



A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PRINTING OF 1952 AND 1953 TOPPS

by [George Vrechek](#)

1952 Topps are probably the benchmark set of the post war era. I have always been interested in this set and I have tried to learn as much as possible about it. The more I learned the more I found that I did not know. My goal for this article is to share what I have learned as well as my opinions on how they printed the cards, what scarcities exist, whether such scarcities are logically valued, and the reasons for any variations. Because of this process I also looked into the printing of the 1953 set.

If I had complete information on uncut sheets of 1952 Topps, my job would be easier, but also not nearly as interesting. What I have found so far is information on some uncut 1952 sheets with plenty of room for conjecture. At least it gives me a start. I would appreciate any additional information that readers can lend to the subject, particularly any of you who have seen uncut sheets.

The Find

My first clue about how the cards were printed was Alan Rosen's description in his book "True Mint" of his 1952 Topps "find." Rosen said that he sorted a box consisting entirely of high numbers. He found 17 to 18 of each card except Mantle, Robinson and Thomson which were twice as plentiful. The high series consists of 97 players with numbers 310 through 407. It would seem safe to conclude from "the find" that 94 players were single printed, 3 were double printed for a total of 100 cards on a sheet. One might presume that 100 cards to a sheet were how Topps printed everything.

1981 Article on 1952 Topps

Further evidence is found in Beckett and Eckes Sport Americana Baseball Card Price Guide No. 3, 1981. The guide contains a great article on 1952 Topps attributed to Mike Aronstein, Larry Fritsch, Lew Lipset, Tom Reid, Herb Ross and Nick Shoff. They describe how an individual brought uncut 1952 Topps sheets to a Maryland card show in June (1980?). The sheets were quickly sold and unfortunately dispersed before adequate study could be undertaken. However some of the sheets were photographed. The sheets that were photographed were concluded to consist of 3/4ths of a 100 card sheet of high numbers that had been cut into quadrants. The wide border on the edges of some sheets helped decipher the layout of at least 3/4ths of the sheet. Based on the even distribution of the cards, they concluded what card numbers were on the missing quadrant and also that the reversed baseball stitching on the backs of cards 311 312 and 313 were printed in equal number as the "non-reversed." In addition to the reversed stitching the box around the players' names and signatures on the front differ. (See

Ehibit 1) There were also two 15 card sheets of the 5th Series cards (#s250-310) photographed.

I have seen conflicting information on the 1952 Topps Series in publications, however the authors of the 1980 article seemed to have figured out the series and the printing process better than others - or they may have figured out HALF of the process. I will revisit this point later. The article suggests that in order to account for 100 cards on a sheet that: Series 1-80 contains 20 double printed cards and 60 single printed cards. Series 81-130 contains 50 double printed cards. Series 131-190 contains 40 double prints and 20 single prints. Series 191-250 has the same 40 doubles and 20 singles. The high series is 94 single prints and 3 doubles. Seems logical?

5th Series Scarcities?

The 1981 article deduces that the scarcities in the 5th series are the single printed cards #s 281 to 300 citing that a find of 3 unopened boxes of the 5th series consisting of 1,620 cards showed the same scarcities for cards 280 through 300. A premium for those cards are shown in price guides at least though 1989. So why aren't those cards shown at a premium in guides today? And what did Alan Rosen "find" on the subject? Rosen says that the 5th Series cards in his 1986 find showed scarcities in numbers 271-280 and 301-310! He found 35 of every 5th Series cards except the previous numbers which were found in quantities of 17 or 18 - single printed. Rosen didn't have the cards for very long but he had them long enough to figure out which ones were scarce and to price them accordingly in his July 4, 1986 SCD ad. Rosen's 1994 "True Mint" book shows a premium for numbers 271-280 and 300-310. So who is right? My theory is that everyone is "right." I will come back to that point as well but I needed more to go on and 1953 Topps seemed like they might be a good place to get another idea on how Topps did things. In addition there seemed to be a lot more information on how 1953 Topps were printed. Best of all, I like the 1953 Topps even better than the 1952s. (Show me only the button on the top of the 1953 player's hat and I can tell you who it is.)

1953 Topps

The Sport Americana Guides beginning with the 1989 Guide Number 11 are very detailed as to the printing scarcities of the 1953 Topps. I haven't been able to locate an article on 1953 uncut sheets, but they must have been found in order to reach the concrete conclusions stated in the guide. However I found myself wanting to dig a little deeper than something was "single" or "double" printed. Here is what I deduced from the descriptions of how the '53s were printed. Now for some real fun with numbers!

Topps appears to have been more complex in organizing the 1953 printing than they were in 1952. Now that kids were collecting, the theory may have been let's get them to chase after some missing numbers sort of like the missing #106 in the 1933 Goudeys or #4 Priddy in 1949 Bowmans. I find it easier to think in terms of print runs rather than numbers in a "series." and to think in terms of how many cards to a print run rather than how many on a sheet in that some cards aren't even on all sheets in a print run. Let's

use "# of cards per print run" rather than "single" or "double" prints when referring to 1953 Topps.

The above sources describe the first print run of 1953 consisting of 80 cards. The 80 cards are cards numbered between 1 and 85 except for #s 10, 44, 61, 72 and 81. The second print run picks up those cards along with numbers 86 through 165, but then excludes 5 more cards: 94, 107, 131, 145 and 156. Those missing 5 cards join numbers 166 through 220 for the third print run consisting of 60 cards. The High numbers are in print run number 4 and contain only 54 cards due to the omission of 6 numbers that were withdrawn.

1953 Scarcities

Next we learn from the Sport Americana Beckett Guide #11 that 40 cards in the first series were printed 50% more frequently than the other 40 numbers. In that there are 100 cards on a sheet, more than 100 cards need to be printed for the math to work out. At least 2 sheets of 100 cards need to be printed to achieve the 3 to 2 ratio between the "triple" printed cards and the "double" printed cards. 40 cards times 3 equals 120 cards, 40 other cards times 2 equals 80 cards. 120 card plus 80 cards equal 200 cards. There must have been two sheets with 100 cards each printed to produce the first series. Let's call the triple prints "3 to a run cards" and the double prints "2 to a run."

The second print run has 45 cards which were printed 50% more frequently than 30 of the cards per Beckett's guide. In addition those 5 rascals held out of the first printing appear to have only been printed once each in the second printing. The math again works out as: 45 "3 to a run" cards equals 135 cards. 30 "2 to a run" cards equals 60 more cards. Finally 5 "1 to a run cards" fill out the 200 cards to a print run. On top of the above fun with numbers we find that the second printing was printed either with white information on a red band on the top part of the back of the card, or with black printing on a red band. (Scarcer.) The five "one to a run" cards appear with both white and black stats.

The third print run has 60 players spread over 200 cards. The information available suggests that 55 cards were printed "3 to a run" while 5 cards (94, 107, 131, 145 and 156) are printed "7 to a run!" (165 cards plus 35 cards equals 200 cards)

The fourth run has 35 "3 to a run cards" and 19 "5 to a run cards." See Exhibit 2.

1953 Prices

Just for fun let's compare guide prices for cards within a series; and let's use excellent prices at say 50% of Near Mint Prices in that there are a heck of a lot more of these cards in excellent or less. A recent Beckett guide shows first series "regular" cards in excellent (at \$15 and "double" prints at \$8. This seems just a little off to me from the prices derived just from scarcities. If a card printed "2 to a run" is worth \$15, a card printed "3 to a run" would be at \$10. (The card that is 50% scarcer sells for 50% more.)

The guide shows second print run regular cards and double prints at the same prices as above and I would have the same reaction. But the guide shows those rascal missing 5 cards as single prints for \$17.50 for the one common #44 Ellis Kinder. #10 Burgess is priced at \$35. I like Smokey (a great pinch hitter in the twilight of his career with the White Sox) but I would think he is a common. But if a "two to a run" card is \$15, a "one to a run" card should be \$30. So maybe only Ellis Kinder's price is out of whack. But wait! If the rest of the world was as fired up about black or red stat variations on the backs of the cards in the second print run as they are about the Joe Page/Johnny Sain 1952 variations, then the price of a scarcer black stat, "single print to a run" Ellis Kinder ought to be about \$70 and a white stat would be say \$50. Fortunately the world does not care much about the color of the stats on the back of some 47 year old pieces of cardboard.

In the third series regular cards are \$12.50 in excellent. If they were printed in the same quantity as the first two series, I would think that their prices should be closer to the \$10 that I derived for "3 to a run" cards from the earlier series. The five cards pulled out of the second run and printed "7 to a run" in the third run are relatively plentiful in any event. If the regular cards are \$12.50, scarcity would say that the "7 to a runs" should be \$5.30 each versus \$8 per the guide.

Finally in the last series the cards were either 3 or 5 to a run. The guide prices are \$50 and \$25. I would derive \$50 and \$30 just from the math as to relative scarcity. Of course there are many other factors effecting prices even on common cards. Overall though the pricing makes sense with what we know about the relative scarcity of 1953 cards.

So What?

From looking at how the 1953s were produced and trying to reconcile Alan Rosen with Mike Aronstein, Larry Fritsch, et al, I believe that to be continued next week.

As described in last week's part 1 of this article, from looking at how the 1953s were produced and trying to reconcile Alan Rosen with Mike Aronstein, Larry Fritsch, et al, I believe that most of the 1952s must have been printed with at least 200 cards to a print run. Instead of their being "short prints" or "single prints," I believe that a portion of the cards were printed in quantities 50% greater than the "regular" cards.

6 Print Runs

We need to confirm how many players were included in each print run. The 1981 article concludes that there were 6 runs: 1 to 80, 81 to 130, 131-190, 191-250, 251-310, and 311-407. The first series (print run) is printed with either red or black backs. No other print runs have black backs. Cards 1 to 80 were clearly printed together. Card numbers 131 to 190 are most commonly found with white backs rather than the gray backs used on all other runs. Therefore cards 81 to 130 and 191 to 250 must have been printed separately. The high numbers and 251-310 were found by Rosen in separate boxes. The scarcity also makes it pretty easy to conclude that they were separate print runs.

Adding to the information on scarcities is a card that I have of Joe Haynes #145. Why Joe Haynes? The back of this card is gray. I also have a Haynes with the more common white back. A look at Dick Gilkeson's expert compilation Baseball Card Variation Book Volume II shows cards 131 to 190 printed with white or gray backs. Bert Sugar's Sports Collectors Bible noted the same 20 years ago, but noted no difference in prices between the two backs. The gray backs have to be scarce in that I collected a complete run of 131 to 190 Topps as well as 10 to 15 duplicates. When I now look at the backs of the cards only one card (old Joe Haynes) out of 70+ cards has a gray back. At least one major dealer has reacted to this scarcity. At least it is a relief to see that Topps had not gotten into the fancy business of missing card numbers that they employed in 1953. If they had tried such shenanigans we should find some 1 to 80 or 131 to 190 cards without the scarcer white or black backs.

Cards Per Print Run

If 100 cards are printed on a sheet and only one sheet is printed and there are 80 players in the first run, then the widest distribution possible would have only been 60 single prints and 20 double prints. This was the conclusion of the 1980 article. (Conceivably you could also have had as many as 79 single prints and one card that was printed 21 times or 20 cards just left blank but that sure doesn't sound like how Topps would spend their hard earned cardboard.)

The problem with this approach is that no one seems to have found significant scarcities with print runs. There are no premiums or discounts in price guides for print quantities of 1952 Topps (although I contend there should be some discounts - more later). Based on the cards that have been floating around for 48 years, there doesn't seem to be unusual scarcities. Even in the semi-highs (251 to 310) no current guide has a premium or discount for scarcities. But I also believe that there were cards printed in different quantities, but they were extra prints rather than short prints.

If Topps had wanted to print the same number of cards for each player, they would have put numbers 1 through 100 on the first sheet and have just let the presses run. I believe instead that they printed at least 2 sheets of 100 cards each and that they cut, collated and distributed the cards from the two sheets separately. In this way youngster A for (Al Rosen) would find a box of cards in his store with scarce numbers 271 to 280 and 301 to 310. Over in neighborhood B (for the boys in the Beckett article) they would find scarcities in numbers 281 though 300. The A and B boys (and girls) would finally get together and trade thus evening out the scarcities. Mr Retailer also might get a B box and an A box and the boys and girls would return to the store in the hope of getting some cards they didn't already have. Eventually all the boys and girls mothers would get tired of picking up the cards and the moms would sell the cards to Al Rosen. Al didn't have to bother buying any cards at the store at retail when he could pick them up in the aftermarket. (Just kidding, Al) Both the 1981 article and Rosen were right except they only had one-half of the print run of the 5th series.

The Vrechek Theory

Now the Vrechek theory could prove to be partially wet, but it sure makes sense to me. (But I am easily convinced by my own opinions.) I think the print runs went as follows:

Run #1 card #s 1 to 80: 2 sheets of 100 cards each, 200 cards in total, 40 players were triple printed, 40 players were double printed

Run #2 card#s 81 to 130: 2 sheets of 100 cards each, 200 cards in total, 50 players printed four times each (or maybe they only ran one sheet)

Run #3 card #s 131 to 190: 2 sheets of 100 cards each, 200 cards in total, 40 players were triple printed, 20 players were quadruple printed

Run #4 card #s 191 to 250: 2 sheets of 100 cards each, 200 cards in total, 40 players were triple printed, 20 players were quadruple printed

Run #5 card #s 251 to 310: 2 sheets of 100 cards each, 200 cards in total, 40 players were triple printed, 20 players were quadruple printed

Run #6 card #s 311 to 407: 1 sheet of 100 cards, 94 players were single printed, 3 players were double printed

How would the cards have been laid out on a sheet? We have an almost complete picture as to the high numbers from the 3 quadrants appearing at the 1980(?) show in Maryland. See Exhibit 1.

We also have a partial sheet from the 5th run. See Exhibit 2. This partial sheet is from the boxes sent to the "Beckett" boys at Store B. I have created a second sheet which would explain why the boys at store A (Alan Rosen) found different scarcities. From what we see of the 5th series partial sheet we might guess that Topps laid out the sheets with 10 cards in a column starting with for example 201 going down to 210. The players triple printed in a run could be those four columns of cards (40 cards) that were single printed on either Sheet A or B. This would account for cards 280 through 310 being triple printed whereas cards 251 through 279 were quadruple printed.

It would appear that the relatively scarcest cards in the first four runs would be the double printed first series cards. But which ones are they? I don't have a clue yet, but maybe you can help me out. The breakdown of the above analysis as shown on Exhibit 3.

This theory is consistent with another Rosen "find." In 1991 Rosen purchased 100s of packs of unopened 1st series black backs at a show in Seattle as reported in his "True Mint" book. He found 3 to 5 of all the low numbers 1 to 80. My theory would yield a ratio of 1.5 to 1 or 4.5 cards for each 3 cards. Unfortunately Al doesn't tell us which cards were only in quantities of 3. He does say that all the Billy Loes cards had pull marks on the bottom right hand corner and that there were 5 Pafkos in the lot. Vintage Beckett currently lists Loes as the only "short" print in the set. It may be one of the lesser

"double" prints in the first series per my theory but it certainly isn't the only one. There should be 39 more and Pafko isn't one of them. It also is conceivable that card #20 Loes was the card in the bottom right corner of both A & B sheets.

It is also entirely possible that there were more than 200 cards to a print run. The theory behind a 300 or 400 card run would be that Topps wanted to print about the same quantity of each card, but would distribute the cards by sheets to stores so that scarcities would appear in each box individually. Topps could have achieved an even distribution of cards by running 4 sheets of the first series and 3 sheets (300 cards) of the series 2,4, and 5 with 60 players each. Series 3 and 6 were basically even to start with. But Topps apparently didn't "run with" an even distribution in 1953. Why would they have done so in 1952?. Let me know what you think.

Again based on just print run scarcity, cards that were quadruple printed should be worth 25% less than triple printed cards. Double printed cards should be worth 50% more than triple prints. The guides show no difference in prices for cards within a series in 1952. There should be premiums and discounts just like in 1953, but we don't know the cards printed in different quantities - yet. Under my new theory, if Mickey Mantle were not a star he should be worth half as much as let's say Ben Thorpe (#367). So send me your extra Mantles and I will send you half of a Ben Thorpe card. Actually I could send you a severely trimmed Robert Kelly card in my collection which would constitute well over 50% of a card.

What else?

What else have we learned about 1952 and 1953 Topps that should be mentioned in any article purporting to provide a "closer" look?

1. Sy Berger dumped the extra high numbers in the Atlantic Ocean in the early 60's. (Rescue teams have been formed to find the cards and dry them out?)
2. The high numbers were easier to find in Canada.
3. I saw 1952 Topps wrapped in cellophane packs were in dime stores for at least a year or more after 1952. Topps also tried to sell the cards with other products.
4. Topps must have been displeased with the coloring of cards in the first run using black ink on the backs. The black backs might also be called the guys with the gray faces on the front. The fronts of red back cards are much clearer with better color than the black backs. In fact it looks like when Topps noticed the Sain-Page goofs they must have also said to themselves: what can we do to improve the color on some of these cards? Ray Boone (#55) looked like death warmed over on a dark orange background. Kretlow (#42) wasn't much better. I think that when the Page and Sain cards got fixed, that Topps also improved #s 42 and 55. Both cards can be found in red and black backs, but the black backs have two different looks on the front. I would submit that the crummier looking versions are as scarce as the incorrect Sain and Page cards. Finally Topps fixed the problem by going with red ink on the back and clearing up the fronts of all cards.

5. Many of the 1952 Topps high numbers that didn't get widely circulated in 1952 were included in the first print run in 1953.
6. Why do lesser condition Pafkos sell for any premium at all? His 52 Bowman card is basically a common. Sure it is hard to find a '52 Topps Pafko in a high grade, but there must be plenty in low grade.
7. Big stars on both Topps and Bowman cards in 1952 and 1953 were: Mantle, Mays, Snider, Campanella, Berra and Feller (a token non-New Yorker).
8. Whitey Ford and Ted Williams were in the service and therefore not in either the Bowman or Topps sets. Today they would probably only have about 200 separate cards issued of them if they were in the service.
9. The 1952 Topps had the following who were not in the Bowman set: Jackie Robinson, (a Topps exclusive after 1952) Billy Martin, Hoyt Wilhelm, Eddie Mathews (rookies), Leo Durocher and Bill Dickey (managers and coaches) The 1952 Topps do not include Musial, Kiner, or Stengel. There are in the '52 Bowmans.
10. 1953 Topps had the following stars that were not in Bowmans in 1953: Mays, Robinson, Mathews, and Wynn. Bowman had Hodges, Snider, Roberts, Ashburn, Lemon, Durocher, Musial and Stengel to themselves. Could Hodges, Snider, Roberts, Ashburn, Lemon and Durocher be the pulled 6 numbers from the 1953 Topps high numbers? They were in the 1952 Topps set and weren't any less well known in 1953.
11. With 407 players in 1952 on 16 different teams an even distribution per team would be 25.4 players per team - just about everyone on the roster. Somehow the Dodgers had 31 players on cards, the Yankees 29 and the Giants 28. 21% of the set is New York City. Where was Topps headquartered? Brooklyn. In the first 104 cards there are 2 Cubs and 8 Yankees, 7 Giants and 8 Dodgers.
12. Frank Campos 1952 Topps #307 can be found with either 2 black stars on the back or one black star and another star originally printed with black but then printed over in red.
13. In 1952 Topps Bob Feller #88 comes with a clear or hazy background and #162 Crandall with a deep red or orange background per Gilkeson's book.
14. 1952 Topps were the first cards with stats on the back and color team logos. 1953s were the first with cartoons on the back, although you could say that the 1943 MP&Co cards had cartoons on the front.
15. If the high numbers are scarce, the wrappers have to be scarcer, and the gum the scarcest of all. Anyone have any mint condition high number gum?

CORRECTION TO PREVIOUS STORY [ABOVE] ON 1953 TOPPS PRINTING

I wrote an article last year on the printing of the 1952 and 1953 Topps sets. Alert reader Peter D'Luhosch found an error in my calculations involving the second print run of the 1953 Topps set. I had counted 45 cards that were printed 3 to a run. I therefore concluded that 30 cards were printed 2 to a run and that 5 cards (10, 44, 61, 72 and 81) were only printed 1 to a run. I thought the 200 cards in the run consisted of: (45 X 3 = 135; 30 X 2 = 60; 5 X 1 = 5).

Peter properly counted 40 cards printed 3 to a run. (I had mistakenly counted the 5 cards 94, 107, 131, 145 and 156 held out until the third print run). Peter's math results in concluding that the 5 oddball cards were printed 2 to a run rather than 1 to a run. ($40 \times 3 = 120$; $40 \text{ times } 2 = 80$) Therefore the prices of #10 Burgess, #44 Kinder, #61 Wynn, #72 Hutchinson and #81 Black should be about the same as other cards printed 2 to a run in the second series rather than at a premium.

This is a significant conclusion in that I stated the 5 cards were even scarcer than thought. I agree with Peter that the 5 cards must have been printed in the same quantity as 35 other cards in the series. This also is supported by my own experience in looking for and being able to easily find the 5 "rascal" cards. They stayed on my want lists because of the inordinate premiums asked. I hope the math hasn't been too fuzzy. Thanks Peter for the help.

A big OBC thank you to [Sports Collectors Digest \(SCD\)](#) for allowing us to reprint George's article here on the OBC site!