

Big cards (Kelly, Anson, Johnson and Ruth) may lurk in small sets.

We are the champions!



By George Vrechek

Freddie Mercury and the British rock band Queen featured Mercury's song "We Are the Champions" and Brian May's "We Will Rock You" on a 1977 album. The songs were perfect to get concert fans singing along. The playlist to accompany any championship sporting celebration since then would be remiss if organizers didn't consider including "We Are the Champions" – at least until they determined what royalties would have to be paid.



Queen's "News of the World" album.

Undoubtedly, Mercury got his inspiration for his song from the 1888 tobacco cards of Goodwin Champions (N162) and Allen & Ginter World's Champions (N28). Perhaps, it was the other way around – Mercury's song got sports card collectors fired up about collecting sets of champions?

As collectors finish mainstream sets, they often roam elsewhere looking for inspiring championship cardboard. Many sets have touted "champions"

whether it be in the name of the set, or the makeup of the athletes included. In recent years, sports have emphasized playoffs with one team named “champion” as opposed to conference or bowl championships. NFL teams start the season with the goal of winning the Super Bowl. Hockey players won’t even touch a trophy now that isn’t the Stanley Cup.

Let’s look at a few of the challenging but popular sets about "champions" issued before Mercury wrote his song and which might be interesting to try to add to our collections.

Stiffeners from the wild '80s

The late 1880s was a wild period for the fledgling U.S. cigarette industry. Companies formed, built plants, created tobacco blends and a plethora of brand identities to compete for a new, profitable cigarette market. Production evolved from “cigarette rolling girls” to machines invented by James Bonsack. Allen & Ginter, Kimball, Duke, Kinney and Goodwin added cards as stiffeners to packages and competed against one another offering an array of subjects and attractive, colorful printing. James Duke quickly snuffed out all this unprofitable competition (and insert cards) by consolidating the major players into the American Tobacco Company trust in 1890.

N28 World’s Champions



Adrian “Cap” Anson, Charles Comiskey and Annie Oakley were in Allen & Ginter’s N28.

In 1888 Allan & Ginter (actually Lewis Ginter and John Pope) produced a 50-card N28 World's Champions set. Six Hall of Famers including Cap Anson were among 10 baseball players, 10 oarsmen, 10 pugilists, seven wrestlers, seven billiard players, two pool players and four rifle shooters. A&G issued another similar 50-card set of champions (N29) and a larger version (N43).

Hobby writer Anson Whaley has collected four "Champions" sets (N28, N29, N162 Goodwin, and N184 Kimball) for years. Given the range of the subjects, Whaley considers them to be the most important sports cards of the 19th century.

"They are home to some of the earliest cards picturing actual subjects of many sports," observed Whaley. "While the baseball cards have always been popular, there is strong interest for the likes of John Sullivan, Buffalo Bill, and Annie Oakley, all of which are priced like baseball subjects. The artwork is impressive, and the rarity falls in the sweet spot of being challenging enough but not impossible."

Collector Daryle Barbee was first attracted to N28s in the 1990s by searching *SCD* ads and completed the set by 1999. Barbee recalled, "As far as any challenges (other than baseball player John Clarkson eluding me), of the last nine cards needed to complete the set, five were from the billiard players, two were boxers and one wrestler, Muldoon."

Dealer/collector Mark Macrae has noticed, "The Allen & Ginter sports issues have a very high-quality stock of paper/chipboard. When held about six inches over a table, then allowed to drop, a unique sound, almost like balsa wood, is heard. Whenever a card in question (counterfeit or altered reprint) is given the same test, the sound is noticeably different."

Recent eBay sales reflected N28 commons in not great shape sold for under \$50, better-conditioned commons in the low hundreds and the key cards at over \$1,000. PSA has graded 5,722 N28s and 1,413 N29s.

N162 Champions

In 1888, Goodwin & Co. produced a beautiful 50-card multi-sport set of "Champions" with similarities to N28. Cap Anson is again featured as well as footballer Harry Beecher, tennis players, track athletes and cyclists. All cards come with and without a small notation identifying the lithographer, George S. Harris & Sons. The notation is scarcer. PSA has graded only 1,571 N162s, and prices run significantly higher than for the N28s.

As to prices, Whaley added, "The N28s have gone up, but I think they're mostly in line with other cards from pre-Covid days. Since then, I'd say most of the cards are 2-3 times what they were and that's on par with a lot of pre-war stuff. N162s have risen more exponentially, though. I've found it to be the most popular of the four Champions sets."

Baseball players routinely list for over \$1,000. An SGC-50 VG/EX card of Cap Anson brought 44 eBay bids recently and sold for \$15,589.

N162s even went for big money back in the day of editor Jefferson Burdick's 1946 American Card Catalog. Burdick listed all cards in the set at 25 cents each, if they were in great shape. Burdick was the champion in identifying these early cards and getting them well organized with letter and number designations still used today. The images shown here of N28, N162 and Sport Kings are from Burdick's collection at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Not to be outdone by A&G, Goodwin went arty with backgrounds for their N162 Champions of Kelly, Beecher and Beekman.

None of these early champion sets include any bios. You just have to know or assume that they were prominent in their fields. N162s advertise "Old Judge and Gypsy Queen Cigarettes" for use with either brand.

T218s from 1910-11

During the second great tobacco insert era, the American Tobacco Company felt the need to squash new competitors selling Mid-Eastern blends. ATC again issued insert cards in abundance including Champion Athletes, T218. Being only a lousy 115 years old, this set is easier to assemble than the N cards – if you aren't obsessed about variations. PSA has graded 10,034 T218s.

ATC used these inserts in packages of Mecca, Hassan and Tolstoi brands in three series of 51 cards each. Mecca was the most popular brand at the time. The base set is counted at 153 cards, but when you add in three spelling variations (Gillis, Trubenbach and Cloughen), three different cigarette brands, two different factories and several different set title descriptions, you can enjoy looking for a master set of 633 verified cards and maybe a few more. Jack Johnson has 13 versions.

The good news is that the cards can be more easily found and seem to be well loved over the years, making for a good selection of low-grade, inexpensive examples. The 153-card base set is certainly doable, if you don't mind paying a few more dollars for the two Jack Johnson cards. There are no ball players in the set unless you count track athletes Irons,



T218s included two Jack Johnsons as well as aviators and a pedestrian.

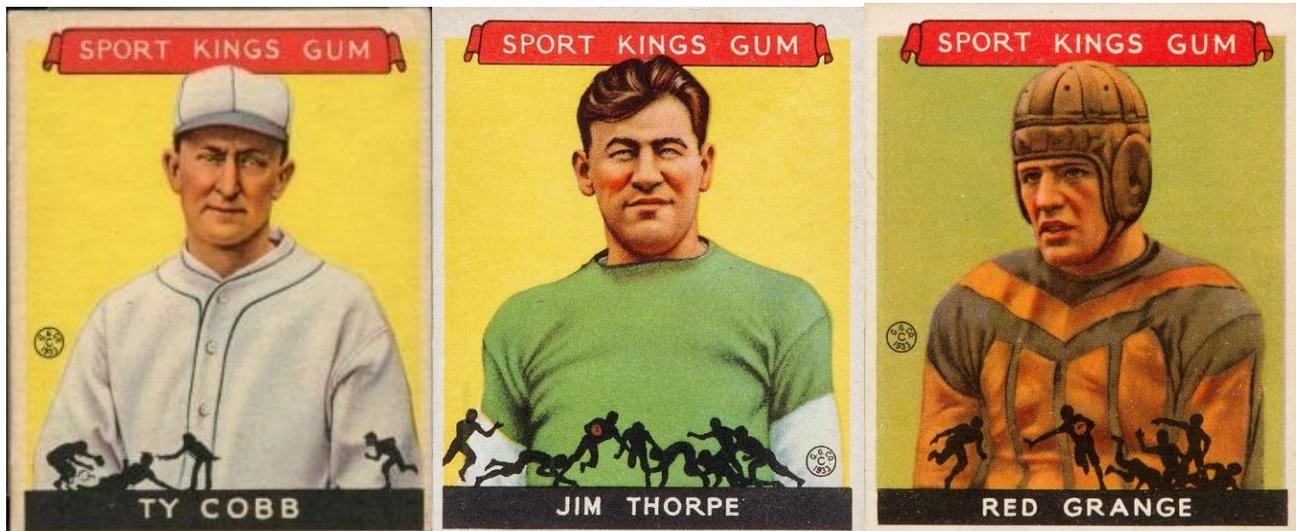
Adams and Kiviatic who played in two baseball exhibition games at the 1912 Olympics. The inclusion of aviators and golfers were new categories of interest. Prize fighters account for 63 cards and track athletes 55 cards. Edward Payson Westin (71 at the time) represented all the championship pedestrians. The backs have bios which are informative and reflect the era.

Commons are often available in lots running under \$5 per card. Individual commons can be less than \$10; prize fighters are usually more. All three series seem to have been printed in quantities. The variations can be tough, especially Tolstoi backs.

Goudey Sport Kings of 1933-4

“This is one of a series of noted athletes and sportsmen. The complete collection includes all the leaders in every branch of sport” according to the backs of these Goudeys. The design of the 48-card Sport Kings can be mistaken for 1933 Goudey baseball cards.

Even without using “champions” to describe the athletes, collectors knew champions when they saw them - Ruth, Cobb, Hubbell, Grange, Thorpe, Rockne, Hagen, Jones, Sarazen, Tilden, Dempsey, Tunney plus hockey and basketball players. Helene Madison and Babe Didrickson were included, presumably as “athletes” rather than “sportsmen.”



Sport Kings included some champions of the recent past.

The set was issued in two series with front and back copyright dates of either 1933 or 1934. In three large Mid-West collections I saw, that were put together in the 1930s, there were plenty of 1933 Goudey baseball cards, but zero Sport Kings, which raises the question, were Sport Kings distributed in fewer areas? In the 1980s an unopened box of 100 cards was found in Colorado.

PSA has graded 108,200 1933 Goudey baseball cards. With 239 cards in the set, the average per card is 452. Sport Kings submissions of 12,586 average 262 submissions per card, or 58% of those in the baseball set. PSA numbers point to the 1933 copyright cards being more available than the 1934s with average submissions of 323 in the first group versus 201 in the second.

As to prices, you may be able to find a type card common in low condition for about the cost of lunch. Thorpe, Grange and Bobby Jones are going to be at least a fancy dinner for four. Ruth, Cobb and most anyone graded PSA8 may exceed your monthly housing cost.

Exhibit Supply Company (ESCO) Champions 1948-9

Once the post-war paper shortages had diminished, gum companies (Bowman, Leaf and Topps) unleashed sets starting in 1948. ESCO had been producing (non-sport) arcade cards since about 1910 and sports cards since 1921. They even managed to issue cards during World War II. In 1948, ESCO cranked out 64 baseball cards and 33 Baseball Hall of Famer cards as well as non-sport issues and a new set of 60 football players.

In 1924 and 1925 ESCO issued 32 cards of champions which included Ruth, Dempsey and Sarazen. In 1932 they issued another scarce set of 32 athletes from the Los Angeles Olympics. In 1948 it was time for another multi-sport champions issue. ESCO produced 32 cards in 1948 and replaced 14 cards with new athletes in 1949. Some checklists show as many as six other cards in addition to the 46, but they seem to be unverified.



Baugh, Henie and Riggs came flying out of penny arcade machines.

ESCO used 13 images from their football-only set plus Bump Elliott and Marion Motley. Mikan and three other basketball players were added as were fighters Joe Louis and Jack Dempsey. Three hockey cards and six skaters elbowed their way onto the cardboard along with two racehorses, a kid shooting marbles and a speed boat. Skaters Button and Scott even got two poses. ESCO's captions told you why the athletes were included. Billiard player Willie Hoppe was described as the "greatest...of all time" making him a GOAT. ESCO didn't include any baseball players since they had plenty in two other 1948 issues.

Different print colors, 28 cards printed only in one year and two variations make for an interesting set. These cards seem to fly under the radar, and you can find bargains or wide differences in pricing. The set doesn't appear in many price guides.

1952 Wheaties (Breakfast of Champions)

General Mills first produced Wheaties in the 1920s and gradually advertised the cereal with baseball and athletics. Their ad agency came up with the slogan “Wheaties – Breakfast of Champions.” In 1934 they put Lou Gehrig on Wheaties boxes with the slogan.



Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com

Round-edged 1952 Wheaties could be neatly cut out of the box – if you had a laser beam handy

They have been at it ever since, although collectors find it hard to fit those boxes still loaded with cereal into plastic sleeves and binders. However, in 1952, Wheaties put smaller images of athletes on the sides and backs of their boxes - 10 cards to a box with 60

cards available in all depicting 30 athletes both in-action and portraits. Young collectors rescued the images by cutting individual cards from the box panels. Not all collectors were thinking of getting the cards graded gem-mint when they started whacking away. At least the cards didn't have any gum stains.

The subjects are Williams, Musial and eight other baseball stars; Mikan and two other basketballers; six golfers; six football players; two divers; a bowler, skier and tennis player. Portrait and in-action cards seem to get graded in about equal numbers, and there are no known variations. Complete boxes or panels can be found. As always, watch for fakes.

Wheaties prices are not silly unless you like your cards neatly cut, and Williams and Mikan might remain on your wantlist for a while. There was also a 1951 set of six larger cards printed on individual serving boxes with orange borders. Over 100 unused boxes were reportedly found in the 1990s.

Looking back at the champions

Champions were on collectors' minds starting with the first tobacco cards. Baseball players were well represented. Track and field athletes, golfers and prize fighters were popular in the early days and have remained so. Football and basketball players appeared in later years. Oarsmen, however, didn't remain in the limelight and the pool and billiard players have taken back seats with the jockeys. Soccer players didn't make it into vintage American champion sets at all, but times change, and marbles champs, speedboats and pedestrians may be replaced by video gamers, pickleballers and fantasy football players.

We will never know how much all these sets of champions influenced Freddie Mercury to write his lyrics, "We are the champions / No time for losers / 'Cause we are the champions of the World." As Freddie sang - we have paid our dues (or at least our SCD subscriptions). We are all the champions.

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