

VintageCards

1957 Topps Baseball: The Standard Bearer

By T.S. O'Connell

The very last baseball cards of the Brooklyn Dodgers appear in the very first set of baseball cards produced by the Topps Chewing Gum Co. in the now-standard 2 1/2-by-3 1/2-inch size. I'm not sure what the connection is there, but the juxtaposition of those two momentous events just seems like it's got to be significant.

Topps also did something that surprisingly had never been tried before; the backs of the cards now included complete statistics for every year of the player's major league (or minor league for rookies) career, rather than simply listing the previous year's stats and lifetime totals. In a frantic effort to make the linkage in the first paragraph more noteworthy, maybe the Brooklyn-based Topps guys wanted Dodger fans to enjoy cards of their beloved Bums that showcased all of those glorious years of the team's National League domination from 1947-56. I know that's a reach too, but it seemed like it was worth a try.

Whatever the motivations, Topps designers rang the bell with their first stab at using color photographs for a full set rather than the charming and colorful flexichromes – colorized black-and-white photos – that had been so popular from 1952-56. About the only flexichrome that appears in the classic set is card No. 100, something slightly less than a classic, of league presidents William Harridge and Warren Giles.

About the same time Topps was cranking out these marvelous baseball cards, Winston Cigarettes got a lot of mileage out of the slogan "It's what's up front that counts," which actually could have referred to Hollywood starlet Jayne Mansfield or the first series of Topps cards in 1957.

In the case of the latter, Topps planted seven Hall of Famers within the first 20 cards in the set and 22 in the first 100, a startling pace that would have exhausted the available supply of immortals long before they ever reached card No. 407, the final one in the set.

As had been the case the year before with the horizontal-format 1956 set, the 1957 set showcases the major league ballparks of the period as well as any set before or since, and the feel for the grass is never more genuine or visceral than in this issue. Indeed, there is an eerie quality to many of the cards as the result of an odd, soft-green color that defies any attempts to name it and appears nowhere else in nature. That curious cast, mixed with judicious portions of infield dirt and a couple of dozen cards made from photographs apparently taken at twilight and thus emitting a sort of yellow or orange sunset in the background, makes for an issue that seemingly could just as easily portray Civil War generals as 1950s baseball players.

The set is a perfect mixture of posed-action and portraits, with a number of legendary players getting perhaps the nicest mug shots ever: Yogi, Roberto, Spahnie, Elston Howard, Sandy Koufax, Moose Skowron, Jim Bunning, Brooks Robinson and Eddie Mathews, to name a few.

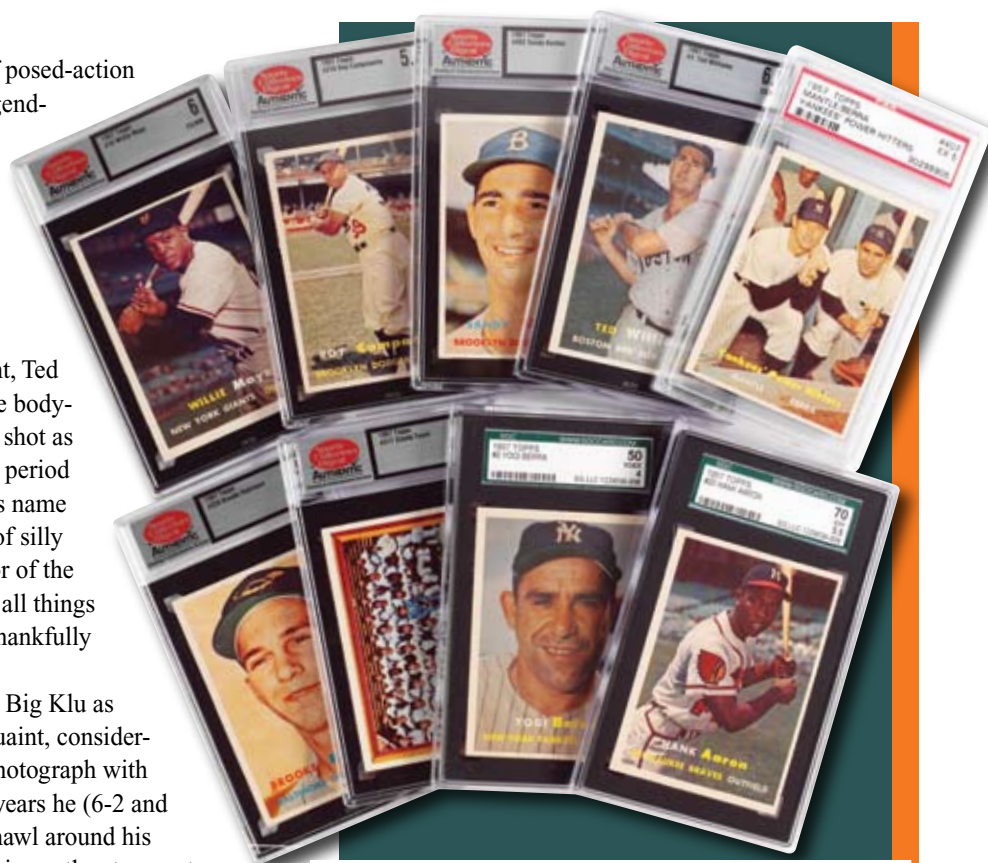
In the posed-action department, Ted Kluszewski probably launched the body-building craze with his sleeveless shot as a Cincinnati Redleg. This was the period when the team official changed its name from "Reds" to Redlegs," a kind of silly but forgivable reaction to the tenor of the times and the preoccupation with all things communist. By 1961, they were thankfully back to being Reds again.

Fifty years later, talking about Big Klu as being buffed up sounds kind of quaint, considering that if he were to pose for a photograph with the steroid gang from the last 20 years he (6-2 and 225 lbs.) might want to drape a shawl around his guns. But in 1957 we thought of him as the strongest man in baseball, and he probably was. And the sleeveless configuration had been his doing; he had unceremoniously cut off the sleeves – to the chagrin of team officials – because he said they were too tight on his biceps and constrained his swing.

But the most-notorious posed-action masterpiece in the set belongs to another Midwestern slugger, the Milwaukee Braves' All-Star outfielder Hank Aaron. Aaron is shown batting left-handed. It's a great photo of the young star, but the batting left-handed part caused a good deal of confusion in 1957.

Since his cap bears the Milwaukee "M" it's no help, and the now politically incorrect Indian logo on the sleeve isn't much of a clue either, but a close examination of his jersey shows a backwards "4." Ah, ha! The negative was flipped over by the Topps graphic artist and subsequently the goof went unnoticed by whatever battalion of sleepy proofreaders Topps employed in those days.

Though he almost certainly had the card shoved in front of his eyes for literally decades, even Aaron himself hadn't known what had taken place to place him on the first base side of the batter's box. Though he wasn't much of a practical joker himself, he played on a ball club that boasted two of the league's best: Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette, coincidentally two of the league's best pitchers.



A greenish-brown hue that appears nowhere else in nature, Big Klu's biceps and Mickey's 'ghost'... and where the heck is Stan again?

Burdette himself managed to trick the Topps photographer in 1959, and Aaron figured maybe that's what he had done for that 1957 card. "I remember one time posing left-handed," Aaron told me in a 1999 interview, which gives you some hint about the power of suggestion.

It was one of my great hobby thrills to explain the details to Aaron and let him off the hook for that one. "I remember what you are talking about, but I always thought that was my own doing," he told me with a laugh. "Well, I'll be darned. I didn't know that. I always took the blame for that, and now I am going to start blaming Topps."

The Aaron "error" was never corrected, which oddly enough in the mystical parlance of our hobby, means that it technically wasn't an error at all. Now there's a nuanced definition that a couple of boatloads full of investment bankers, Wall Street charlatans and congressional chuckleheads would love to adopt as their own.

The very same grammatical gymnastics probably irritate Jerry Snyder, whose card No. 22 actually pictures teammate Ed Fitz Gerald, who got his own properly appointed card at No. 367. Besides, it was a fairly common epithet of the period for fans to suggest that "all those Senators look alike."

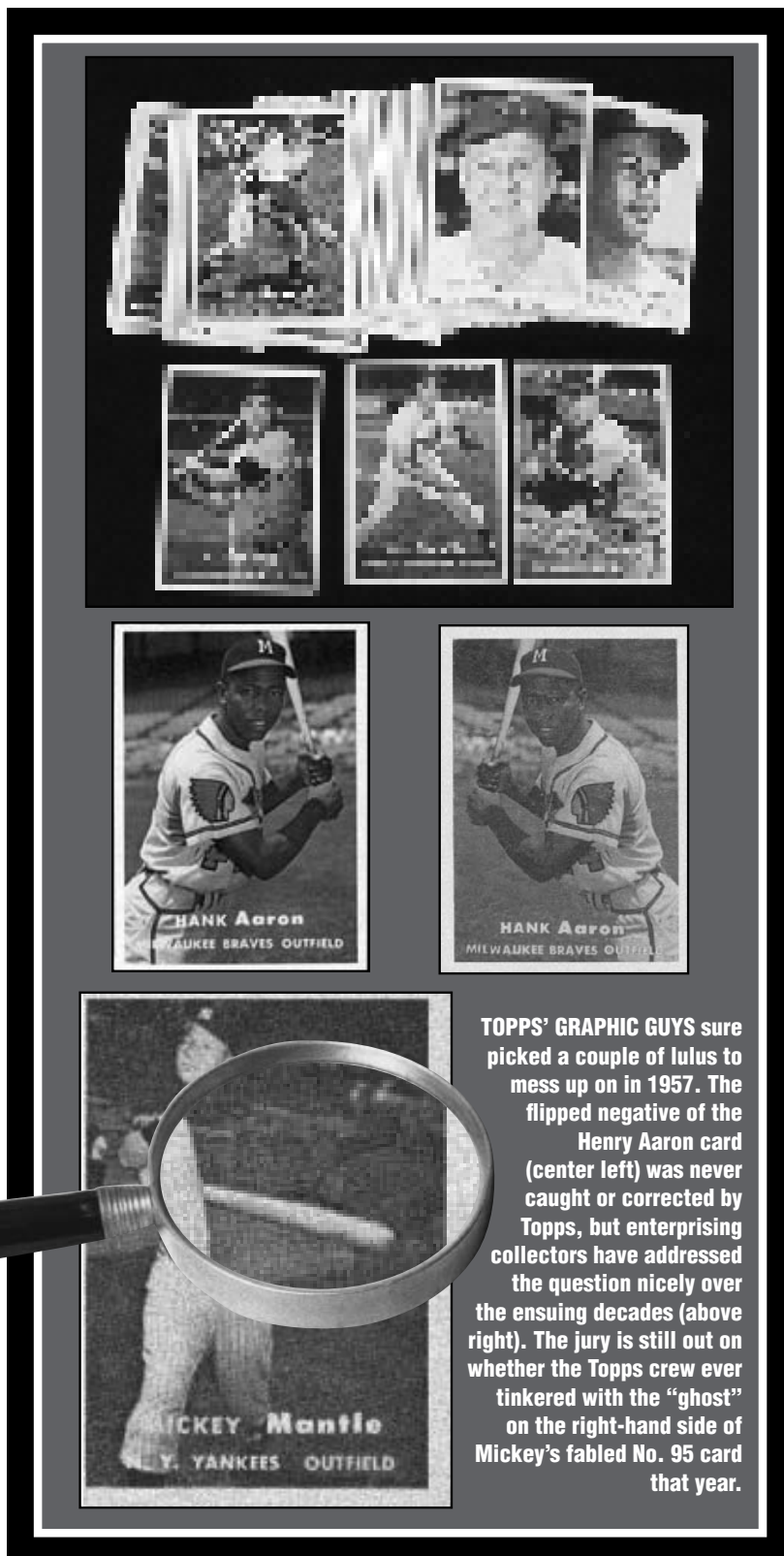
And just to muddle up the "error" lexicon even further, the Mickey Mantle card (No. 95) may well have been corrected by the Topps graphics crew, but it's not an error either, because the alleged changes made were so subtle that the hobby's price guides have never drawn a distinction between the two versions. Get it?

On many Mantle specimens you'll find (aside from almost lethal off-centering to the left) a ghost in the background on the right-hand side of the card. Most reference works suggest that the graphic artists tried to airbrush him to the netherworld, but he could still be spotted and they went back and tried again to better effect. That's one version of the story.

But no less of an authority than Bob Lemke, former editor of *The Standard Catalog of Baseball Cards*,

said that the passage of time has led him to doubt that there was ever a plate change and that changes where the "ghost" is less prominent were simply the result of adjustments in the print registration or the amount of ink.

That notion is backed up by another authority on all things vintage in general and Mickey Mantle in particular: Levi Bleam of 707 Sports cards in Plumsteadville, Pa. Suggesting whimsically (I think) that the ghost in ques-



TOPPS' GRAPHIC GUYS sure picked a couple of lulus to mess up on in 1957. The flipped negative of the Henry Aaron card (center left) was never caught or corrected by Topps, but enterprising collectors have addressed the question nicely over the ensuing decades (above right). The jury is still out on whether the Topps crew ever tinkered with the "ghost" on the right-hand side of Mickey's fabled No. 95 card that year.

tion was Babe Ruth, Levi said that the ghost was "somewhat visible to varying degrees in every 1957 Mantle that he's seen, and he's seen plenty.

Bleam also pointed out that the original photograph from Mantle's 1956 Topps card has surfaced in the hobby recently, a neat find that makes serious Mickeyphiles wonder if the original picture from 1957 might turn up someday. Maybe that would shed some additional light on the legendary hobby ghost.

Speaking of Mantles, uber dealer Alan "Mr. Mint" Rosen once had nearly 150 uncut sheets of 1957 Topps, all the first series sheets (two versions) with Mantle cards. "There were one or two Mantles, depending upon which sheet it was, and many of them suffered from nail holes from when the sheets had been kept under the floor of the man's home," Rosen recalled. As luck would have it, on one of the sheets the Mantle cards fell precisely where the nail holes did. Ultimately, Rosen said, some of the sheets made their way to the Home Shopping Network, where they were cut up and sold in strips.

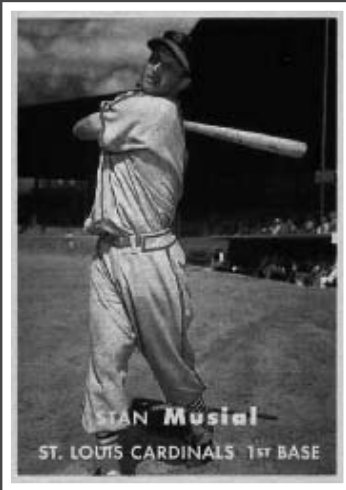
So we're still left with a vintage 1950s Topps issue that doesn't appear to have had any actual plate changes for corrections ever done. But wait, you might be saying, what about the Gene Baker error card showing some type differences in his name on the back of the card?

The error version is truly rare and expensive, probably costing thousands for what would otherwise be a \$20 Topps common. Very few dealers have ever even seen the card, but it's another case where hobby experts like Lemke think that the "error" resulted from something on the plate that kept a portion of some of the letters from printing on the back.

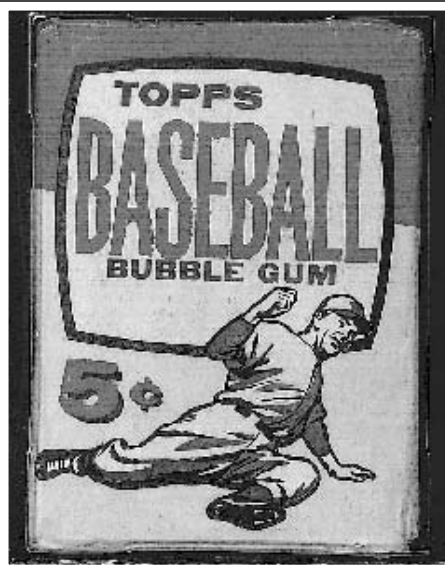
Wow! Now that's a cool baseball card set, with three or four different definitions of what constitutes an error!

And ironically, the one thing that everybody wishes could have been corrected has actually been corrected dozens and dozens of times over the past 50 years, though it wasn't accomplished by Topps.

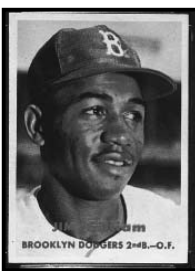
Go to 1957 TOPPS BASEBALL on next page



AN UNOPENED 1957 TOPPS PACK is shown at right, but if you were so headstrong and injudicious as to dole out maybe several hundred dollars for the thrill of ripping it open, you wouldn't want to do so in hopes of finding any of the cards shown surrounding it. Keith Conforti is one of a host of talented designers who create "Cards That Never Were" for any number of vintage (and even newer) mainstream and regional card issues.



Here's
The
Pitch



For pricing of 1957 Topps, go to our exclusive auction database at www.sportscollectorsdigest.com



The experts weigh in on the ins and outs of the 1957 set

"We have had this set in complete form hundreds of times in the past seven years and broke the set out card by card just about every time," said **Brad Griffin** of Vintage Sports Cards Inc. of Athens, Ga (www.vintage-sports-cards.com). "It's my favorite set to buy in all the 1950s. We hardly ever sell the set in complete set form as it does so well for us breaking it up card by card. It is the best-selling set, card-by-card, per book value in the 1950s in my opinion.

Griffin explained that the issue is very popular for many reasons, noting first that it is loaded with rookie cards: Don Drysdale, Brooks and Frank Robinson, Bobby Richardson, Bill Mazeroski, Jim Bunning, Rocco Colavito, Ken Boyer, Kubek and Ralph Terry, just to name a few. "Second, those mid-numbers 265-352. We have noticed that you can throw book value out the window on the scarce mid-numbers, especially in high-grade condition. We have seen commons that book for \$25 consistently sell for as much as double book in NM condition. Even G-VG examples sell very well."

Griffin said the set only books for \$1,500 more than the 1958 set and \$1,000 more than the 1956 set, but sells so much better. "You can find lower grade 1956 and 1958 sets out there a lot for pretty cheap prices, but you will have a tough time to find a great deal on the 1957 Topps set," he continued. "In fact, we have seen all the Topps sets 1954-59 come up for sale four or five times more than you see the 1957 set. It is a tough set to find. And with the economy taking its toll on complete-set prices the past year in the 1950s and 1960s, I have seen no drop in the price of the 1957 set."

He added a couple of what he called weird things that he's seen over the years in selling so many of the sets (he bought more than 40 last year). According to Griffin, the Team cards sell better than any other team cards in any Topps sets. "In half the sets we buy, even in VG condition, there's a run of cards, roughly Nos. 240-255, that always seem to be high grade. I bought a collection last year that had 1,000 Topps 1957s in it and it had over 20 each Cardinals Team No. 243 and Orioles Team No. 251 in NM-MT condition mixed in with 1,000 EX and EX-MT cards."

And the ultra-rare Gene Baker? "We have never had the Gene Baker Error on Back card, but we race right to card No. 176 every time we get one just to see."

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For a discussion of unopened material, we turned to **Steve Hart** of the Baseball Card Exchange (www.bbcexchange.com) in Lynwood, Ill. In 1957, Topps produced a regular 5-Cent wax pack with five cards, a 1-Cent pack with one card and a 10-Cent cello pack with 12 cards. Topps did not issue any type of rack pack that year. Hart noted that there are some "Christmas" rack packs floating around out there, but they are not a regular-issue Topps product.

"Both the 1-Cent pack and 5 cent wax packs were very, very rare to find until a few years ago when a small find of 1957 Topps 5-Cent wax packs popped up. I have heard it wasn't a large find (maybe a few dozen packs), but they did all contain cards from the second series (Mantle series).

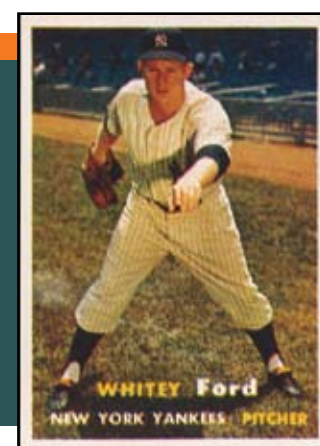
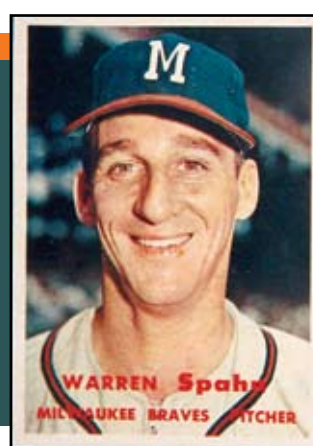
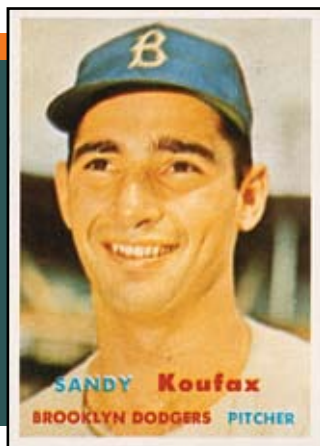
"Therefore, these second series wax packs do pop up from time to time and fortunately, were preserved in high grade," Hart continued. "Very few wax packs from any of the other series have ever been seen for sale."

Hart insisted that cello packs can be found from Series 1 through 5 fairly easily. However, he urged that collectors be careful when purchasing the cello packs. "There are tons of counterfeit packs out there that people try to sell. Sellers may or may not know what they are selling is no good, but the packs are fake, homemade packs. They have the incorrect thickness of cellophane along with the wrong seal folds on back."

Still, he explained that Topps did make an interesting cello pack that year that is known as a Topps Card Guild Version which has "Hobby Cards" written on the front of the cellophane. These packs are pretty rare and highly desirable when they come into the hobby.

— T.S. O'Connell

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1957 TOPPS BASEBALL from page 22

What, no Musial again?

The most beloved player in the National League had been missing in the Topps issues for several years, but that didn't make it any less traumatic for youngsters in 1957. We had no clue why Stan wouldn't be included in the sets, and it caused a good deal of angst even where I lived in Wisconsin that year, so I can hardly imagine what it was like for towheaded youngsters in the St. Louis region.

Back in those days the Cardinals had an enormous regional following at a time when they were the western-most city in the National League. And no card of the man who already had his Hall-of-Fame credentials long since locked up?

Though we didn't debate such a weighty topic as kids, the hobby has for many years wondered whether Stan's deal with Rawlings might have been what kept him out of the Topps arena. Naw.

You know what they say about "When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras." I think that's an old medical school adage, but it works across any number of situations. Think money.

"I guess that probably the reason was the financial set-up," Musial told me in a 1999 interview. "I guess I didn't think I was being compensated enough to be on those cards," he conceded. "I had an agent in those days and, of course, back in the early 1950s I started getting close to \$100,000 a year. I guess the main reason was we couldn't agree on compensation."

For Topps, the idea has always been a kind of egalitarian view that looked at all players as equal parts of a set, which probably wasn't even accurate at the time but certainly the gap between the Mantles and Aarons and the rest of the great unwashed has widened over time. That meant \$125 per and a chance for some swell gifts from the Topps Catalog. Stan must have already had a workable toaster.

Another legendary figure from the times, Sy Berger of Topps, never shed much light on why Musial was missing from all those years (1952-57), but he was forthcoming about the resolution of the impasse that would earn Stan a 1958 Topps All-Star card in the final series that next year and his first regular-issue Topps card the year after that.

"I wanted to get Musial," Berger recalled. "Al Fleishman, the PR director for Augie Busch and the brewery, came to me and was trying to raise money for charity. So I said, 'I'll give you a donation. I'll be happy to give you a

donation if you can get me Musial.' And he got Stan for me. I never paid Stan directly – he agreed to the arrangement – and this went on through 1963 (Musial's retirement and final Topps card)."

In the half-century since, enterprising collectors have created probably hundreds of ersatz versions of Musial cards for every one of his missing Topps years, and some of the 1957 versions are among the nicest "unofficial" cards you will ever encounter. If you want to get a feel for people who have a profound love for this hobby, check out some of the websites that typically picture such creations (I can't imagine you can do much better than www.vintagecardtraders.org).

So Stan's been taken care of, ex post facto though it has been. What's left for the MIA roster? The checklist cards aren't missing, but they are hard to find. They come four combinations of two series on each card, and two versions (Twin Blony or Bazooka Gum) of those, making for potentially eight more super-expensive cards for those who feel compelled to chase them.

Fortunately for the cost conscious, a set of 1957 Topps can be considered complete without including the checklists or the the four "Contest" cards or the Lucky Penny insert, which is a considerable and welcome savings. ♦

