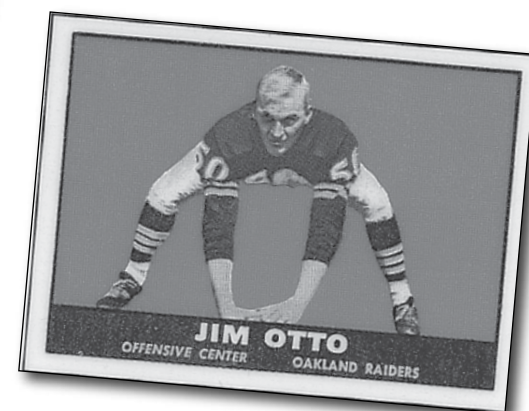


1961 Topps

Topps added the AFL, creating the largest issue ever, but this particular merger would only last one year



By T.S. O'Connell

There was a new kid in town in 1961, and at least in Topps' side of town, it was time to include the new guys in an institution that might have done as much for their street cred as anything. The American Football League had just wrapped up its first season of professional football and already it had the football cards to prove it.

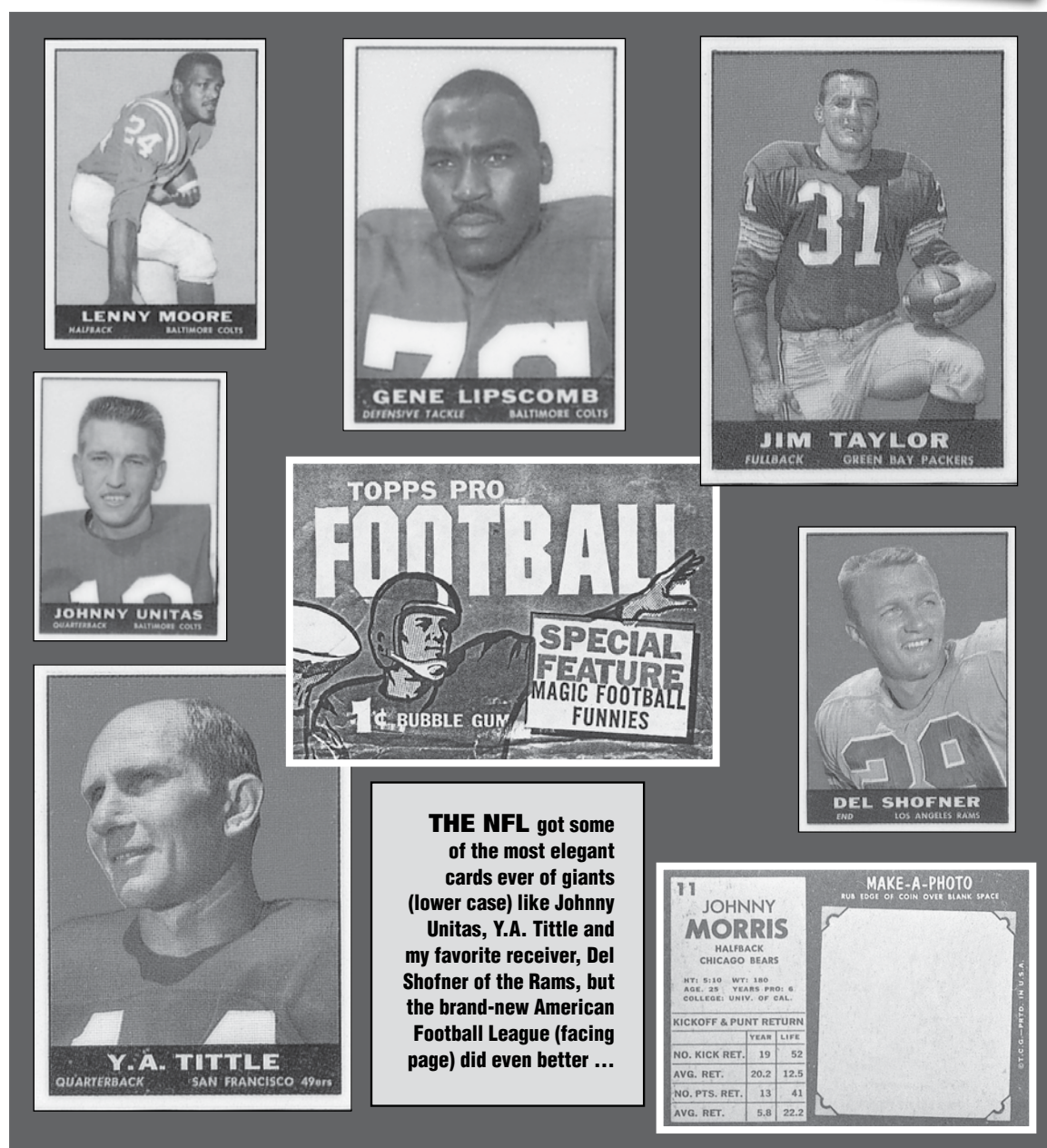
The brash young league had come along in 1960 to challenge the National Football League, which was coming into its own as the new decade was dawning but was hardly the marketing behemoth that it would become by the end of it.

The 1961 issue was the company's largest football issue ever, which was understandable since a whole new league was being added to the mix. There are about 8-9 players per team, with a neat team card on a green background card for all of the NFL clubs but not for the AFL. That's not hard to figure: in those days it would have been tricky finding suitable team pictures for AFL clubs that had only been around one season.

The NFL old-timers also ended up with some ho-hum Football Highlights cards, about a half-dozen were included, but again no AFL ones. These are offered in a television design not unlike the 1955 Bowman Baseball issue, thought not done to as laudable effect here, and with barely any enthusiasm at all.

With teams listed alphabetically by city, Johnny Unitas ends up with card No. 1 once again, a marvelous bit of good fortune for card collectors as they enjoyed the league's marquee player having a similarly lofty status with Topps. It was the third year in a row for that honor, and there would be two more after that. Unitas didn't relinquish the No. 1 spot until Topps relinquished the National Football League, opting to produce an exclusively AFL issue in 1964 as Topps officials wrangled about player contracts.

With the release of the 1961 set, Topps had only been producing football cards for the NFL for five years, but their graphic designers arguably nailed it with the combination of majestic portraits of many of the greatest players of that generation silhouetted by



THE NFL got some of the most elegant cards ever of giants (lower case) like Johnny Unitas, Y.A. Tittle and my favorite receiver, Del Shofner of the Rams, but the brand-new American Football League (facing page) did even better ...

Hall of Famer Jim Taylor had to wait three years to finally get his mug on a Topps card

brilliant colors that were further marked by that most Topps-like nuance: near color coding.

All of the players were identified by name, team and position in white letters on a black panel on the bottom, but the background color surrounding the players themselves would be mostly one often bold, bright color per team, but there would always be a handful or more of exceptions.

Had there been such a thing as plastic sheets back in those days, the occurrence of near-miss color coding might have driven youngsters mad.

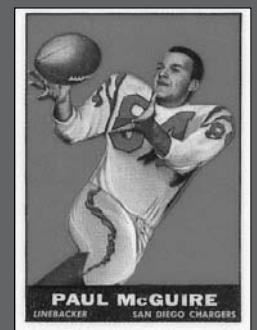
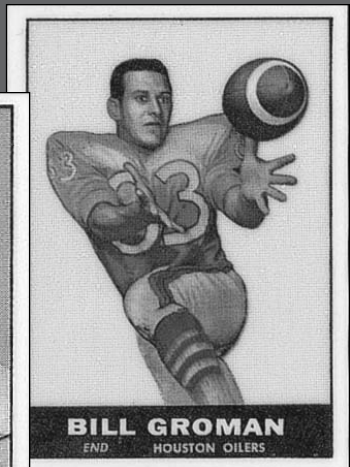
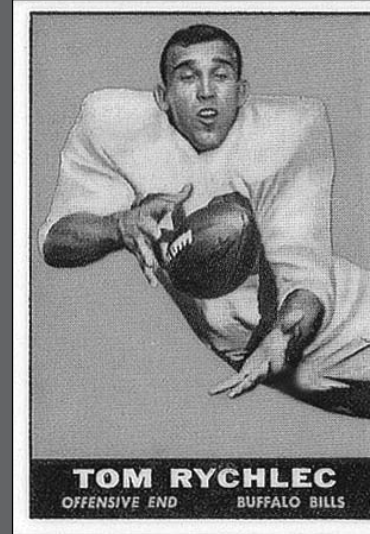
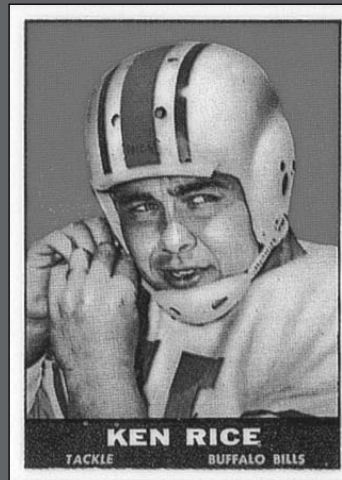
The Green Bay Packers, who would go on to win their first NFL title in 17 years by drubbing the New York Giants, 37-0, in a New Years Day triumph at City Stadium, have eight players represented in the set, seven of those with bright red backgrounds. The irascible Max McGee, mavericky long before the word ever found itself being abused in the public arena, ended up with a Kelly Green background. That quirky procedure would prevail for every team, but you'd have to be marginally insane to suggest it detracts from the issue. It's just noteworthy, that's all.

Far more interesting is the use of the charming posed-action shots that had been a staple of Topps football sets from the very first in 1956. The NFL guys are cool enough: Lenny Moore, the Colts Hall-of-Fame running back might be break dancing, if there had been such a thing, and Gene Brito of the Rams might be doing the Mashed Potato, which was in fact popular at the time, but most of the NFL entries are fairly typical, with three-point stances for line-men and such, but ...

When it came time to make football cards of the newcomers from teams with curious names like the Dallas Texans, the New York Titans or the Denver Broncos, the Topps designers really hit their stride.

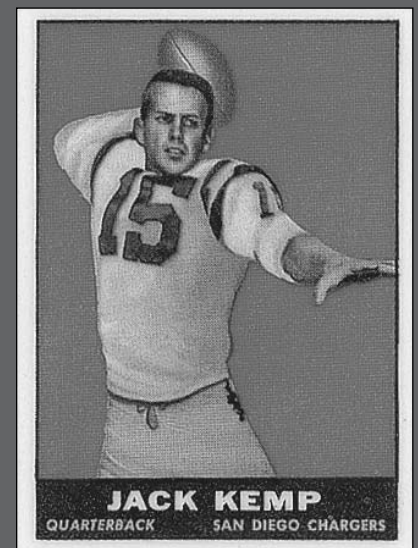
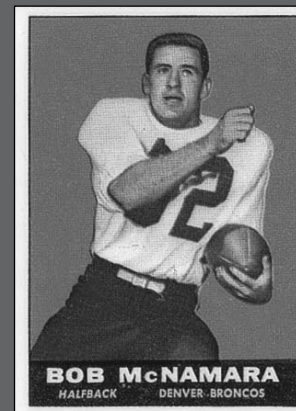
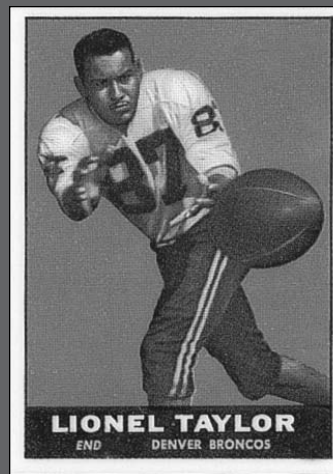
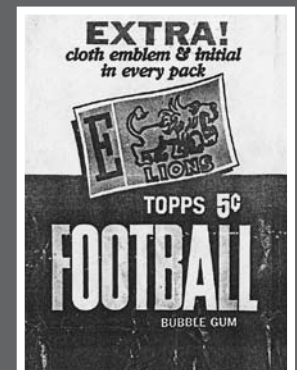
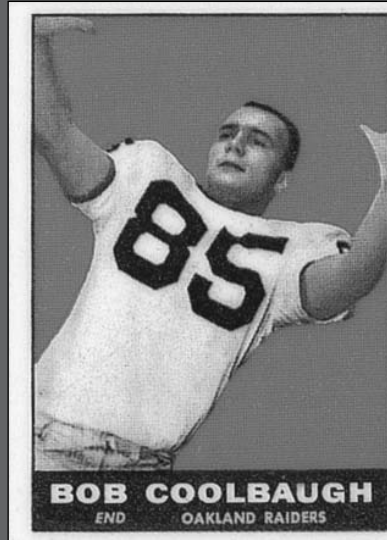
Though no one could have articulated such a thing at the time, serious collectors decades later no doubt spotted a noticeable change once the AFL roster starts at card No. 133 with a classic Abner Haynes card. The AFL posed-action cards often got way jazzier, and the preponderance of all the AFL cards, portraits included, were apparently the flexichromes that proved such a staple for Topps through the 1950s and 1960s.

These are hand-painted black-and-white photos, and the difference can rattle back and forth between barely discernible and completely outrageous. Me, I like the outrageous ones.



Is that card wide enough?

Much of the classic charm from the 1961 Topps Football set is derived from the many flexichromes of the guys from the American Football League, particularly the wide receivers who were willing to do extraordinary gymnastics in order to get their first-ever Topps card. Some of the AFL guys are quite obscure, others are better known for other things, like television announcer Paul McGuire and his San Diego Chargers teammate, Jack Kemp, who gained even more fame in the political arena.



VintageCards

1961 TOPPS FOOTBALL from page 19

There are nifty flexichromes of wide receivers doing things that wouldn't really be possible for another 40 years or so when Hollywood film makers figured out ways to have Keanu Reeves suspending himself in mid-air as he does karate kicks. Paul McGuire of the San Diego Chargers and later of television NFL announcing fame, is shown awaiting a nifty pass in as cool a football card as you'll ever find. The ball so neatly floating his way might have been tossed by Jack Kemp, a Chargers teammate in another great flexichrome of his first Topps card (and one of the most expensive in the set at \$175 or so).

These standout graphic wide receiver MVPs (Most Valuable Pasteboards) include Bill Gorman of the Houston Oilers, the legendary Lionel Taylor of the Broncos reaching for a pigskin so far from him it's almost a 3D effect, or even Tom Rychlec of the Buffalo Bills flying in from the right-hand side of his card, but the top prize has to go to Bob Coolbaugh of the Oak-

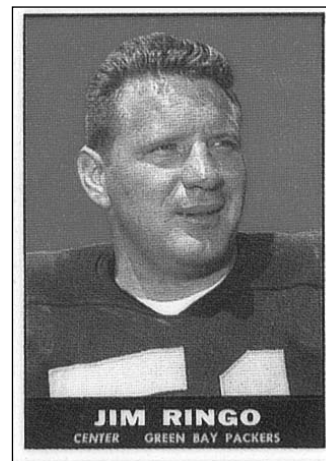
land Raiders. He is ostensibly also awaiting a pass, but his arms are so far apart that they appear to be clinging to the frame of the card's border. Either that, or he's anticipating the arrival of a football the size of a Volkswagen.

There are other curiosities in the issue: Topps had the right idea in those days about showing players without helmets, but for some reasons two guys – Dick James and Ken Rice – ended up displaying classic vintage headgear; Hall of Fame center Jim Otto is the only horizontal player card in the set, presumably because he posed as though he were hiking the football. Except that there's no football, so he actually appears to be catching a frog.

And finally, there are no killer rookie cards in the set, although there is one important rookie card that ain't really a rookie card. In 1959 and 1960, Topps mixed up Packer fullback Jim Taylor's picture with a Cardinals linebacker of the same name.

The Packer legend finally got a Topps card with his mug on it in 1961, which was probably a bigger event for collectors than it was for Taylor.

And in case it isn't obvious, I'll confess that if I ever decide to make a move back into football cards, this is the very first set I would buy. I suppose a really nice one would run me \$1,200 or more, but it would be worth it. This is the nicest early snapshot by Topps of two competing leagues that would eventually merge into one giant, multimedia conglomerate, and the group never looked as charming – and colorful – as it did right here. ♦



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