

By T.S. O'Connell

The mid-1970s look better in the rearview mirror than they did in the 1970s. It was a confused decade.

The economy sucked, the Middle East sucked worse, shortages of really important stuff like gasoline and meat left us longing for the good ole days of the 1960s, and in August 1974, we put the finishing touches on the greatest political drama of our lifetime.

Amid that kind of backdrop, baseball cards seemed like an odd and frivolous diversion, but ironically, 1975 was just about the point that our hobby was launching itself into the mainstream. The good folks at Topps, having rolled out a couple of fairly pedestrian efforts in 1973-74 after almost jumping the shark with a psychedelic 1972 issue, turned to one of its great design fallback strategies: blazing color.

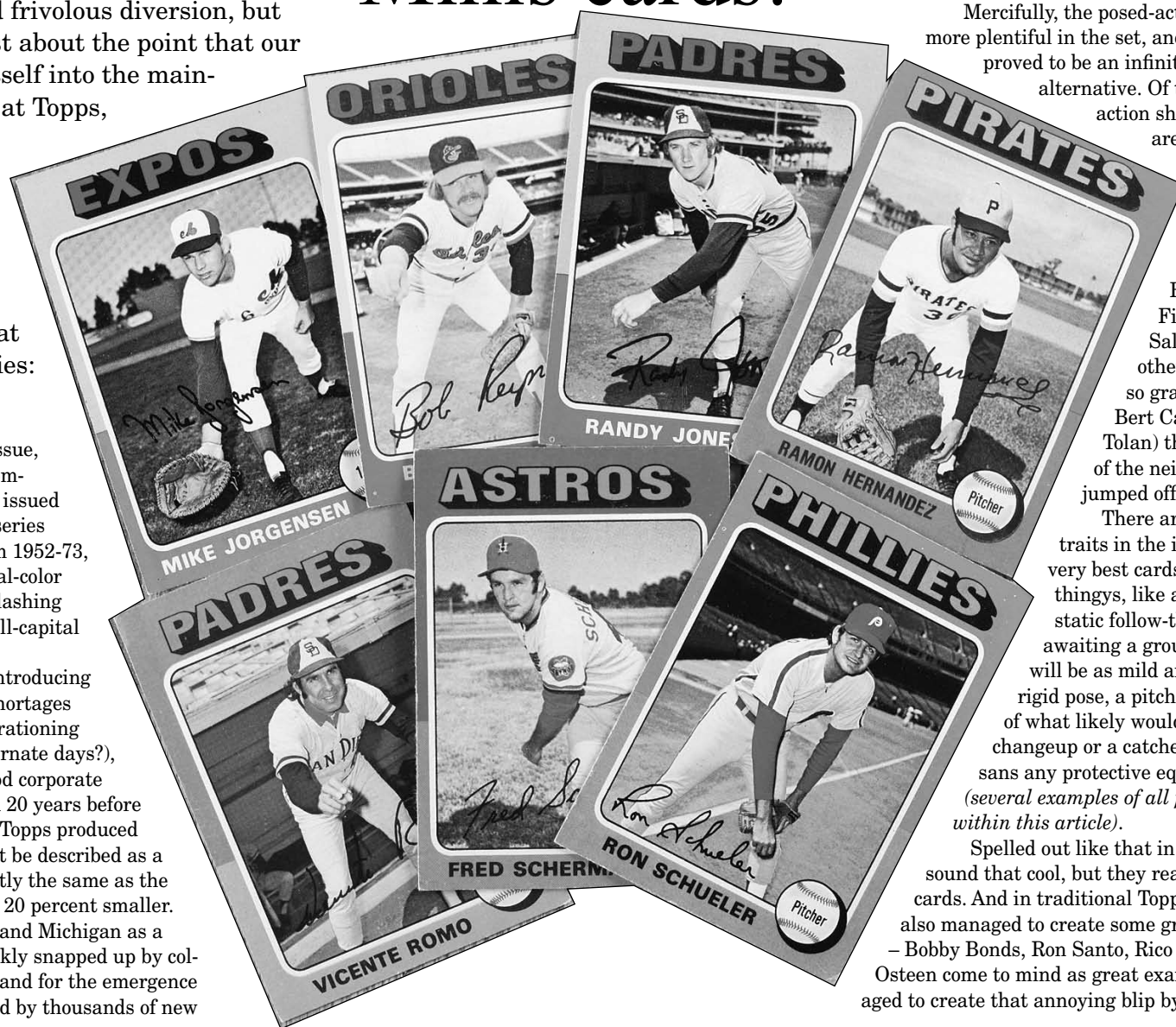
The 1975 Topps Baseball issue, just the second effort by the company where the entire set was issued all at once rather than in the series format that had prevailed from 1952-73, showcased the players in a dual-color background, with similarly splashing color used for the bold-faced, all-capital letters team name on top.

In a decade renown for reintroducing Americans to unaccustomed shortages and even the occasional bit of rationing (Remember buying gas on alternate days?), Topps showed itself to be a good corporate citizen by "going green" a good 20 years before the term became popularized. Topps produced a test "Mini" issue, what might be described as a parallel today, and it was exactly the same as the regular issue set except it was 20 percent smaller.

Offered on the West Coast and Michigan as a test, the cards were fairly quickly snapped up by collectors, who in 1975 were on hand for the emergence of a hobby soon to be inundated by thousands of new

1975 Topps

In perilous times, Topps' 20 percent solution ... Minis cards!



"collectors," many of whom were really investors looking for something other than a sluggish unpredictable stock market as a repository for extra dough. More on the famed Minis later on.

For the regular-issue 2 1/2-by-3-inch issue, finding a winning design was the main selling point, just as it had been since the beginning. For much of the first half of the decade, Topps' designers relied pretty heavily on the idea of action shots rather than the old tried-and-true staple of the oxymoronic posed-action shots that had dominated so many of the classic issues of the first 20 years of Topps. The 1975 set turned out to be the perfect comparison vehicle for the two ideas.

Mercifully, the posed-action shots were much more plentiful in the set, and in almost every case proved to be an infinitely more attractive alternative. Of the several dozen action shots in the set, many are plagued with horrifying shadows that significantly mar the presentation – think Tom Seaver, Jon Matlack, Reggie Jackson, Rollie Fingers, Don Baylor and Sal Bando – and in many other instances were simply so grainy (Steve Carlton, Bert Campaneris, Bobby Tolan) that the superior quality of the neighboring images all but jumped off the page.

There are some wonderful portraits in the issue, but many of the very best cards are the posed-action thingys, like a batter in his stance or static follow-through, a fielder stiffly awaiting a ground ball that hopefully will be as mild and unthreatening as his rigid pose, a pitcher in a follow-through of what likely would have been a 35 mph changeup or a catcher in a relaxed crouch sans any protective equipment whatsoever (several examples of all four styles are featured within this article).

Spelled out like that in the text, it doesn't sound that cool, but they really are some very nice cards. And in traditional Topps fashion, the company also managed to create some great portrait cards – Bobby Bonds, Ron Santo, Rico Carty and Claude Osteen come to mind as great examples – but still managed to create that annoying blip by having the player

pictured with a team other than the one most fans would remember them with.

Now, in fairness to the Topps guys, it's not their fault that Santo was located in the wrong end of Chicago by 1975, or that Bonds was pictured as a member of the New York Yankees. It's not even their fault that Rico Carty, pictured in what's easily the neatest portrait shot of his career, winds up on the wrong politically incorrect offensive stereotypical Native American logo (Indians, rather than Braves).

Having moaned about the imperfections, I should mention some of the many winners: great rookie cards of George Brett and Robin Yount; one of the nicest Mike Schmidt cards; and classics of Joe Rudi, Nolan Ryan and Catfish Hunter, to name a few.

Like so many of the great early sets, you can write about them at length without wading into the question of values, but probably not forever. When the hobby reached its grand peak back in the late 1980s or very early 1990s, the complete set got up near \$600-\$700, and the Minis even more than that, but that was based on recorded peaks for the Brett and Yount rookies or nearly \$200 for each one, or with Brett typically a bit more expensive than Yount.

Both were early-on Hall-of-Fame locks, but 30 years after issue those two rookies reside at roughly one-third of their top prices, though far more than that in the top specimens in third-party slabs. At the same peak more than 15 years ago, the hobby had anointed possible HOF status to Gary Carter and Jim Rice; Carter pretty handily beat Rice to Cooperstown, but now that they are both enshrined (Rice this summer) their icky multi-player rookie cards have settled in at the moment at about \$20 or so.

Hank Aaron, fresh from his ordeal of breaking Babe Ruth's all-time home run mark in April 1974, wound up with two cards, sort of, the first and the last in the issue, similar to the unique honor afforded to Ted Williams 21 years earlier. But the No. 1 card is one of those "Highlights" cards, rather than being an actual second Aaron card for 1975. Methinks the idea was Topps wanted to be able to picture Aaron in a Braves uniform; No. 660, his "real" card in the set, shows him in an Atlanta uniform but with the profile portrait, the logo on the cap is not shown.

The subset lineup was limited but distinguished: World Series recap; team cards, in roughly the same design as the regular-issue cards; and a unique Most Valuable Players subset that heralded "25 Years of Topps Baseball Cards."

Numbered from 189-212, the subset reproduced earlier Topps cards side-by-side for each NL and AL Most Valuable Player from 1951-74. The tiny versions were even minnier than the Minis, and in the case of three of them, they were ersatz creations by Topps of "Cards That Never Were."

Roy Campanella, MVP in 1951, 1953 and 1955, didn't show up on a Topps card in 1951 and 1955, so the design-

ers in 1975 had to create a couple of fantasy specimens. They ran into a similar problem with 1962 MVP Maury Wills, who didn't appear on a Topps card until 1967, nearing the end of what should be a Hall of Fame career, though the Veterans Committee voters haven't gotten around to agreeing on that point just yet.

So to match Mickey Mantle's 1962 card, the design crew created a 1962 Topps Wills, a passable enough version that would have been a lot easier to engineer, say, a quarter-century later once computers came on the scene.

For other curiosities, there's Oscar Gamble's groovy No. 213, showcasing that wonderful afro with the Cleveland Indians cap with the skanky "C" perched precariously atop it. Under the head-

ing of the usual wrong-mug entries, card No. 120, ostensibly Steve Busby, is really Fran Healy, and card No. 626, listed as Larry Haney, is really Dave Duncan. Probably annoying when they are presented to the various athletes involved years later at card shows, but in the big picture of card making, hardly drawing more than a yawn.

And finally, the 1975 set has the only card in history with the position designation on the front of pinch runner. This unusual honor was accorded to Charlie Finley's Frankenstein-like creation (only much faster) Herb

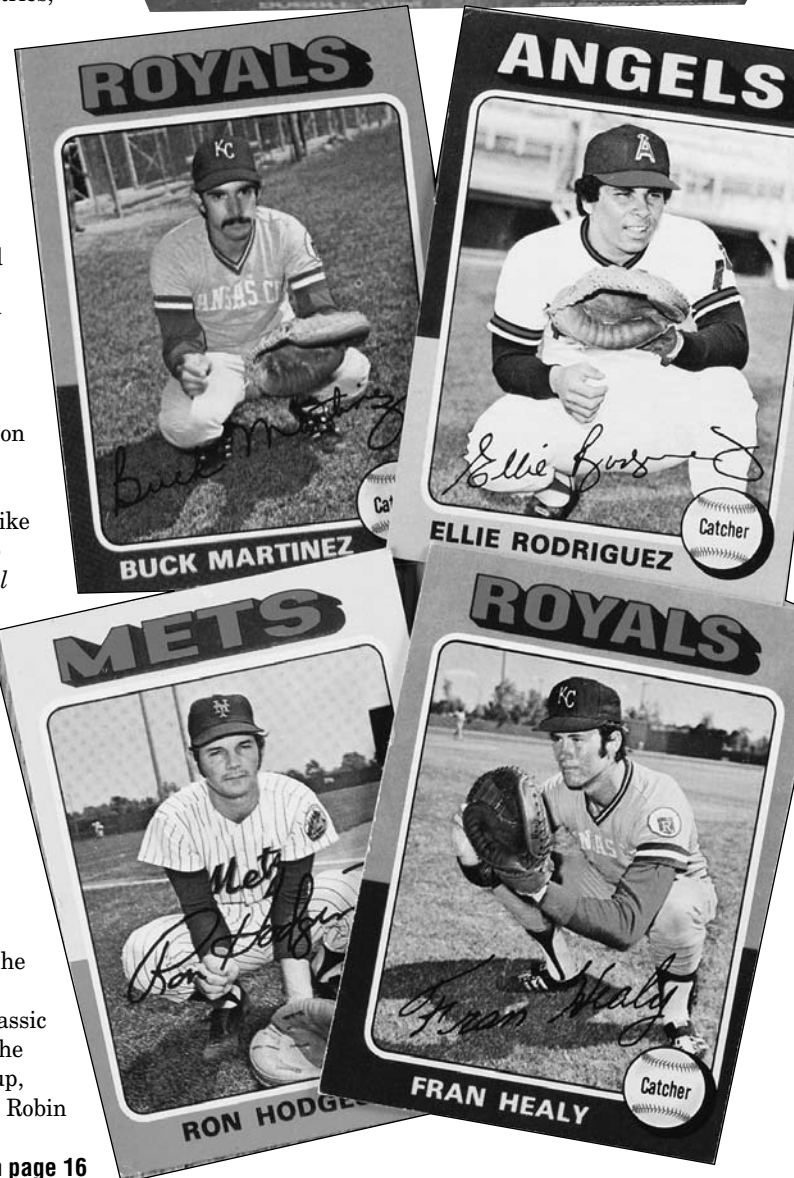
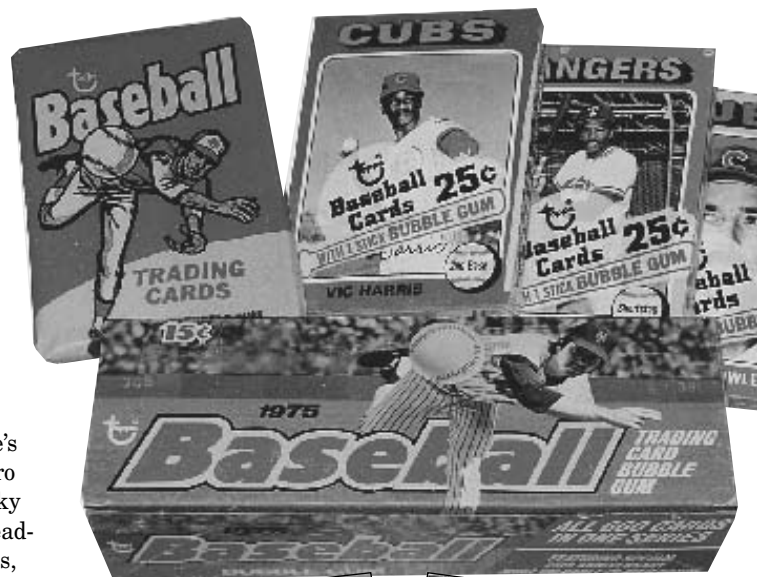
Washington, who wound up in the *Baseball Encyclopedia* with a relatively bizarre statistical record. Try this out: 105 games played, zero at-bats, 33 runs scored and 31 stolen bases. And they never let him get up to the plate even once!

Hell, even 3-foot-7-inch Eddie Gaedel whooped him in that department.

Ask the experts

Kevin Savage, veteran dealer from Maumee, Ohio, had his own shot at the Topps Minis way back when, but concedes he muffed it.

"I think of the 1975 Topps Set as the classic 1970s set. I have always liked the look of the cards and it has outstanding player makeup, including the rookie cards of George Brett, Robin



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A whacky decade of flakes, daring hairdos, 'fros and 'staches

1975 TOPPS BASEBALL from page 13

Yount, Jim Rice, Gary Carter, Fred Lynn and Keith Hernandez,” said Savage.

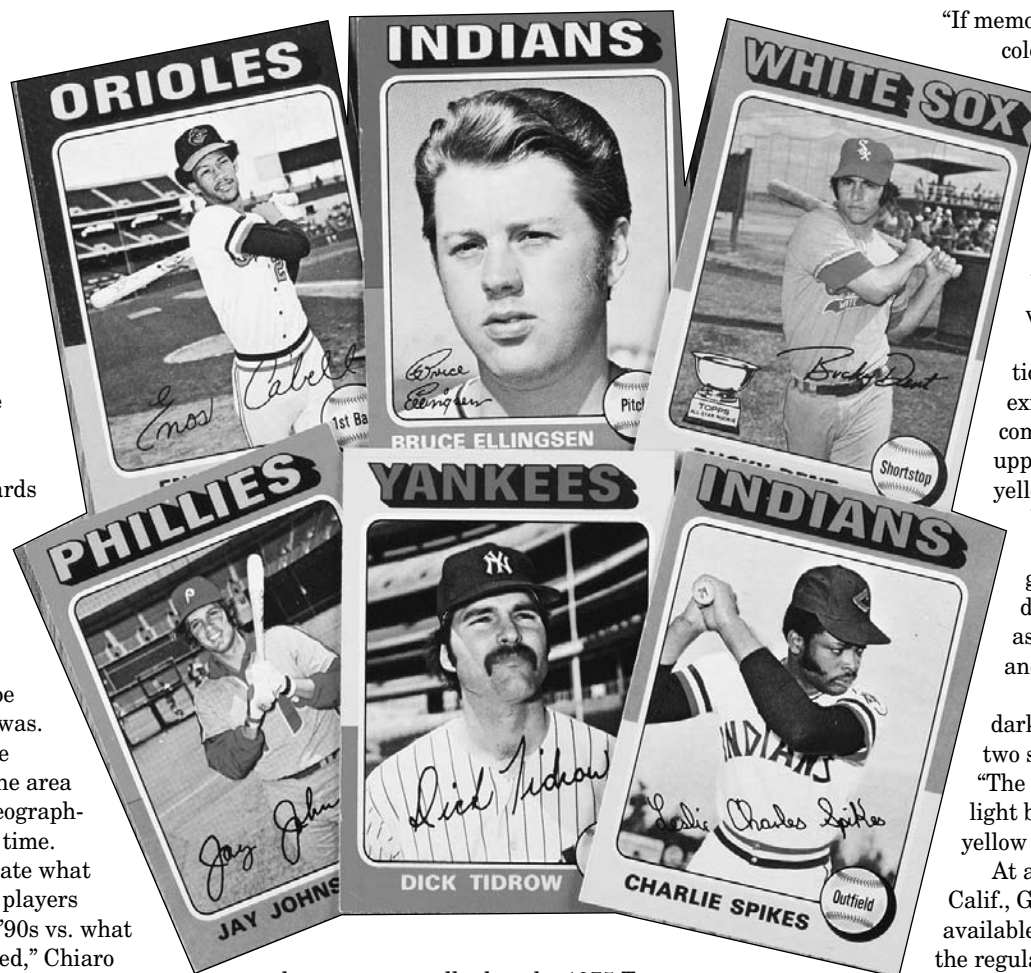
“It is a set which has always been popular with collectors and the fact that it has the tougher Mini version helps make it stand out from the other 1970s issues. The Minis were available in our area – and I strongly remember (I was 13 then) feeling like I was being shortchanged with smaller cards. Little did I know that the Minis would become more valuable.”

Ron Chiaro of Augusta Baseball Cards in Augusta, Kan., another veteran dealer in vintage Topps and Bowman cards, offers this insight into the popularity of the color-splashed offering. “In the late 1980s and early '90s before the great push for vintage cards developed, the 1975 set seems to be the most desired vintage card set there was. Of course, that was driven by the George Brett rookie, which was “The Card” in the area where I lived and the relatively small geographical area that I was doing shows at that time.

“Also, I guess this set came to illustrate what happened to high-profile rookie cards of players who were still playing in the 1980s and '90s vs. what happened to their prices after they retired,” Chiaro continued. “Not only with George Brett and Robin Yount, but of Nolan Ryan, Tom Seaver, Mike Schmidt, etc. All dropped dramatically once their playing careers were over.”

Rich Gove of Rich Gove Collectibles in Deer Park, Texas, also had his shot at finding the 20 percent less-filling versions himself. “I remember the 1975 Topps issue very well, including the Minis. I was living in San Luis Obispo, Calif., and as it turns out, California was one of the targeted states for the ‘test issue’ of the Minis. I bought wax boxes of Minis in San Luis Obispo, Bakersfield, Orcutt and Sacramento. I liked them immediately, as did the other collectors in our baseball card circle of friends.”

Gove, one of the great old-time dealers who boasts a luminescent display of pristine vintage cards at most of the major shows around



the country, recalls that the 1975 Topps wax boxes had very good distribution within each box and that it was not difficult to piece together complete sets. He does not remember cello boxes in any area other than in Bakersfield, where he purchased about six boxes.

“At the time, Brett, Yount and Winfield weren’t that big of a deal, but we did place a premium on a few cards, specifically Fred Lynn, Hank Aaron and Nolan Ryan, although having Aaron as a “Brewer” seemed strange,” Gove said. I swear, I wrote that sentiment *above* before I talked to Gove. Heck, it did seem strange.

“The overall positive impact of the 1975s was immediate. We loved the bright colors and we each had our favorite color combinations,” he continued. He was always partial to the “yellow over red” (Pete Rose, Johnny Bench, Jim Wynn), the “red over blue” (John Milner, Mickey Lolich, Bob Watson, George Hendrick, Mel Stottlemyre) and the “blue over orange” of Freddie Patek, Dick Lange, Jim York and Bernie Carbo.

“If memory serves, I think there were 11 different colors. The colors I can remember are orange, brown, red, yellow, purple, pink, light blue, dark blue, light green, dark green and tan. Because card colors are far from perfect, many of the colors appear to have subtle differences. For instance, what we used to call ‘tan’ could be considered a ‘pale orange,’ although it is obviously an attempt by Topps for a separate color and not just a variation.”

The colors were used in various combinations and about 20 different combinations exist. Some of the colors were involved in more combinations than others. For instance, the red upper color was combined with bottom portions of yellow, orange and blue. The upper yellow shared blue, red and green. There were two distinct shades of green: a light green and a dark green. There are a couple of cards that have a dark-green top and a light-green bottom, such as Paul Popovich, Leroy Stanton, Rudy May and Jerry Morales.

“I don’t remember any cards that shared both dark blue and light blue, but there are certainly two shades of blue within the set,” Gove added. “The dark blue is used on more cards, with the light blue generally used as the bottom half with a yellow top.”

At a card show in the late 1970s in Buena Park, Calif., Gove recalls that there were boxes of the Minis available, but it seemed like there were fewer boxes of the regular 1975 Topps.

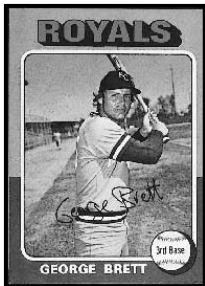
“The 1975 issue continues to retain its appeal. I sell thousands of 1975 Topps each year and complete sets in nice condition sell readily. Maybe because it came sandwiched with very bland issues of 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979,” Gove continued. “Now *those* issues are b-o-r-i-n-g, so it is no wonder that the 1975 Topps sets (regular and Mini) maintain a demand in today’s market.”

And he added one more observation, certainly one that’s undoubtedly shared by countless dealers and serious collectors around the country. “I can’t wait to see what happens to the ‘Mini market’ with the new ones hitting through the big auction.”

The big auction that Gove alluded to is the Robert Edward Auction in late April and early May. **Rob Lifson** scored a major hobby coup last year when he collared the famed Charlie Conlon Collection, which included an almost unheard of stash of 26 unopened cases of 1975 Topps Minis wax packs.

“There’s no perfect way to do it,” Lifson said in a phone interview after the announcement. “I think they will do well,” he added.

Here's The Pitch



For pricing of 1975 Topps, go to our exclusive auction database at www.sportscollectorsdigest.com

Hundreds of cases of Minis and a 1975 'Pure' card set

1975 TOPPS BASEBALL from page 16

Conlon probably did have hundreds of cases at one time, Lifson noted, adding that there are other elements at work that could push bidding upward. "We will likely never again see 26 cases of an important vintage issue available at one time like this again. People will look at it as a unique opportunity. This is the time to buy them."

The plan is to sell the three cases as single lots each, three lots of three cases in each lot and two lots of seven cases in each.

The auction, which closes May 2, will also have several lots of loose cards, an uncut sheet of 1975 Topps, a PSA 10 George Brett rookie, a couple of complete sets and 2 1/2 cases of Topps Minis Cellos, which will be sold as a single lot. The cases will carry minimum bids of \$2,500 per case.

And there's even going to be an unopened case of 1975 Topps Football Cellos, though that consignment came from a different collector. He noted the inclusion of the Conlon Collection cases and simply concluded that "maybe this is the right time" to sell that football case.

Lifson delights in retelling the story of Conlon's impact on the hobby. "In 1975, he accomplished one of the great coups of modern collecting. At the very beginning of the baseball card season, he could not help but notice that the Topps cards at the local store were very different than the Topps cards from past years, and very different from the 1975 Topps cards that were sold elsewhere in the county. It was impossible to miss. They were smaller!"

"By chance, most of these test cases were sent to Charlie's area in Michigan. When Charlie realized these cards were in short supply and not available anywhere else and would likely sell for a premium, he went from store to store, and wholesaler to wholesaler, and bought all he could find. Anyone who thought he was crazy soon stood corrected," Lifson added.

The veteran auctioneer figures that just about every unopened box of 1975 Topps Minis in the hobby today can be traced back to Conlon. "As the years rolled by and prices went up, he slowly sold off his seemingly never-ending supply," Lifson continued. "When asked how the supply was holding up in recent years, he

Conlon probably had hundreds of cases at one time, but his supply had diminished to exactly 26 unopened wax cases (with 16, 36-pack boxes per case), with an original cost to Conlon in 1975 of less than \$1,000.



would simply say, 'I'm running low,' and leave it at that."

Lifson calculated that Conlon probably had hundreds of cases at one time, but many of those would have been opened over the years to make complete sets. "But we now know that his supply had diminished to exactly 26 unopened wax cases (with 16, 36-pack boxes per case), with an original cost to Conlon in 1975 of less than \$1,000.

Few issues in the hobby have as colorful a history as 1975 Topps in terms of unopened material, a point emphasized by the historic Conlon Collection sale coming this spring, but it wasn't the first or largest deal involving 1975 Topps cards.

That laurel would presumably fall to Alan "Mr. Mint" Rosen, who turned up more than 100 cases of 1975 Topps Rack Packs back in 1984. "It was one of my first big deals," recalled Rosen, who had plenty of those over his near-three decades in the hobby.

After picking up the cases from an East Coast collector, Rosen took the cases to the Hotel Penta in Midtown Manhattan. "We were busting them open at the Penta with crowds of people surrounding me," said Rosen.

He experienced the same kind of pandemonium later that summer at the old EPSCC Seashore Show in Ocean

City, N.J. With waves lapping beneath the famed Music Pier, Rosen orchestrated a chaotic scene selling the rack packs for \$20 each as he opened cases as quickly as he could. If Mr. Mint was the conductor,

to bleed this particular analogy just a wee bit more, the frenzied collectors were the chorus, with excited shouts of "Brett" or "Yount" as they tore open the packs.

And even with all that hoopla, the famous dealer still ended up with a few cases left later that fall. "The last bunch that was left we opened up and made sets. I had a good time going through them and making mint, centered sets," said the man who seemingly put the "M" in Mint.

Initial rumblings of competition ...

Other than the 1975 Topps Minis, the year was largely devoid of the kind of peripheral Topps test and insert issues that were so prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s. Topps' stranglehold on the world of baseball cards would have appeared to be as solid as it had ever been, but Fleer filed a lawsuit that year in yet another attempt to allow the Philadelphia-based company to have a crack at the lucrative world of baseball cards. It would take several years for it to work its way through the courts, but the writing was on the wall.

And there *was* another set produced that year that offered a glimpse of those things to come. After producing a test issue of 42 cards that apparently was well received, the Sports Stars Publishing Co. printed a 630-card "Pure Set" that was made available to the fledgling hobby late that summer.

Well-known hobby veterans Tom Collier and Mike Aaronstein (TCMA, which is an acronym for either their names or "The Card Memorabilia Associates" – I lean to the former) produced the unlicensed set under that SSPC name, creating a pretty neat alternative for serious collectors at a time when having a second full-scale set was unheard of. Topps quickly shut it down in the courts, but not before it got rather considerable distribution within the hobby.

Oh, yeah, almost forgot to mention. The fella who did the interesting biographies on the SSPC card backs? A Cornell University undergrad named Keith Olbermann. ♦

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