sell. Mr. Mint's table was about the last thing I saw which looked familiar.

There were card dealers with tables, but not that many, and many dealers were unfamiliar faces selling cards that gave off a noticeable glare. Strictly vintage card dealers could be counted on one hand. The majority of the smaller-than-expected floor space was dedicated to autographs and the autograph-related sports supplies for the big-name guests. Autograph guests, who started appearing at shows years ago as extra added attractions, had become THE attraction. Guests included retired super stars from several sports and current starters from the Chicago Cubs, dropping by after a home game.

It looked to me that the rest of us were there to support the autograph activity. Vintage cards were not what got most people in the door. If you were there just looking for vintage cards, you would probably be back out the door within an hour, like I was.

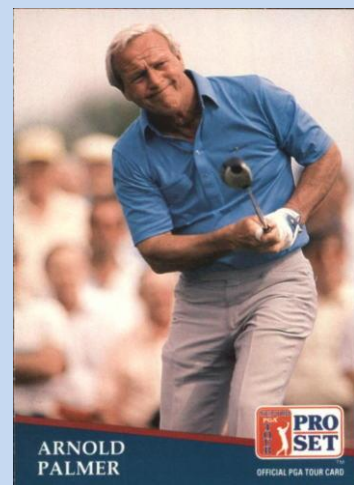
In fairness, when I re-read the publicity, the event is described as a "sports collectibles convention that will occur in major cities.... Each show will feature appearances by some of the biggest names in sports" It didn't say it was a "card show" or that I would find many old cards there, and I didn't. Don't assume.

I contacted Fanatics Authentic for a comment, but did not get a response. A representative at the show, however, left me with the impression that the normal array of vintage card dealers would be back for future three-day shows, and the three-day shows would likely be just twice a year in Chicago.

Playing with Arnie

Playing a sport with a professional athlete is a memorable experience. About 20 years ago, I played golf with Arnold Palmer. At least that is what I tell people; however, I also tell them the rest of the story.

Palmer was playing with a member at Butler National in Oak Brook, Illinois. Palmer was waiting to hit his second shot from the middle of the first fairway, and I was in a separate group teeing off on ten to start the back nine. The 10th and 1st fairways were close. My very errant drive went into Palmer's fairway, and I said to Arnie (and everyone else within shouting distance), "Fore!" I retrieved my ball from their midst, and Palmer actually looked at me to see who owned the lousy shot. That was my golf with Arnie.



"Playing" with Palmer was an unforgettable experience.

Playing with ex-Minnesota North Star Alex Pirus

My second experience playing with a professional athlete was much better. If you can skate a little, can dodge slap shots, don't check, don't play too seriously and find the right group, I have found you can have fun playing hockey even at an advanced age. I've been playing weekly pick-up hockey with a group of mostly older players. We are careful when new players join us to see that they are not too serious about the whole thing, like knowing or caring what the score is.

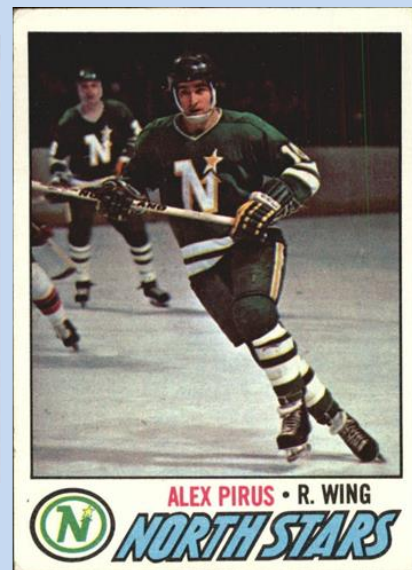
One of our new players this year looked like many of us...until he stepped on the ice. The newcomer was 61-year-old Alex Pirus, who played in the NHL between 1976 and 1980. He played at Notre Dame and joined the Minnesota North Stars for his rookie season in 1976-7. He scored 20 goals that year on a team where the top 7 scorers averaged just 22 years of age.



Alex Pirus played in the NHL between 1976 and 1980 and, at age 61, can still skate circles around most of us.

In a 1977 game between the North Stars and the Winnipeg Jets, 22-year-old Pirus successfully defended 38-year-old Bobby Hull as reported in a *Minnesota Star* article titled "Jets' Hull meets his match."

Hull commented, "Before I drive home tonight, I am going to peek in the back seat and make sure that kid isn't there. What was his name?"



Pirus left professional hockey after the 1980-81 season. He traded on the Chicago Board Options Exchange for 17 years and then began running hockey camps with Hockey Ministries International.

When Pirus was on the ice, he focused on getting the puck to the rest of us and giving us tips on technique and strategy. He played with us, but at an entirely different level. He moved the puck at will around anyone else. I felt about as effective as a pylon in trying to even slow him down.

I have written *SCD* articles about the whimsical possibility of games involving baseball and football super-senior professional athletes. It is hard to imagine old-timers in those sports back on the playing fields. However, former professionals in some other sports including hockey can still look good playing, especially when you leave out the checking and fighting.

The experience made me realize how much more proficient a professional athlete is than the recreational athlete. Pirus was a great addition to the group, and he offered advice without making you feel like a slug. He signed my Topps card of him.



Mickey Mantle 1952 Topps, Stan Musial 1953 Bowman, Graig (or Craig, if you prefer the error card) Nettles 1981 Fleer and a T-206 of Deacon Phillippe

Quick thoughts on prices

- Do the prices for 1952 Topps Mantle cards make sense to you? Mantle was certainly a great player, but there have been many great players, his rookie card was the 1951 Bowman and his 1952 hi-numbered card was “double” printed. He wasn’t a choir boy, but neither was Ruth. My take on it is that he is a good-looking symbol of the 1950s, like Marilyn Monroe and Elvis. His 1952 Topps is the most prominent memory of him, but it still doesn’t make sense.
- What would make sense would be higher prices for Stan Musial’s 1953 Bowman. Musial’s 1953 card generally costs less than even a Pee Wee Reese and a lot less than a Mantle in the same set. Although it wasn’t his rookie card, it was the only large card of him available until 1958. He was a great player on a good-looking card, and he was known as a modest and generous person. Jefferson Burdick’s 1960 *The American Card Catalog* had the 1953 Musial valued separately at 25 cents and all 1952 high numbers, including Mantle, at 30 cents. Musial’s mistakes were not playing in New York and not hitting prodigious home runs.
- Fleer and Donruss cards from 1981 are now more than 35 years old. How much older do they need to get to be worth much of anything?
- Maybe those tobacco cards weren’t all that cheap in 1910. You could get one T-206 card for 5 cents in 1910, however 5 cents in 1910 is the equivalent of \$1.25 today which isn’t all that cheap for one lousy card. But, I forgot, you also got 10 unfiltered cigarettes back then which would cost you an arm, leg and lung today.

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