

1961-62 Fleer Basketball a perfect glimpse of a changing game

By T.S. O'Connell

If there were such a thing as a graduate-level course on the history of the National Basketball Association, picking up a 1961-62 Fleer set would be a helpful student aid, maybe as vital as the various texts that might be assigned. Few card sets in any sport so neatly arrived at a historic juncture in the sport's unfolding history, providing an almost unequalled glimpse of a league and a sport smack dab in the middle of perhaps its most important transition.

Lauding the 1961-62 Fleer offering on conventional grounds is obvious, like noting all the rookies that are included and the fact that at 44 regular cards and 22 In-Action cards, the set is dominated by Hall of Famers and All-Stars to a striking degree. But it's more fun noting the quirkiness, like the odd colors throughout or some of the In-Action photos that can't help but draw a chuckle or two.

But I think the broader view of the historical implications is perhaps the buzzer beater here, as fans and collectors – perhaps unconsciously – recognize that the card set nicely chronicles the stirring changes in the once mom-and-pop league.

Initially populated by a rough-and-tumble crowd of blue-collar white guys who generally looked more like your Uncle Ned than the towering giants of modern times, the NBA was changing its color in 1961, and changing its style right along with it. Bill Russell had started the ball rolling, in a manner of speaking, but the holy trinity of Wilt Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor and Oscar Robertson – all with rookie cards in the set, though the first two were hardly rookies – would collaborate to redefine much of the NBA game and launch a half-century of dominance by black players.

Fleer's designers couldn't have known all that at the time, but they managed nonetheless to create a legendary basketball card set that would be popular with several generations of basketball fans as yet unborn in 1962.

What I remember most about the issue both at the time and in the hobby over the last 20 years or so was an unshakable feeling that the company was trying to produce a sports card set that looked nothing at all like those typically offered by their arch-nemesis, Topps.

I can't remember when the Fleer cards were available where I lived in Upstate New York, but I do remember thinking that here was a card issue that looked markedly different from Topps cards. I was just getting into bas-

A colorful, raucous NBA game immortalized in a card set that summed up a whole decade

ketball at the time, enthralled by the exploits of big-time college players as much as the NBA, so I eagerly sought these odd-looking cards with the curious, warm colors.

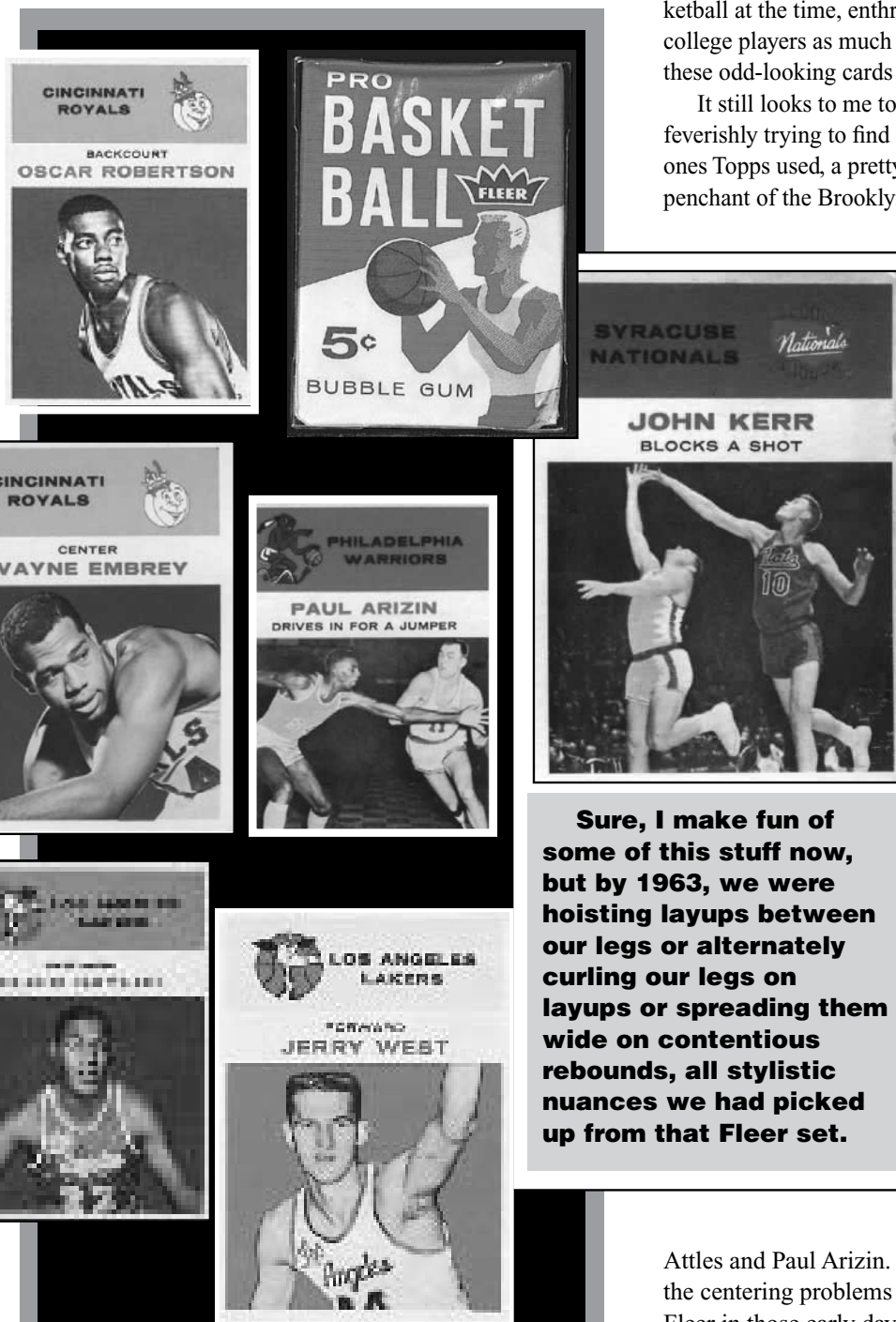
It still looks to me today as though the Fleer guys were feverishly trying to find colors that were different from the ones Topps used, a pretty imposing challenge given the penchant of the Brooklyn-based Topps to employ some of

the brightest hues imaginable. I know it sounds like I am being whimsical, but I defy any collector to find a match between a color used by Fleer and anything from any of the Topps offerings prior to it (or since). There's just no way that can be an accident, especially given the funky color cast of the Fleer basketball beauties.

Nope, Fleer went for a different look – and succeeded. Of course, they did have the one advantage in that basketball had a pretty slim history as fodder for mainstream cards. Heck, the league itself wasn't all that old, and for much of its lifetime, it was overshadowed by the college game, even in the gauzy days before the NCAA Tournament was turned into the cash cow it is today.

The 66-card set is in alphabetical order, almost. They barely messed up with the first two: Al

Attles and Paul Arizin. The issue was plagued with the centering problems that befuddled both Topps and Fleer in those early days, and finding perfectly centered specimens in the highest grades can be a true hobby adventure. On the plus side, there are no known rarities



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Many of the 1961-62 Fleer cards are pictured courtesy of www.vintagecardtraders.org.

VintageCards



or variations.

The first 44 cards are either portraits or posed-action shots, all with black-and-white photos of the players displayed atop those garish colors mentioned earlier. The last 22 cards are “In Action” of players with regular cards, meaning the 1961-62 Fleer set probably has a higher percentage of stars and Hall of Famers than any mainstream issue ever devised.

Aside from the alphabetical glitch at the beginning, the only other notable missteps were spelling errors of Wayne Embry’s name (Embrey) on both front and back of card No. 12, which ironically is one of the great portrait cards in terms of the graphic presentation of the Cincinnati Royals’ center. The other misspelling came on Lenny Wilkens (Wilkins) card No. 44, again with the botched surname appearing both front and back, thus giving the proofreaders points for consistency, at least. Neither was ever corrected, so obviously no premium is attached.

The cards themselves lovingly bring to life the legendary ballplayers depicted, along with offering a real window to a time when the NBA was closer in scale and temperament to roller derby than it was to the glitzy marketing behemoth of the last 20 years. Other than local television, the reach of the game to the hinterlands was modest, and for many youngsters like myself, the set offered the first good look at what many of these great players looked like, even it was still in black and white.

The first 44 are about evenly divided between nice close-up head shots and the charming action poses where defenders appeared to be reaching down to the bottom of the photo frame to lift something not shown to the viewer. The portraits of Bob Cousy, Walt Belamy, Clyde Lovellette, Jack Twyman, Lenny Wilkens and Bill Russell are all classic looks at legendary stars; others like Wilt Chamberlain, Elgin Baylor, Jerry West and Oscar Robertson and only marginally more exotic, with slightly pulled-back shots showing players occasionally looking like some of the baseball players in 1960 Topps: i.e. guys ducking down or sideways to make themselves fit into the allotted space.

A number of other prominent names from the period, like Larry Costello, Hal Greer, Cliff Hagan, John Kerr, Rudy Larusso, Dolph Schayes and Frank Selvy, are shown preparing to launch either a set shot or maybe something from the foul line, which says much about the tenor of the times and the style of play.

Fleer got even quirkier when it turned to the final 22 In-Action cards, mixing gems (Larry Costello attempting to levitate a basketball, Tommy Heinsohn, Hagan or Jack Twyman) with oddities (Paul Arizin appearing to drive around Walter Dukes on a linoleum floor in the kitchen), the sublime (Russell seemingly

sailing into the heavens) and even the ridiculous (Johnny Kerr blocking a shot in a kind of curious ballet).

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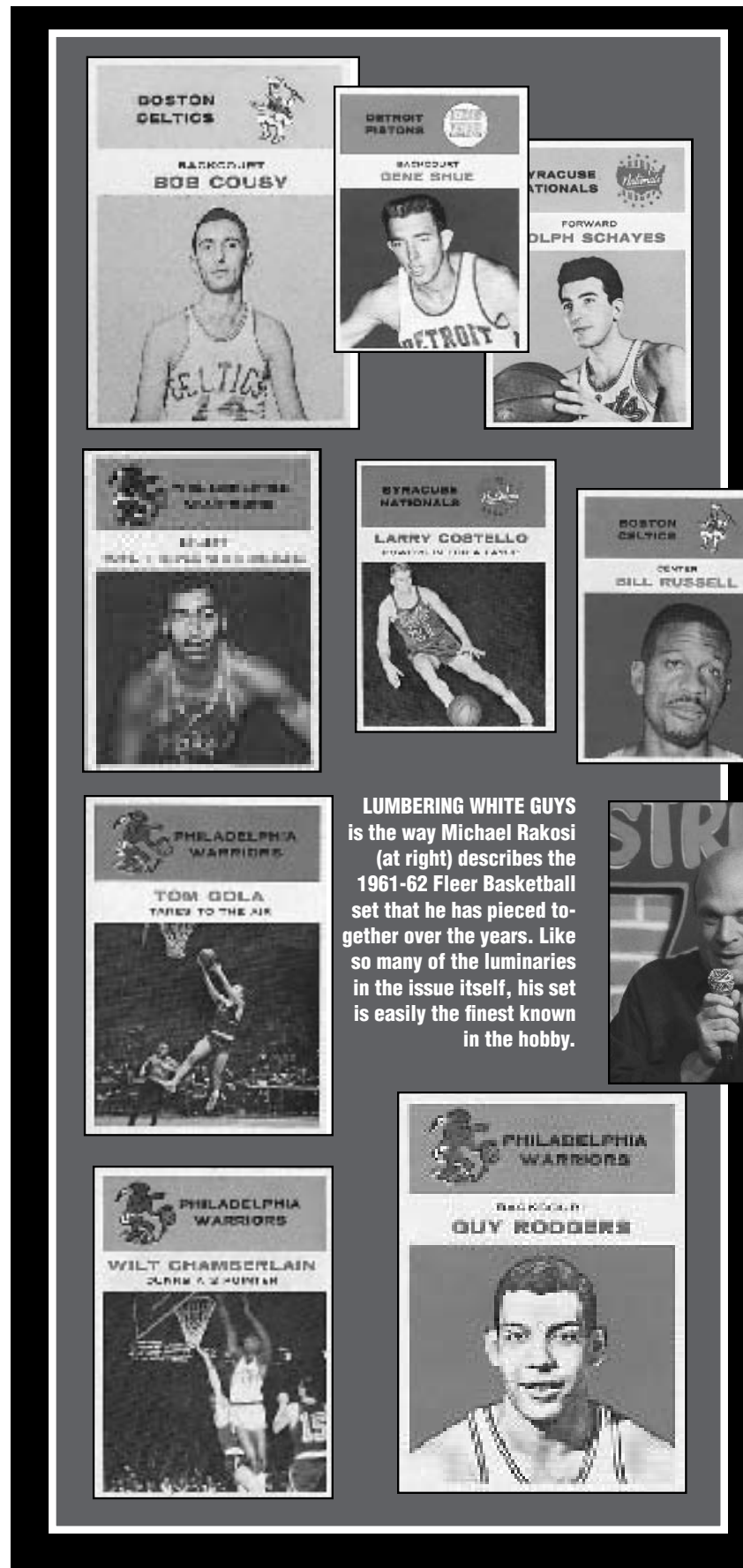
No less of an authority than **Michael Rakosi**, the man who has the finest 1961-61 Fleer set known to man, delights in talking about the card set that has helped propel him to genuine fame within the graded-card sphere in general and the PSA Set Registry in particular.

His set, dubbed “More Stars Than There Are in the Heavens” for its No. 1 status in the Set Registry, averages out to PSA 9.34, which is about as close as you can get to unimprovable without actually being so. “I have an underlying affection for the set; it is incredibly star packed,” is the way the 62-year-old collector describes his treasure.

For Rakosi, the winning bidder of a 1961-62 Fleer Oscar Robertson rookie PSA 10 at \$26,000, the pursuit of the 1961-62 Fleer set has fit right in with similar odysseys pulling together the top basketball sets from 1948 Bowman, 1957-58 Topps and even the exotic 1968-69 Topps Test issue, but there’s a special place in his heart for the 1961-62 Fleer.

Rakosi, touting a set he describes as featuring many “lumbering white guys from the 1950s,” figures a Fleer set in all PSA 8 holders might sell for \$11,000-\$14,000, a figure that jumps to maybe \$85,000 or so if they are all PSA 9s. His set is all PSA 9, except for the 19 cards that are slabbed as PSA 10. ♦

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LUMBERING WHITE GUYS is the way Michael Rakosi (at right) describes the 1961-62 Fleer Basketball set that he has pieced together over the years. Like so many of the luminaries in the issue itself, his set is easily the finest known in the hobby.