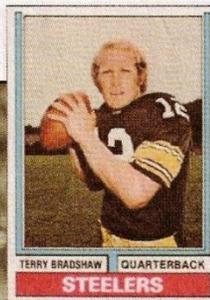
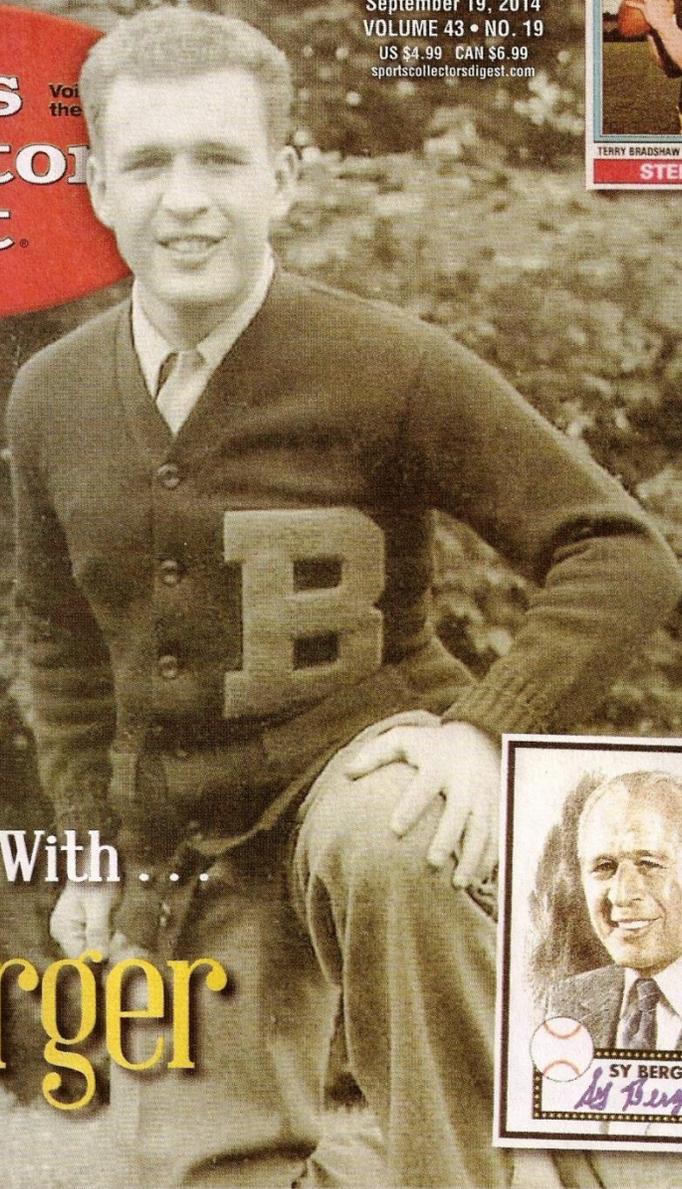


# IT'S GOOD! – 1974 TOPPS FOOTBALL

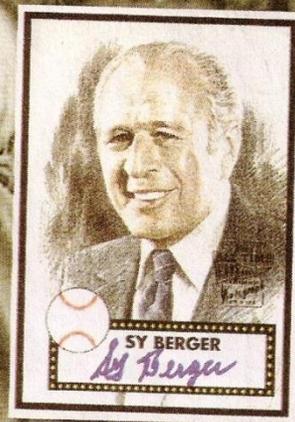
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Catching Up With ...  
**Sy Berger**



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# Sy Berger still brings a smile to your face



*Tom Tresh and Sy Berger when Tresh was featured on the Topps All-Rookie team in 1962*



By George Vrechek

His mom lived until 88 and his dad until 96, so it hasn't been a complete surprise to hobby icon Sy Berger that he celebrated his 91<sup>st</sup> birthday this past July 12th. Sy, of course, was the man at the moment when Topps launched into the baseball card market in the early 1950s. Sy's initiative and persistence helped bring Topps to the forefront of the hobby market and started a run of cards that continues today. His outgoing personality and interest in others has produced life-long friendships with the many people he has known.

Sy spoke with me several times over the past few years and answered questions about the early days of Topps. He discussed his involvement in signing players to contracts, the design of the 1952 set, his friendships with players and his 50-year involvement in the card market. He even took a look at some mystery prototype cards for me in 2012 that appeared to have been generated by Bowman in their final days. (*SCD, Mysteries from 1956? June 1 and June 15, 2012*)

### **How is Sy doing?**

I called Sy recently and found that he is still living at home in Rockville Centre, New York, with Gloria his wife of 68 years. They are about 20 miles east of Brooklyn on Long Island. While at one time Sy could discuss every experience with great ease and clarity, the words are coming harder to him now. It is not surprising that neither Sy nor the cards he developed have not all remained in mint condition. When I talked to him two years ago he admitted to forgetting a few names, but then a name or event would come back to him in great detail. If you had kept up on hobby and sports history, you could decipher most of Sy's shortcuts as he recalled events from more than 60 years ago. Today, his mind is still working quite well, but he can be frustrated with the increased difficulty articulating what used to come to him so easily. What comes through very clearly though is his continued enthusiasm and optimism. He will bring a smile to your face.

Sy's wife Gloria, his daughter Maxine, and his sons Glenn and Gary answered the questions I had about how Sy is doing today and what his life has been outside of bubble-gum cards.

### **The baseball nut**

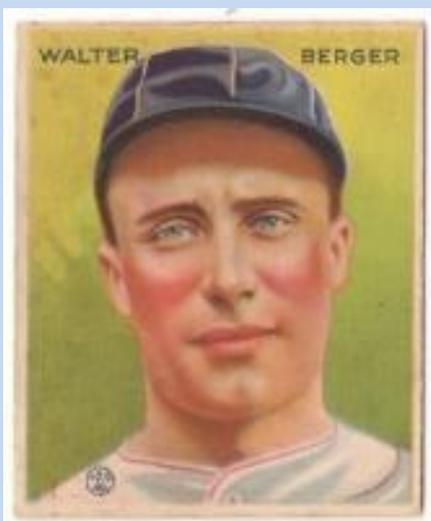
Sy's parents came to the Bronx as immigrants from the Russian/Polish border. Seymour P. "Sy" Berger was born July 12, 1923, the middle of three children. His dad had a successful business as a furrier in Manhattan. As a kid he played stickball in the streets, collected Goudey baseball cards and attended games at both Yankee Stadium and the Polo Grounds which were nearby. He became a self-proclaimed baseball nut.

You could tell early on that Sy was destined to be a deal-maker. His daughter Maxine Berger recalled, "His favorite player as a kid was Wally Berger of the Boston Braves because he had the same last name. He used to say that Wally Berger was his cousin so he could get into the ballpark when the Braves came to town. He actually met Wally Berger as a kid and got to know him very well, as he has with so many other players."

*Sy, on the right, is the Berger with the big smile in this 1930 photo with his parents and siblings.*



*Wally Berger, a distant "cousin" - 1933 Goudey and 1939 Play Ball*

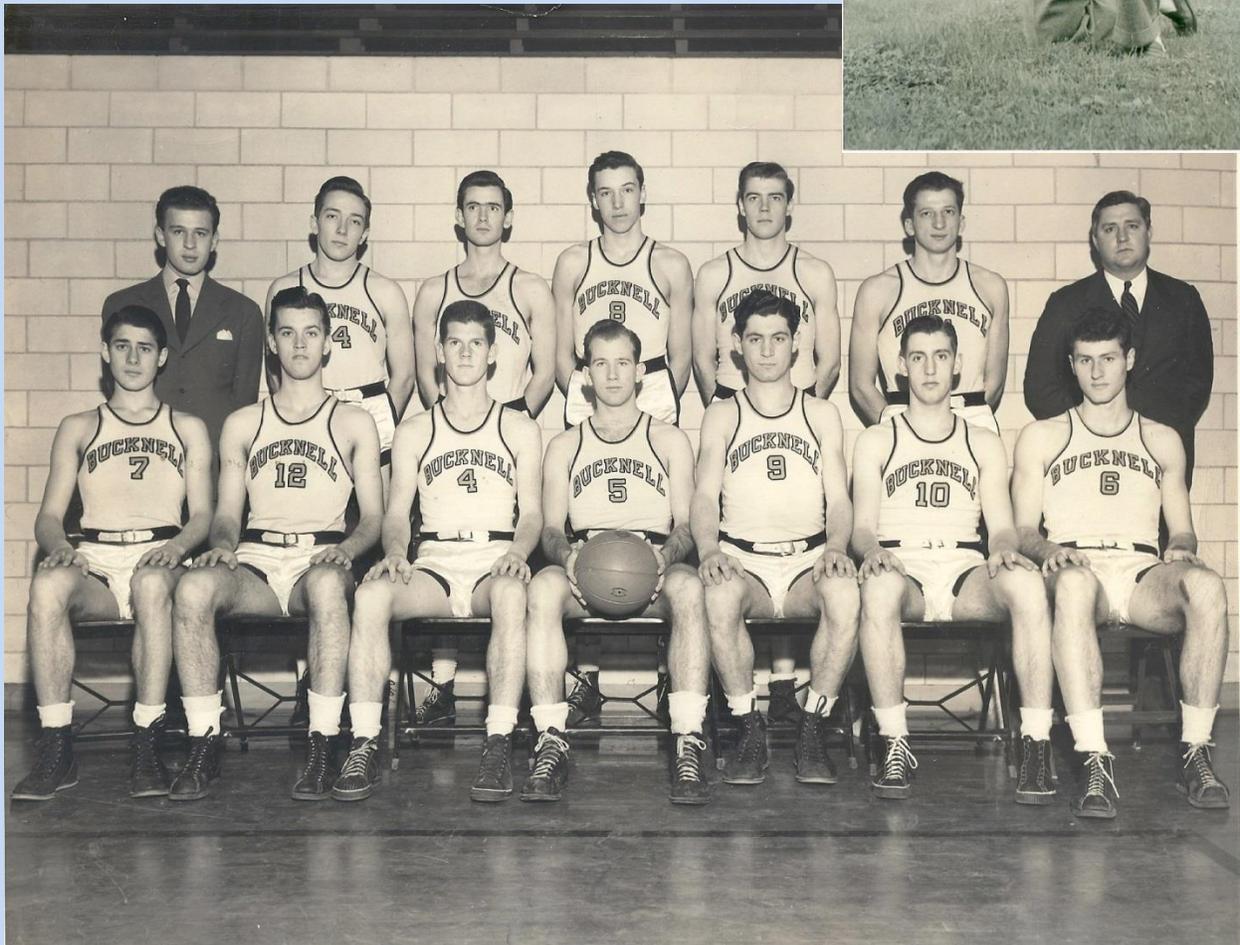
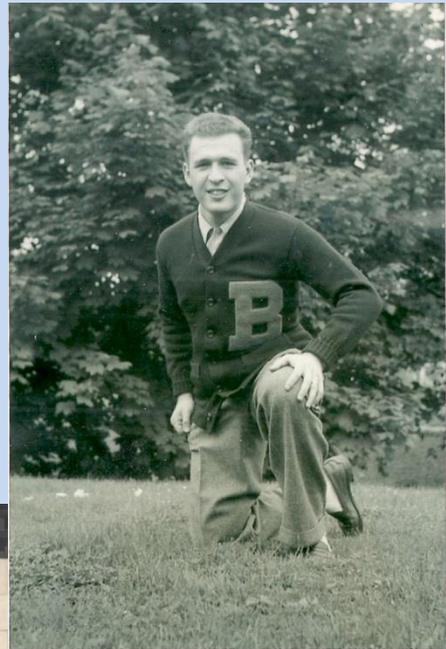


### **The Shorin connection**

Sy would do his sister's homework, and she was older than he was. He graduated at the top of his class at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx and went on to Bucknell University where he became friends with fraternity brother Joel Shorin, the son of Phil Shorin. The four Shorin brothers took over their father Morris' business, the American Leaf Tobacco Company. In 1938 the brothers branched into the gum business and renamed their company Topps.

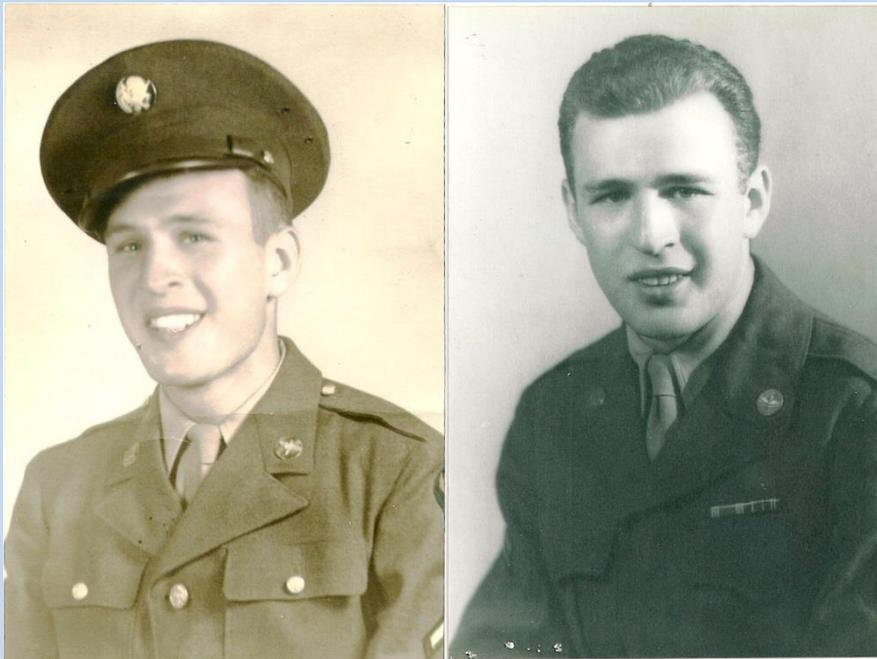
*Sy in 1941 as a freshman at Bucknell*

*Berger, top left, as manager of the Bucknell basketball team*



Maxine fills us in on the details: “My dad was to graduate in June, 1944 but the Army recruited the students so they couldn't graduate. He was gone for three years, most of the time in Europe. He saw the bombing of London, Belgium, France and Germany as a serviceman in the Army Air Corps. He helped supply the parts for damaged planes and get them back to the front line.

“He returned home in January 1946 and went back to Bucknell to finish his senior year. He graduated in June 1946 but registers with the class of 1944. He was the sports editor of the college paper and manager of the Bucknell basketball team. He also became friends with future major league pitcher Bob Keegan. After graduation, he took a temp job at B. Altman, a fine New York department store. He worked in the luggage department and then moved up to the linen department where he increased the sales so high that they wanted to hire him full time, but it wasn't for him. He was the kind of person that would do a great job of whatever assignment came his way. Joel Shorin got in touch with dad and offered him a temp job at Topps to work on a sales project, which he accepted. When that was assignment was done, he was asked to stay and that's when he started with the baseball cards. The rest is history.”



*Sy joined the service in 1943.*

**Sy the businessman**

Sy has described his involvement in the Topps baseball card sets many times and many of us have written about that wonderful history. While collectors might get immersed in the details of specific cards and

designs, Sy always looked at the big picture, which was to be successful selling a product and earning a return. For example, Sy and the Shorins reasoned that while kids might buy gum that tasted good, they would buy even more gum if it came with something extra like a trading card. While Hopalong Cassidy and Lone Ranger cards might be popular one year, baseball was popular every year. Selling baseball cards could be like an annuity with annual issues of the players.

The challenge became getting players under contract to Topps rather than rival Bowman and designing cards that would sell. This was when Sy “invented” the modern baseball card and subsequently became known as the “father of the modern baseball card.” At his kitchen table, in collaboration with artist Woody Gelman, Sy created the prototype for the 1952 card. Maxine stated that Sy came up with the idea of making the size of the cards larger, putting player photos with team names and team logos on the front, and statistics, interesting player facts, and a

cartoon on the back. He also handled the player contracts. Joe E. Shorin became a great mentor and wonderful friend. I recall Sy's lavish praise of Shorin, "A brilliant man. I loved him."

Sy's ability to get things done wasn't limited to baseball. He wound up dealing with the NHL, NFL and the NBA. He was also involved in cards featuring the Beatles and Michael Jackson and met with Brian Epstein in London and Michael Jackson for two days at the Neverland Ranch as an invited guest. He dealt with license agreements involving cereal companies. Sy made friends with those in the executive offices and with sportswriters. NFL Commissioner Bert Bell and Marvin Miller, executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, thought very highly of Sy. Maxine told me that her mother "Gloria was beloved by Sy's baseball friends, husbands and wives alike. They are the godparents to (MLB executive and Hall of Famer) Pat and Doris Gillick's daughter, Kimberley."



*This lineup of HOFers from the 1952 Topps set all became friends of Sy Berger's.*

### **Impact on players**

Maxine also recalled, "Mark Bienstock (my husband), general counsel of the Yes Network, brought Sy to the B.A.T. (Baseball Assistance Team) dinner a few years ago. Mark was astounded as Sy was treated as a dignitary. Hall of Famers and security men alike knew Sy as their beloved friend. People in the baseball community were genuinely ecstatic to see him and regaled Mark with personal stories about them and their friend, Sy. Goose Gossage summed it up when he hugged Sy (everyone does with genuine feeling), and told him 'I'm so happy to see you. I thought you were dead.' Sy replied, 'I'm not doing so great, but I'm still here.'"

Sy's rapport with players goes back to his start with Topps. Maxine told me, "Willie Mays, one of his closest friends, was a raw rookie in the New York Giants clubhouse in 1951. He immediately connected with my dad who signed him to his rookie card, and became a lifelong friend and one of the few people Willie trusted entirely. Nine of the players who my father signed in this series went on to the Hall of Fame - Mays, Mantle, Robinson, Campanella, Reese, Wilhelm, Herman, Dickey and Mathews also became a part of his life... When Roger Maris passed away, his wife presented Sy with a shirt with the #61/'61 on it which she said she gave to Roger's closest friends. "

Sy would appear in locker rooms with plenty of gum and cards for players. Casey Stengel would shout out, "Hey, Bubble Gum is here." He developed friendships with players when they were still unknown minor leaguers and when they really appreciated the extra money and attention as well as the opportunity to appear on a baseball card. He made a point of staying in touch with people. Players would seek out Sy for advice and he would help them, acting as a non-paid agent or mentor for some of the players including Mays, Frank Robinson and Jackie Robinson.

While Sy was approached more than once to do a book on what he knew about the players, he never would betray their trust and would not get involved. In return players would say that Sy was their friend, that he really touched their lives.



*Roger Maris' widow gave 61/'61 shirts to Roger's closest friends which included Sy.*



*Sy was crowned King of Baseball at the Winter Meetings, December 1982, Hawaii. Sy was the only non-professional baseball person to be honored.*

*Sy and his old college buddy Bob Keegan at a Bucknell University reunion*

### **Memorabilia and hobbies**

“During one of my many visits to the Yankee clubhouse, my dad got Mickey Mantle to sign a ball for me,” Maxine fondly recalled. Mantle’s inscription was “1962 To Maxine, My best of wishes. Your boyfriend, Mickey Mantle.” Maxine teaches at LaGuardia Community College and the United Nations, but earlier was in the publishing business and worked with Sy producing *Topps Baseball Cards: The Complete Picture Collection (A 35-Year History, 1951-1985)*. Sy told me, “I was never a collector; I was a gatherer.” Sy’s sports memorabilia was sold several years ago.

Neither Maxine nor her two brothers, Glenn and Gary, became collectors either, but they did collect some great memories of their father and his work. Glenn remembers as a kid his dad taking him not only to Yankee Stadium for games but also right into the clubhouse where he got to sit next to Mickey Mantle while he wrapped his frail legs. Sy gave Glenn baseball cards to take with him to distribute at summer camp, making the young Berger an instant heroic figure. Glenn wound up with mitts from Gil McDougald and Jimmy Piersall, but most of his early cards disappeared.

Glenn and Gary worked for Sy during the summers in the ‘60s and ‘70s. They were sent on road trips to sign minor league players to Topps contracts (carefully written by Sy) and recall the wonderful earlier days of Topps baseball cards. Players would get \$5 to sign with Topps and maybe \$125 more if they appeared on a major league card. Since Glenn was a school counselor, he was able to work 15 summers for his dad touring the minor leagues across the country signing players like Robin Yount, Paul Molitor, John Elway, and Tony Gwynn.

Sy was very involved in his work, and he traveled, but always seemed to get back home pretty quickly. Maxine added, “Family always came first. Outside of work, he played golf and from the time he was a boy loved music and dancing. In fact, as a teenager, after stickball in the schoolyard, he used to dance with his pals and girlfriends on the streets of the Bronx.” Sy and Gloria attended most New York football Giants home games until just a few years ago.

### **Sy’s baseball cards**

Topps has been honoring Sy with special cards over the past few years. Topps Fan Favorites was issued in 2004 and resembles the 1952 Topps cards. Next was a 2011 Topps Lineage baseball card. Sy signed all 60 cards produced and kept one for himself. There was also an insert “History of Topps” card in 2011 of a very young Sy Berger with a backdrop of the 1952 cards.



*Sy's 2004 Topps Fan Favorite, his 2011 Topps Lineage autograph card and his 2011 History of Topps card. A Wheaties box was created to give to Sy who was in charge of licensing for Topps.*

*Sy attended a July 2013 Yankees game with his son-in-law, Mark Bienstock and kept an eye on the balls and strikes while handling autograph requests.*

### **Staying in touch**

By the late 1980s, Sy was working with Topps part-time. He retired from Topps in 1997 as vice president sports/licensing but remained on the board of directors and was a consultant until 2002. He continued to represent Topps at the Baseball Winter Meetings, World Series, Super Bowls, and All Star Games. When Sy turned 90 in 2013, he received hundreds of birthday greetings from many collectors and players throughout the country. He also attended a Yankees game. He watched intently and kept track of the game situation commenting that a certain player should try to steal a base. Once the word got out as to Sy's presence, fans and collectors showed up for autographs with anything they had available including a napkin.

Do people still get in touch with Sy?

According to Maxine, "Baseball people are always calling to see how my dad is. Many



just want to hear his voice and tell him how much he means to them. Not a week goes by when he doesn't get letters from collectors with his card, requesting his signature. Often included is a special letter to him with a thank you for how he influenced their lives."

### **Sy, the wonderful dad**

How did Sy influence his three children? His son Gary recalled: "I used to go to the clubhouse and locker room with my dad, Yankee Stadium, Polo Grounds and Shea Stadium. I remember that my dad could be in a clubhouse full of stars, yet would often sit down next to the trainer and help him with his problems. I remember dad arranging for dentures for one of the trainers. My dad was a friend of everybody. He treated all people with the same dignity and respect. In the early 60s when I was a kid, there were a lot of day games, so players would come back to our house for dinner. Billy Pierce was a frequent guest when the Chicago White Sox were in town. I remember eating dinner and seeing all the neighborhood kids peering in our dining room window while we ate! Whether I was working for my dad in the minor leagues or just in some other area, I would often ask if the person might know my dad, Sy Berger. Sy Berger -- two magic words...like the red carpet rolled out. I was given royal treatment."

Sy's oldest son Glenn saw his dad in action for many years. Sy could have started the "take your kids to work" concept since he brought them along whenever possible. Glenn would go with his dad to games, visit clubhouses, and meet players. He remembers shaking hands with catcher Del Crandall who told the seven-year-old that he had the hands of a catcher. Minnie Minoso showed him how to chew tobacco. Jungle Jim Rivera came to his Bar Mitzvah. Glenn remembers, "Dad dealt with people with a handshake. While he was a great negotiator, he didn't have an ego or try to play hard ball."

Maxine added: "I've always been proud to be known as 'Sy Berger's daughter' because of the extraordinary human being he is. He never judged people on the color of their skin or station in life. He is a generous soul and a kind man. He was the voice of reason and an incredibly loyal person to those who knew him. He gave the kind of advice or took action (if need be) that somehow always got you back on track."

On my recent call to Sy, I thanked him for letting me tell the *SCD* readers how he was. I told him that I could always find him even in the earliest of family photos because he was the one with the smile on his face. I made him laugh again. He graciously thanked me for doing a story and said with difficulty, "You can call any time."



*Sy and his wife Gloria in 2007.*

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