

Hobby Odds and Ends

Super-seniors, Card indices, Kut Outs, 1956 flat hats, and Cobb

By
George Vrechek

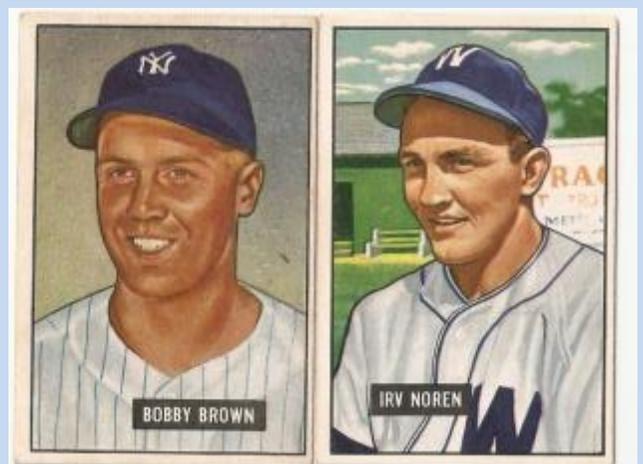
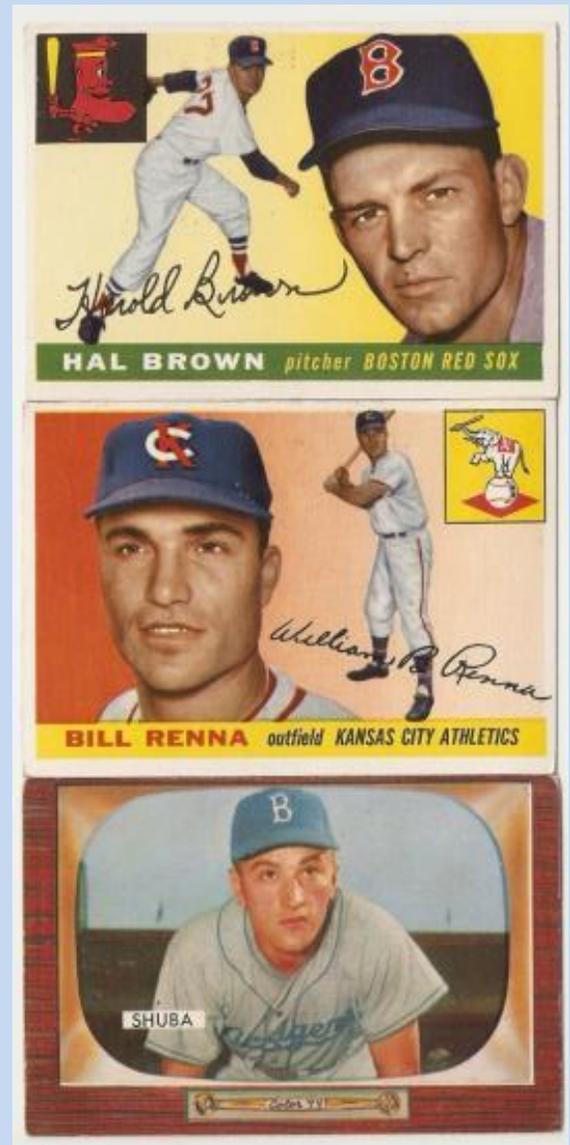


Super-senior squads change

Several readers sent me comments that my February 2013 *SCD* articles proposing a game played by super-senior former major leaguers brought back fond memories of the players and their cards. Unfortunately one of my stars, Stan Musial, and my young manager, Earl Weaver, died shortly after the article was written. Since the article was published, the Wikipedia listing of the 100 oldest former major leaguers has continued to change. Other players I mentioned who also passed away were Virgil Trucks, Cot Deal, Joe Astroth, Grady Hatton, and Moon Mullen.

At least six new players will be eligible for selection to the next version of the super-senior fantasy All-Star baseball team.

“Youngsters” now appearing at the bottom of the list of living former major leaguers include pitcher Hal Brown, third baseman Bobby Brown, and outfielders Bill Renna, Irv Noren, Bob Usher, and George Shuba. Bobby Brown was 28 when he quit baseball in 1954 to become a doctor. Cardiologist Brown will be a valuable addition to the American League squad. All of the “rookies” are now 88 years-old and have plenty



of baseball cards providing an opportunity to update the concept in a future article.

Unfortunately I lost my oldest-living-man to throw out the first pitch. Jiroemon Kimura of Japan looked like he could still toss a pitch, but he died recently at age 116.

I also lost some of the boys on my squad of the oldest former NFL players (*SCD* May and June 2013) with the deaths of Jack Butler (85) and Bill Austin (84).

Card price indices

Several readers commented on my article on calculating an index for vintage baseball card prices, the Vrechek Vintage Card Index (*SCD* Dec 14, 2012). Subscriber Ric Apter of Pound Ridge, New York, knew something about the subject as an investment advisor, stock broker, collector, and hobby writer. Over 20 years ago he developed a baseball card index more like the Dow Jones Industrials of 30 stocks than the Standard and Poor's Index of 500 stocks. He shared with me his approach and copies of his articles.

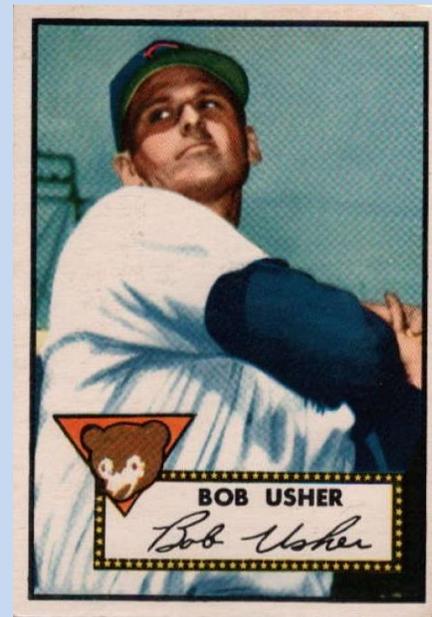
Apter selected 30 key cards or sets that he thought would be representative of the baseball card market and tracked their prices each month calling it the Apter Card Average (ACA). The list was heavy on cards of superstars from the 50s through the 80s: 1951 Mays, 1952 Topps Mantle, 1953 Jackie Robinson, 1960 Yastrzemski, 1964 Rose, 1967 Seaver, 1973 Schmidt, 1975 Brett, 1983 Stawberry, 1984 Mattingly, and a few factory sets from the 80s. He weighted each item in the index so that it would have an equal effect of 1/30th each; a 5% price change on a 1986 Donruss set had the same impact on the ACA as a 5% price change for a 1954 Topps Aaron.

Apter developed card values based on his own experience and buy/sell information that he obtained. He published his results in *SCD*, *Tuff Stuff*, and his own newsletter, *Card Collector Commentary*. The ACA went from a base of 1,000 in 1989 to 1,590 at the end of 1993 (numbers coincidentally similar to my analysis for that period based on prices for the major vintage sets.) Crazy price increases disappeared by the mid-90s and Apter mothballed the ACA, but not before garnering significant publicity on the idea and the hobby in *Sports Illustrated*, *U.S. News & World Report* and other publications.

Apter added, "I still think there is some validity to such a tracking device, but condition, liquidity, subjectivity all make it sort of questionable. When I created the ACA the hobby was not as deeply committed to grading services as it is today...any modern average, would need to stipulate the precise condition level."

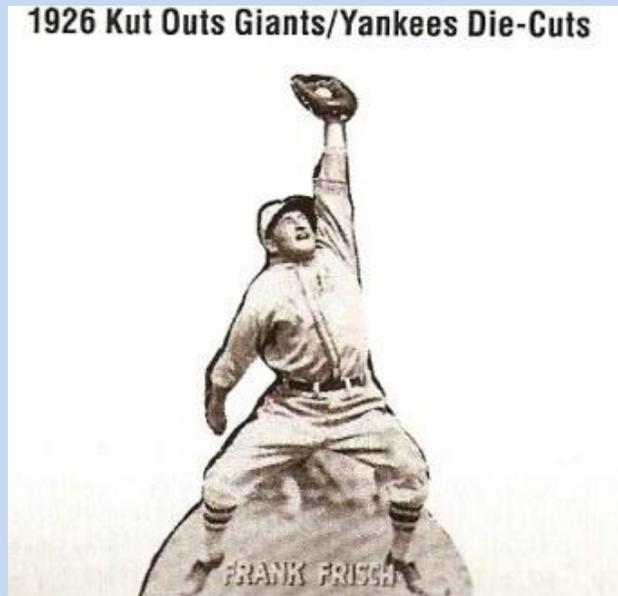
How about this return?

Three years ago, I reported the discovery of several previously unknown 1934 Al Demaree Die-cut cards (R304) found under a bed in Wisconsin. Like many old sets, the cards were expensive and obscure. Even though I find it impossible to consider collecting



many such sets listed in *SCD's Standard Catalog of Vintage Baseball Cards*, I enjoy reading about them.

SCD's catalog lists another die-cut set, the 1926 Kut Outs Giants/Yankees Die-Cuts. I had never seen them; never heard of them. According to the catalog, Ruth in the Yankee set is worth \$7,250, Gehrig \$4,500, and commons \$350. The set description shows the value of wise investing. "These black-and-white, blank-back, die-cut cards were sold as complete sets for 10 cents per team." If for some reason you bought the 10-card Yankee team in 1926 for 10 cents and didn't touch them, the set in mint condition today would be worth \$17,950. I thought this was a pretty astronomical return until I got out my handy calculator and found that it represented only a "lousy" 14.9% annual return compounded over 87 years - the power of compounding. You would also get a 14.9% annual return today, if you could have purchased the set in 1980 for \$180, per my calculator. The biggest "if" in all this is probably even finding the set, never mind the price.



The 1926 Kut Outs were a pretty good investment at 10 cents per team no matter how you analyze the results.

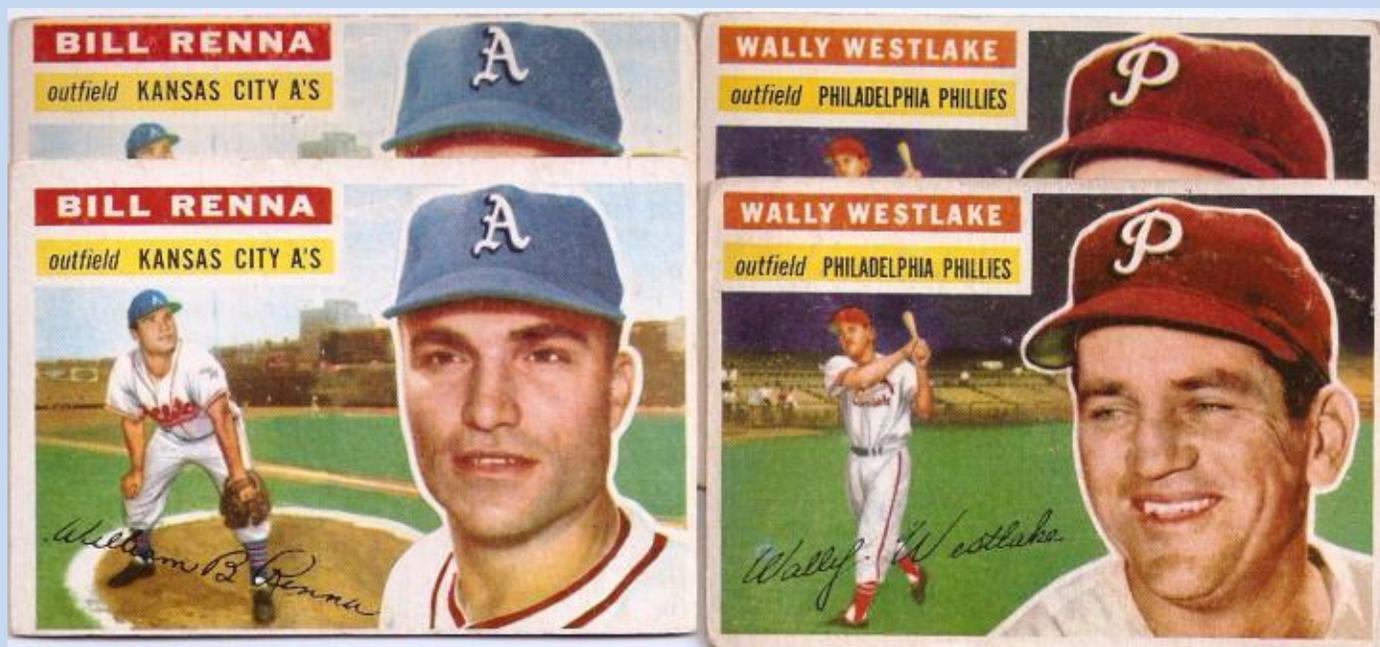
Cropping differences and fun with hats in 1956

It's always interesting to find something new about old cards. A few years ago, alert collectors started spotting new variations in 1963 Topps baseball cards. With the help of variation collector Dennis Elkin, I reported on our discovery that 11 cards had slight variations in how the cards were cropped, chopping off shoulders or backgrounds differently. These cropping differences could be noticed on the edges of 11 cards that were printed in one row - #372, 376, 386, 387, 388, 404, 409, 413, 438, 439, and 445. The two variations of each card seemed to be available in equal numbers, leading to the conclusion that the cards were quadruple printed with two printings of each of the two cropping versions in the print run.

The 1962 Topps second series (110-196) green-tint variations were previously discovered to have a similar additional distinction with both green tinting and slightly different cropping compared to the normal cards. The green tints were produced when Topps used an additional printing company to meet the demand for the 1962s, according to uber-veteran collector Irv Lerner.

This time the discovery involves certain 1956 Topps cards. This difficult set is already embellished with white backs, gray backs, dated team cards, team names centered, team

names left, miscellaneous colored lines around names, and blotches and blobs (#108 Pepper and #211 Temple). These new-found variations have very slight differences in either the cropping of the principal portrait photo or of the background photo. Before you get too excited, even persnickety variation collectors would agree that the differences are slight at best. However, the differences appear to be true variations (created as a result of changes in the pre-press set-up) rather than printing differences (caused by some glitch during the printing process itself). Most, but not all, of the cards involved have white backs.



Round hats and flat hats

The most detectable differences are found on the hats of the players' portraits, as if Topps designers said, "Gee, we are chopping off some of the tops of their hats. Why don't we adjust the set-up slightly so that their hats don't look so flat?" Let's call these cropping differences the "round hats" or the "flat hats" for want of a better term, although some of the changes involve different croppings for the background action photos and autographs.

Again variation collectors Tom Billing and Dennis Elkin helped me in our search for the variations. Part of the fun in collecting variations is the discovery process of looking for the differences. Rather than have a spoiler alert and then reveal all of the cards (possibly) involved, I'm going to present four of the cards. There are more. If you get into this (a dangerous addiction) and have trouble finding the rest, send me an email and I'll give you additional clues. More uncut sheets of 1956 Topps might help figure out how all these variations happened.

The four players depicted here all have white backs and are sequentially numbered 81, 82, 83, and 84. The hats on their head shots hit the top border slightly differently. In some cases the hats appear flatter or the distance from the hat to the top border is narrower or

(slightly) wider. The flat or round hat versions didn't have obvious differences in scarcity.

We're still scratching our heads for a logical explanation of why all this happened, but it is tempting to involve the changes in the dated team cards, all in the first series, as to why there was fiddling with the print runs. However, cards after the first series may have some similar issues. The variation mystery continues.



These four consecutively-numbered 1956 Topps cards all have slight differences as to how hats meet the top border of the card.

Heart of a Tiger

Ty Cobb's grandson Herschel Cobb has just written *Heart of a Tiger* describing his experiences as a youngster staying with Ty Cobb at Lake Tahoe in the 1950s. I reviewed his book prior to publication and found it provided new insights into Ty Cobb and his relationship with his family. Ty Cobb's second son was the author's "cruel and abusive" father and headed "a chaotic, destructive household" in the author's words. Grandfather Ty Cobb provided a welcome refuge.

The author helped Cobb package and mail baseballs autographed in green ink. Some collectors asked for and received an autographed ball, without even sending Cobb a ball to sign. Cobb's biographer, Al Stump, painted an unflattering picture of Cobb's later years. Herschel Cobb was there at the time, met Stump, refutes much of Stump's portrayal, and comments on Stump's efforts to snare Cobb memorabilia, a must-read for those interested in Cobb.

Herschel Cobb writes a memoir about growing up with grandfather Ty Cobb.

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