

Baseball exhibits: stars, variations and tough cards galore for 46 years



Two 32-card uncut pre-production sheets from 1966 include two Mantles, two Killebrews, two Fords and other tough cards like Yastrzemski, Richardson and Kranepool. Photo F. McKie



BY GEORGE VRECEK

Exhibit cards, or arcade cards, have been around for years and have featured some of the greatest athletes who have ever lived. They have always been a little special.

Exhibits were not issued with gum, tobacco, marbles, cereal, dog food or any other product. Even without a product, you got more out of your penny from a card machine in an arcade than you would from any other machine. However, the cards were large, mono-toned, undated, numberless and void of any information other than players' "signatures." If you wanted a specific player, you would have to "play" the machine for a while to get the player you wanted to come flying out – a concept still very popular with modern issuers and their chase cards.

Musial for a penny

If you were looking for Stan Musial in the mid-1950s, exhibit cards were a better source than waiting for Topps or Bowmans. The 1953 Bowman Musial was one of the few premium-priced cards in the 1950s aftermarket, because it was the only (non-Rawlings) Musial in a larger format until his Topps All-Star card appeared in late 1958. However, if you were near an amusement park, you might be able to get a Musial to come flying out of a machine for only a penny.

Kids would sometimes cut their postcard-sized exhibits to fit their needs. Heck, cards cost only a penny, so you weren't cutting up something like Babe Ruth's bat - which Upper Deck did in 1999.

Collecting exhibits today

Collectors seeking exhibits at a card show or shop may find them in an out-of-the-way place, if they are carried at all. If you look for exhibits at a postcard show, they are arranged by topic. If you want to get a card graded, they require a little more plastic and a little more money. When buying exhibits online, seeing the backs, we will see, is as important as seeing the fronts.

The concept that drove design and production of exhibits in the first place was based on surprising the arcade customer with an inexpensive souvenir without dating or numbering that might cause it to look stale. This worked well for sellers, but likely attributes to the lack of universal enthusiasm by collectors.

Exhibits are still relatively inexpensive for raw common cards at \$2 or \$3, and stars can be a lot less expensive than those on gum cards. Aaron, Banks, Kaline, Mays, Musial, Spahn and Ted Williams are plentiful and can often be found for under \$20 in decent shape.

It does not take a collector long to figure out that the challenging cards are the players who only appeared for a year or two, like Mulcahy, Rizzo, Kranepool or Richardson. Among the most expensive cards are stars who only appeared for a year or two, like Averill, Gehrig, Yastrzemski and portraits of Mantle and Ford. If you decide to work on a set from one year, you will find that it is tough to figure out what cards constitute a set.



Exhibit machines were loaded with stars.

One of the few show dealers selling primarily exhibits noted that maybe 10% of people stopping by his tables are knowledgeable about exhibits. As a collector himself, he has found it hard to pick up cards he needs from the 1920s and 1930s; Ruth, Gehrig and Cobb are among the challenges. He has never seen an exhibit graded higher than PSA 8. He also feels that exhibits do not get the publicity of other cards.

Arcade card history

Arcades became popular around 1900. An arcade owner would rent a store in a high-traffic area and buy or rent amusement machines - whatever machine amused people enough to part with a few coins. Digger or claw machines were particularly profitable. Other machines promised sneak peeks at early motion pictures of risqué beauties.

Gradually machines were added that dispensed cards of actresses, art models or humor. Unlike the earlier tobacco issues, it took a while to get to sports figures. Exhibit Supply Company was the most prolific issuer, but there were competitors like Eastern Exhibit and Mutoscope who would deliver, install, finance, repair and supply the machines they offered. Buying new cards was like buying razor blades; ESCO machines were calibrated to only dispense ESCO cards. Suppliers and arcade owners were alert to new and profitable machines. Any prize had to be cheap.

J. Frank Meyer sits in his office in Chicago in 1914 with photos and cards of pinups in the background. Photo from Penny Arcade.



ESCO history

ESCO started in Chicago in 1901 supplying arcades. Printer J. Frank Meyer (1881-1948) took control in 1907. By 1914 he was printing cards featuring young ladies for ESCO card dispensers.

Business flourished, and by 1921 Meyer needed more subjects and added boxers and baseball players. ESCO made money selling cards for less than 4/10ths of a cent. Operators made money by selling the cards to “players” for 1 cent. Risqué cards might get you 2 cents or even 5 cents. A penny in 1914 was worth 25 cents today.

Meyer bought photos from photographers, had an art department do layouts and made up sheets for 32 cards. Brochures advertised that you could buy an arcade-full of game machines for \$3,000 and be in a profitable business. ESCO featured 20 or 30 card products, of which only two or three were sports figures. Their art models were approved by censors! From 1921-1928, ESCO baseball cards were (primarily) of one player; from 1929-1938 cards included four players on one card before returning to one player per card in 1939.

ESCO grew, took over competitors and in 1927 built a large plant on the west side of Chicago. In 1937, Chet Gore joined ESCO as plant manager. Meyer died in 1948. Gore took over ownership of the arcade business, moving it to a smaller nearby location employing about 15 people in the late 1950s. Even into the 1960s, cards were sold to operators in bricks of 1,000 for less than \$5.



ESCO letterhead before they moved to 4222 W. Lake St., Chicago (left) and then 4719-21 W. Lake St (right), photos by F. McKie and Vrechek

Working the puzzle

Collectors have been trying to figure out the puzzle of dating arcade cards for years. Information has come from Jefferson Burdick, Buck Barker, Jake Wise, Elwood Scharf, Bob Schulhof, Steve Reeves, Sheldon Goldberg, Lew Lipset, Fred McKie, Adam Warshaw and others.

Fred McKie was very helpful providing information and images for this article. When asked what still interests him, he responded, "The fun part of collecting exhibit cards is that even after all these years, there are still surprises popping up like the recent Dad's Cookies album and new adverting backs, while still trying to figure out yearly checklists."

It is like working on a giant puzzle, which will never be completely solved. Actually, it is more like working on 28 puzzles that look about the same and were thrown into one big box. Let's take a harder look at just the baseball cards produced by ESCO from 1939 to 1966.

Steady runs of players

From 1939-41, 16 cards were likely in a print run; from 1942 to 1946 ESCO went with 32 cards. Thereafter, they printed 32 American Leaguers and 32 National Leaguers each year (except 1962). In the 1939-1966 era, there were only about 300 players featured, giving you a good chance at a well-known player. You might also get plenty of steady players who were repeated like Dark, Ennis, Fain, Hegan, Lockman, Mitchell, Pafko and Wertz. If you thumb through a large stack of exhibits, you are guaranteed to run into one of these names.

Once a player got into a print run, he might have his hat airbrushed, the spelling of his name corrected or even get a rare new pose, but he did not seem to get demoted. The math involved is something like the average player appeared on an exhibit card for five years in a row.

Woody's work

Jefferson Burdick's 1960 American Card Catalog identified all baseball exhibits from 1921 to 1966 in just four categories: W461 – all cards of single players, W462 – cards of single players with salutations, W463 – four players on one card and W464 – the 1948 HOF set. Elwood Scharf (1919-2012) got to work in 1954, shared checklists with other collectors and eventually deciphered most sport exhibits. He added 29 subcategories to the ACC classifications and wrote 38 detailed, year-by-year articles for *The Trader Speaks* starting in the late 1970s.

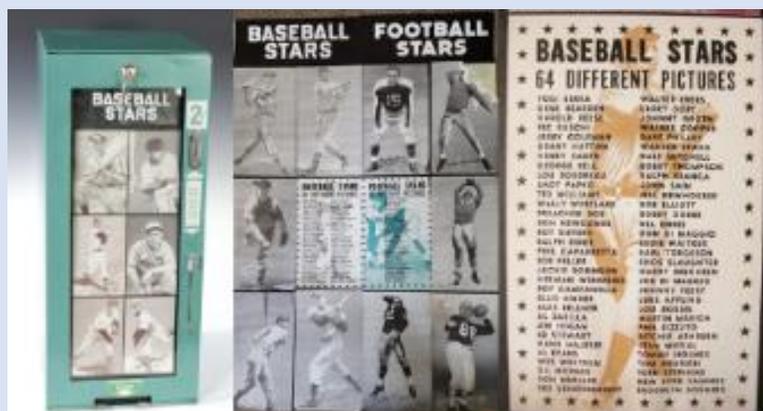
Unfortunately, his system has not been widely incorporated or understood, but it is very logical. Each distinct printing (usually annual) is divided between 1) new player cards, 2) returning players with anything changed and 3) returning players with no change to prior designs, although he couldn't always figure out which players returned. The only era he had to lump together was 1939 to 1945.

Scharf may have organized the entire exhibit run more than ESCO did since collectors think in terms of annual issues, and ESCO's system was likely geared to how sales were going, what sets needed to be

freshened, what new photos were available and what was left in inventory. They didn't have youngsters waiting at their doors before each season.

Scharf determined, for example, that ESCO's 1952, 1955, 1956 and 1961 printings introduced no new players. In 1964, they just reran the 1963 set without stats on the back.

ESCO card machine, ad card and a rare checklist, photo F. McKie



Tougher cards

You would think that the war years' cards would be the toughest to find. However, ESCO did not have to worry about any shortage of gum, and they also had government contracts to supply switches for bomber doors. While everything was in short supply, the cheap cardboard stock must have been available, although some wartime cards were printed on a whiter, chalky-looking cardboard. ESCO printed non-sports sets copyrighted between 1941-45 with wartime themes – soldiers on leave and more girlie cards. Perhaps, like baseball, arcades were considered necessary businesses for wartime morale?

When they returned to one-player per card in 1939, they also ditched troublesome team names with an equal number of players from each team. Some players they picked were close to the end of their careers – Averill, Dean, Gehrig, Gomez, Hartnett, Klein, Lombardi, and Rizzo. Others went into the military - Feller, Greenberg, Mulcahy and Williams. Such players were likely pulled from print sheets. Gehrig, who only tried to play in eight games in 1939, and Ted Williams, with the number 9 on his back showing, are among the priciest exhibits. World Series team cards from 1948 to 1956 were likely printed for just one year and are also pricey.

Toward the end of ESCO's run, they introduced a few new players and poses. Print runs declined dramatically. Tough cards include Ford (portrait), Killebrew (portrait), Mantle (portrait), Kranepool, Richardson, Yastrzemski and 11 others.

Chasing down tougher cards can be frustrating and expensive. Perhaps that is why collectors interested in exhibits for their history and affordability will veer off into another endless pursuit: variations.

Variations galore

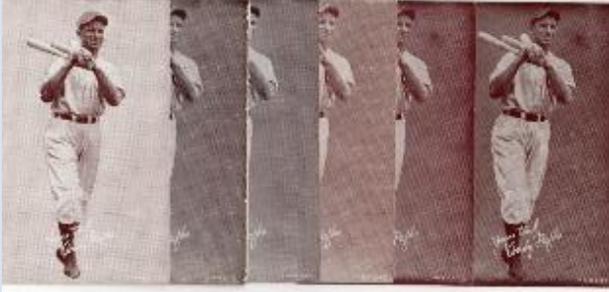
Cards that are different poses of the same player are not variations; they are just different cards. Catalogs will list them to help collectors understand that you get to chase down Ford, Mantle and Killebrew in three poses and several others with two.

Let's try to stay organized and categorize the variations. Keep in mind, cards considered as even the harder variations were likely in circulation for at least a year or two. Most variations are the slight tweaks ESCO made when re-using photos. There are at least 200 variations for only 300 players.

An argument could be made that any different formatting of exhibits lasted at least until the next "set" came out which may have been once a year. Therefore, all cards were unaltered originals from a set, and there are no variations per se. Agreed, but that argument makes a confusing topic even more confusing. A more practical argument might be that some of these variations are so slight that they should be ignored, but that is a lot to ask, if you are a variation collector.

- 1. Misspellings** - Player names had errors, and occasionally they would fix mistakes resulting in variations. Buck Newson was a misspelling and was corrected to Louis (Buck) Newsom. Ritchie Ashburn was corrected to Richie Ashburn. Lowery changed to Lowrey. Matthews became Mathews. McCaskey became McCoskey, even though his name was really McCosky.
- 2. Airbrushing** - Airbrushing was used to deal with traded players. Usually they just got a blank cap or a logo-less uniform. In a few cases, players who were not traded (Kubek and Sievers) got an entirely new background. Antonelli, Ashburn, Bailey, Bauer and others got at least a revised hat. Sawatski got three. Torgeson got traded, but it took ESCO six years to airbrush his uniform. Dixie Walker's "D"

for Detroit cap did not change until nine years after he left Detroit. A 32-card uncut sheet from 1961 had eight players with air-brushed hats.

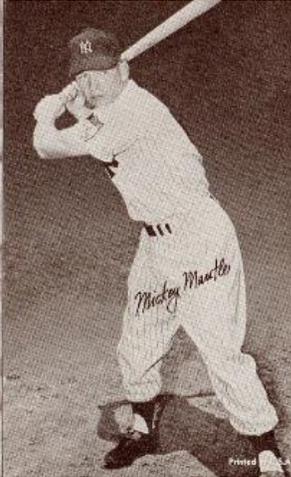


Pafko's last exhibit card in 1959 (left) finally wiped out his Cubs logos from his 1946 card (far right). The salutation greeting was retained throughout. Williams didn't need any airbrushing, but he was a little smaller in some years. The boys never aged.



Jackie Robinson zoomed around third in an airbrushed 1946 Montreal uniform. Joe Gordon's Yankee uniform was neatly re-lettered for Cleveland, a rare case of jersey tampering by ESCO.

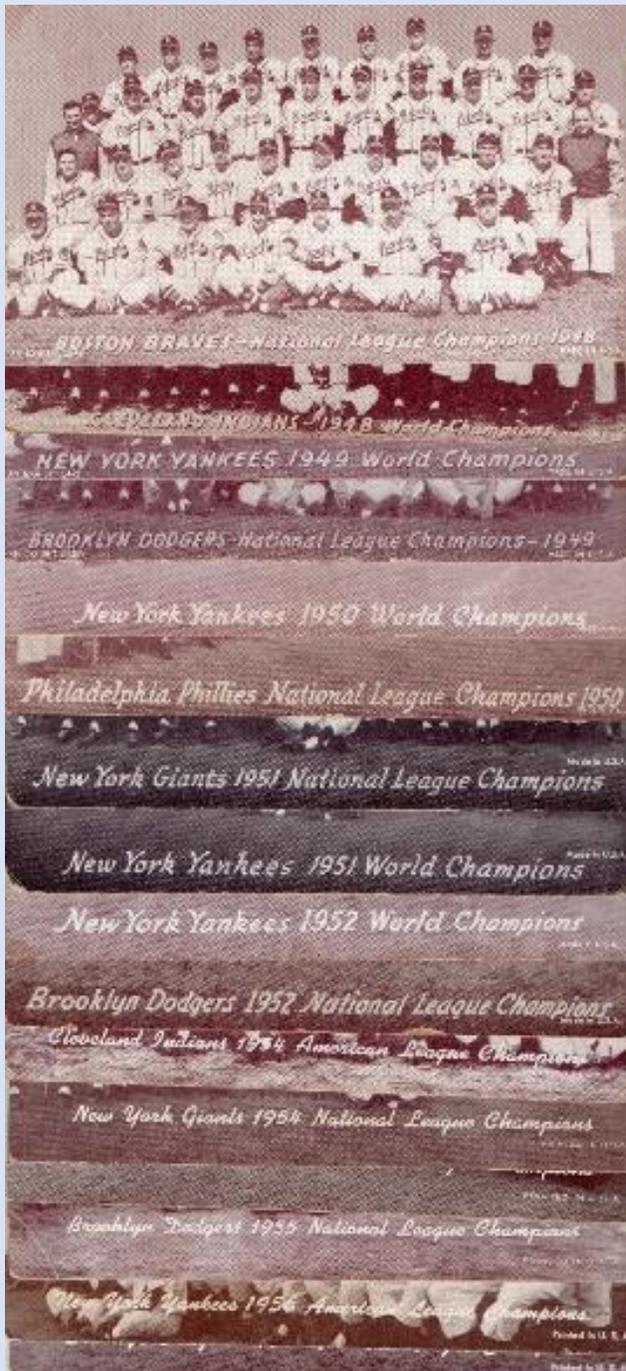
3. Signatures - ESCO might horse around with the player's so-called signature, the color of the signature or the salutation wording. Greenberg, Holmes, Lombardi and others were altered.



Mantle's "signature" on the far left wound up with a white-outline one year, creating a small variation on a big player.



Newhouse lost his salutation greeting. Maybe they gave it to Groat and a few others, who had greetings to extend.



4. Printing notations - A plethora of confusing printing notations were used by ESCO to figure out when they had last played around with a card design. The notations had nothing to do with what year the card was printed, but when it was last altered or introduced.

Over the years, ESCO started with "MADE IN U.S.A.," moved that around from corner to corner, changed it to "Made in U.S.A.," followed by "Printed in U.S.A.," "PRINTED IN U.S.A." and then no notation at all. They also changed the font size and consequently the length of the notations. Just the "MADE IN U.S.A." notation comes in five different lengths ranging from 7/16 of an inch to 12/16 of an inch.

Oh, and in the middle of all this they added "An Exhibit Card," and then scratched it out for just Doby and Rizzuto. Several cards have dark coloring at the bottom in what looks like an effort to remove print information. Catalogs have not identified many of these distinctions. Understandably, when they have, the information has not always been correct.

The gamut of different notations, fonts and colors were evident on the annual cards of World Series participants from 1948 to 1956.

They skipped 1953 because the Dodgers and Yankees repeated from 1952.

Sometimes several changes were made to photos reused in the next year.

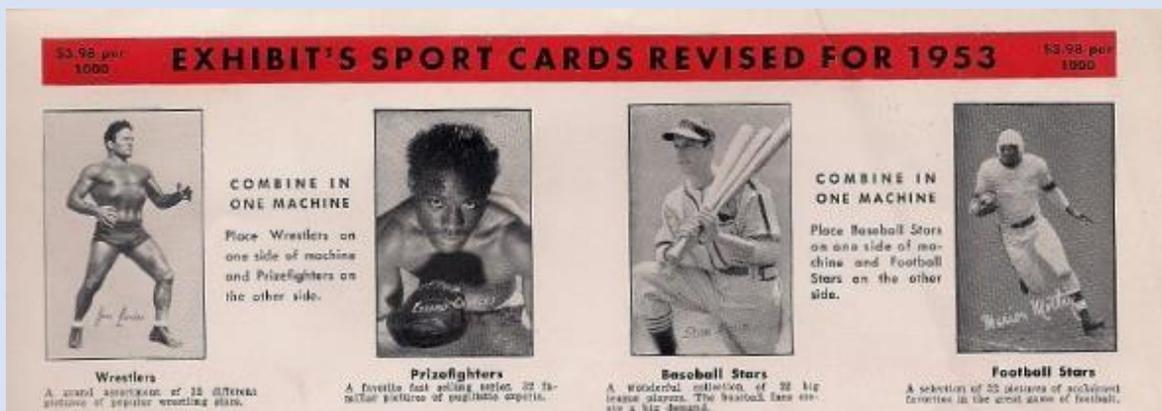
Rizzuto's card deleted some printing and shrunk his size. Reese's ball edged its way back onto the card.



- 5. Projections and croppings** – Some images were cropped differently when printed at a different time. Catalogs have identified the most obvious, however, other small differences have been noted, and it was not always clear as to how or why they might occur.

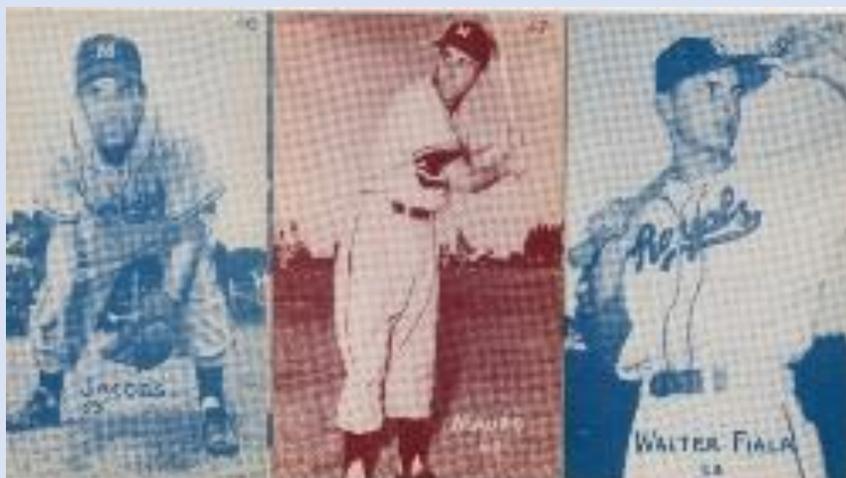
Paul Marchant bought ESCO from Chet Gore in 1979. He recently explained how Gore put together 32-card printing plates. Four cards were put into a frame and eight frames were joined to make up a sheet. If a player needed to be deleted and replaced, ESCO would fiddle with just the four-card frames and not the 32-card layout. If one or two cards in the four-card frame were pulled and replaced with new cards, the remaining (theoretically unchanged) cards, would get dropped in again using the original photography, but could be placed or projected slightly differently. Player cards with slight differences include Doby, Feller pitching, Gustine, Lowrey, Marshall, McDougald, Musial, Thomson, Torgeson and others. Frequently, cropping changes were accompanied by print changes as well. The same thing happened with pinups.

- 6. Print colors** – Exhibits were printed in sepia (reddish-brown and hues thereof) or black and white. Many players who stuck around for a while were printed in both. Sometimes it is hard to tell if the print is sepia or black and white. There were also different color mixes depending apparently on what the printer had for lunch. Before 1939, cards were printed in a rainbow of colors.
- 7. Stat backs** – In 1962 and 1963, ESCO added statistics to the backs. The 32-card 1962 issue had stats with either black or the rarer red ink. It looks like the split is about 67/33 between black and red. All 1963 cards were printed in red with “Printed in U.S.A.” on the front or back of the card. Fortunately, you won’t find a player with such printing in both places. The 1963 set of 64 cards was printed again as-is in 1964, but with blank backs.
- 8. Thin paper** – ESCO printed ad cards showing four or more players on the fronts of their machines. Operators had the option of regular stock or thin, glossy paper. Some of those ad cards survive intact or cut. Checklists were printed with the ad cards in at least 1950 and 1951.
- 9. Uncorrected errors** –Albert Mele was printed in 1948 even though he only played in 1937. ESCO likely intended to include Sam Mele who played from 1947 to 1956 and who eventually got his own card. Jim Greengrass was always “Ted” Greengrass. Frankie Thomas was really Bob Skinner. Kluszewski and Schoendienst never got their names spelled correctly despite being on three different cards.



ESCO's brochures would usually show the sports sets available. The images didn't change much. Photos F. McKie

1953 Canadian exhibits were colorful, and they had numbers!



Other issues

ESCO issued other sets that are hard to find: 64 Canadian exhibits in 1953, 64 postcard-backed exhibits in 1955 and 24 Wrigley Field exhibits in 1961. The 1948 HOF set had 32 cards, but then Ruth batting was replaced with Ruth with bats. The 1959 64-card Dad's Cookies cards were only half done by ESCO. Football, hockey and multi-sport champions went out the door between 1948 and 1953. Boxers and wrestlers were also printed.

Population reports

Population reports show few exhibits get the two highest grades, apparently even if they just came right out of arcade machines untouched. Less than 1% of cards from 1939 to 1946 received such grades and less than 3% from later years.

While Williams swinging, DiMaggio, Feller and Pafko are categorized in the 1939-1946 Salutation group, their submission numbers are robust – further evidence that they were printed well after 1946. Gehrig submissions are only 1/3rd of the “Number 9 showing” Williams.

The tough cards of Averill, Gomez, Hartnett, Mulcahy and Rizzo are found as expected in the bottom third of the submission numbers, but there are a lot of other guys down in the numbers there as well.

A 2019 find of locked ESCO arcade machines, pulled from use at Coney Island in the 1950s, contained 110 baseball cards; only 16 eventually graded PSA 7 or PSA 8. The 110 cards included six different print styles! The player distribution was statistically close to random from a 64-card set.

End of the run

Old-style arcades slowly died out but were not completely gone when ESCO stopped issuing baseball cards after 1966. Collector Bob Solon (1923-2009) said that Gore told him in 1966 that he had “legal problems with Topps.” Solon said that Gore pulled players from his printing. Uncut (likely pre-production) sheets from 1966 show two cards each of Mantle, Ford and Killebrew and cross-outs over Hinton and Wagner.

Sheldon Goldberg, writing for *Penny Arcade* newsletter in 1992, reported that ESCO had been sued by “Don Drysdale and the players’ association along with Topps” for using unlicensed images, and Gore decided it was not worth the legal fees to fight, since he was only running about 20,000 sets per year in 1966, about one-fourth of the normal level. Marvin Miller took over as director of the players’ union in 1966, and everyone got a lot testier about player images. Fleer and Topps fought in the courts. ESCO had likely been relying on limited rights obtained through photographers under the adage “Don’t ask for permission, ask for forgiveness.”

Fakes

One of the bigger problems with exhibits has been reprints, plenty of reprints. Most collectors know to look closely at the back of a card to see if it looks right, but sometimes it can be challenging to decipher from a photo. Online sellers may profess that they don’t know what they have. Grading services have even made mistakes, completely missing suspect cards with white, bright white or dark gray backs. Unfortunately, many of the players involved in such funny-looking exhibits are big stars. An original exhibit of such a player might be worth \$50, while the funny-looking-back card may be worth 5 cents. If you cannot see the back of an exhibit card, you have no idea what you are buying.

ESCO changed their card stock from a creamy, grayish color to white after 1968, which means that a 24-card 1974 Baseball Hall of Fame exhibit set should be found only on white stock. The set was printed by ESCO while they were still operating. The 1977 HOF 32-card set is the same situation, although current players were added, and they are easy to distinguish. Collectors may erroneously assume that they were not printed by ESCO.



What most authentic exhibit backs should look like these.

Marchant’s involvement with Gore

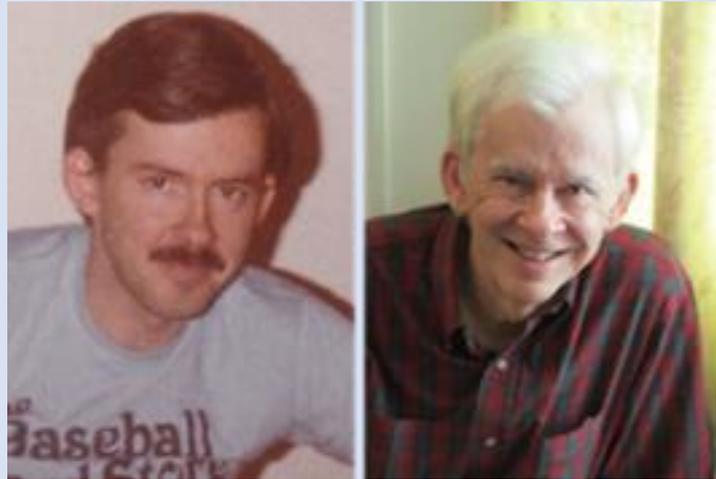
Marchant made several visits to ESCO in the late 1970s, and no other sports cards were available other than the 1977 HOF issue and some loose 1974 HOFers. Marchant bought those and movie star cards from Gore and sold some at shows or at his three card shops at the time.

Marchant recalled, “Gore was always an exciting character. He was an old-fashioned, no-nonsense kind of guy who was used to being in charge, a good businessman.” He would talk a good game and encouraged Marchant to take a few more things than he was really interested in acquiring when they negotiated the purchase of ESCO.

The end for ESCO

Marchant acquired 7,000 photos and used some to print two 32-card sets: "An Exhibit Card 1980" of 5,000 sets in sepia, red or blue tint, and "An Exhibit Cards 1980 Hall of Fame" of 5,000 white backs and 5,000 gray backs. Marchant sold sets for about \$5.

After a few years, he sold the photos in a Mastro auction, which may explain how exhibits may have been reprinted after 1980.



Paul Marchant in 1980 and in 2020, photos Marchant

ESCO could not copyright a player's (or movie star's) image, and there was no text on the cards. Non-sport cards created by ESCO, however, were given copyright notations, in some cases going back to the 1920s. Unopened non-sport bricks showed up in modest eBay sales quite recently.

Penny Arcade

Bob Schulhof (1942-2015) published *Penny Arcade* newsletter, which went to about 100 subscribers between 1989 and 1996. Schulhof visited Gore, who had retired to New Mexico, and purchased an uncut sheet, a run of annual 1939 to 1961 catalogs and a 1914 photo of ESCO's Frank Meyer sitting in his Chicago office with arcade pin-up cards on the wall behind him.

Schulhof reported everything in *Penny Arcade*, which was a fantastic compilation of arcade card information covering the entire range of sports, pin-ups, movie stars, airplanes, cowboys, fortunes and jokes.

While the newsletter died out, interest in exhibits continues with many online discussions and pieces of the puzzle still explored. Baseball exhibits remain a mostly affordable, challenging pursuit of cards in the 1921 to 1966 era. Just don't ask if you can look at a "set."

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