

What you might gather from reading the non-sport numbers



The sets pictured above have one thing in common: they were all great sets that didn't make the top 20 list of graded non-sport sets.



By George Vrechek

When I re-discovered the hobby in 1981, I counted the cards remaining from my childhood collection: 4,800 baseball cards from 1933 to 1960, 400 football cards, 10 Ringside boxing cards and zero basketball, hockey or non-sport cards. When I learned of The Wrapper in the 1980s, I figured that somehow, I had missed the non-sport boat as a kid. Was I a baseball-only purist back then, did the nearby corner store just decide not to order the stuff or did Topps allow Woody Gelman to finally get going on year-round issues after I stopped collecting?

I remember having a few cards from the Topps Flags and World on Wheels sets neatly taped together with an accordion-like fold on my room bulletin board. Perhaps I ran out of room. Like even baseball and football cards, we never bothered to worry about the numbers on the backs or completing a set. We focused on the players.

PSA population reports as a tool

While I jumped back into completing vintage sport sets over the past 43 years, I have only dabbled in a few non-sport sets, but I have thought about what one might collect next and how the popularity of non-sport sets may have changed.

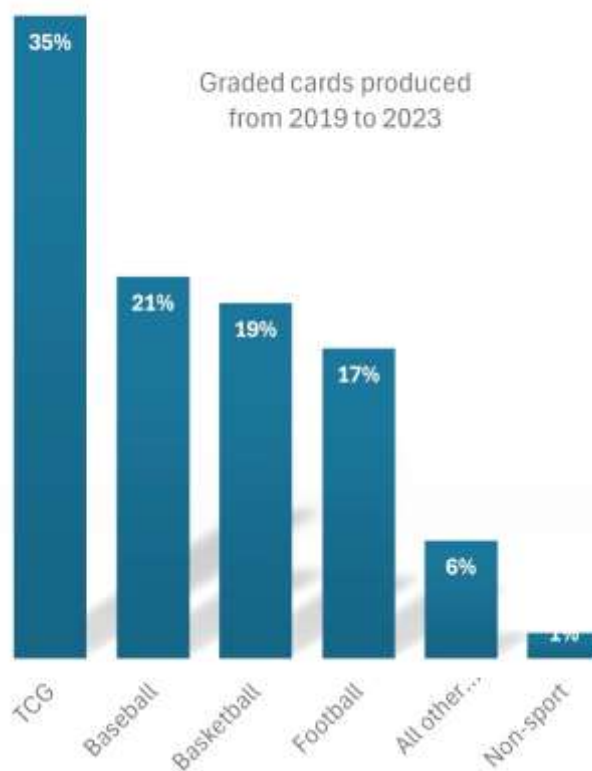
While all my graded cards could fit in one hand, I like numbers, and I look occasionally at PSA's population reports to get an idea of the relative popularity and availability of cards. PSA has categories with submission totals by grade and by year for all the major sports, non-sport cards and Trading Card Games (TCG) (mostly Pokemon).

There are many caveats about using graded card information. Also, the population reports don't directly tell you much about value, which is another topic. I will guarantee that every number used in this article is wrong, and that I probably have missed a set or two from my lists. I culled what I could from the extensive data with the hope of not being too far off from a birds-eye view of the collecting universe.

TCG – another world

Let's treat TCG cards as a separate collectible altogether even though PSA lumps them in with non-sport cards for some of their category information. You can actually do something with TCG cards by playing with other people, even around the world. Information as to the myriad capabilities and powers of your game card is right on the card. You don't have to look up how your fantasy team of players did the previous weekend - what a concept. The idea has caught on with a generation of new players and collectors.

TCG cards are significant to what PSA handles. The 7 million TCG cards graded to date exceed all other categories of post-2018 cards. All (other) non-sport cards produced since 2018 have resulted in 270,000 cards being graded (1% of the total). Therefore, TCG cards have crossed the desks of PSA lately at a ratio of 25 to 1 compared to non-sport cards. Despite the popularity of "recent sets" (to borrow a reference first used by Jefferson Burdick), traditional non-sport cards have remained a small portion of all cards in the population reports.





Marvel, Star Wars and Garbage Pail Kids account for at least 20% of the PSA-graded non-sports cards.

The Top 20 of graded non-sport sets

The largest group of non-sport cards graded by PSA come from three relatively recent franchises: Marvel characters (174,000), Star Wars (137,000) and Garbage Pail Kids (113,000). Spin offs and Star Wars episode issues have been included as part of the big three numbers only from the initial years of their appearance. There are so many sets over recent years of Marvel Universe characters and Star Wars movies that are hard to count. The top two “sets” are more like perpetual licenses to sell and they will continue to lead the pack for a while.



TOP 20			
1	1990-4	Marvel Universe	174,000
2	1977-83	Star Wars	137,000
3	1985	Garbage Pail Kids	113,000
4	1973-5	Wacky Packs	48,000
5	2019-21	Fortnite	38,000
6	1966	Batman	29,000
7	1959	Three Stooges	27,000
8	1952	Topps Look 'n See	18,000
9	1962	Mars Attacks	17,000
10	1962	Civil War News	17,000
11	1938	Horrors of War	15,000
12	1964	Beatles	15,000
13	1976	Star Trek	15,000
14	1956	Adventure	15,000
15	1933	Goudey Indian Gum	13,000
16	1956	Davy Crockett	11,000
17	1955	Rails and Sails	11,000
18	1956	Elvis	9,000
19	1952	Wings	8,800
20	1954	Topps Scoop	8,600

While excluding TCG cards, Fortnite cards, issued by Panini from 2019 to 2021, sound like TCG cards to me. However, if PSA thinks they are non-sport cards rather than TCG cards, let's go with PSA.

While there are many great old, interesting sets out there, only a few dozen of them have resulted in more than 3,500 submissions. What are the card sets from these older sets that seem to be popular and available and have been viewed by their owners as worth sending off to PSA?

Listed are numbers 4 to 20 in the hit parade of submissions. The sets span the years from 1933 to 1975 and the majority come from the 1952 to 1966 era, right around the time that Woody Gelman, Ben Solomon and Len Brown worked at Topps. Many of the sets feature dramatic artwork complete with blood and guts, which must have been fun for the artists and product development folks.

PSA shows estimated prices for cards in various grades. The cards in the Top 20 that would be at the

high end of PSA's common prices in average shape would likely be Indian Gum, Horrors of War, Mars Attacks, Three Stooges and Topps Look 'n See.

Not making this arbitrary litany of popularity and availability are sets like Topps Flags, World on Wheels, Antique Autos and Presidents. Also missing are Gum Inc./Bowman sets like Mickey Mouse, Fight the Red Menace and TV and Radio Stars. Exhibit or arcade cards don't seem to get submitted much either.

The oldest cards with any significant submissions (3,000 cards) are the N2 1886 A&G American Indian Chiefs, which Forbes and Mitchell called, "one of the most sought-after tobacco card sets, bar none." Indians proved popular again in the second tobacco card era of 1910. Indian Life in the '60s (T73) had 1,300 submissions to top the list from that era. It wasn't until the 1933 Indian Gum Goudeys that there were any significant number of submissions (13,000).



The next big grouping of sets that have been graded consists of Wacky Packs, Batman, The Three Stooges, Mars Attacks and Look 'n See.

Cards seem to have a shelf-life of popularity related to the age of the collectors. It is not surprising that Star Wars, Marvel and Pokemon are closer to the nostalgia sweet spot for people today. Kids are not likely to get into Indian Life in the '60s sets even if they were about the 1960s.



The middle group of the Top 20 includes Civil War News, Horrors of War, the Beatles, Star Trek and Adventure.

Observations

The biggest takeaway from just looking at the numbers is that PSA must be making a heck of a lot of money these days. Because producers of recent sets generally advertise the scarcities right away,

you don't have to wait and see if a card is worth getting graded. You can look up the cards as they are unwrapped by checking their supposed values on a variety of apps. You can then rocket the winners off to PSA for instant entombment and relegate the rest of the cards to a shoebox or bike spokes. With non-sport cards, you don't even have to wait to see if a player makes the Hall of Fame.

The most active market for grading seems to be the first three categories of Star Wars, Marvel and Garbage Pail which account for at least 20% of the graded non-sport cards. After that grouping, it looks like you can start sorting the most graded sets into buckets. I would label those buckets as follows –

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Tobacco cards | 5. TV Shows |
| 2. All other Pre WWII cards | 6. Entertainers |
| 3. Creative sets by Topps and others | 7. Military |
| 4. Movies | 8. History |

Numbers 15 through 18 of the Top 20 are Indian Gum, Davy Crockett and Rails and Sails, and Elvis.



You would think that some sets would be more susceptible to falling out of favor over time such as movies, TV shows and entertainers. My Hopalong Cassidy memorabilia can't compete with a Marvel character. Unfortunately, there seems to be no end to military conflicts and the weapons used regardless of year.



Topps Scoop and Wings round out the Top 20. Superman came in at #21 and I thought you would like to see him in action anyway.

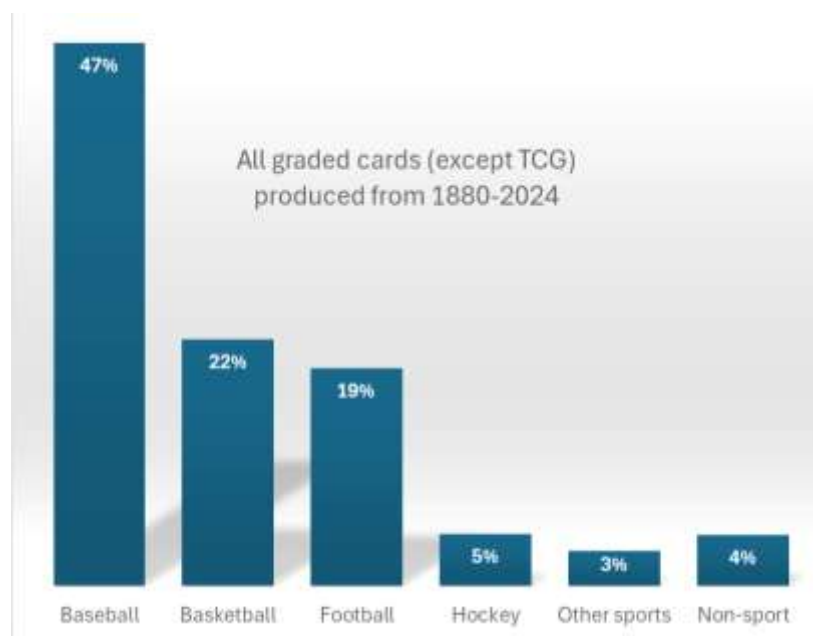
The history and creative category may be the fields that have the highest probability of continued popularity in the near term. Fitting nicely into that logic are sets like Look 'n See, Topps Scoop, Mars Attacks, Wacky Packs and Garbage Pail Kids. The category might be more profitable for issuers as well since they are probably not splitting the take with licensors. However, it sure looks like any big numbers in the future will be put up by new characters, games and movies that kids can relate to.

How non-sport and sports cards compare

The categories and percentages of PSA graded cards for all years of production going back to 1880 (other than TCGs) are as follows – baseball 47%, basketball 22%, football 19%, hockey 5%, other sports 3% and non-sport 4%.

Basketball numbers are surprising since the surge in their popularity is relatively recent. It is also surprising that soccer cards are only about 2% of the graded market despite soccer's popularity today with kids. (Maybe you need to look under "foot-ball.") In my own collection as a kid, baseball accounted for 92% of what I had and football was 8%. I never encountered any basketball cards in the 1950s and hockey cards somehow avoided our Chicago-area stores.

I also looked at all sport and non-sport graded cards by year in 10-year intervals between 1953 and 2023. If you look at how many cards were submitted that were manufactured in the years 1953, 1963, 1973, 1983, 1993, 2003 and 2013, you'll find that the numbers are surprisingly consistent with an average of 400,000 cards graded. However, for cards produced in 2023, the cards graded has already jumped to 887,000 submissions reflecting a "rush-to-grade" that has soared in the last five years. Non-sport cards have even more of an increase in submissions in this span, going from 17,000 cards per year to 78,000 cards in 2022. Baseball cards have declined from 87% of the graded cards from 1953 to under 50% over the last 30 years.



What to collect

You could take the position that you don't want to pursue sets that are viewed as investment vehicles that need to be graded and entombed by PSA for you to have fun collecting. You might go after Topps Flag and World on Wheels cards that already have masking tape on the back, or maybe you can pursue those actresses from the 19th Century tobacco cards that Jefferson Burdick tried to organize. You don't have to have any of the 64 million pieces of cardboard that

PSA has graded to enjoy what you collect, but you may find it interesting to look at PSA's numbers every now and then.

Cards in the collage of images below the headline include 1956 Topps Presidents, 1953 TV and Radio Stars NBC, Topps Flags, World on Wheels, A&G Indian Life in the '60s, N392 Actress Admiral Tobacco, 1935 Mickey Mouse, 1950 Bowman Wild Man, 1950 Topps Hopalong Cassidy and Exhibit Supply Company movie stars. Let's hear it for all those sets which didn't even get mentioned.

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