

1969-70 Topps Basketball

The card set inspired by a very special rookie

By T.S. O'Connell

It was a noble, interesting idea, and ultimately one that worked just fine in the long run, if not necessarily at the time. Topps, which had been out of the basketball card business for all of a decade, decided in 1969 that it would jump back in, so to speak, with a mainstream hoops issue, its first since the pioneering 1957-58 Topps set that gave fans a nice hint of the kind of potential that was out there for collectors.

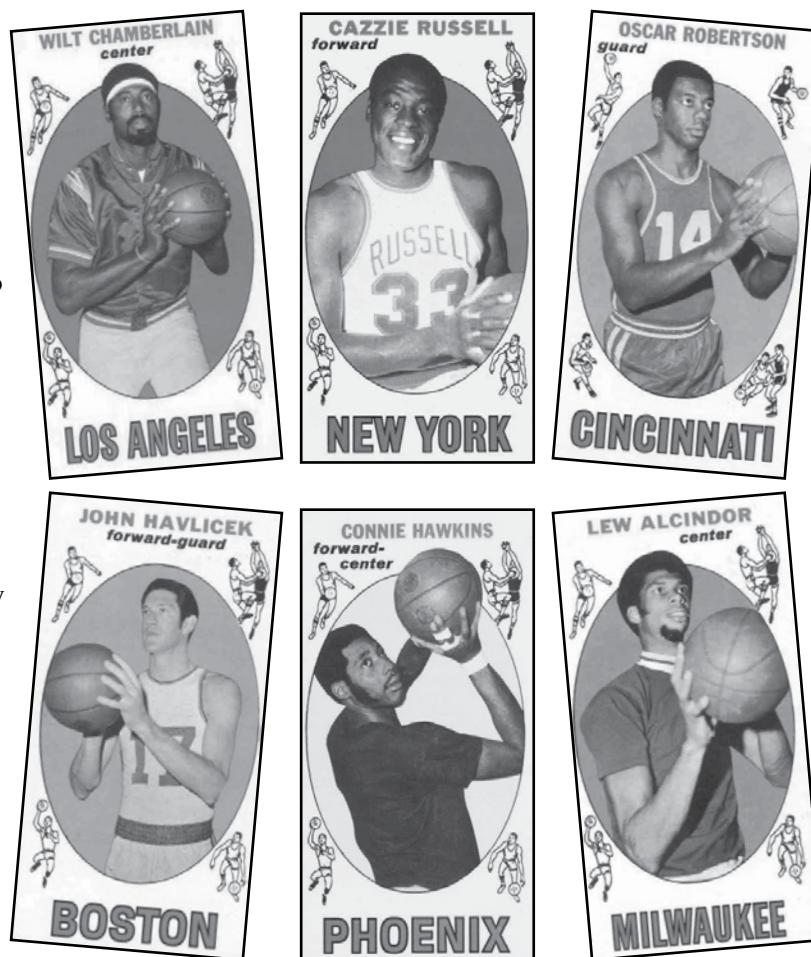
But the interesting idea part? Topps designers seemed to have postulated something to the effect of: "Let's see, basketball players are tall, so why not try a card set that's quite dramatically elongated in order to handsomely display their charges to best effect?"

Behold, the elegant yet quirky 1969-70 Topps Basketball set, with its curious yet apropos 2 1/2-by-4 3/4-inch dimensions and its stunning list of rookies, nice collectible size that shouldn't be that daunting to collectors (a mere 99 cards) and a checklist card that's so difficult to find in high grades that it still gives dealers headaches.

And the quirky part, aside from the size, is that there seemed to be some odd karma going on with the uniform of the day, which is to say that our imposing galaxy of NBA superheroes often found themselves attired in garb that would have better suited to the local Police Athletic League.

There's a prevailing view on just why the haberdashery took such an odd turn, but it has to be presented here as just that, a prevailing view, rather than hard fact. Hobby lore and legend says that because of odd language in the players association contract, the players wouldn't get paid for the usage of their likeness on the cards if the NBA team name appeared on their uniforms. Had that occurred, the royalties would have gone to the teams, so an equally odd solution had to be proffered, and it turned out to be the same one I used 30 years ago when I attended my 10th high school reunion and the zipper broke on my brand-new pants the first 30 minutes after I arrived: I wore my pants backwards.

If that sounds awkward, so be it, but it was effective enough for me and a whole generation of NBA stars. Thus there are spectacular, important cards of some of the



biggest names in the game's history, showing up in stylistic posed-action shots in warm-up garb and shooting shirts, looking impressive indeed, but just a tad peculiar, even for the youth of America, historically indifferent to minutiae in most settings, but eagle-eyed in matters involving their heroes.

"I was 10 years old, and I was really excited about having a basketball set," said Jeff Fritsch of Larry Fritsch Cards, who knows a thing or two about sports card, what with the pile of 60 million or so in the company inventory. "And we noticed the uniforms; we used to joke about it."

Of course, some of the jarring quality of the finagling by Topps is lessened a bit by a number of cards where city names appear, like Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Detroit, most frequently. But there's no getting around the fact that All-Star guard Gail Goodrich looks funny wearing the same shirt that I wore for five straight years on the beach in Jamaica, or the New York Knicks as a unit seemed particularly bedeviled by those turned-around shirts, all the way to the rookie card of Rhodes Scholar, NBA Hall of Famer, former senator and near-miss presidential candidate Bill Bradley.

The defending champion Celtics, with Bill Russell not included in the issue, don't fare that well, with players pictured in either solid green or white jerseys that would otherwise seem relentlessly generic, save

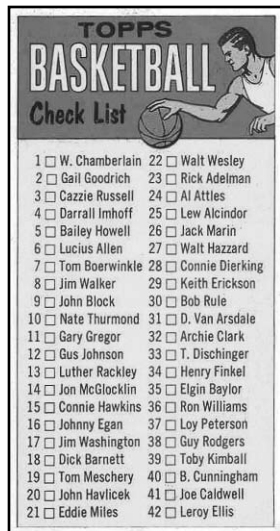
for the color identification. The Lakers, with Wilt as the No. 1 card in the set, end up a little better off by virtue of having The Stilt and Elgin Baylor in warm-up duds, and Jerry West in one of those closely cropped portraits that make up about 25 percent of the issue, but seemingly defeat the purpose of having the elongated cards in the first place.

Maybe, just maybe, the idea of the elongated set came from the most important card in the set, the Lew Alcindor rookie card that may have actually been the driving force for the leap back into the basketball card business. "It was his rookie season, but Topps would typically wait until the second year for a rookie card," Fritsch noted about an iconic basketball card that could be called a pre-rookie.

The hoopla surrounding the arrival of the two-time NCAA Player of the Year to the NBA is hard to overstate. Alcindor had already prompted college rules tinkering as

Classic rookies make up more than half the set, but why are there so many players with their jerseys on backwards ... and what's up with the checklist?

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the dunk was banned from college ball after his junior season; you could suggest the rules change was just a coincidence, just as the rotation of the earth and the arrival of the sun every morning may be a coincidence.

That said, Alcindor's rookie card is difficult and expensive in highest grades, but it still probably only sucks up about a third of the cost of the very affordable issue. And it's affordable despite the fact that slightly more than half of the set is made up of guys making their cardboard debuts. "It's a popular set, loaded with rookies, just like 1961 Fleer and 1957 Topps," said noted basketball card expert Steve Taft (stevetaft.beckett.com). "It's

always in demand in the highest grades and it seems like a lot of people are putting high-grade sets together."

Taft points out that when the issue came out there certainly weren't any sleeves or plastic sheets to help protect what would have been a condition-sensitive issue if only because of the odd dimensions. "You've got to do a little work to get a high-grade set, but I'm amazed that you can get a set in PSA 8s and not have to pay all that much," Taft continued.

In fact, he's convinced that PSA 8s aren't really getting all the respect (meaning dough) that they deserve. There are exceptions, of course, and the mystical card No. 99, the famous checklist card, would be a good starting point for that discussion.

That card, thought to have been planted in a lower corner on a 99-card sheet that yielded the entire set, winds up attaining a degree of difficulty that seems to even surpass the traditional checklist/rubber band dilemma of standard hobby lore. "The checklist is so difficult. I don't know how it could have been a short print, but it seems like one," Taft said, adding that when he's offered complete sets or looks at other offered at auctions, he typically finds the checklist card at least a grade or two below the rest of the offering.

That thorny checklist contributes to the idea that 1969-70 is not as easy to put together as the next Topps set the following season, when they tried the same pre-rookie ploy by including a card of another collegiate marvel, Pistol Pete Maravich. "I think the 1969-70 set is much tougher than 1970-71," said Fritsch. "I don't think they printed a lot of them in 1969," he continued.

And he should know, since even as a pre-teen he would help his pioneering card dealer dad, Larry Fritsch, as they opened packs and put together card sets at the kitchen table. A 99-card issue would be child's play for a company that would routinely assemble complete sets from all four major sports at a time before anybody thought of the factory set. Unfortunately, they forgot to set aside a handful of those unopened packs for posterity, a maneuver his dad was a bit better about when it came to his first love: baseball.

"We sold a lot of sets, but I don't we have any unopened packs left," Fritsch explained. Neither does eBay, as a quick search of that grand behemoth revealed, but no doubt the per-pack price would be substantial, given the opportunity for snagging rookie cards (see adjacent chart).

Got Rookies? Yep! Lots of 'em

If you're only going to produce a card set every 10 years or so, finding rookie cards isn't so difficult. How's this for a Naismith-like All-Star Team:

Cazzie Russell
Nate Thurmond
Gus Johnson
Connie Hawkins
John Havlicek
Lew Alcindor
Billy Cunningham
Bill Bradley
Jerry Lucas

Dave Bing
Wes Unseld
Willis Reed
Elvin Hayes
Earl Monroe
Happy Hairston
Chet Walker
Walt Frazier
Paul Silas

And while the Alcindor would seem to be the logical choice for this aging writer as a favorite card – my sister was an undergrad with him at UCLA and even had a science class with the big fella – my actual nod goes to another rookie card, this time of arguably the greatest schoolyard player in modern basketball history. I had read volumes about Lew Alcindor at Power Memorial High School in New York City

before he even played his first varsity game at UCLA, but I had heard nearly as much in off-court chatter and legend about Connie Hawkins.

The Brooklyn-born Hawkins was as big to us as teenagers as anybody playing in the NBA, what with the stories we heard about his New York City playground exploits. Topps tapped the great ABA star for his first NBA card, one that nicely encapsulates everything cool about the whole set: a rookie card of a legendary figure, wearing a T-shirt more suitable for Rucker Park in Harlem than for the Phoenix Suns, nicely presented in a campy, over-the-shoulder pose that hardly does justice to the pre-Dr. J maneuvers

that made him such a revered name.

Imagine, all that in a really tall basketball card for a mere 50 bucks or so, perhaps 1/10th the cost of Kareem's rookie. I'm sold. ♦

Photo credits: *The Virtual Card Collection by Dan Austin* (www.vintagecardtraders.org)



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