

Spahn and John were all you needed

For nearly 40 years, collectors could find one or both cards of lefty pitchers Spahn and John



Spahn's Topps cards from 1951 to 1965 Spahn's 1953 card was painted before the Braves moved from Boston to Milwaukee in 1953. The three horizontal cards ('55, '56 and '60) included two images. In 1964, Spahn hit the last of his 35 career home runs. He never showed much hair, even with his hat off in 1965. He felt that the three years in the army not pitching helped prolong his career.



By George Vrechek

John's Topps cards from 1963 to 1989 Knuckle ball pitchers have had long careers, but John threw everything but the knuckler. He liked to pitch quickly, change speeds and get ground balls. His career was saved due to "Tommy John" surgery.

Warren Spahn, Johnny Sain and a day of rain were all you might need for a pitching staff, according to Gerald Hern's 1948 poem, *Spahn and Sain; then pray for Rain*. From 1951 to 1989 all you would need for a type card collection of regular Topps cards were cards of Warren Spahn and Tommy John. Either Spahn or John appeared on cards for 39 years in a row.

Both were crafty, left-handed starting pitchers with long careers but in different eras and (for the most part) different leagues. Spahn became a professional in 1940 at the age of 19. John was 18 when he started in 1961. Both pitchers' fathers helped teach them how to pitch. Both pitched until they were 46 years old. Between them they won 651 games over 47 years in the majors. (They also lost 476 games.)

Over the 39 years these players appeared, Topps card designs varied like new automobile designs. In the early years of Spahn's career, designs morphed quickly with the changing technology. Topps had three different sizes, as well as portrait and landscape orientations, colorized photos, black and white photos, full-color photos, paintings, full or condensed statistics, cartoons, autographs, quizzes and graphics. All of these elements changed a bit each year and gave each year a distinctive look. By the time Tommy John's career started, Topps seemed happy to stay with a successful formula and tweaked the look occasionally - change the dashboard, rework the trim, add some color, show the stats on the back.

Spahn in Topps issues from 1951 to 1965

Spahn (1921-2003) was there for Topps, signing through Players Enterprises (Topps' agent in 1950) for maybe \$100 to appear in the Topps inaugural 1951 Red Back issue. Thereafter, with Sy Berger on the job, players received \$125 if they signed an exclusive with Topps or \$75 for a non-exclusive. The majority of players didn't bother reading anything they signed but gladly accepted the extra money.

Spahn, Berra and Rizzuto were among the few stars who appeared on Topps cards each year through the "card war" years with Bowman (1951-1955). Spahn also was under contract to Bowman from 1948 to 1953, collecting the big bucks for being in both sets. He kept smiling for Topps photographers each year bowing out as a balding 44-year-old pitcher/coach in 1965 with the Mets and Giants, the only year he wasn't a member of the Braves franchise.

Spahn's Bowman cards from 1948 to 1951 had a familiar look. His 1952 card looks like they used the same fence.



Spahn's rookie card was the 1947 Tip Top, left (or could it have been an Exhibit Supply Co. card issued in 1947)? Spahn's 1948 Bowman card is in the center and his final 1953 Bowman on the right.

WWII and then Hall of Fame career

He first reached the majors as a 20-year-old in 1942. Paul Waner, born in 1903, was one of his teammates. Spahn's next three years were spent as a combat engineer in the US Army. He was awarded a Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, a battlefield commission and survived the Battle of the Bulge.

He was 25 years old in 1946 before he had his first of 363 major league victories. He waited until 1947 for his rookie card: a 1947 Tip Top. His 1959 card has three variations as to his correct birthdate. He won 20 or more games 13 times; only Cy Young had more 20-win seasons. He was an All-Star for 14 years and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1973.

Spahn still pitched a few games for Tulsa in the Pacific Coast League at age 46. His last regular Topps card was a 1973 Indians coaching card, also a variation with and without both of his noticeable ears. Later he coached pitchers in Japan for six years.

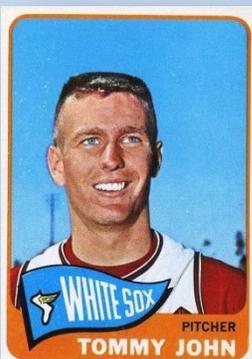
Tommy John and 26 years of Topps cards

Tommy John was a star basketball player in high school but an even better pitcher. John was courted by many college basketball coaches including Adolph Rupp of Kentucky but opted to sign for \$40,000 with the Cleveland Indians. He started with Dubuque in 1961, was promoted to the Indians in 1963 and got his half of a rookie card in 1964. Thus began his uninterrupted run of 26 years of Topps cards finishing in Yankee pinstripes at the age of 46 with a lifetime record of 288-231. He even had a card in 1975 when he didn't play.

Surgery

In 1974 John had a record of 13-3 with the league-leading Dodgers but on July 17th, he threw what he called "The Pitch" in his book *T.J. My 26 Years in Baseball* with Dan Valenti. His elbow "popped" on a pitch to Hal Breen. Fortunately the team physician was Dr. Frank Jobe. Jobe told John that, if they found his ligament to be torn in two (which they did), they would do a novel transplant surgery and said, "The chances of you pitching again are one in a hundred." John figured that was still better than no chance without the surgery. The transplant surgery was performed on September 24, 1974.

With significant rehab efforts, this break-through surgery was a success. John did come back, winning more than 20 games in 3 of the 5 years following his return. You could call it the million dollar arm, but no one in baseball made that kind of money at the time. John's ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction became known as Tommy John surgery and Frank Jobe had a lifetime ticket into any baseball surgeon's hall of fame. As a result, Tommy John's name appears constantly in sports sections when athletes have the now-common surgery. He should have negotiated for the royalty rights to the name.



John said his favorite Topps card was his 1965 card.

Underwear isn't John's and candy isn't the Babe's

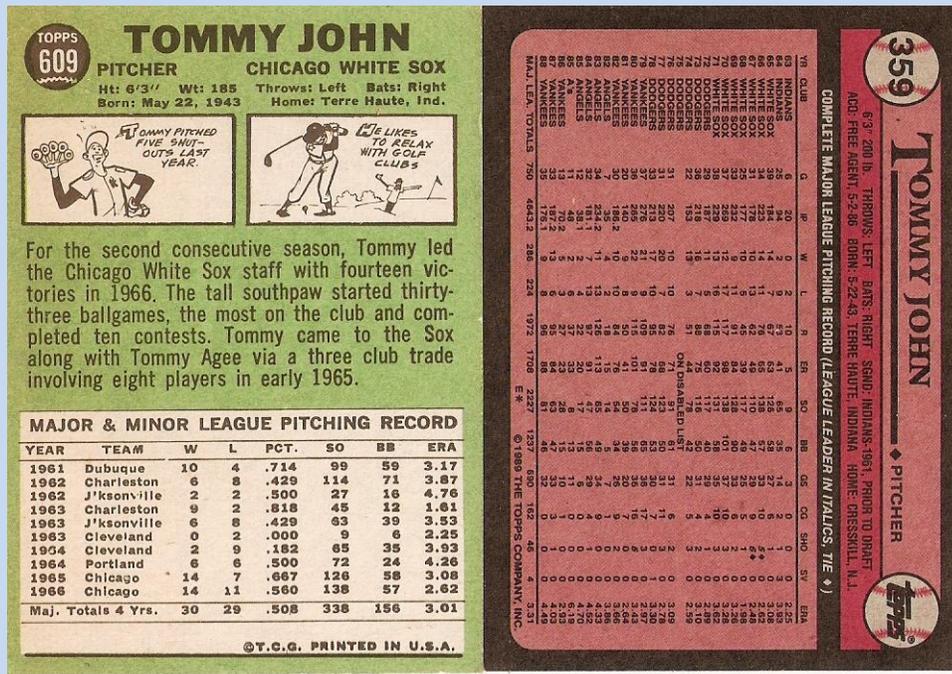
Tommy John also appears in the media today due to a company selling men's underwear called Tommy John Inc. named after its CEO Tom(my) (John) Patterson. Tommy John, the pitcher, is not a beneficiary of any underwear sales or profitability. John's agent Kim Berger responded to my inquiry on the subject, "Let me say we are in no way shape or form affiliated (with) the underwear company."

Babe Ruth was not a beneficiary of sales of Baby Ruth candy bars either, since it was obvious (to the Curtiss Candy Company) that the candy bar was named after Baby Ruth Cleveland, President Grover Cleveland's daughter. Yes, when I think of "Tommy John," I always picture CEO Tom Patterson in his underwear, and I never fail to think about Baby Ruth Cleveland when I bite into her candy.

A binder of John cards

In the 1980s I organized each of John's annual cards in a binder noticing how he aged a little each year. I decided to collect all his cards. It became a type card collection since he appeared on just about every imaginable baseball card.

His early Topps cards, except 1971, were portraits or posed action shots. Starting in 1979, John's Topps cards generally showed him in action. He liked to tip his cap back for his portraits showing a full head of hair. I contacted John to see which of his Topps cards he liked the best. John responded, "My second year, 1965, in Cleveland uniform with flattop." John's 1965 card shows him as a White Sox but, as John points out, he is wearing a Cleveland uniform that has been partially hidden. It is also his only Topps card without him wearing a hat. The Topps photographers always tried to get hatless photos in case a player was traded; John was traded on January 20, 1965.



In 1967 there was still room to include 7 lines of text on the back of John's card along with his stats. His 1989 stats were nearly impossible to read, and there was certainly no room for any text.

Despite being traded a few other times, he never appeared in a blacked-out or airbrushed hat. He looked good on most cards with the variety of photos and designs used by Topps. There were spring training photos, pre-game stadium photos and game action photos. Photo styles were posed action, game action, posed portraits and candid portraits.

During John's career, Topps designs changed a little every year; the only constants were his name and the team name on the front of a vertical card. When he started in the majors, there was room to write a few sentences about him on the back of the card. But by 1975, there was no room left on his card for anything but his lifetime stats. The copy writers took a break when they got to his card. His 1989 card had numbers so small that serious magnification was required to decipher anything.

John in other issues

John appeared in all sorts of Topps-produced issues including O Pee Chees, Venezuelans, Burger Kings, tattoos, giants, minis and special cards. He also appeared in most other sets such as Milk Duds, Fleer, Donruss, Score, Kellogg, Upper Deck, Milton Bradley, Hostess and Transogram. I rooted for him to keep playing and appearing on cards.



As a well-known veteran starting pitcher for teams in major markets (New York, Los Angeles and Chicago), John was featured by about every issuer who wanted to sell cards

Retired but still on cards

John won the opener for the Yankees in 1989, but was released on May 30, 1989 - a few days after his 46th birthday and his last game, which he won. The day after John's release, 21-year old Deon Sanders made his debut with the Yankees. John probably had the record for the most appearances on individual

baseball cards through 1989. Only the gum made more annual appearances, and even the gum was retired after 1991. In the 1990s, the number of cards of individual players mushroomed due to more manufacturers, more sets by each manufacturer and more special cards.

Following retirement, John and Spahn have been featured on numerous retro-sets by Topps and others. John has been accommodating at card shows, where I had a chance to say hello and get his autograph.

“Let’s Do It” Foundation

As described on his website, John has established the “Let’s Do It” Foundation. Proceeds from autographed balls, prints and photos go to support research in preventing the type of injury he endured and the “AFSP (American Foundation of Suicide Prevention). Tommy’s youngest son Taylor surrendered to suicide in 2009.”

Who’s left next?

If we wanted to continue to look at one player appearing annually on cards following Tommy John, it wouldn’t take too much thought to come up with Randy Johnson as a candidate. His rookie card was in 1989, and he also pitched until age 46 in 2009. He would add 303 wins and 166 losses to our totals and get us to 59 consecutive years of Topps cards. Appropriately, he was also a left-handed starting pitcher and had surgery, although it was to his back.

Chris Sale is a left-handed starter who debuted at age 21 in 2010. Maybe he’ll last another twenty years and have his own binder to continue the march of Topps cards, using just left-handed starters.



Randy Johnson was on a myriad of cards each year from 1989 (top left) to 2009 (bottom left), retiring at age 46. A Topps card of Johnson appeared each year through at least 2010. Will Chris Sale be next to pick up the string of long-lasting left-handers?

Other options

You could put together a string of Topps type cards for each year using a combination of three other players. Yogi Berra (1951-1965 Topps cards), Pete Rose (1963-1986) and Greg Maddux (1987-2009) should do the trick as well through 2009, but it would be impossible to do it with only two players. Some long-career players like Jamie Moyer and Julio Franco didn't play every year and didn't have a Topps card each year.

You could also have fun using one-year-only players to feature in a continuous run of Topps cards. That may be a bit harder. In the early years, Topps stretched to come up with enough players under contract. Players like Johnny Doerr (1951), Johnny Kucab (1952), Dick Bokelmann (1953), Paul Penson (1954), Harry Agganis (1955). Rance Pless (1956) and Jim Pyburn (1957) would fit the bill, but don't get me started.

Spahn and John were two of very few

Players come and go. The average stay in the major leagues is 5 or 6 years. The chance of playing more than 20 years in the majors is about 1%. Warren Spahn and Tommy John played long and hard. Over the span of years they played in the majors, they played with Paul Waner (1942) and Deion Sanders (1989). They saw it all, including a run of Topps cards that included the innovative, the classic and the bland. A great time it was.

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