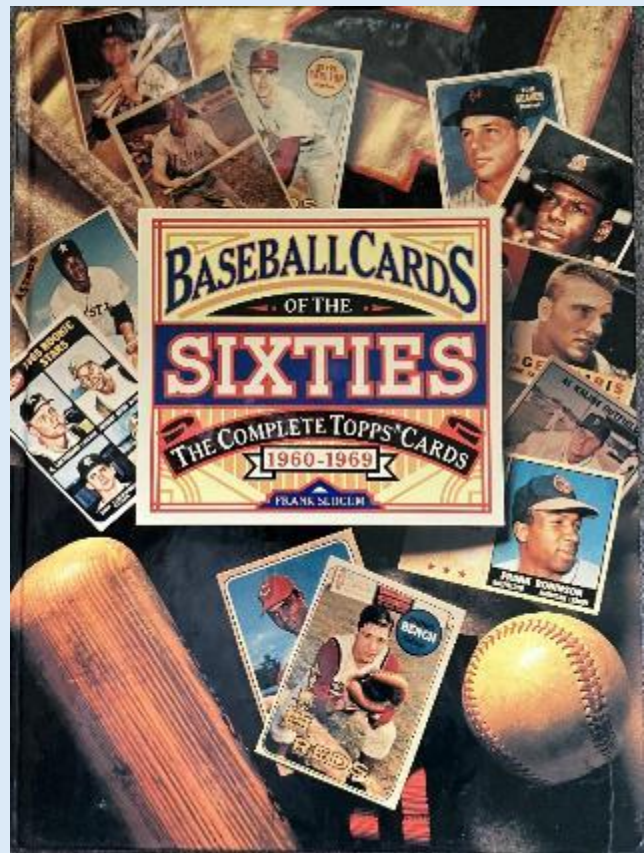
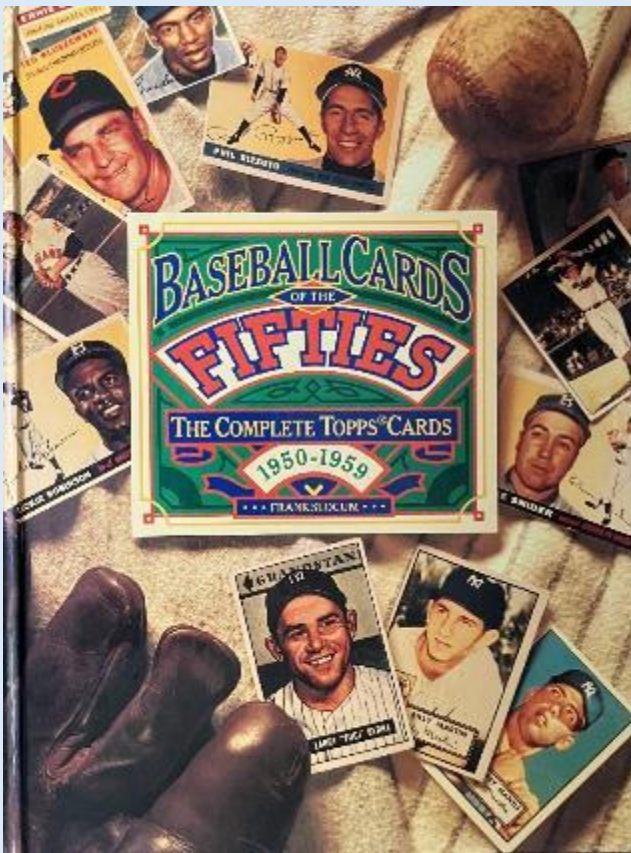




Necessity can be the mother of invention when it comes to baseball cards

By George Vrechek

Sy Berger's daughter Maxine Berger Bienstock kindly sent me copies she had of the 1994 Simon & Shuster books "Baseball Cards of the Fifties" and "Baseball Cards of the Sixties" by Frank Slocum with an introduction by Sy Berger and forewords by Willie Mays. Maxine provided background information I used to write an article on Sy Berger shortly before his death in 2014. I re-read the books recently and enjoyed looking at the photos of each of the regular Topps and Bowman cards produced during the era.

Sy and Gloria Berger in the 1990s. Photo courtesy of Maxine Berger Bienstock.

While writing this article, I checked in with Maxine, who has been very fond of her dad's involvement with Topps' history. As I talked with her, I could picture Sy Berger and Topps figuring out how to



select cards that would be popular and profitable while hurdling the obstacles in getting player agreements. Maxine reports that her mother Gloria Berger, 101, is still doing quite well and continues to follow the Yankees.

400 Players to choose from

Major League active rosters have been limited to 25 players since 1910. The league held at 16 teams until expanding to 20 teams from 1961 to 1968. Thus, there were 400 players to choose from to be on baseball cards until 1961. Bowman had the market to itself in 1950 and issued 252 cards or 63% of the available players. They could forget the fringe players, throw in a few managers and feature the best of the players they had under contracts.

In 1951, Bowman increased their set to 324 cards, but Topps entered the market and introduced their own 104 red and blue back “taffy” cards, as Sy Berger called them.

The card wars

In 1952, Topps issued a 407-card set - huge in size and quantity compared to Bowman’s 252-card set. Players signed contracts with Bowman, Topps or both, creating good billable time for lawyers representing each side. Because of the litigation, Topps became more conservative between 1953 and 1955 on who they depicted on their cards. The invention by necessity for both companies was to create cards in their collective productions which exceeded the number of players on major league rosters.

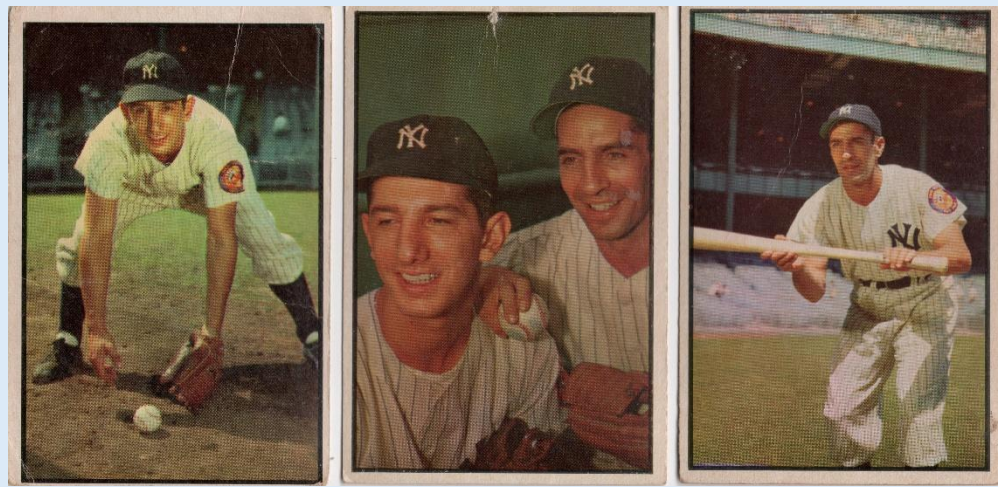
Managers and coaches had been on cards before but not in the increased quantities during the cardboard war years. Youngsters weren’t usually delighted finding such retired players in their 1953 gum packs. In 1954 and 1955 Topps and Bowman resorted to including players who enjoyed a cup of coffee in the majors at best.

The companies came up with set-filling ideas that started as a trickle and gradually became a deluge. Even when Topps had the market to itself after 1955, they kept increasing set sizes with special cards. Let’s look at when these cards were introduced. You might call them rookie cards of new card concepts.

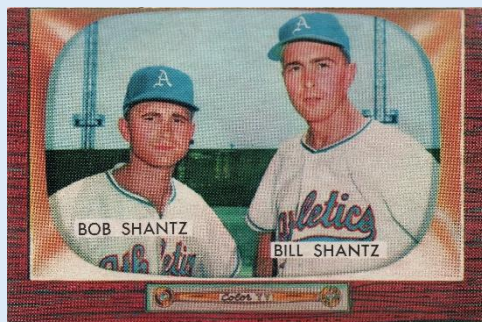
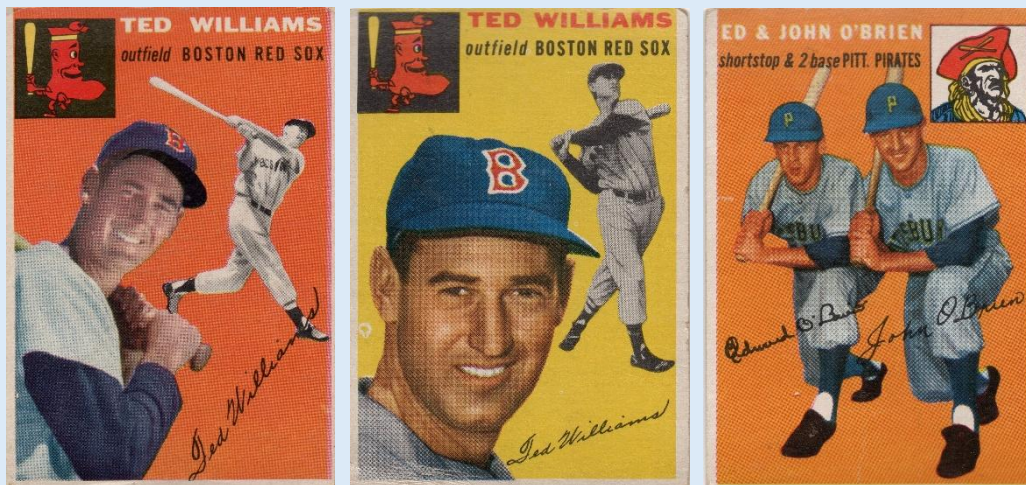
Multi-player cards – 1953 and 1954



Bowman's 1953 Color set included a three-player card of Berra, Bauer and a sliver of Mantle and a card of Martin with Rizzuto. All five players had individual cards as well.



I remember being excited to see identical twins Eddie and Johnny O'Brien on one 1954 Topps card, although I was puzzled as to how I might use them both in our dice baseball games; both where in the military all year anyway. Maybe Topps was making room for the two Ted Williams cards in the set? You could tell that Topps was stretching by including 25 coaches and managers in their 250-card 1954 set. Bowman fired back with two brothers, Bobby and Billy Shantz, on three cards in 1955.



EDWARD JOSEPH & JOHN THOMAS O'BRIEN

PITTS. PIRATES

Height: 5' 9"

Weight: 165

Bat Right

Throw Right

Home: South Amboy, N. J.

Born: December 11, 1930

shortstop & 2nd base Eddie and Johnny are identical twins. They made a successful jump from the college campus to become the Pirates' regular keystone combination last year. Johnny had the third best Fielding Average among regular N.L. Second Basemen. He took part in 48 Double Plays and Eddie in 39, most of them together.

MAJOR LEAGUE BATTING RECORD

Games	At Bat	Runs	Hits	Doubles	Tripples	H. R.	R.B.I.	B. Avg.	P. O.	Assists	Errors	F. Avg.
*Edu	89	261	21	62	5	0	14	.238	122	207	23	.935
John	89	279	28	69	13	2	22	.247	172	210	7	.982

*These are lifetime records.

FIELDING RECORD

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INSIDE BASEBALL

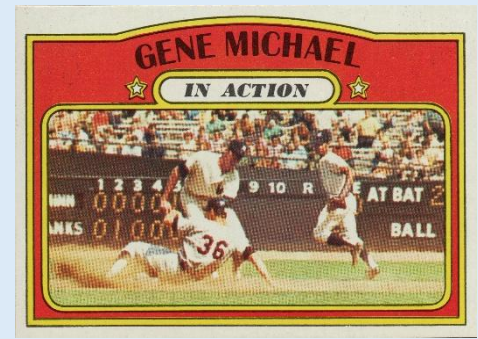
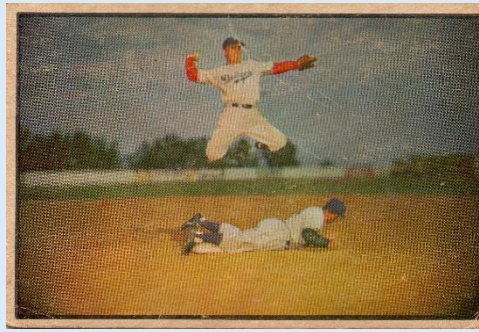
The O'Briens are the first twins on the same Big League club!

They were All-America basketball stars at Seattle University!

They became a star double play combination after Eddie was switched from the outfield to 2nd base!

In-action card – 1953

In-action photos of players as the main image on regular cards prior to 1972 are not easy to find.

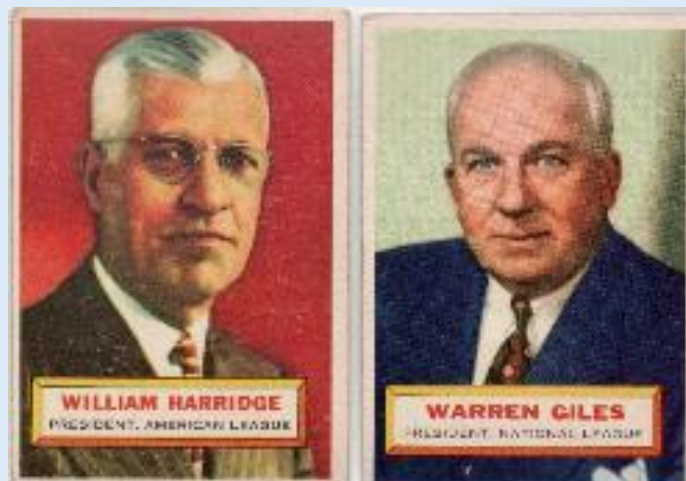
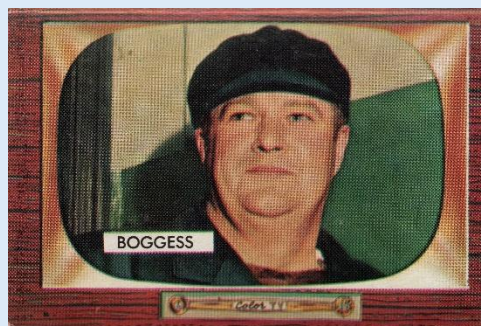


I nominate Bowman's 1953 Pee Wee Reese as the "rookie" for this category, although it wasn't until 1972 that action cards were in addition to a regular card.

It was easier to get shots of the many faces needed if a photographer posed the players. Sometimes they would pose as if they were in action, but a collector could quickly tell that they weren't. Old Judge photographers in the 1880s had players pose with balls hanging from strings to accommodate the cameras. Equipment improved for taking action shots, but, even in the early 1970s, the photographic results were sometimes distant and fuzzy. Reese's 1953 card image was likely posed as well, but he couldn't have spent much time hanging in the air over second base.

Umpires - 1955

If you are going to play those dice games with baseball cards, you might need umpires and Bowman filled out their 320-card 1955 set with 31 of the least popular people on the field.



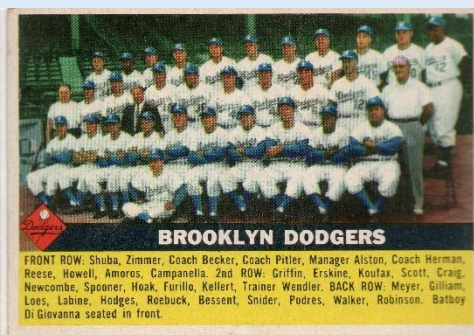
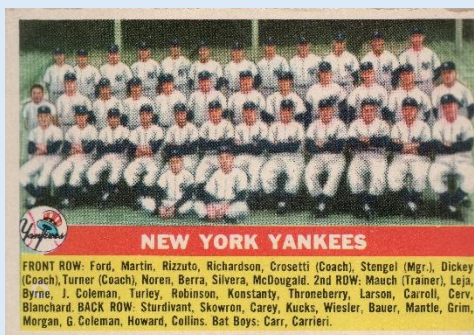
Executives - 1956

After purchasing Bowman in 1956, Topps had their pick of the 400 active players to include in their sets.

Topps soon created sets using more special cards to boost sales. League presidents Warren Giles and William Harridge appeared on cards in 1956. Their inclusion likely earned yawns from collectors but brownie points for Topps.

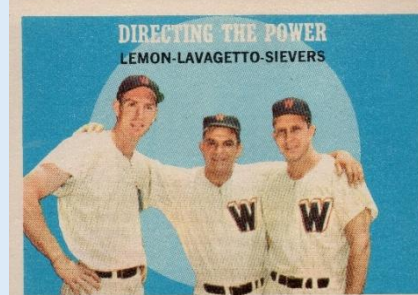
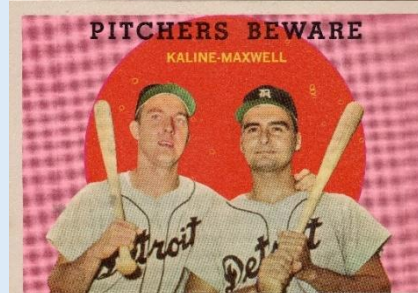
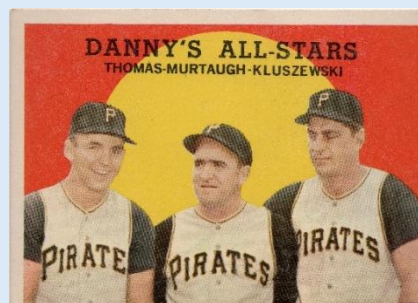
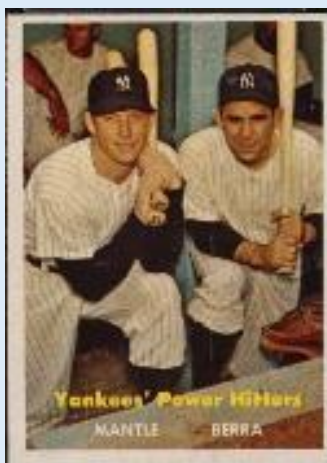
Team cards - 1956

In 1956, Topps could now safely depict cards of all players on team cards, which they had last tried in 1951. Exhibit Supply Company backed off on their use of team cards of pennant winners after Topps took control.



Checklists - 1956

Finally, in 1956 we had checklists in wax packs. They weren't exciting, but they took up space and let the kids know who they should be looking for. Checklists continued in various forms thereafter. Checklists for 1956 and 1957 can get pricey these days.



Multi-player cards in abundance after 1956

Cards with more than one player increased dramatically after 1956 as Topps sets went from 407 in 1957 to 572 by 1960. The last series of 1957 cards included Mantle and Berra on one card and Furillo, Hodges, Campanella and Snider on another. Collectors must have liked the idea of seeing stars since Topps included nine such cards in 1958 and 16 in 1959. While player contract language morphed over the years,

Topps usually had the right to use a player's image on more than one card without additional compensation.

All-Star Cards - 1958

Issuing 494 cards with only 400 players in the league in 1958 was aided by a popular addition at the end of 1958 – the 21-card All-Star subset, which included Stan Musial.



Musial had been absent from Topps and Bowman since 1953. *SPORT* magazine guessed at the start of the year who the players would be; Topps printed multiples of Mantle and Musial cards. Topps All-Star subsets continued in 1959 and quickly became annual staples.

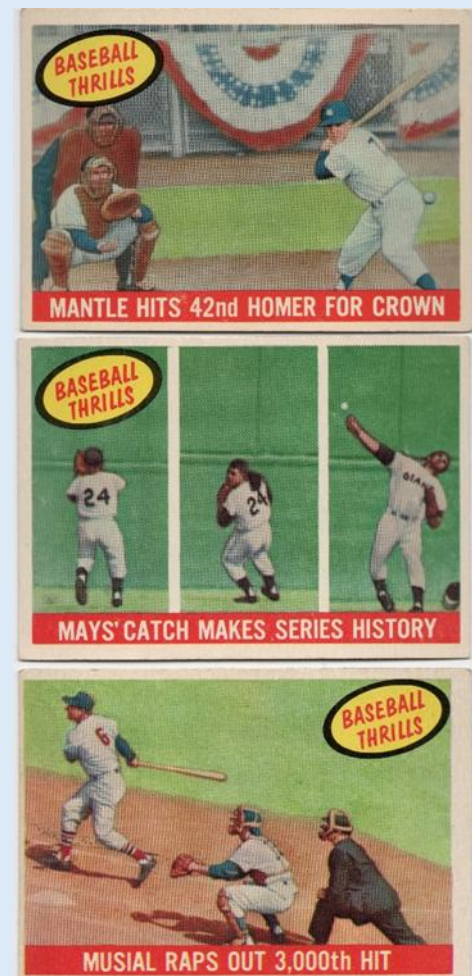
Special events - 1959

Topps picked 10 events from prior years to feature in their 1959 set. Mantle, Kaline, Mays and Snider were among those pictured in game action. Today, if something remarkable happens, Topps can get out a special card quickly, if they think it will sell.



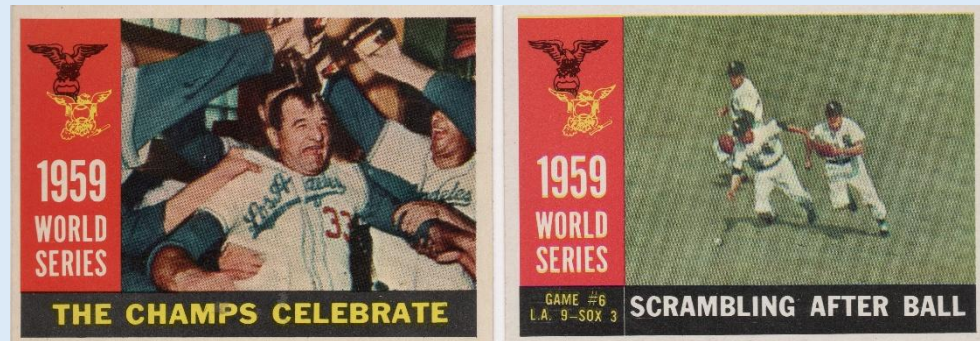
Rookies – 1959

Rookie cards were not a big deal when issued in the 1950s. Perhaps Topps got the ball rolling with 31 players



selected by *The Sporting News* as “Rookie Stars of 1959.” It sounded better than “new guys who have a chance of sticking in the majors in 1959.” None of them turned out to be superstars, but Yastrzemski appeared in Topps’ 1960 version among 31 players picked by *SPORT*.

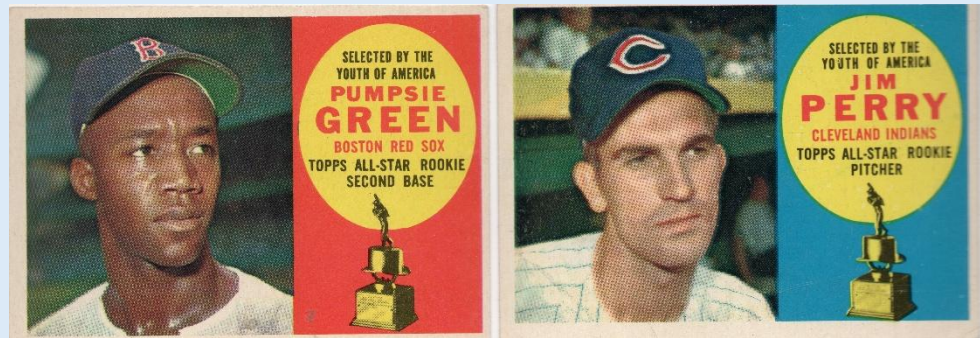
World Series - 1960



Topps produced seven cards about the 1959 series for their 1960 set and included such highlights in subsequent years.

All-Star Rookies - 1960

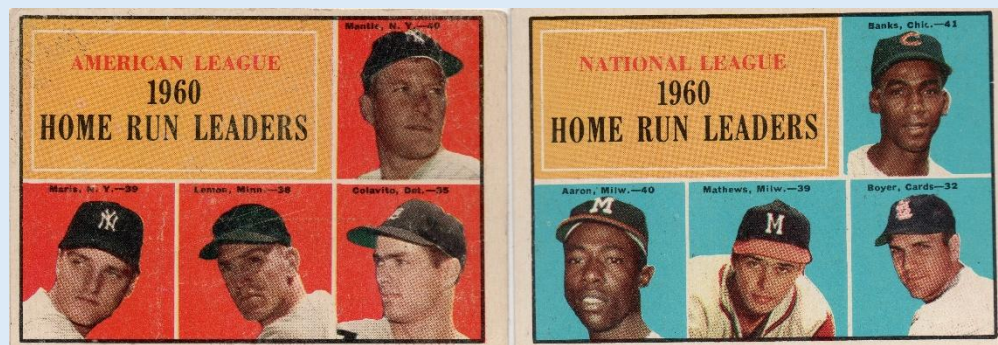
Topps gave you the best of three confusing worlds in 1960 with: 1) 10 cards of Topps All-Star Rookies as



selected by The Youth of America 2) 20 regular All-Stars and 3) 20 1960 Rookie Stars selected by *SPORT*. Topps managed to again issue 572 cards when there were only 400 players.

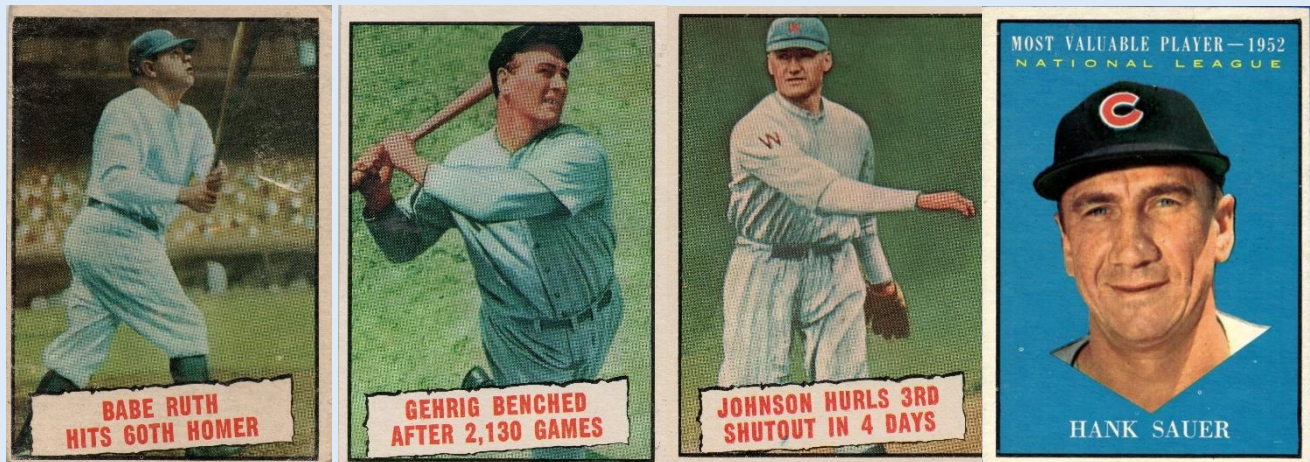
League Leaders - 1961

This category proves handy for filling out sets because there is no end to the



things you can lead the league in, and the players involved are usually stars to start with. The 1961 set included 10 cards of leaders from the prior year.

Old-Timers and MVPs – 1961

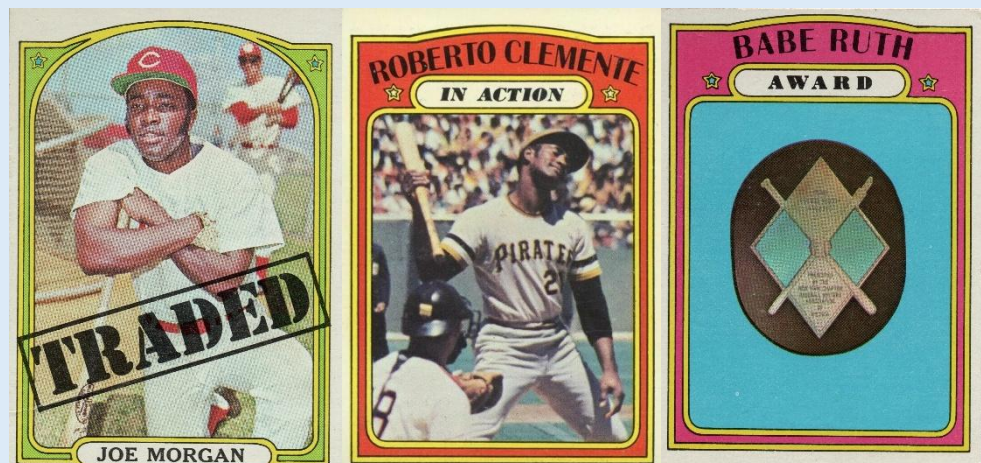


It is never too late to get some sales out of the legends of the game like Ruth, Gehrig...and Harvey Haddix. Topps honored them with 10 cards in 1961 and featured Ruth on 10 cards in 1962. Ten seemed to be a handy number for the layout of special subsets. Topps also included 15 MVPs from the prior decade in 1961.

Gum, Inc. (Warren Bowman) beat Topps to the punch by including 18 retired players in their 1940 Play Ball set. However, Ruth, Gehrig and Cobb were not included. They were represented by Christy Walsh, who had the radical concept that players should get paid for the use of their name, image and likeness. Gum, Inc. added a plethora of managers and coaches and one umpire.

Traded players, in-action players and awards on the wall - 1972

In 1972, Topps was able to get 787 cards in a set using most of the prior special categories plus new subgroups for in-action and traded players. Taking the proverbial cake though was the inclusion of photos of actual annual awards like Minor League Player of the Year and the Babe Ruth Award. No longer did we have to just imagine what those awards looked like on a wall.





Others

There were other oddballs which made appearances in this era.

1939 Play Ball #116 featured Al Schacht, the “Clown Prince of Baseball.” Schacht had been a very good minor league pitcher but became more famous for entertaining fans.

Bowman included a caricature of Paul Richards in 1951 rather than a colorized photo or realistic drawing. He became the Sox manager in October 1950. Collectors have wondered, why the funny drawing? I will guess that Richards didn’t have an agreement yet with Bowman at production time, and it had more to do with a caricature drawing not requiring his consent anyway.



Summary

Bowman and Topps sparred over player agreements and the right to use images between 1951 and 1955, making it a challenge to get permission from enough subjects for their sets. While Topps had about all players under contract after 1955, they saw the attraction to collectors of “long” sets, even when the number of cards exceeded the number of players in the league. In 1959 and 1960, Topps included 43% more cards than players. After 1961, the set sizes calmed a bit at about 10% to 20% higher.

Special cards were heavy on stars. Collectors today find that a special card with Mantle is a lot less expensive than his regular card. However, these repeat appearances of stars probably meant that you weren’t going to find a Bert Hamric, Stan Jok, Mickey Micelotta, Jake Crawford, Roy Hawes or Memo Luna on cards anymore. I miss those guys.



	Set	League		% special	Single	Mgrs	Multi	Umps	Teams	All	Others
		Rosters	% players	cards	Players	Coaches	Players	Exes		Stars	
1952 Bowman	252	400	60%	5%	239	13					
1952 Topps	407	400	99%	3%	395	12					
1953 Bowman	224	400	52%	7%	208	14	2				
1953 Topps	274	400	67%	2%	269	5					
1954 Bowman	224	400	56%	0%	224	0					
1954 Topps	250	400	56%	11%	223	25	2				
1955 Bowman	320	400	71%	12%	283	8	1	28			
1955 Topps	206	400	50%	3%	199	7					
1956 Topps	340	400	80%	6%	319	3		2	16		
1957 Topps	407	400	97%	5%	388		2	1	16		
1958 Topps	494	400	112%	10%	447		9	1	16	21	
1959 Topps	572	400	126%	12%	504		16	3	16	23	10
1960 Topps	572	400	122%	15%	487	32	10		16	20	7
1961 Topps	587	450	101%	22%	456	17	10		15	22	67

The above chart depicts how the percentage of special cards in a set increased over a decade from 5% of the 1952 Bowman set to 22% of the 1961 Topps set. The number of single players also grew to exceed the 25-player rosters as set sizes increased. Rookies are included with the “single players.” Players identified as rookies increased from 31 in 1959 to 68 in 1961.

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