

Football Fifty Years Later



by George G. Vrechek

Cards are the same size but the players aren't

Card backs and football clichés examined

By
George Vrechek



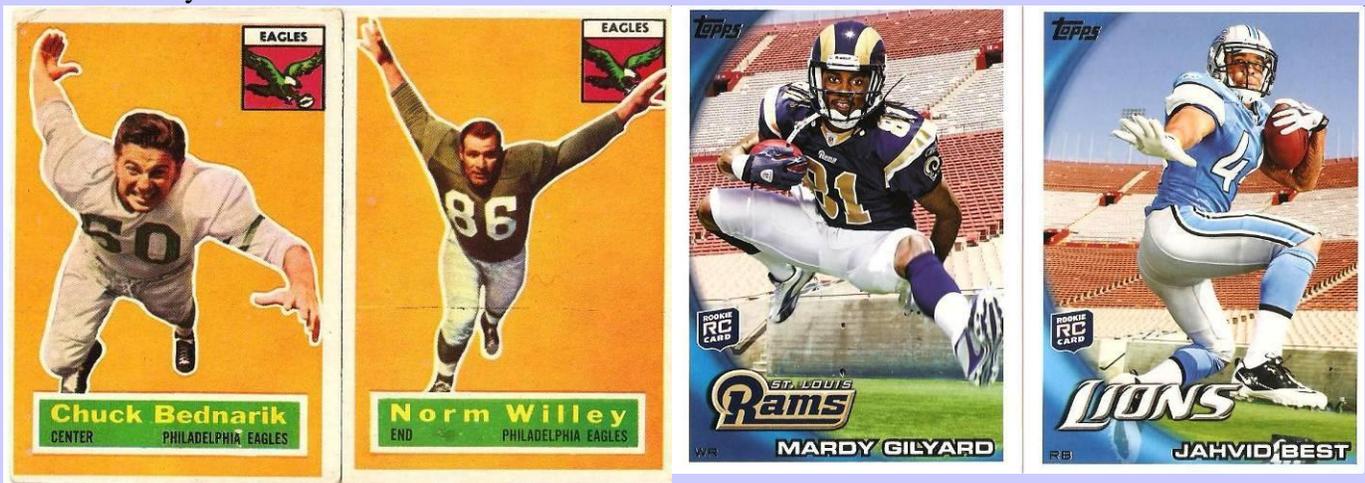
Big men 50 years ago included professional wrestler and school teacher Sid Youngelman at 6'5" 262 lbs., "towering" Doug Atkins 6'8" 255 lbs., \$100 waiver man Big Daddy Lipscomb 6'6" 288 lbs., and Art Donovan of the "irrepressible humor" at 6'3" 262 lbs. Today, the linemen are even bigger, a lot bigger, although they have trouble getting depicted on Topps cards.

When I pick up cards to add to my sets, I always read the backs of the cards before putting them away. Occasionally I find that a previous owner has even left his name on the back of the card for me, as was the practice of hobby pioneer Buck Barker who would pencil his name on the back of his cards. But most of the time I find things I never knew about the player pictured. Some card backs are filled with statistics and others have biographical information. Sometimes it is pretty obvious that the person writing the card bio didn't have much information to use. For example, football linemen don't get to touch the ball very often and therefore it is hard to gas on about their stats, although in recent years sacks, batted balls, hurries, and other forms of quarterback harassment have been tracked. Still, linemen are hard to write about other than to acknowledge that they are "big."

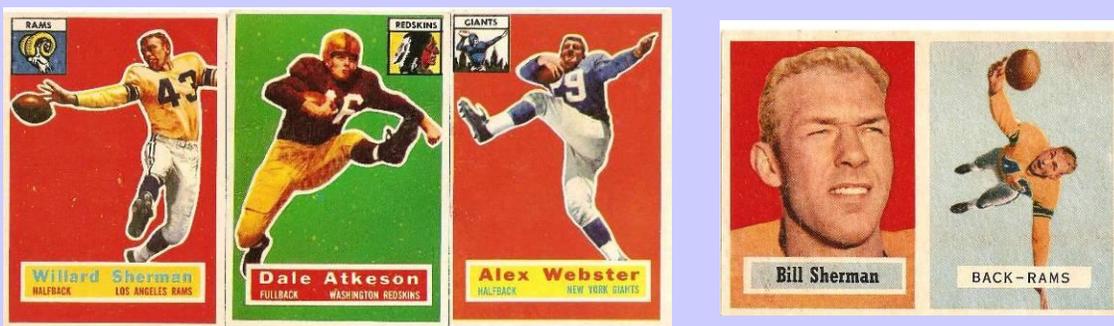
1961 Fleer Football

Recently I attended an old-fashioned card show run by Mark Macrae called the 26th Annual St. Leander's Sports Collectors Show, in San Leandro, California, near Oakland. I enjoyed talking with the dealers and collectors and picked up 24 Fleer football cards from 1961 to chip away at that set. While early 60s baseball is relatively easy to find, the football cards from the 60s are not plentiful. My own collection of cards from my youth consisted of about 95% baseball to 5% football.

In 1961, Fleer bravely featured 220 AFL and NFL players on their football cards. Fleer produced cards of AFL players in 1960, 1962 and 1963. However by 1964 Fleer was back on the sidelines having been legally scooted off the football and baseball card playing fields by Topps lawyers. The fronts of the 1961 Fleers at least look like the player is on a football field someplace, an improvement over the solid color backgrounds on the 1960 Topps and Fleers and the parking lot backgrounds on the 1964 Philadelphia cards of the Cleveland Browns. The player photos were all posed shots, nothing in much action. There was no one flying through the air like depicted on a 1957 Bill Sherman or 1956 Norm Willey card, but the helmet-less player photos enabled you to see what they looked like.



Topps players could fly through the air 50 years ago and they still do today.



Turning to the player bios on the 1961 Fleers, I found them filled with amusing sports clichés but also recording how much has changed in football over the past 50 years. Players who were described as “huge” in 1961 would probably be described as “undersized” by today’s football scouts. Linemen seemed to top out at about 250 pounds in 1961, whereas today they seem to start at 300 pounds. I thought I’d take a closer look at the players and the card bios.

Football Clichés

The Fleer writers had a knack for stringing together gridiron jargon. Some phrases employed a military analogy; others didn’t really add much other than filling up space on the back of the cards. Excerpts included:

- Joined the receiving corps
- Constant threat
- Speed and deception
- Strong and powerful
- Sure-fingered Iowa native
- Fast with all the moves and sure hands (used at least twice)
- Sure-handed fleet flanker who is a threat to go all the way anytime the ball is pumped his way
- Excellent recovery instincts
- Bouncy, jolting runner
- Slashing halfback
- Heavy duty carrier
- Stalwart lineman
- A student of line play
- Versatile star
- Magician at picking apart enemy defenses
- One of the great field generals of football history
- Ferocity marks his line plunging
- He’ll do a job wherever they put him (Apparently he never went home in a snit.)

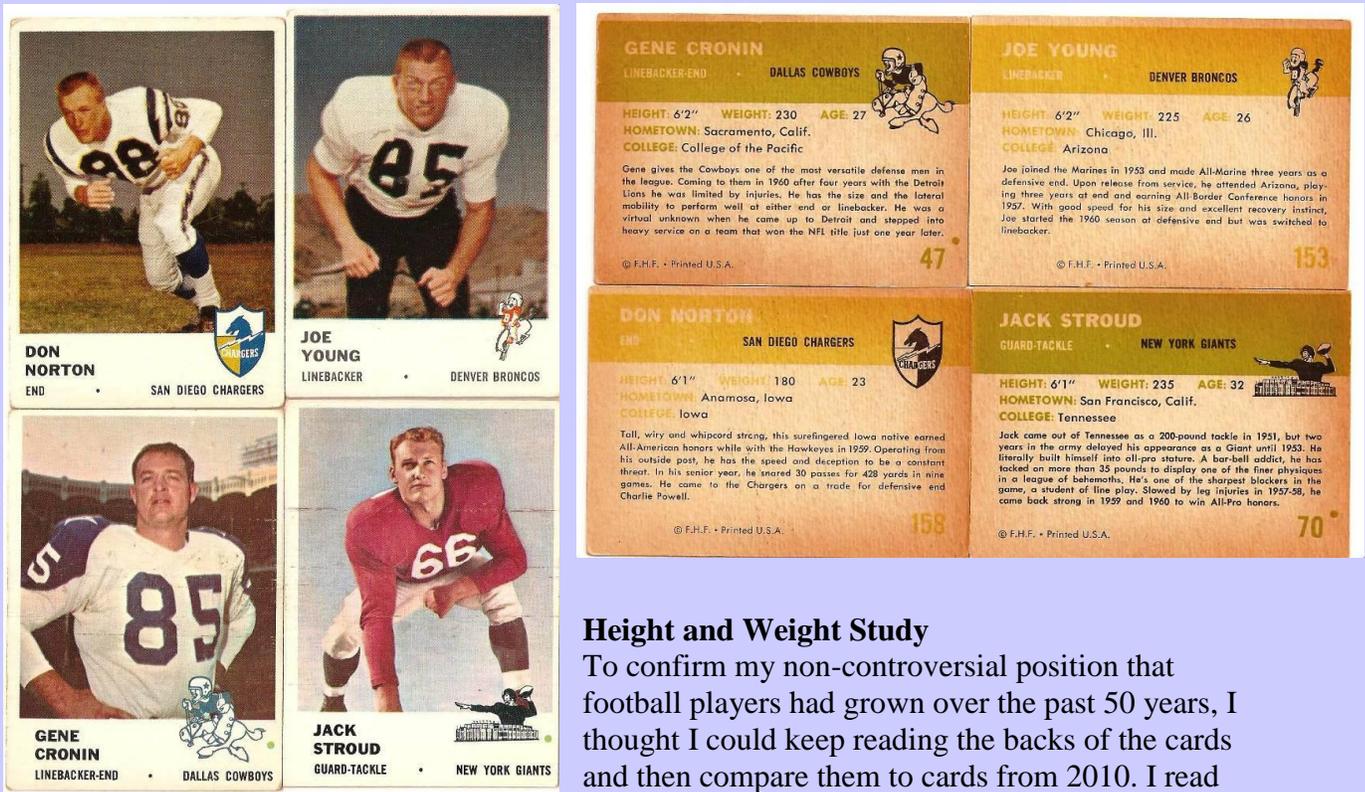
You could string a number of these together for an offensive player as in: “He showed an affinity for a thrown ball each time the Vols went into the air.” On defense you could say: “He’s a rugged type, known as a sure tackler and a tenacious tracker of potential receivers.” It all reminded of me of an assignment I had in high school. The athletic director grabbed another lineman and me to write bios for a printed program featuring the captains of basketball teams from other schools. The information provided was sparse, but we were instructed to write a two inch paragraph – and we did. If the player wasn’t going to tell us about his hobbies, we added some for him, as in “Bert is a noted stamp collector and enjoys gardening in his spare time.”

Size Matters

Gene Cronin of the 1961 Cowboys was 6’2” and 230 pounds. He was described on his 1961 Fleer card #47 as having “the size and the lateral mobility to perform well at either end or linebacker.” Jack Stroud, a guard-tackle for the Giants, was 6’1” and 235 pounds. His bio (1961 Fleer #70) noted that “he came out of Tennessee as a 200 pound tackle in 1951. He literally built himself into an All-Pro stature. A bar-bell addict, he has tacked on more than 35 pounds.” The 2010 Chicago Bears have Tommy Harris a 6’3” 295 pound defensive tackle who has been described as “undersized” at times. They also have 6’7” 283 pound defensive end Julius Peppers. Obviously the players have packed it on over the years. I pictured 6’5” 230 pound quarterback

Peyton Manning towering over his father Archie Manning who quarterbacked in the 1970s. My initial impression was that the players at every position were bigger, faster, and stronger.

The backs of the 1961 Fleers provided tidbits: Gene Cronin had “the size and lateral mobility,” Joe Young had “good speed for his size and excellent recovery instinct,” Don Norton was “tall, wiry, and whipcord strong,” and Jack Stroud was “a bar-bell addict.”



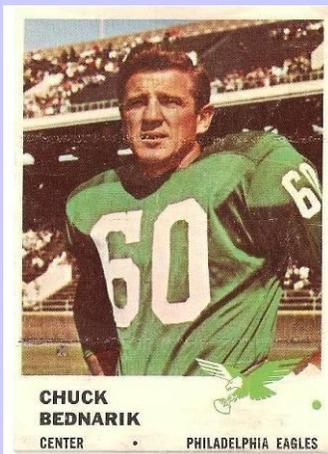
Height and Weight Study

To confirm my non-controversial position that football players had grown over the past 50 years, I thought I could keep reading the backs of the cards and then compare them to cards from 2010. I read about 6'1" 180 pound end Don Norton (1961 Fleer #158) being “tall, wiry and whipcord strong” and 6'2" 225 pound linebacker Joe Young (1961 Fleer #153) having “good speed for his (large) size.” Fullback Doug Cline at 210 pounds (1961 Fleer #169) was reported to be “carrying his poundage solidly but lithely on his 6'2" frame.”

However, football card issuers are interested in selling cards and star players are easier to sell than the “rugged, stalwart” linemen. If I used just football cards for my analysis, I would be missing many players including virtually all of the special team players. A better source for comparisons was going to the complete rosters of players. Fifty years seemed like a nice round number. I decided to look at the size of players in 1960 and compare them to the size of players in 2010. Thanks to the natural tendency of sports fans to keep track of sports statistics, fantasy football, and perhaps a few people interested in gambling, there are a number of sources available to get height and weight information on football teams. One source I used was <http://www.pro-football-reference.com/teams/>. Rather than looking at every team and every player, I took the easy way out and compared three teams from 1960 and the same three teams in 2010. I picked the Chicago Bears, since I live in Chicago, the Green Bay Packers, since SCD's editorial offices are in Wisconsin, and the New York Jets (formerly the Titans) because “if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere” and we needed some AFL/AFC representation. Readers are welcome to expand the study to see if they can uncover any significant differences from my findings.

Football in 1960

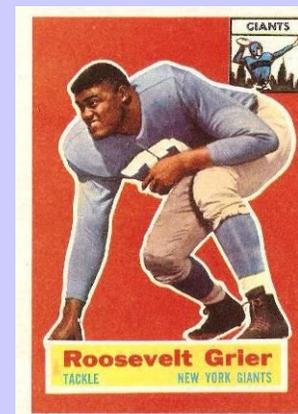
In looking at players by position, I found you have to make some adjustments because of the changes in the game. When I played high school football in the early 1960s, they didn't allow platooning. You were expected to play both ways. Defenses were frequently patterned after the Oklahoma 5-4 with 5 guys on the line and 4 linebackers. They kept our quarterback out of the fray on defense by positioning him at safety. There was no "special team" for kicking, the same 11 stayed out there. One of the halfbacks did all the kicking. On offense, we had two halfbacks, a fullback and a quarterback. One end sometimes played split away from the rest of the gang and the quarterback would throw a few passes in (almost) every game. Using a shotgun formation would be a sign of pure desperation. We wore high-topped shoes and one or two bars on our face masks (the freshmen got varsity equipment hand-me-downs and therefore no face masks). No one had pads on their arms, gloves on their hands, a mouth piece, or a protective cup. Blockers kept their hands pinned to their chests. Tacklers were coached to spear with their heads. I played in steel toed shoes that weighed a ton. We used longer cleats for muddy fields which were more the norm than the exception. We never played on anything artificial. This brand of plodding along football was so exciting that 91,328 people showed up in Soldier Field, Chicago, to see our last game of the season. Seriously, I'm not making this up, except that the shoes didn't really weigh a ton.



The pro players had about the same equipment we had. They had gone to full platooning in the 50s; however veteran Chuck Bednarik of the Eagles still played both ways. His 1961 Fleer card mentioned that he was "hepped up by the title (1960 NFL championship) and has forgotten about quitting football." Kickers were expected to play some other position as well. "Ends" were still just "ends" and it was a little hard to decipher who was really a wide receiver, a tight end, or even a defensive end. Safeties, cornerbacks, nickel backs, long-snappers, wide receivers, blocking fullbacks, and running backs were also a little hard to compare between 1960 and 2010, but I did my best to line up the players by position. I was surprised by some of the results.

Linemen Keep Growing

The biggest lineman I found from the 1960 sample was Joe Katchik of the Titans at 6'9" and 290 pounds. Rosey Grier's football card described him as a giant at 6'5" and 284 pounds. Les Bingaman of the 1950s Detroit Lions was remembered as a behemoth at 272 pounds. Big Daddy Lipscomb was 6'6" and 284 pounds. Lipscomb's 1961 Fleer card stated that he "rushes in, scoops up every opponent in sight, sorts them out and when he comes to the ball carrier, keeps him." However, the average height and weight for an offensive tackle in 1960 (based on my three team study) was 6' 1" and 250 pounds. The table below shows the results for each of the positions. The smallest current offensive lineman I found was Olin Kreutz at 292 pounds; 22% of the players on the three 2010 rosters were over 300 pounds. Packer linemen pictured on my old



football cards and representative of the league in 1960 were guards Ron Kramer (6'3" 234 pounds), Fuzzy Thurston (6' 247 pounds), center Jim Ringo (6'1" 232 pounds), and tackle Forrest Gregg (6'4" 249 pounds).

On defense the story is a little different. The guys today who are expected to stop the run are really huge e.g. the Ravens have a 354-pound rookie defensive tackle, Terrence Cody. The guys expected to get to the passer are big but quick e.g. the #2 overall pick in 2010, Lion pass rusher Ndamukong Suh, is a mere 307 pounds and played soccer. The size increase on the defensive line was lower than on the offensive line as shown in my table. I began to see the effect of the need for speed as well as size at some positions today.

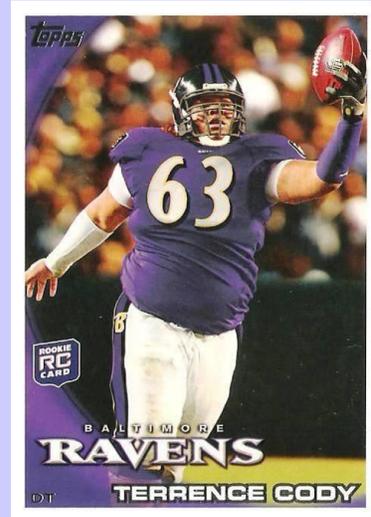
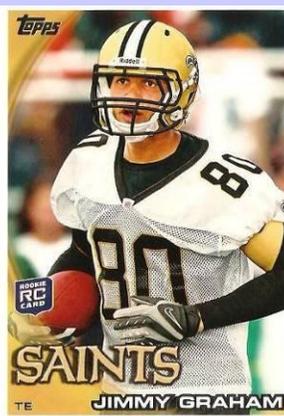
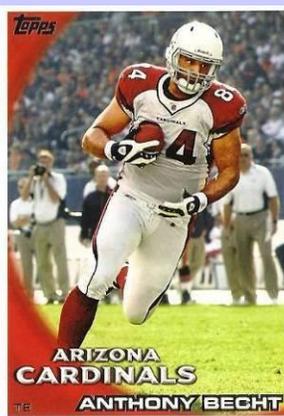
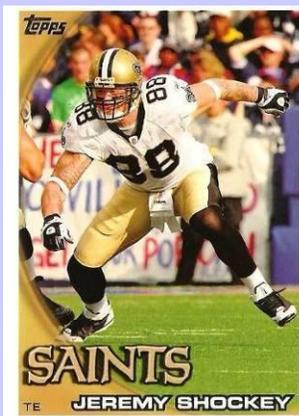


Table of Average Weights by Position

	1960	2010	% Change
Offensive tackle	250	319	28%
Guard	243	312	28%
Center	243	301	24%
Defensive tackle	256	311	21%
Defensive end	248	291	17%
Tight end	222	258	16%
Fullback	213	246	15%
Quarterback	202	224	11%
Linebacker	227	245	8%
Running back	199	213	7%
Defensive backs	193	198	3%
Wide receivers	206	202	(2%)
Entire team	222	247	11%

Tight Ends and Fullbacks

Tight end Ron Kramer of the 1960 Packers was 6'3" and 234 pounds. Greg Olsen of the 2010 Bears is 6'5" and 255 pounds. Fullbacks have changed considerably since 1960 with memorable "crushing ball carriers" like Rick Casares (6'2" 226 pounds), Jim Taylor (6' 214 pounds) and "opera fan and hamburger spots" owner Alan Ameche (6'1" 217 pounds) giving way to obscure blocking fullbacks today. If I gave you their names, it still wouldn't help you picture them. Fullbacks and tight ends have only grown a lousy 15% in 50 years.



Tight ends today are on the tall side. Shockey is 6'5", Becht is 6'6", and Graham inches up on the back of his card from 6'6" in the bio to 6'7" on his height and weight line.

Quarterbacks

While the proto-typical pro quarterback has been thought of as a towering “stalwart” peering over the pocket and “rifling” missiles to receivers, we are seeing more mobile and lighter quarterbacks. This is certainly the case at the college level with the shotgun spread formations. In the pros you have tall guys like the Mannings but also smaller scramblers like Drew Brees and Michael Vick. Quarterbacks in my study grew just 11% from 202 pounds and 6’1” to 224 pounds and 6’2”. Bart Starr was 6’1” and 197 pounds. Ed Brown of the Bears was 6’2” and 200 pounds. “Little magician” Eddie Le Baron was only 5’7” and 160 pounds. My hunch is that some of the heights listed from players today, especially quarterbacks, have been inflated to help their marketability. This probably went on in 1960 as well though, and I have chosen to assume that players and teams lie about their heights and weights like they always have and to the same extent statistically. A recent study of this concluded that NFL starting quarterbacks average 6’3”. Archie Manning was listed at 6’3” as well; consequently Peyton and Eli don’t really tower over the elusive Archie.

Quarterbacks - Ed Brown: 6’2” 200 lbs, 40-year-old Charley Conerly: 6’1” 185 lbs., Bobby Layne: 6’1” 210 lbs. Some of the boys today like Roethlisberger, Manning, and Rivers are around 6’5”, but many are closer to the height of the quarterbacks 50 years ago at 6’ to 6’2”



Linebackers and Running Backs

The need for speed at linebacker and running back seems to have dampened the increase in size. Linebackers and running backs have only increased in weight by about 8% over the 50 years. Linebackers of yesteryear’s cards included Ray Nitschke (6’3” 235) and Bill George (6’2” 237). Today we think of Ray Lewis at (6’1” 250) and Brian Urlacher (6’4” 258). All of these numbers seem a little larger than life to me.

Running backs in 1960 included Paul Horning at 6’2” and 215 pounds, but also runners like Willie Galimore at 6’1” and 187 pounds. Jump back 80 years and you find “giant” Bronko Nagurski was 6’2” and 226 pounds but Red Grange was more typical at 6’ and 180 pounds. Today we have stars like Adrian Peterson (6’1” 217) and LaDainian Tomlinson (5’10” 215.) The running backs are a little bigger, and my wild hunch is that they are a lot faster.

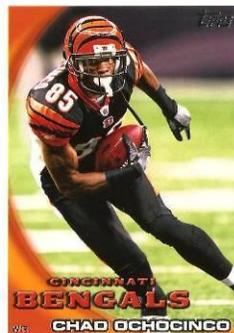
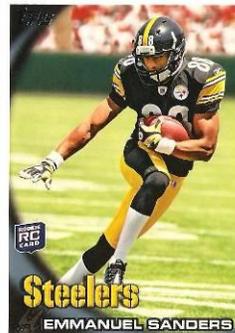
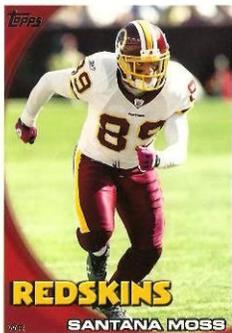
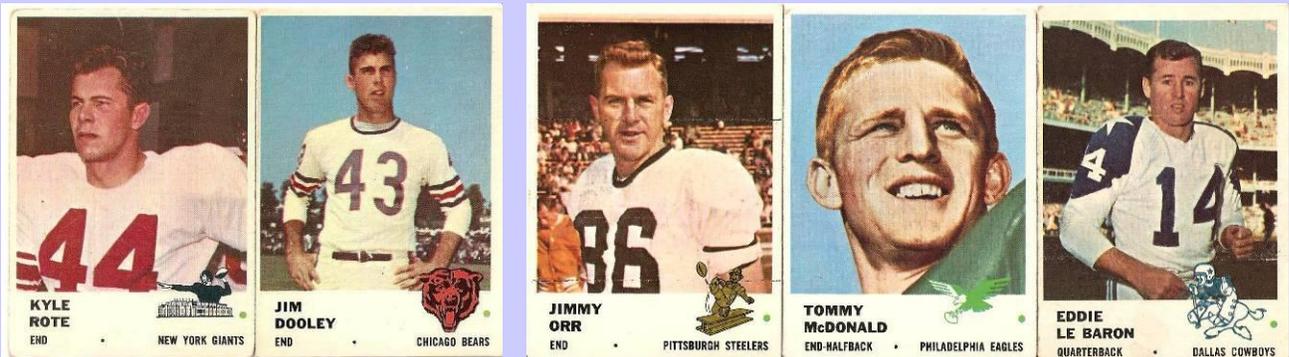
Alan Ameche was related to actor Don Ameche and at 6'1" 217 lbs was an "avid opera fan."
 "Glamor man" Billy Cannon was 6'1" 210 lbs



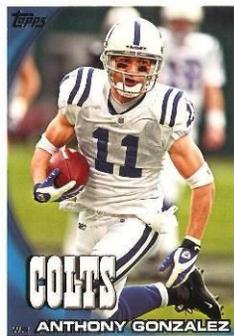
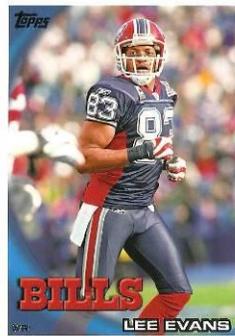
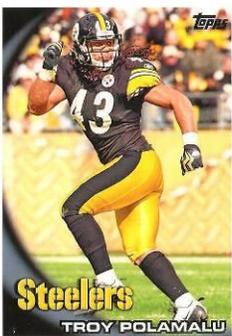
Wide Receivers and Defensive Backs

Nowhere is my initial impression about size escalation more off than at the skill positions of wide receiver and defensive back. There are not only faster players at these positions today, but there are a lot more of them. In 1960 four defensive backs would do the trick most of the time. Today you see 5, 6, and even 7 backs line up to defend the pass. Speed is also important on special teams and some of these same players serve double duty on special teams. Defensive backs were all lumped together in my study because of the difficulty of sorting out safeties from cornerbacks. Defensive backs only added 3% in weight over 50 years. Defenders of 1960 included Emlen Tunnel at 6'1" and 187 pounds. Today you see Peanut Tillman and Charles Woodson at around 6'1" and 200 pounds.

While teams today would like the tall, fast receiver, they'll take fast with good vertical leaping over just plain tall, if need be. Randy Moss is 6'4" and 210 pounds, Braylon Edwards is 6'3" and 214 pounds, but there are also a lot of guys like Devin Hester, Johnny Knox, and Santonio Holmes out there at around 5'11" and 185 pounds, maybe. Receivers in 1960 included little guys like Don Maynard (6') and Johnny Morris (5'10") but also "ranging ball chasers" like Harlan Hill (6'3" 199 pounds), Max McGee (6'3" 205 pounds) and Boyd Dowler (6'5" 224 pounds.) When you add them all together I found wide receivers decreased in weight by 2%.



Receivers Kyle Rote: 6' 200 lbs.,
 Jim Dooley: 6'4" 198 lbs
 The little guys: Jimmy Orr 6' 190 lbs.,
 Tommy McDonald 5'10" 182 lbs.,
 and veteran hurler Eddie LeBaron 5'7" 160. Receivers and defensive backs are a little bigger today, but not much.



Team Averages

As a result of modest increase in players' weights at the skill positions, an increase in the size of rosters, and the increase in the number of backs and special team players, I found that the average weight of all the players had only increased 11% (222 pounds to 247 pounds) between 1960 and 2010.

2010 Cards

Before wrapping up this weighty exercise I read some of the backs of the 2010 Topps football cards. The cards are the same size as they were 50 years ago, but the players aren't. Terrence Cody was known "for his great size and strength." Matthew Stafford "showed toughness, comeback-engineering poise and an unlimited ceiling. His brightest moment in the sun was etc etc." Marcus Easley was a "tall, fluid wide receiver prospect." I guess some things don't change and that is the business of writing football clichés on the backs of trading cards.

George Vrechek recalled that his 1960 football shoes weighed a ton

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net.

A big OBC thank you to [Sports Collectors Digest \(SCD\)](#) for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site.

