



Top row: exhibit cards from sets of Hot Rods and Custom Cars, Sports Cars and Weird-Ohs Cars. Bottom row: New Jet Planes, Action in Korea and The Beatles



Bundles of Fun for a Penny

By George Vrechek

Since 1979, Paul Marchant has been moving around non-sport arcade cards produced by the Exhibit Supply Company (ESCO). Marchant bought the ESCO assets from company owner Chet Gore in 1979. Gore had been moving around the same cardboard in Chicago since he started at ESCO in 1937. Therefore, Gore had been looking at arcade cards for a mere 42 years compared to Marchant's 46 years.

Marchant was a teacher, card collector and card shop owner. In 1979 he purchased ESCO's photo files, plates, card inventory, presses, cutters, tools and arcade machines. Using the ESCO photo files, Marchant produced two sets of baseball cards in 1980 and labeled them as such. He sold most of the ESCO assets years ago, however the non-sport arcade cards were an exception. According to Marchant, "From the early 1980s through recently I sold very few exhibit non-sport sets. The one set I had several bundles of was Army/Navy from the WWII era, so I sold those and virtually nothing else."

What is left today

In February 2025, Marchant started unbundling all the uncirculated, original non-sport issues and selling them through his eBay store. Most cards are in the buy-it-now format with shipping included in the price.

A few full sets of cards are still intact, however there are many partial sets and singles. Marchant commented, “There were two main sources of what I have - the permanent Exhibit archives (cream-colored backs) and left-overs from opening and sorting bundles from the regular 1979 inventory into sets (white backs).”



Bandleaders and recording artists were popular. A few sets had descriptions or biographies on the backs. Over the 78-year history of the company, photos of models that would pass the scrutiny of any censors were always hot numbers.

Always inexpensive, amusing cards

ESCO produced machines to sell to amusement arcade operators starting in 1901. Shortly after J. Frank Meyer took over as president in 1907, ESCO was also designing and printing cards to use in their card machines. Cards originally sold for a penny. ESCO’s array of cards included about every imaginable subject that could be produced cheaply. Subjects included “art models” and novelty cards aimed at young men and women. In ESCO’s heyday, they would run 16 or 32 cards on a plate and put them in bundles of 1,000 (actually 1,024 cards) to sell to arcade operators for as little as \$3.85 per bundle.

Marchant's inventory tells us something about what subjects would attract "players" and when. Machines often had two side-by-side coin slots to purchase two similar sets of cards but with one side geared toward men and the other toward women.

ESCO would add or subtract subjects to popular sets to be able to advertise something new each year in their brochures sent to operators. Cropping, coloring or print notations might be altered between years as well.

A 1946 ESCO brochure, that Marchant has, listed ESCO's biggest set sellers in descending order - Film Celebrities, Earl Carroll Vanities and Art Portraits (scantily clad ladies), License Bureau, Roy Rogers Buckaroos, Gloom Chasers, Army/Navy Comics, Future Partner, Looney Lyrics, Ideal Love Mate and finally Baseball Players and Prize Fighters. The top 10 "draw like a magnet" per ESCO's brochure.

Hindsight is 20/20, but you could spend your one-cent on a Gloom Chaser card or a baseball player. Williams, DiMaggio, Greenberg and Feller were among the 32 cards in the 1946 baseball set.



Bob Livingston in color, John Wayne, former MLBer Chuck Connors and Richard Boone were in cowboy sets which have been among Marchant's personal favorites.

Cream and white card stock

From 1968 until ESCO's end in 1979, the cardboard stock was white. Prior to 1968, the stock was cream-colored and has now aged to various hues of the color of old, cheap cardboard. The cards in Marchant's inventory are about 50/50 between white and cream backs meaning that about half of the cards were printed before 1968 and half between 1968 and 1979, but all cards are ESCO originals.

While there have been counterfeit reprints on white stock of some baseball stars from the 1950s, the non-sport exhibits have not attracted such shenanigans since original, mint cards like these are still inexpensive. Had ESCO not been concerned about litigation from players and Topps after 1968, they would have probably printed baseball cards from their

files on white stock since the baseball cards were still relatively popular. However, Gore confided to collector Bob Solon that the cost of litigation wasn't worth it. Therefore, it is appropriate to be wary of any white-backed sports exhibits (with the exception of the 1974 and 1977 ESCO Hall of Fame sets), but white-backed non-sports are okay.

Marchant stated, "At one point I went through several of the yearly (ESCO) sale flyers and compiled a list of when certain titles were issued." ESCO records didn't leave many clues, and there don't seem to be any ESCO employees we can ask to fill in any blanks. Most of these sets continued to be reprinted whenever ordered. The 1961 ESCO sales brochure was the last one printed and used until 1979. Marchant remembers that in 1979 Gore, his wife and one employee were working in the old plant along the westside "L" tracks in Chicago printing a few sets for customers and getting ready to retire. Local collector/dealers like Solon and Audrey Gold had been visiting ESCO and buying bricks of sport arcade cards from Gore in the 1970s. It took me until 2016 to visit the old ESCO plants. There were no old cards in the alley by that time.



The bulk of Marchant's non-sport exhibits went into a warehouse in the mid-1980s along with the inventory from his three card stores. In 2014 he closed the warehouse and moved about 10,000 exhibit cards to his home. At age 78, he decided it was time to sell and listed cards on his eBay store in 2025.

Paul Marchant, 2025

The 400 listings Marchant had when I talked to him included cards from the following sets as well as many others.

All-Star Cowboys 4-in-1	Hot Rods & Custom Cars	Sports Cars 1970-71
Atomic Laugh Bombs	1972	True Love Letters for Men
Beach Bunnies	Magic Tricks	True Love Letters for
Bikini Bathers	Monkeyshines	Women
Blind Dates for Men	New Art Portraits	TV Cowboys 1960s
Blind Dates for Women	New Jet Planes	TV Stars Female 1960s
Block Busters	New License Bureau for	TV Stars Male 1960s
Film Stars Male	Men	Weird-Ohs (Cars) 1972
Film Stars Female	New License Bureau for	Western Aces
Future Partner for Men	Women	Wrestling 1960s
Future Partner for	Outdoor Girls	Your Ideal Love Mate for
Women	Palm Fortune for Men	Men
Gloom Chasers	Palm Fortune for Women	Your Ideal Love Mate for
Hobo the Bum Fortune	Recording Artists	Women
Teller	Male 1960s	
Hot Rods & Custom Cars	Recording Artists	
1960s	Female 1960s	



ESCO created artwork for their novelty cards. From their style, it would appear the artists didn't work much after the 1940s. Holes punched in the cards meant that the cards were part of Gore's file copies.

The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Elvis, John Wayne, Marlon Brando, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry and Liberace are in Marchant's bundles of cards. You can also find corny cards, outdated topics, sexist comments and jokes of the day in sets that seemed to live on forever even with copyright dates going back to the 1920s. The Weird-Ohs cars from 1972 are interesting in that the artwork has that '70s look and preceded Topps 1973 Wacky Packages.

Marchant's eBay store is found by going to "advanced" search on eBay and doing a search of the seller's user ID of marchantcards. One of these days, he will run out of exhibits before another 46 years fly by. All the cards shown are in his current inventory.

George Vrechek can be reached at vrechek@ameritech.net.

This article appeared in the August 11, 2025, issue of The Wrapper. Our thanks to them for allowing us to post the article on the OBC library page.