



By George Vrechek

HOBBY ODDS AND ENDS

Berger, Merrell mysteries, oldest players, footy cards, etc.

Sy Berger article

On Sunday morning December 14, 2014, I received a call from Butch Jacobs, former director of photography at Topps, informing me that his mentor, long-time Topps marketing executive Sy Berger, had passed away that morning. Sy Berger was very generous to me taking my phone calls over the past few years and telling me the stories of his involvement with Topps. Last summer I decided to write an article that was more about Sy than the cards and was helped in the endeavor by his family. The more I learned about Sy, the more I admired him.



Sy Berger (1923-2014)

I have written articles for SCD for over 25 years and the resulting September 19, 2014, article "Catching up with Sy Berger" drew more response than I have ever received. I heard from many readers who know Berger and echoed comments by family members who praised his career and personal touch. I heard from former business associates, writers, people at Topps, Berger family members, and I heard that Willie Mays enjoyed the article. Berger's widow Gloria and daughter Maxine said that they were especially pleased that Sy was able to enjoy the story. We should all be remembered so well.

Marshall Merrell prints

When I was a youngster, my aunt and uncle lived within walking distance of Milwaukee County Stadium, home of the Braves starting in 1953. I visited them several times and attended Braves games where I would splurge and spend 25 cents for one large black and white print of stars like Hank Aaron, Warren Spahn and Eddie Mathews. I carefully taped or glued those 8 by 10 inch prints to a bulletin board. I still have the prints along with a little front and back damage.

The prints were made from drawings by Marshall Merrell and are called 1953-4 Marshall Merrell Milwaukee Braves Portfolio in the SCD Catalog. I told then-catalog editor Bob Lemke that the prints were sold at the park for 25-cents, and he included it in the catalog description. Unfortunately, the set was copied in the 1990s with no indication that they were reprints. The backs of the reprints are bright white, whereas originals have backs that have yellowed. I've been looking for authentic prints of a few players for about 35 years with limited success, although the misleading reprints pop up sporadically with expensive prices. I may have been one of the few suckers willing to shell out the 25 cents in 1953 (\$2.20 in today's dollars) for these prints, based on the difficulty of finding originals today.



Marshall Merrell Braves prints of Aaron, Spahn and Mathews – along with some scotch tape marks

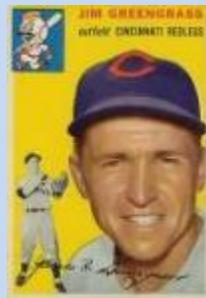
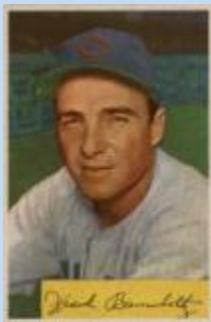
Recently I was delighted to find an eBay listing for what were described as Marshall Merrell prints. As always, I suspected the prints were probably reprints, but at least there was a listing. The prints turned out to be mystery images of unidentified players who were not Milwaukee Braves. The seller (Mears Auctions) told me that the items were from the estate of Bill Topitzes, who had worked as the visitors' clubhouse manager for the Braves in 1953 and for the minor league Brewers at Borchert Field for the 12 prior years. I turned out to be the only bidder on these mystery drawings. The search was on to find out what I had just bought.

I wasn't able to find anything on the career of artist Marshall Merrell. I had assumed that he was not involved in any sports-related drawings other than the 1953-4 Milwaukee Braves assignment since there were no other catalog listings or eBay results for him. The mystery items I won were signed by Merrell and appeared to be from before the mid-1950s. These odd-sized drawings did not have the players' names and were likely part of a proposed issue or issues that never went ahead. The details on the drawings were not as sharp as on the Braves prints. The items appear to be original drawings or tracings from an original with shading added but no erasures

The uniform styles in the drawings appeared to be from among the Cleveland Indians, Chicago White Sox, Chicago Cubs or Cincinnati Reds. One player looks to me like either Frankie Baumholtz,

who was a Red from 1947 to 1949 and a Cub from 1949 to 1955, or Jim Greengrass, who was with the Reds from 1952 to 1955. This player has a "C" with the distinctive pointed mid-point used by the Cubs, Reds and Indians.

The second player has a thin block "C" on his hat and piping on his jersey which looks like a White Sox uniform from the 1940s. There are readers who know more about uniforms than I do, and I would appreciate any help in identifying the players or teams of my mystery players



here.

The mystery Merrell prints - could the player on the left be Frankie Baumholtz or perhaps even Jim Greengrass? The player on the right appears to be in White Sox uniform from the 1940s similar to that worn by Ted Lyons, pictured

Oldest players update

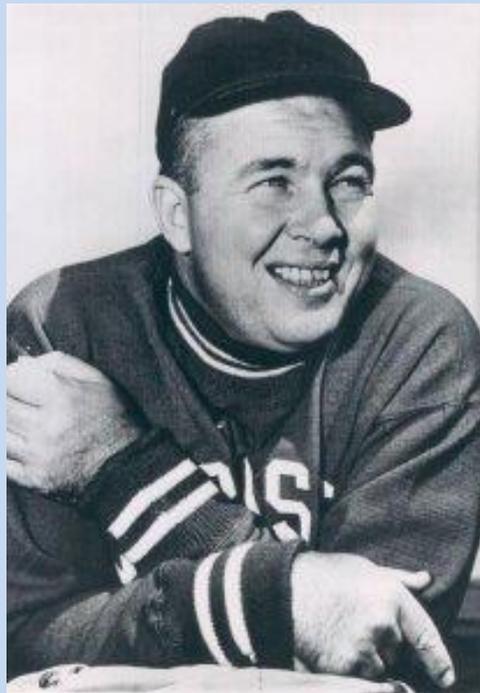
In 2012 I wrote SCD articles about the oldest living former major league baseball players and former NFL players who were featured on trading cards during their careers. I put together fantasy teams for both sports. Several of my starting players have died since the articles appeared including Stan Musial, Ralph Kiner, Andy Pafko, Alvin Dark, Al Rosen, Earl Weaver, Jerry Coleman

and Virgil Trucks. My most experienced pitcher, Connie Marrero, died at the age of 102 in April 2014.

NFL HOFer Ace Parker was on both my baseball and football teams since he played for the Philadelphia A's in the 1937 and 1938. Ace died at the age of 101 in November 2013. Other football players on my fantasy team who have died include Bill Austin, Eddie LeBaron, Chuck Bednarik, Ed Modzelewski, Wilford White, Frank Tripucka and Ed Sprinkle.

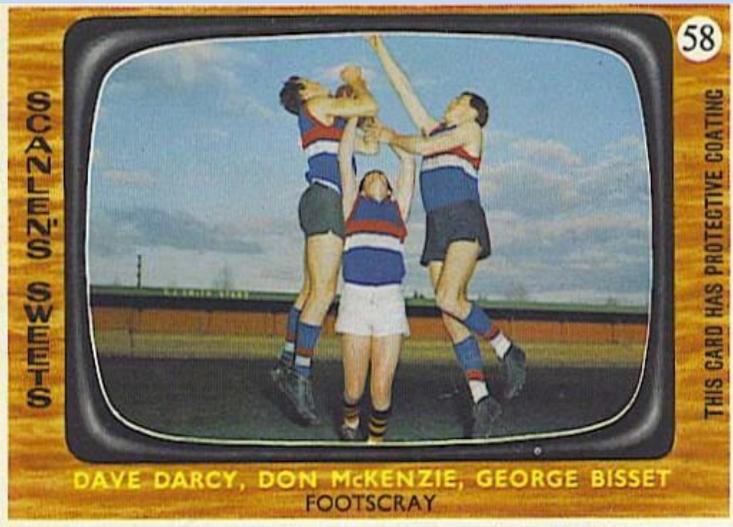
If I were to reform baseball teams today comprised of the oldest former players who had cards, I would be adding youngsters Yogi Berra, Bobby Shantz, Ralph Branca, Don Newcombe, Johnny Groth and Joe Garagiola. My football squads would welcome Yale Lary, Joe Schmidt, Billy Wade and Buddy Ryan. Mike Sandlock (99) is the oldest living former baseball player. Bill Glassford (101) is the oldest footballer.

I didn't cover golfers in my articles, but professional golfer Ernie Ball died in 2014 at the age of 103. Ernie was the last living competitor to have played in the first Masters Tournament in 1934, called the Augusta National Invitational. Ball also had two hole-in-ones on the front nine on a day in 1962 when I caddied for him. I didn't give him any suggestions on putts as I recall, but I do remember getting his normal 35 cent tip. He was a very polite (and thrifty) man.



The oldest living former baseball and football players are Mike Sandlock left and Bill Glassford as of June 2015. Glassford photo via Wikimedia Commons under Creative Commons license

Bugger-all sporting swap cards



The design of this 1967 Australian football card was apparently licensed through Topps who used this same TV console design on their 1966 football and hockey cards.

I was sent an Australian publication called ManSpace Magazine recently, which proclaims its focus is “inside the world’s best garages, sheds and mancaves.” The cover story was “House of Cards” and dealt with “the footy or cricket cards we once purchased as kids.” We did? I don’t remember that, but maybe it was because I was never in Australia.

The article, “Bubblegum Bonanza” by Ian Kenins, reported on the sharp increase in the values of Australian sports cards issued between the late 1800s through the 1980s. The story sounded like one on vintage American sports cards except for the terminology: footy, sporting swap cards, VFL and AFL cards. A 1963 Graham (Polly) Farmer footy (Australian football) card sold for \$7,200. In Australian football, players collide with one another at full speed wearing no equipment and barely any shorts. The story mentions, “Cards have to be in a slip or some kind of album. If they are stuck in a book they’re worth bugger-all.”

One collector’s big find was surprisingly at a garage sale. He reported, “I found a set of Hutton’s Pies footy stickers, which are something of the Holy Grail for collectors and worth about \$1,200. I paid 50 cents.” The stickers were then carefully peeled out of an album and therefore were worth more than “bugger-all.” An Australian dollar converts to .87 U.S. Dollars.

Museum at new Harry Caray’s restaurant

As reported by Ross Forman (SCD, Dec 12, 2014), Harry Caray’s Restaurant Group has taken over a large space on the seventh floor of Water Tower Place in Chicago. If you eat at Harry Caray’s 7th Inning Stretch, you get a complimentary ticket to the adjacent Chicago Sports Museum. The museum is incredibly large given the high rents in the area. There are plenty of inter-active, computer-generated activities where you can swing at a pitch, take a slap shot or throw a football. You can measure your arm span against a cut-out of Scottie Pippen. The museum has Cubs and Harry Caray memorabilia including old newspaper sports pages, photos, Sammy Sosa’s corked bat,

the remnants of the “Bartman” ball and a life-sized cut-out of Harry Caray. It is a fun experience, although the memorabilia per square foot is relatively thin.

The writer with a cardboard Harry Caray at the new Harry Caray restaurant



There are numerous inter-active video games at the museum.



A museum display features Will Ferrell as Harry Caray.

Cards and eBay

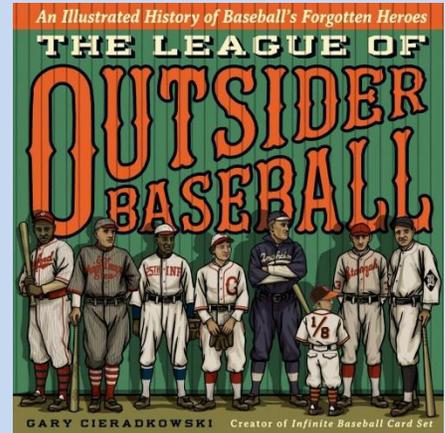
Has anyone else noticed these three eBay developments? Sellers are concerned that the card is protected in shipping. However, rather than using a hard plastic sleeve, some sellers will put the card in a fairly flimsy sleeve, but then wrap it up like a mummy with cardboard, bubble wrap and as much tape as the market will bear. The challenge for the buyer is to free the card from all the packaging without destroying the card. I suspect USPS handling is the impetus for this protective custody program. I know USPS wants to charge more for an envelope with a hard plastic sleeve, but the hard plastic works fine for protecting the card without further packaging.

Observation #2: Most card variations involve differences on the backs of the cards (on about 3,000 vintage cards), but many sellers only show the card front, even if there is a catalogued back variation. Back variations may involve traded lines, changed statistics, cardboard color, ink color, copyrights and misspellings. It tells me that the seller either uses an abridged catalog, or they are not interested in spending the time or money to scan the backs. Furthermore you don't get to see the condition of the back. It may have been pasted in an album and is worth bugger-all.

Finally, you find common cards for sale, which are not especially old or scarce, graded PSA 2 or PSA 3. The cards are not worth more than a few dollars regardless of what the seller imagines. Why does the seller waste the money to get such cards graded? I presume it is because they expected better results, or perhaps they think everything needs to be graded?

And finally

An enjoyable new book is “The League of Outsider Baseball” by Gary Cieradkowski, a compilation of stories about famous, infamous and unknown players. Cieradkowski is an artist, or is he a writer? He does both by using his baseball card paintings to illustrate the short stories of around 100 players. The meat of the book deals with players who may have played in foreign countries, semi-pro leagues, prisons, or in obscurity in the major leagues. They were not all choir boys.



I received responses to my suggestion about recognizing levels of achievement in collecting vintage sports card singles (SCD, June 12, 2015). Two collectors are in the Buck Barker Level with between 65,000 and 80,000 cards. One collector is in the Lionel Carter Level with over 50,000 cards and six collectors are in the Charles Bray Level with between 35,000 and 50,000 cards. I presume other readers are still counting.

I plan to spend some time at the SCD booth during the National. Please stop by.

This article appeared in the July 10, 2015, SCD.

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