

# 1961 Topps

Still a great set, with brutal high numbers, but for God sakes, put your hats on!

By T.S. O'Connell

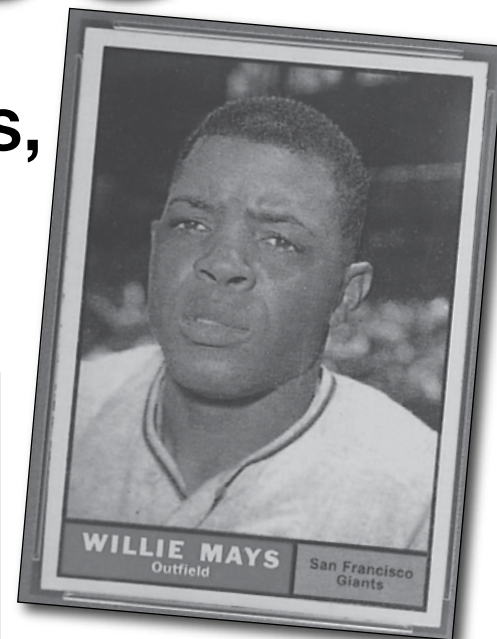
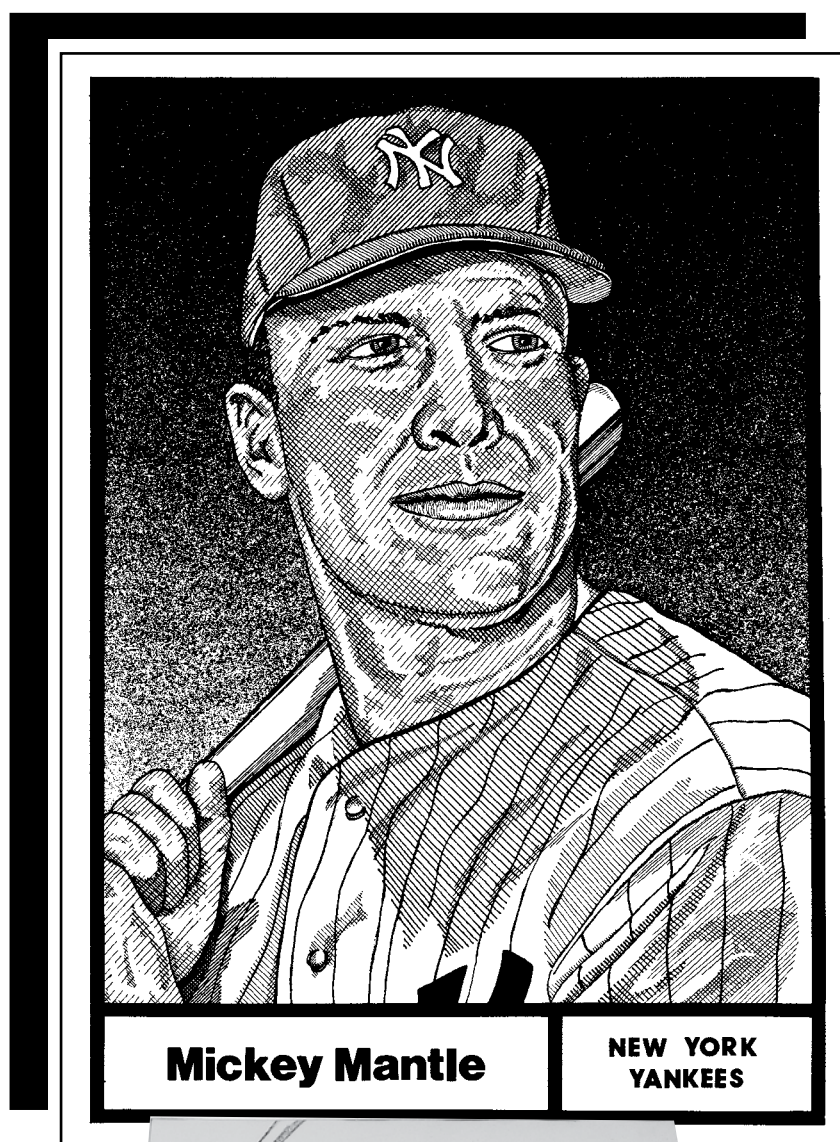
Willie Mays was famous for having his cap fly off as he was pursuing rocketing fly balls or turning a double or a triple, but that's no excuse for having the "Say Hey Kid" show up on his 1961 Topps card sans chapeau.

For much of the popular issue, that's precisely the way the boys appear. In most instances it's not the immortals like Mays, though Ernie Banks and Harmon Killebrew were similarly treated that year. One suspects that it was the slap-dash expansion of 1961 that prompted the Topps designers to go a bit overboard with their default photo option.

If that odd nuance (about 20 percent of the regular-issue cards show the boys capless) had any impact on the long-term collectibility of the issue, it would be pretty difficult to quantify. With some of the toughest high numbers in the decade, the set has been a hit with serious collectors virtually from the earliest days of the organized hobby, and it didn't hurt that 1961 was such a historic season.

It was arguably the last hurrah of a four-decade Yankees dynasty; Wait, before you start launching e-mails willy-nilly, I know the club won pennants again in 1962-64, and they even won the World Series in 1962 (when Bobby Richardson put his glove up in self-defense and wound up stopping a Willie McCovey liner for the third out), but 1961 was the last time they dominated. The end was near, but you couldn't necessarily tell it in 1961.

Still, in part because of the Yankees prominence that heady season and more specifically because of the pricey high numbers, the set has long been popular with collectors despite an arguably insipid design and the ghastly overuse of the hatless gimmick.



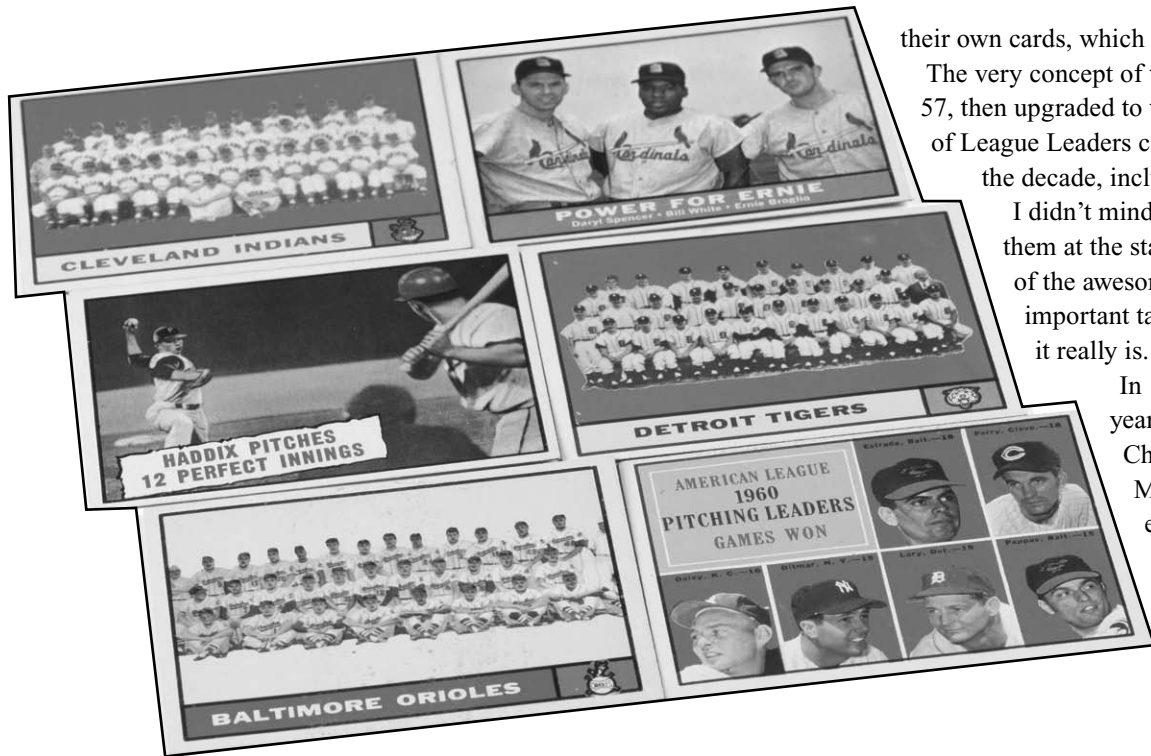
Various sources have suggested that the idea was that Topps could airbrush in caps to account for trades and – in this particular instance – wholesale player movement because of the expansion draft, but Topps didn't actually airbrush in entire caps, at least as far as I can recall. The images that most collectors recall being somewhat repelled by were more often than not clumsily airbrushed team logos on caps that were already there. The level of sophistication in graphic design just wasn't there in 1961 to create caps out of whole cloth, if you'll pardon the lame pun.

Nope, the better explanation is that it was in part a reaction to the expansion draft – the vast preponderance of players from the newly added Angels and Senators, plus the transplanted Twins appear without headgear – and then presumably the design device was expanded to others to give it some broader legitimacy. How else to explain subjecting Banks and Mays to that indignity, since nobody was speculating about either of those two being traded smack dab in the middle of their Hall of Fame primes.

If the front design was uninspired, the Topps gang tried to make up for it with genuine innovation in the specialty cards, and indeed, several of the ideas they came up with would be incorporated into the basic strategy for decades to come. For the first time, checklists would be granted



**A lackluster design is aided by an imposing array of subsets and innovations, including League Leaders, Most Valuable Players and Checklists on their own**



their own cards, which may not sound like a big deal but it clearly was for set collectors.

The very concept of the checklist got a slow start, first appearing as unnumbered “inserts” in 1956-57, then upgraded to the backs of team cards from 1958-60. The 1961 issue also launched the idea of League Leaders cards, another subset that would enjoy significant status for much of the rest of the decade, including leading off the issue from 1963-65 and 1968-69. Ugh.

I didn’t mind the idea of the League Leader cards, but I didn’t see a good reason to have them at the start of each issue. About all that accomplished was to absolve the Topps crew of the awesome responsibility of deciding who would be the No. 1 card each year. Such an important task and they really only batted about .500 every year, which sounds better than it really is.

In 1961, somebody apparently decided showing the two MVPs from the previous year would be a good way to start things off, and Dick Groat of the World Series Champion Pirates wound up atop the pile, with American League MVP Roger Maris at No. 2. At the very least. It was a dramatic improvement over two years earlier when Commissioner Ford Frick was the No. 1 card.

Groat wound up No. 1, presumably because the Pirates slipped past the Yankees in the goofy 1960 World Series. Speaking of which, the fascinating convergence of Whitey Ford shutouts in lopsided Yankee wins and narrow Pirate victories was nicely portrayed in the World Series subset, with cool

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*This from noted card dealer Rich Gove of Rich Gove Collectibles in Houston, Texas:*

**A terrifying tale of high-number angst ... but with a happy ending**

In the spring of 1962, my friends Nevitt, Drew and Jim were gathered around Nevitt’s living room in our annual preseason baseball card exchange. It was the typical “I’ll-give-you-Gus-Triandos-for-Howie-Bedell” sessions. Oddly, however, Drew had a Mickey Mantle card that I had never seen and since I considered myself the foremost authority on all things Mantle, I asked (trying hard not to sound desperate) where he got it and what did he want for it.

He said that he got it at Ellsworth’s Market last September!

I was dumbstruck. I had completed my Topps set and I didn’t have that Mantle. I turned the card over and looked at the number. No. 578. No. 578? My 1961 set stopped at No. 522. I felt like someone had punched my in the stomach. I had been misguided into thinking that my set was complete. I was living a lie. I felt empty.

As my dismay faded, I became angry. I hopped on my bike and pedaled the six or seven blocks to Ellsworth’s Market. I explained my plight to



Mr. Ellsworth and demanded an explanation. I reminded him that I spent the better part of each week’s allowance with him and that he garnered nearly all of my soda-pop bottle-redemp-

tion business. Not to mention that he was our primary outlet for kites (during March) and Abba Zabas (year round).

In his best calming, paternal voice, he apologized for any failing on his part, but to make things right he thought he had a box of the “last shipment” in his back room. He left and returned about five minutes later with an unopened box of 1961 7th Series cards. He was so nice he even let me have the box at a discount “for all the trouble I went through.”

I didn’t have the money (allowance was due in two weeks) but he let me take the box with the promise that I would pay him later (which I dutifully did).

I went back to Nevitt’s with the box. Opened a pack. Chewed the gum and marveled at the Jim Archer, Barry Latman, Chuck Hiller and others that lay before me. I thought about opening the rest of the box but decided against it. We finished our “card show” and I took my 1961 High-Number box home.

I never opened it. Maybe someday. Most likely it will end up in an auction.

– Rich Gove

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flexichromes (painted black-and-white photos) recounting all the details in fine fashion. What the campy cards don't detail is the odd strategic decision of Casey Stengel to open the Series with Art Ditmar, saving Ford for Game Three at Yankee Stadium. He ended up adding two more shutout wins, adding to his record World Series scoreless inning streak than ran all the way to 33<sup>2</sup>/<sub>3</sub> innings, but leaving Ford with a nagging "what if" feeling that would last for literally decades (nicely recounted in the *Legendary Yankee Stadium: Memories and Memorabilia From The House that Ruth Built* book authored by yours truly and published by Krause Publications – available at bookstores everywhere).

The flexichromes employed for the World Series cards also came into play in another subset, Baseball Thrills, which had been first tried in 1959. Those cards weren't terribly popular at time of issue, but as the decades passed several of them got very pricey because of the player pictured: "Ruth Hits 60th Homer" and "Mantle Blasts 565-ft. Home Run," for example. The "Gehrig Benched After 2,130 Games" always commanded a premium, but got another significant bounce around 1995 or so.

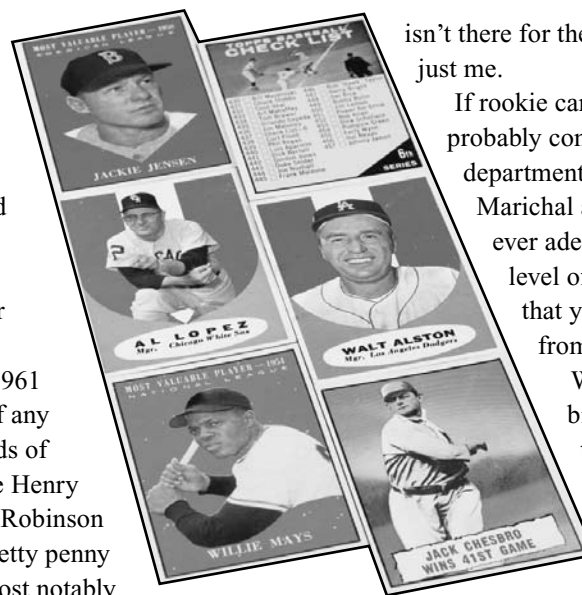
The other cool innovation from 1961 Topps was the

tribute to MVPs from 1950-60.

The 16-card, color-coded subset featured eight players who snagged the award during that 11-year span, and it worked out nicely that Campanella and Berra had three each and Mantle and Banks a pair.

For the fourth year in a row, Topps closed out the issue with the All-Star subset, but this time there was more intrigue, because the high series in 1961 was perhaps the smallest print run of any final series of that decade. Thus, cards of that perennial group of All-Stars like Henry Aaron, Mays, Mantle, Banks, Frank Robinson and Al Kaline wound up adding a pretty penny to the total cost of a complete set, most notably from a Mantle All-Star that got about as close to its regular-issue counterpart as it ever would in 1960s Topps issues.

Of more compelling interest to me about the high numbers was the different cast that the high numbers boasted, clearly reflecting, I believe, a better grade of card stock used for those final 66 cards that gave the front image a greater brightness and clarity and the green (and black) colors on the back a boldness that



isn't there for the first 522 cards. But that's just me.

If rookie cards are a big deal, 1961 probably comes up short in that department. Billy Williams and Juan Marichal are it, and neither card ever adequately approached the level of interest and excitement that you would have expected from players of that caliber.

Which of course leaves the big tickets for the traditional big-ticket guys, like Mantle, Mays, Aaron and a handful of others. Still, the boatload of Mantle cards – regular, All-Star, MVP, Thrills

and even his League Leaders card – would likely set you back nearly \$1,000 or more to snag them all in Near-Mint or better condition. ♦

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