

1955 Topps

Size hardly matters in a classic baseball card set with bedazzling colors and brutal high numbers

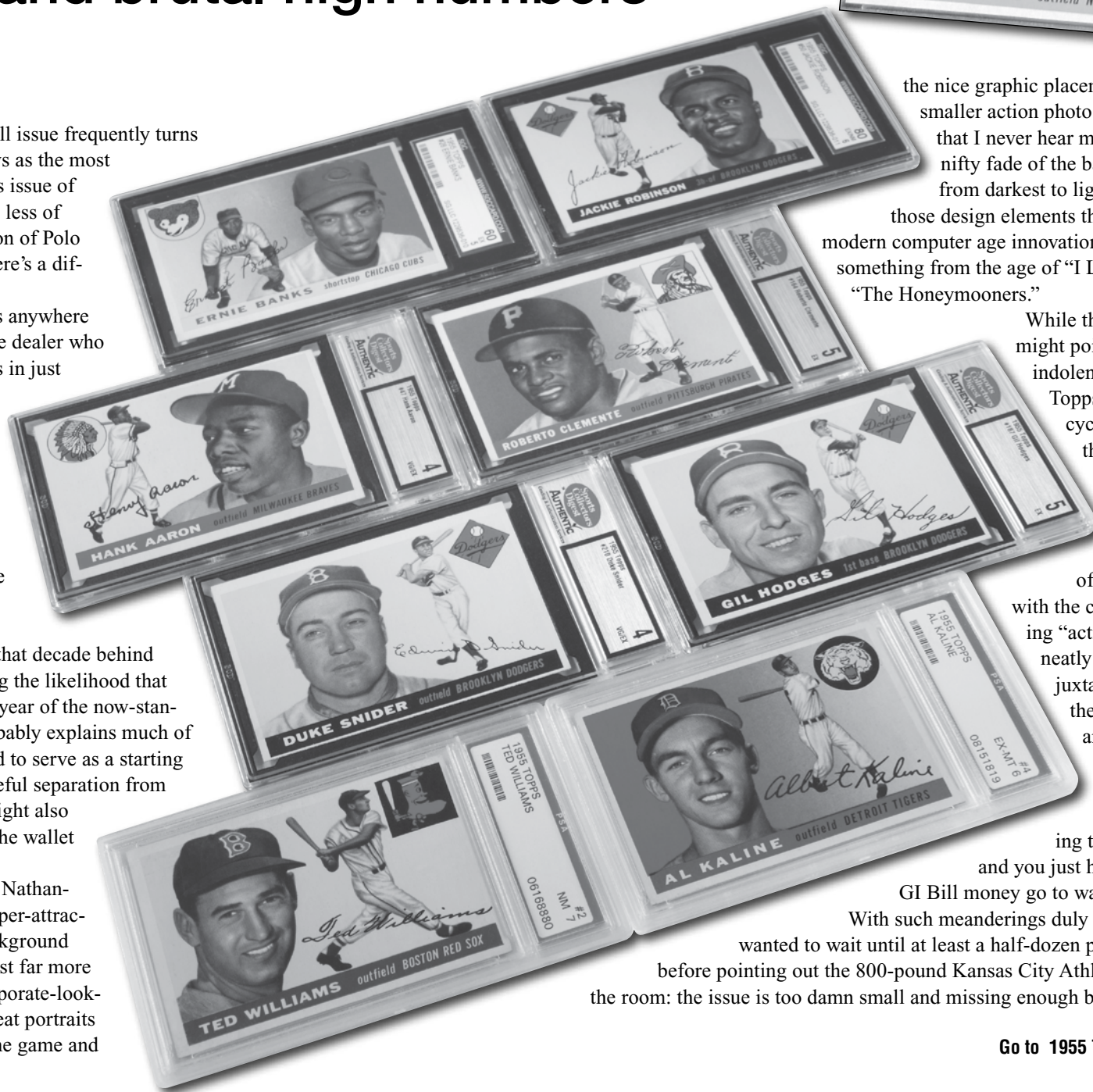
By T.S. O'Connell

The 1957 Topps Baseball issue frequently turns up on polls and surveys as the most widely collected Topps issue of that decade, but for no less of an authority than Bill Nathanson of Polo Grounds in Plantation, Fla., there's a different favorite.

"I don't think 1957 Topps is anywhere near as pretty as 1955," said the dealer who handles plenty of both varieties in just about the prettiest condition imaginable. Nathanson, widely known for selling vintage Topps and Bowman cards in the highest grades (typically sans slabbing and third-party grading), understands the likely reasons for the seeming disparity.

"Clearly, 1955 Topps is the second-most popular set from that decade behind 1957," Nathanson added, noting the likelihood that the fact that 1957 was the first year of the now-standard 3 1/2-by-2 1/2-inch size probably explains much of it. The 1957 issue often seemed to serve as a starting point for many collectors, a useful separation from the larger-format issues that might also have posed a big challenge to the wallet as well.

And I'm right in there with Nathanson in applauding 1955 as a super-attractive issue, with the blazing background colors, splashy team logos (most far more compelling than the stuffy, corporate-looking crapola they have now), great portraits of many of the top players in the game and



the nice graphic placement of the smaller action photo. Plus, here's one that I never hear mentioned: the nifty fade of the background color from darkest to lightest is one of those design elements that seems more modern computer age innovation than it does something from the age of "I Love Lucy" and "The Honeymooners."

While the more cynical might point to a seeming indolence on the part of Topps designers in recycling so many of the images from the previous year, I prefer to look at it as effective use of great images,

with the complementing "action" element neatly placed in perfect juxtaposition with the main portrait and the team logo.

I spent three semesters as an art major learning to talk like that,

and you just hate to see all that GI Bill money go to waste.

With such meanderings duly installed, I wanted to wait until at least a half-dozen paragraphs in before pointing out the 800-pound Kansas City Athletic elephant in the room: the issue is too damn small and missing enough ballplayers – from

Most of the unopened packs from 1955 that survive came from Mr. Mint's 1987 find

1955 TOPPS BASEBALL from page 14

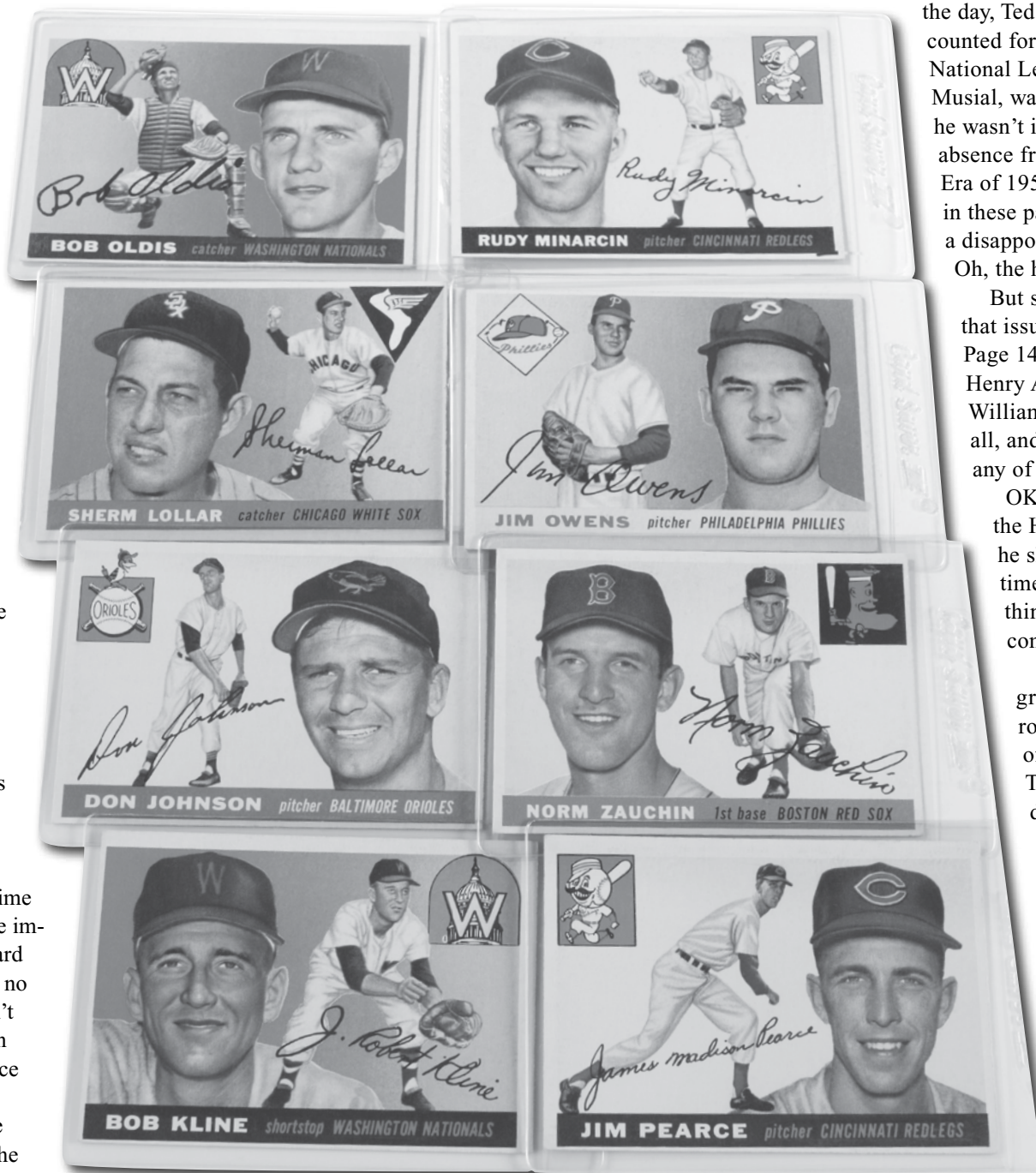
the pedestrian to the immortal – to fill a couple of All-Star teams.

If anybody missed the oft-told story, it was the final year of wrangling between Topps and Bowman over exclusive contracts, and in this final campaign Topps lost the battle but won the war. Archrival Bowman had the more-complete offering that year, but was gobbled up by Topps nonetheless, paving the way for 25 years of unfettered monopoly by the boys from Brooklyn.

But in 1955 it meant that the purtiest set you'll ever hope to see was finished at 210 cards, er, 206 cards. If there had been a checklist, it would have finished at No. 210, but there are four numbers missing, a nice companion piece to the horde of great ballplayers similarly MIA. Since Topps was still a year away from the creation of the checklist card, the youth of America presumably spent an inordinate amount of time (what's time to a kid?) and more importantly, money, looking for card Nos. 175, 186, 203 and 209. To no avail, or course, since they didn't exist. I won't dwell too much on the MIAs from 1955 Topps, since correspondent George Vrechek handled that topic nicely for the years 1953-55 in his article in the April 24, 2009 issue.

But there was that one thorny problem. Probably more troubling at the time than the vast array of MIAs was the absence of the greatest young player in the game: Mickey Mantle. In one of the neatest bits of irony ever, the "missing" 1955 Topps Mickey Mantle card ended up being one of the all-time great "fantasy" creations, perhaps *the* all-time great fantasy creation.

Collectors with creative skills to match any graphic designers have been producing ersatz 1955 Topps cards for decades, and just to jazz it up a bit more, Topps itself stepped up to the plate in the last couple of years and created literally hundreds and hundreds of 1955 Topps Mantle cards as inserts in any number of modern issues produced by the card maker.



The other great American League star of the day, Ted Williams, was present and accounted for in a terrific baseball card. The National League's premier attraction, Stan Musial, wasn't in the 1955 Topps set, but he wasn't in the Bowman set, either. Stan's absence from Topps throughout the Golden Era of 1952-57 has been well chronicled in these pages, but it still must have been a disappointment every year for the kids. Oh, the humanity!

But still there were/are beauties in that issue. Check out the graded cards on Page 14: Ernie Banks, Jackie Robinson, Henry Aaron, Duke Snider, Gil Hodges, Williams and Al Kaline. Hall of Famers all, and you couldn't find a nicer card of any of them on this or any other planet.

OK, I realize Gil isn't technically in the Hall of Fame, but it's enough that he should be, so I'm trying out the timeless principle of saying something often enough that it eventually comes true.

The other slabbed card in that grouping is the Roberto Clemente rookie card, and it obviously is one of the great postwar hobby icons. The card shows up in the ultra difficult high series from Nos. 160-210, and would have been a pricey item even without that added fillip.

That would be enough rookie card mojo for any card issue, but there are also rookie pasteboards for Sandy Koufax and Harmon Killebrew. Those three and the Aaron, Mays, Robinson, Williams and even the final card, No. 210 Snider, can make pursuing a complete set of 1955 Topps a formidable challenge, even with the realization that there are

only 206 cards in total that must be mustered in for the enterprise.

"(1955 Topps) are not as expensive as 1953s," said Nathanson about the prospect of chasing the set. "But all the high numbers 160-210 (*shown*) are really tough in high-grade condition," he continued.

"I don't have a huge problem selling them when I can find them," he said with obvious understatement. He concedes that as in the case with so many of the 1950s-70s Topps issues, centering can be a problem for all of the series, not just the high numbers, and collectors will occasionally even encounter the "rough cut" edges that also pop up in vintage Topps offerings.

He also points out one other seemingly odd bit of 1955 wisdom that is hardly a secret to dealers and even advanced collectors: While the No. 210 Snider card is tough like all the final cards from early Topps issues because of widespread rubber band abuse, the Snider may not be the toughest card in the set. "One of the tougher ones is Harry Agganis, 'The Golden Greek,' who always seems to be found off-center when he is found at all," said Nathanson, adding that "he is probably the most popular card in the set."

That's saying something in an issue with so much firepower despite its diminutive size.

Agganis was an All-America quarterback at Boston University in 1951 with Adonis-like good looks who was the darling of New England. Despite his football cred, he opted to play professional baseball and wound up a Boston Red Sox Bonus Baby who was starting at first base by 1954. The next year he died of complications from pneumonia at age 25, a cruel addendum to a much ballyhooed curse that seemed to ravage a franchise for a half-century.

And what about finding unopened material? Steve Hart of the Baseball Card Exchange in Lynwood, Ill., says there's some out there, but plenty of reason for caution as well.

"There are wax and cellos out there, but unfortunately virtually every single wax of 1955 Topps that we've seen opened shows evidence of the gum bleed," said Hart. All of the boxes of 1955 Topps that he's seen came from the famous Paris, Tenn., find by Alan "Mr. Mint" Rosen in 1987

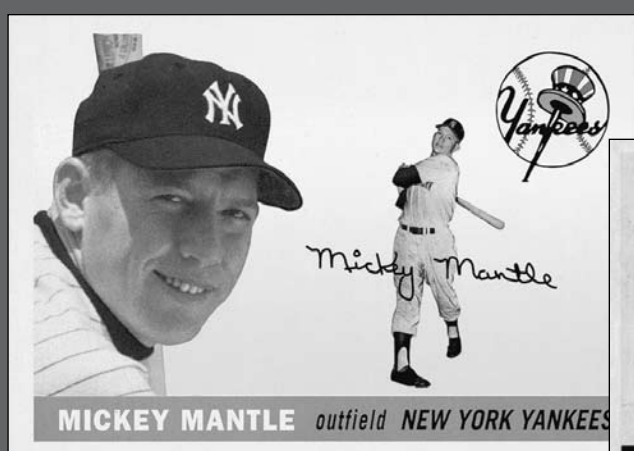
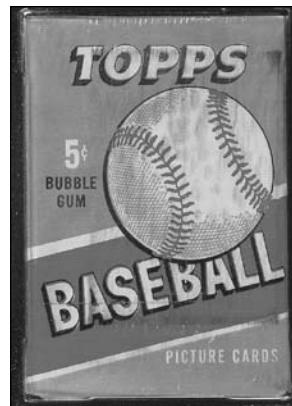
when a total of more than 200 boxes of 1954-55 Topps and Bowman baseball turned up. Though many suffered extensive damage from the combination of Father Time, the elements, infestation and the simple perils of residing on a dirt floor in the basement of a warehouse, the event remains one of the most stunning finds of unopened material in hobby history.

Of more immediate concern to unopened collectors is the spectre of intentional fraud. "There are a lot of bad cellos out there," added Wright, noting that the ones that pass muster can command mucho dinero (12-card cellos perhaps \$3,000-\$3,500; 22-card cellos from \$5,000-\$6,000).

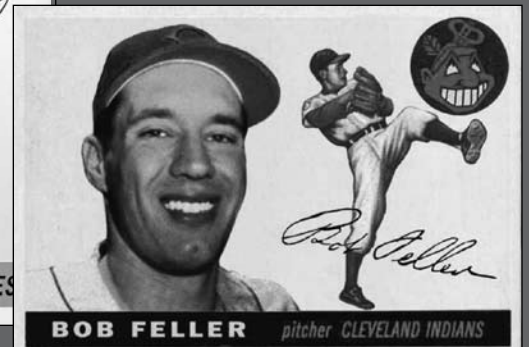
Despite being saddled with the aforementioned perils facing the wax packs, Hart figures those can run from \$1,000-\$1,500, even with the prospect of snagging no more than 5s or 6s from the grading companies because of the gum bleed.

I don't know about you, but I sure would like a crack at opening something that's almost as old as I am, even if I have to worry about bleeding gums, gingivitis or whatever. It would be worth it. ♦

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MICKEY MANTLE outfield NEW YORK YANKEES



BOB FELLER pitcher CLEVELAND INDIANS

Who you calling missing?

Mickey Mantle didn't get an actual Topps card in 1955, but over time that injustice was addressed from a number of directions. In the ensuing half-century, a battalion of talented collectors created their own 1955 Topps Mantle cards (and Bob Fellers, too – Keith Conforti's Feller is shown), but once Topps snagged the exclusive Mantle license several years ago they started making 1955 Mantles with a vengeance, producing literally hundreds and hundreds of them. Topps also made some nifty Fan Favorites issues (Kaline and Mays shown).



AL KALINE outfield DETROIT TIGERS



WILLIE MAYS outfield SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

Thomas Francis QUALTERS
pitcher Philadelphia Phillies

TOPPS
33

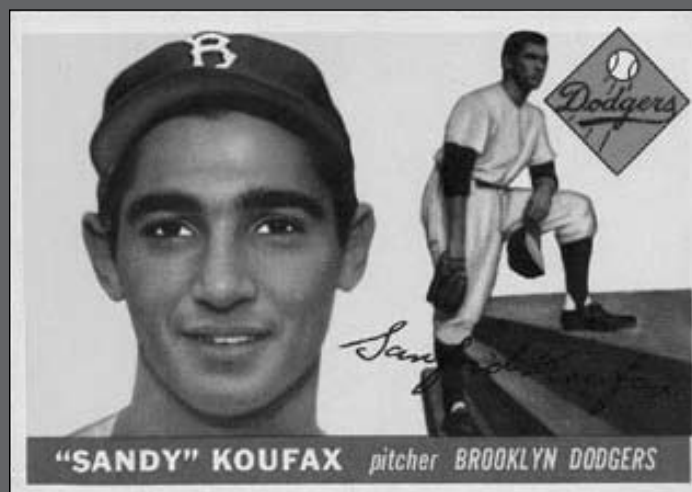
Although Tom didn't pitch last season he travelled with the Phillies, picking up valuable information on how to huri to the National League batters. One of the largest bonuses ever paid want to Tom when he inked a Philadelphia contract upon his graduation from High School. As a schoolboy, he set all kinds of records and was offered many Big League bids.

Height: 6'1"
Weight: 190
Throws: Right
Bats: Right
Home: McKeesport, Pa.
Born: April 1, 1935

MAJOR LEAGUE PITCHING RECORD

Year	Games	Innings	Won	Lost	Pct.	Hits	Runs	E.R.	S.O.	Walks	E.R.Avg.
DID NOT APPEAR IN ANY GAME IN 1954											
Life	1	0	0	0	.000	4	6	6	0	1	

AMS: 3rd base.
printed in U.S.A.



"SANDY" KOUFAX pitcher BROOKLYN DODGERS

"This is Sandy Koufax's Bar Mitzvah picture. The uniform was a present from his grandmother."

*From the best book ever written about baseball cards, **The Great American Flipping, Trading and Bubble Gum Book** by Brendan C. Boyd and Fred C. Harris (1973)*