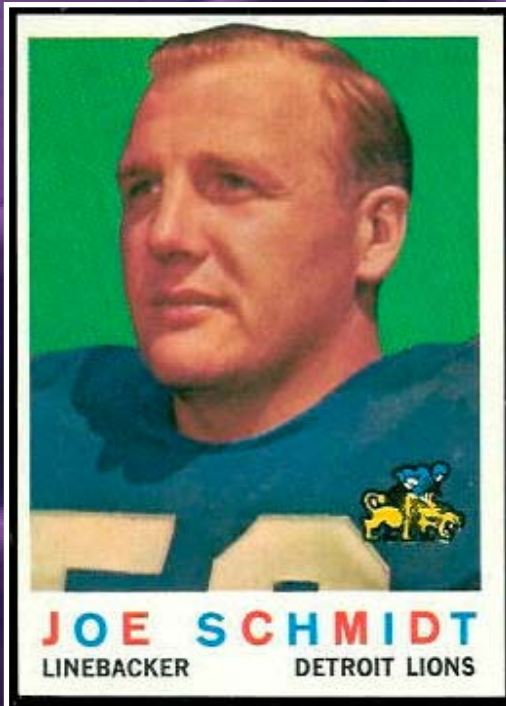


VintageCards

1959 Topps Football

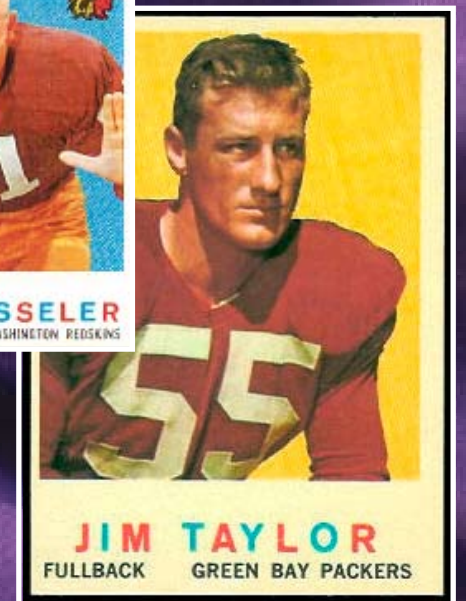
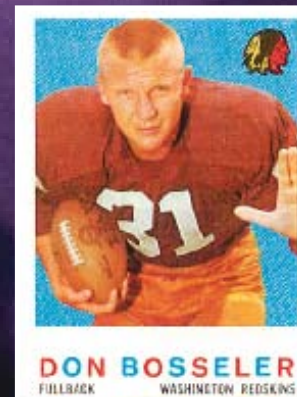
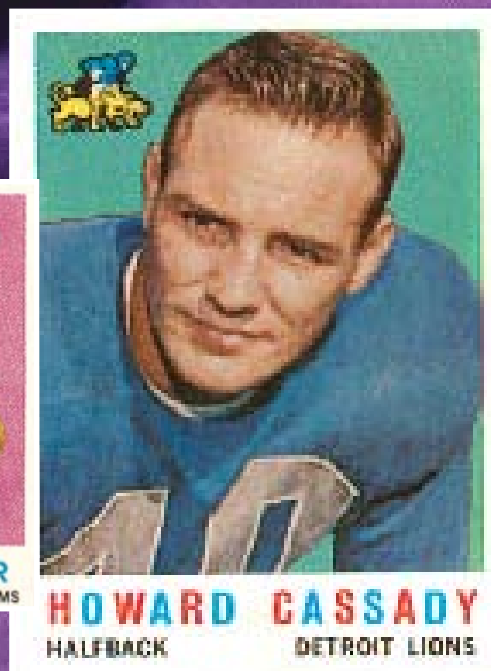
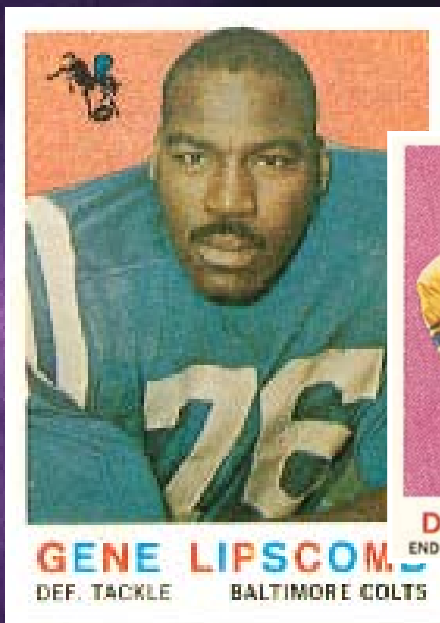
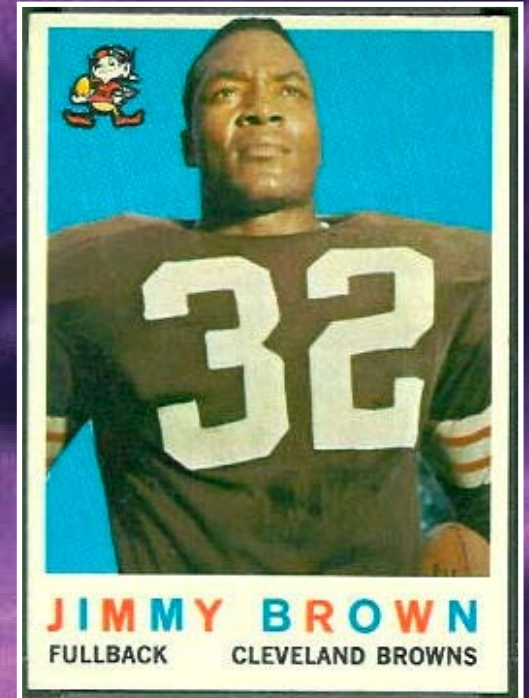


By T.S. O'Connell

I can't possibly be objective about the 1959 Topps Football set, so why even bother trying? From the first of more than a half-dozen Johnny Unitas cards that would grace the No. 1 card slot in Topps sets to the final card of Tom Tracy (No. 176) with crew cut to match Johnny U, the issue is a classic offering with a marvelous mixture of portraits and the deliciously oxymoronic posed-action shots.

The result is a card set that perfectly mirrored the times and the NFL game, an uproariously chaotic convergence of the ethnic flavor and innocence of a professional game on the verge of going big time. All this and the greatest lading of the color pink into a sports card background ever undertaken.

Competing with a comic mix of quarterbacks pretending to throw a football, running backs with a stiff arm extended or a wide receiver holding a football in front of him in an odd fashion suggesting he could be examining it for imperfections, the portraits in this issue hold up their end of the deal quite well.



The NFL was almost 'in the pink' as the 1950s decade ended

Check out the card of Detroit Lions Hall-of-Fame linebacker Joe Schmidt shown on the facing card page in color. Is that just about the nicest portrait card you've ever seen? His mother must have loved it. For some reason, the Lions fared really well with their 1959 Topps cards; the Hopalong Cassidy card alongside it is even better than the Schmidt card, and the cards of Yale Lary and Bobby Layne (*shown on this page*) aren't too shabby, either.

I know, technically Layne wasn't a Lion anymore, having been traded to the Steelers, but any football fan from that era (and outside the Pittsburgh environs) thinks of the legendary quarterback as a Lion. Besides, he's wearing a Lions jersey in the photo.

For kids used to seeing their NFL heroes only in fuzzy black-and-white television reception, early Topps football cards provided an opportunity to see what those ruffians actually looked like. In keeping with that goal, Topps disdained the use of the cumbersome helmet in 1959; there are only a handful to be found, occasionally to good effect, as in the case of another HOF passer, Y.A. Tittle.

Though I could hardly have articulated it at the time, I was taken by the ethnic quality of so many of the portraits, with Topps providing wonderful images of guys who would appear to have been plucked right out of central casting for any number of Hollywood roles.

If what you wanted was a leading man, the NFL had a flock of them, from the obvious ones like Cassady, Frank Gifford and Kyle Rote to lesser lights like Preston Carpenter or L.G. Dupre. Me, I just thought the initials thing was cool (Y.A. Tittle, R.C. Owens, M.C. Hammer, er, Reynolds), and no, that's not where I came up with the idea for myself. The "T.S." appellation is a nod to my father, who always used initials throughout his life.

Westerns were atop the public's list for both television and in feature films, and Harlon Hill and Bill McColl could have fit into that genre nicely. It's probably no more than coincidence that they were Chicago Bears.

The *Godfather* flicks were still more than a decade away, but Andy Robustelli and Rick Casares would have been easy calls for any of those films as well.

But mostly if you wanted to generalize about what NFL guys looked like, you might come away with little more to offer than they looked like a generation of young Americans from across ethnic lines and linked primarily by a rugged, rough-hewn look, with the possible exception of a couple of dozen guys who looked like bankers, accountants or hairdressers. But really tough hairdressers.

Speaking of the grooming, Johnny Unitas had the most recognizable crew cut in America, but he was not alone on the gridiron with that particular fashion pronouncement in 1959. The Beatles hadn't yet turned up on the scene, so there was no long hair to speak of and wouldn't be for quite some time.

As might be expected, the league was much whiter in 1959, but that's not to say that blacks hadn't already made an impact by that time. Jim Brown (*shown facing page in color*), for one, was arguably the most prominent player in the league at the time, and he had the proud second-year card to show for it. Like the man himself, the card doesn't neatly fit any category; it's a portrait, but kept at a distance, maybe figuratively stiff-arming the fans a bit, in what is nonetheless a great football card by any measurement.

Still, he wasn't exactly alone, and there are plenty of super pasteboards of the likes of Roosevelt Grier, Mel Triplett, Lenny Moore, John Henry Johnson and – my favorite – Gene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb.

Presenting all of this happy slice of Americana in a football card set was something Topps handled almost flawlessly, unless you would describe an unseemly reliance on the color pink as a flaw.

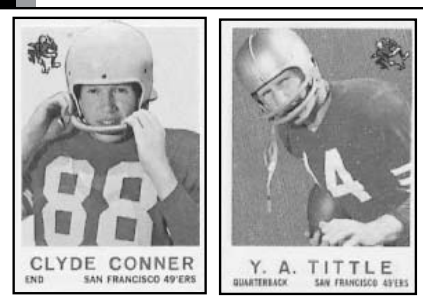
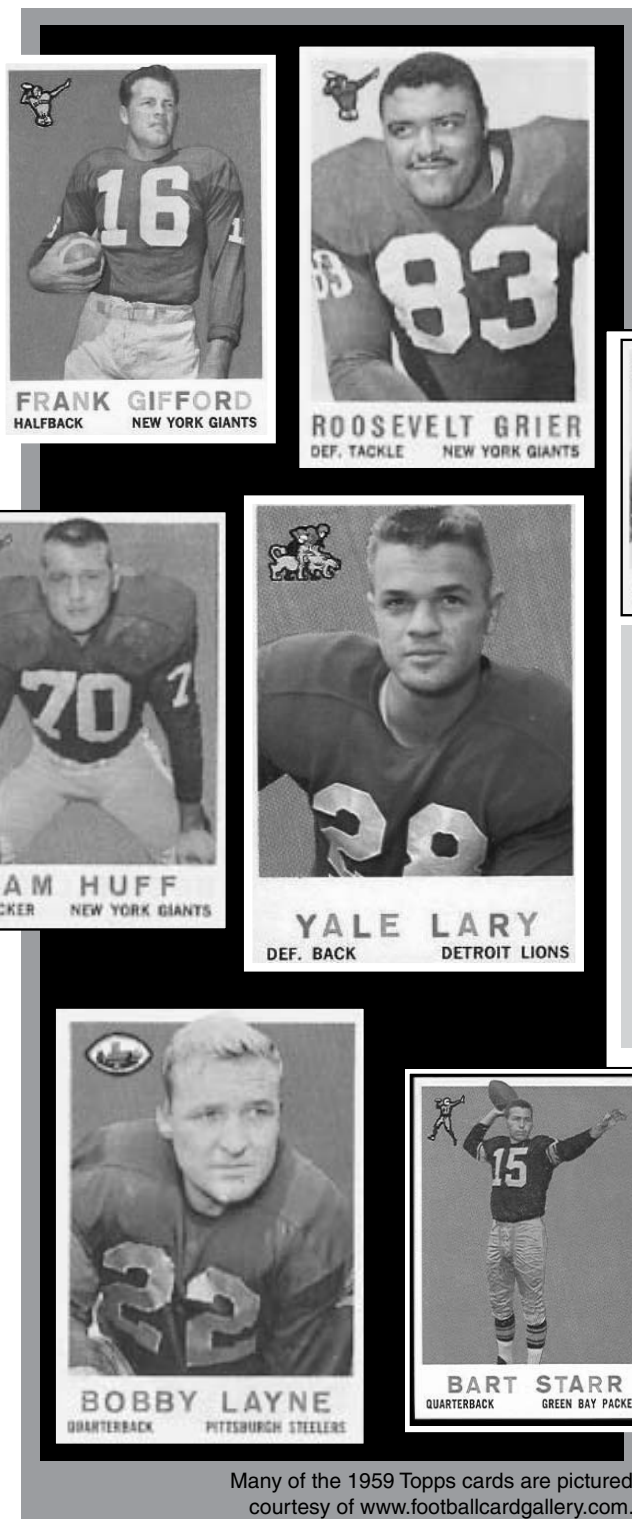
To continue the movie-making metaphor just a bit longer, utilizing such

an, uh, effeminate color so extensively in a football card issue might be considered a shrewd bit of casting against type, but it also would probably be a stretch to suggest that the Topps designers were craftily navigating such nuanced waters at the time. Probably, they were just looking for bright colors.

I can remember finding the pink usage in 1958 and 1959 Topps Baseball cards only mildly noteworthy back then, and besides, the pink in those instances had barely enough blue in it to hint that the goal had actually

been purple, rather than pink. But in 1959 Topps Football it was pretty clearly pink, mitigated only slightly by the realization that there might have been two dozen different shades of it pictured.

Still, no animals or small children were irreparably harmed by such frenzied usage, though a couple of Detroit Lions standouts, Bill Glass and Alex Karras, probably have a legitimate beef. Maybe the Topps guys were just getting even for having created those masterpieces of Schmidt and Cassady.



HELMETS are rarely seen in the 1959 set, with the Clyde Conner card an exception because the NFL was trying to conceal the fact that he was only 11 years old and had just led his Pop Warner team to the regional championships. Y.A. Tittle also ended up so adorned to conceal his age as well.

Many of the 1959 Topps cards are pictured courtesy of www.footballcardgallery.com.

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SCD 35 YEARS

1959 TOPPS FOOTBALL from previous page

And some technical stuff, too

Mike Thomas, owner of NearMint's Vintage Football Cards in Denver (www.nearmintcards.com), is also the creator of a great website for football card collectors, www.footballcardgallery.com. He's been dealing in vintage cards for two decades and he's a big fan of the vintage Topps sets, citing a neat convergence of affordability and attractiveness.

"This is one of the easiest football sets in the 1950s to collect in high grade," said Thomas, who added that the cards do seem to suffer from toning of the white card stock on the back, even to the point of advanced collectors being willing to pay a premium for the whiter examples.

Speaking of card backs and premiums, Thomas calculates there's also probably some additional juice to be had from cards that haven't been subjected to some over-enthusiastic youngster molesting the card back by rubbing off the quiz answer with his last nickel.

"I'd say there's a premium for cards that haven't had the quiz rubbed off on the back, especially for cards that are sent in for grading," Thomas continued. "I've never seen a PSA 9 with the back scratched (literally speaking), and I think that's true with other Topps football issues like 1961 and 1969."

He opines that the first series may be a little tougher to find than the second, but the difference is not dramatic, though it is noted in the *Standard Catalog of Football Cards* with perhaps a 20 percent premium added. A high-grade example of the full set sold for \$2,400 in a Heritage Galleries auction last year.

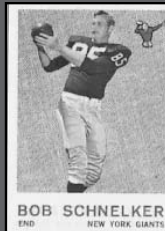
Speaking of affordability, in addition to the pricey second-year cards of Jim Brown (PSA 9 – \$900) and Paul Hornung and the No. 1 Unitas (Near-Mint – \$150), the set boasts rookie cards of Sam Huff, Karras, Jim Parker, Bobby Mitchell (SGC 9 – \$215) and Jim Taylor, sort of.

The Taylor card for the Hall-of-Fame Packer fullback actually pictures a different Jim Taylor, in this case a linebacker for the Chicago Cardinals of the same name. One would have thought that the bright red uniform would have been a giveaway for the discerning eye, but apparently the outcry from disgruntled youths across the land was minimal, since Topps made the same mistake the next year. Taylor is the only Hall of Famer from any sport thusly dissed: he didn't show up on a Topps card until his third try.

"Collectors aren't sure which to pursue," said Thomas, adding that the snafu leave's Taylor third-year ditty in the 1961 Topps set – an admittedly great card itself – with some additional heft in the pricing department because of its ersatz rookie-card status.

Thomas had one final observation about the popular set, which he insists suffers from the typical centering problems that plagued so many 1950s and 1960s Topps baseball and football card issues.

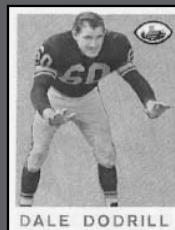
PORTRAITS WIN! – In an informal poll that probably couldn't withstand a great deal of scrutiny, the judges have decided that the classic portraits in 1959 Topps edge out the campy posed-action shots for top honors. Still, it's refreshing to see otherwise ferocious linebackers appearing to be working as crossing guards for dwarfs or running backs and wide receivers lugging a football as though it were a Faberge Egg.



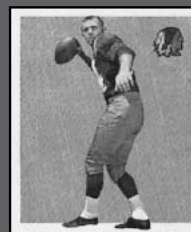
BOB SCHNELKER
END NEW YORK GIANTS



HUGH McELHENNY
HALFBACK SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS



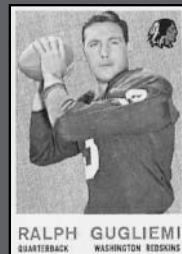
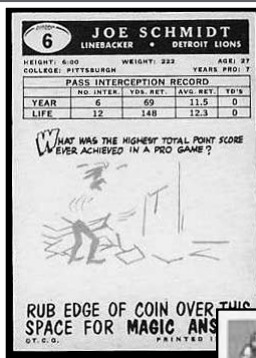
DALE DODRILL
LINEBACKER PITTSBURGH STEELERS



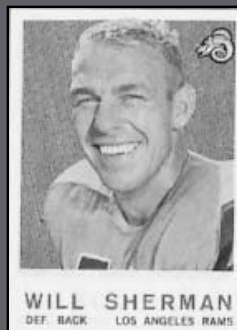
EDDIE LeBARON
QUARTERBACK WASHINGTON REDSKINS



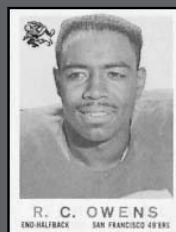
BILLY WILSON
END SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS



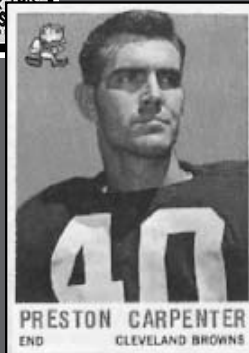
RALPH GUGLIEMI
QUARTERBACK WASHINGTON REDSKINS



WILL SHERMAN
DEF. BACK LOS ANGELES RAMS



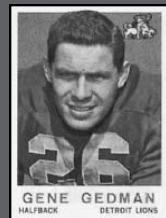
R. C. OWENS
END HALFBACK SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS



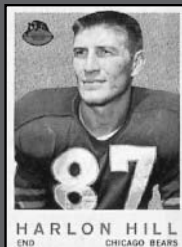
PRESTON CARPENTER
END CLEVELAND BROWNS



GERN NAGLER
END CHICAGO CARDINALS



GENE GEDMAN
HALFBACK DETROIT LIONS



HARLON HILL
END CHICAGO BEARS

HOLLYWOOD CASTING CALL – Unlike the sort of homogeneous look that the NFL takes on these days (except the "keekers"), the league 50 years ago boasted a kind of quaint everyman look with real ethnic flavor and a diverse group of characters that could have nicely filled in as extras in any mainstream Hollywood production of the day. And Harlon Hill would have made a good Marlboro Man, cough, except that Phillip Morris already had one.

"Because of the centering issue and the fact that some of the players' heads extend beyond the top of the photo's borders, it's not unheard of to see poorly centered cards top-to-bottom where the top of the player's head can show up on the bottom of the card above it on the sheet." Kinda like the old "Kilroy was here" graffiti that was so popular in the same era.

That kind of centering might not horrify another veteran dealer, Mark Smith of Hemlock, Mich. He specializes in vintage 1950s and 1960s cards, but laments that a lot of the preoccupation with centering has perhaps gone too far.

"This set is still reasonable, even with the second-year Brown card," said Smith, who travels much of the country on the regional and national show circuit. "It seems like certain cards come up over and over again on want-lists (and missing in offered collections), often obscure commons," Smith added in a refrain familiar to serious collectors and dealers.

And he agrees with Thomas about the premium attached to the untouched card backs. "I buy a lot of cards from collectors at shows and I would guess I find it about 60-40 percent for rubbed off vs. untouched," he continued.

He also volunteered a belief that the card stock may have been better in the year preceding the 1959 set and the following year, 1960, a view that might corroborate what Thomas had noted about yellow toning with the 1959 issue.

Smith also lumps those three years together as a group, though he concedes that the 1958 and 1960 football issues may be a bit more popular with collectors.

"Maybe it's because the 1958 Topps Football design reminds collectors of 1959 Topps Baseball," Smith suggested.

Or maybe it's just a bit of backlash about the pink thing. ♦

T.S. O'Connell is the editor of *Sports Collectors Digest*.

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