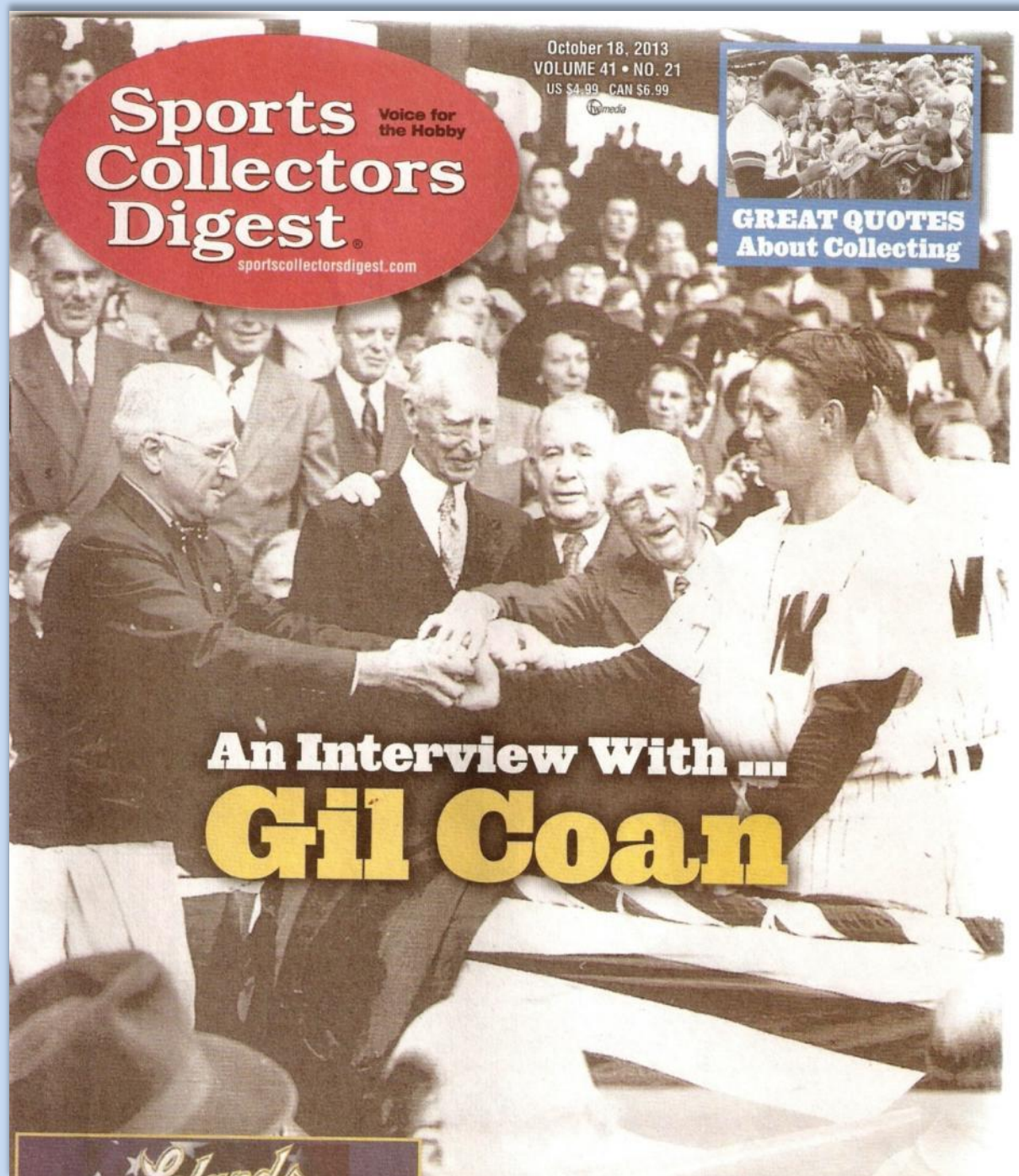


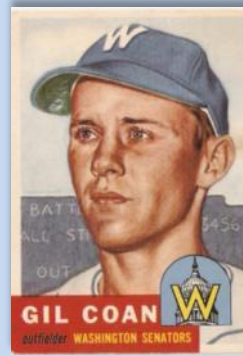
# Gil Coan, still using his arm... to feed the cattle

The 1945 Minor League Player of the Year had a 10-year  
career mostly with the Senators





By  
George Vrechek



In a prior *SCD*, I had whimsically suggested that the oldest living major leaguers convene to play a super-seniors baseball game. I also thought it would be great to talk to some of the players I selected. I started by following a thread about the post-baseball career of outfielder Gil Coan (90). Coan played for the Senators between 1946 and 1953. He finished by playing with the Orioles, White Sox, and Giants in 1954, 1955, and 1956. In his playing days, he was 6', 180 pounds, batted left, and threw right; he was frequently described as a "promising fleet-footed" outfielder.

### Coan's cards

Coan had several baseball cards, and with his longevity, it isn't hard to find an autographed card. His signature remains remarkably clear and consistent over the years. There were 501 eBay listings for cards, photos, or other Coan memorabilia when I last checked. His rookie card is a 1949 Bowman valued at \$20 in *SCD*'s price guide. He was one of only 25 prominent players depicted in the 1949 M&P set. As a promising player, he was included in every subsequent Bowman set, and he usually appeared in an early series. Consequently, his cards are not difficult to find. Card backs usually mention his outstanding minor league career or his back to back .303 seasons with Washington. He had two Topps cards: 1952 and 1953, with his #291 5<sup>th</sup> series 1952 card the more expensive at \$65.

He has a few cards in difficult sets which command high prices even as commons. Coan's Esskay Orioles cards in 1954 and 1955 are priced at \$3,750 each, and his 1952 Red Man Tobacco card is \$100. The earliest known safety set of (perhaps) 21 Senators is the 1948-50 Safe-T-Card set and includes a Gil Coan card valued at \$125.

*Gil and Dovie Coan have been married 71 years. (From Gil Coan 2010)*



### Interviewing Gil Coan

His good-looking, youthful face on my 1953 Topps card was firmly in my mind when I followed a lead that he had owned Brevard Insurance Agency in Brevard, North Carolina. I called the agency. Gil Coan was long retired, but his son Gil Coan Jr. and his grandsons still ran the agency, and they were kind to ask Gil Sr. to call me. Coan has lived in North Carolina for all of his 90 years and his speech reflects his region. He has a way of slowly pronouncing his words, accenting each syllable, and painting a colorful story that captures your interest. He could be talking about going out to the mailbox, and it would sound interesting.

## **Early years**

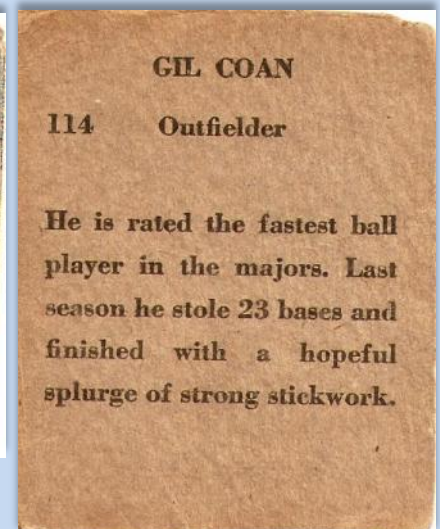
Coan was born in Monroe, North Carolina, 25 miles from Charlotte, on May 18, 1922, although all his baseball cards list his birth year as 1924. He said he didn't recall why his birth date got out of kilter at the very outset, but that when he applied for his pension from major league baseball, his birth record was corrected to 1922. Due to an infection when Coan was 10, he lost most of his left thumb, a condition he described as a "definite liability catching a baseball." He tried a prosthetic, but it never helped. Coan's left thumb is never shown on any of his baseball cards.

Coan's dad, like many people, ran into financial difficulties during the Depression. However, his dad was a WWI veteran and received \$700 as a "pension" which helped the family move to a farm outside Monroe. In 1933 the family moved again a few miles to Mineral Springs where Coan's dad ran a gas station and grocery store. Coan played baseball, football, and basketball at Mineral Springs High School. In 1940 he went to Brevard College in far western North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains, but left after a year and worked at a cigarette paper mill for Ecusta Paper Corp. near Brevard for 40 cents an hour. Due to his missing thumb, he was classified as 4-F for military purposes. Ecusta sponsored the Ecusta Papermakers team in the highly-competitive Western North Carolina Industrial League, and Coan played with many former pro players also employed at the mill. The quality of ball was similar to today's Class A minor league teams, according to Coan. He was up to \$1.87 an hour when he left in March 1944 to play professional baseball.

## **Minor league sensation**

He began his career with a bang in 1944 signing with the Senators and starting with Kingsport (TN) of the Appalachian League where he made \$275 per month. He quickly moved up to the Chattanooga Lookouts of the Southern Association. He hit .354 in 1944 and .372 in 1945 with 37 stolen bases, when he was named the Minor League Player of the Year by *The Sporting News*. His lifetime batting average for the four seasons he eventually played in the minors wound up being .339; his slugging percentage was .550.

His speed and hitting earned him a quick promotion to the Senators to start the 1946 season with a salary of \$4,500 plus a \$500 bonus. That first season though he hit just .209 in 134 at bats. In the spring of 1947 he had an appendectomy and Clark Griffith thought it best that "the fleet footed outfielder" return to the Chattanooga Lockouts "where he could hit his stride much faster than playing part-time for the Senators," according to newspapers at the time. He hit .340 and had 22 homers in 585 at bats with the Lookouts and was back with the Senators for an 11-game stint in late 1947 setting a MLB record hitting .500 in his 42 at bats. On one glorious day at Fenway Park (September 20, 1947), he went 5 for 5 with a double and a triple. Coan recalled, "It was one of those streaks where you just stick out your bat and the hits seemed to fall in. Sometimes in baseball, when you are on a streak, the ball looks as big as a softball. Other players have mentioned the same thing. At other times, when your timing is off, it can look like a golf ball."



### **Back to the Senators**

He was back with the Senators for good in 1948. Coan's 1949 Bowman card mentions he had trouble with blistered feet in 1948. His 1949 M&P card says that he "is rated the fastest ball player in the majors." He played with the Senators for 8 years. He wore 9 different uniform numbers over his career, but #2 and #3 with the Senators were his most common. He played all three outfield positions. He was used as a pinch runner and hit more triples than home runs, once tying a record by hitting two triples in one inning.

### **Opening Day 1949 and Connie Mack**

Coan has a picture of himself on Opening Day of the 1949 season handing a ball to President Truman. Flanking Coan and Truman in the picture were A's owner and manager Connie Mack, U.S. Vice President Alben Barkley, and Senators president Clark Griffith. Coan led off and went 3 for 5 that day. Later that season he found himself on the same train as the 86-year old Connie Mack. Mack asked Coan to join him for dinner and Coan recalled having the honor of an hour-long conversation with the very cordial Connie Mack, who began his long baseball career playing for Washington in 1886.

*Opening Day 1949, Gil Coan of the Senators hands a ball to President Harry Truman. To the right of Truman are Connie Mack, VP Alben Barkley, and Clark Griffith. (From Gil Coan)*



Mrs TRUMAN, PRES TRUMAN, Connie MACK ALBON BARKLEY,  
Clark Griffith, Hal Coan

## A Griffith and Veeck promotion

In listing a PSA9 1951 Bowman of Coan recently, Goodwin & Co. included the following description of a 1946 event: "A confident rookie, Coan challenged five-time AL stolen base champion George Case to a foot race at Griffith Stadium prior to a game. While Case bested Coan by a step, the promotion was wildly successful and endeared Coan to the Washington fans. Speaking of the race years later, Case recalled, 'It pulled a lot of people into the ball park, including President Eisenhower.'" In the month prior to the 100-yard race, it was billed as a race

to determine “the fastest man in major league baseball.” The Dodgers and Reds added to the pre-event publicity by claiming they had speedier runners than either Case or Coan.

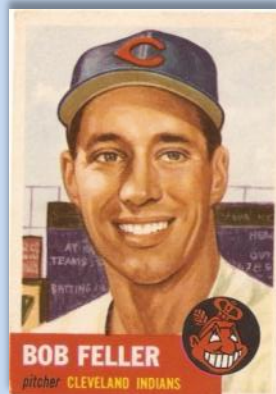
*Exhibit card of George Case, who led the A.L. in stolen bases 6 times*

When I asked about the race, Coan had a more accurate description of the events. “I did not challenge (former Senator teammate and track athlete) George Case. Clark Griffith (president of the Senators) and Bill Veeck (president of the Indians) arranged the race. Case and I received \$500 each. This was part of a two-day series in Washington with Cleveland. Our race was before the second game. Before the first game, the Army set up a crude machine with Bob Feller throwing six pitches to check the velocity of his fast ball. Five pitches were strikes that averaged 98 mph. The sixth pitch hit the machine made primarily of wood and destroyed the machine. All games filled Griffith Stadium, probably the only series sellout of Griffith Stadium, unless it happened during the 1933 World Series.”



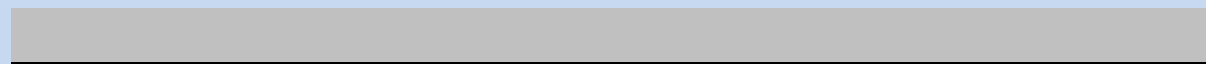
*After the race Coan and Case posed with General Dwight Eisenhower. (From Gil Coan)*

Feller negotiated \$700 for his efforts. Coan’s \$500 for just 11 seconds of running was an even better deal, but not as good a deal as the return Griffith got on his money.



Getting people in the park wasn’t easy. Washington averaged around 10,000 per game in the years Coan played there, and even worse before. *Baseball Almanac* shows 30,051 came out to see Feller’s exhibition before the August 20, 1946, game which he pitched and lost, and 24,123 came to see the Case/Coan race on Wednesday, August 21<sup>st</sup>. Even when the Senators made the World Series in 1933, their highest series attendance was 28,454. The two Cleveland games with the Feller and Case/Coan promotions contributed to the Senators drawing 1,027,000 fans in 1946, the only year they ever exceeded a million.

Bill Veeck’s involvement adds to the lore of the Case/Coan race. Later in 1946, Veeck brought in Jesse Owens to challenge Case between games of a doubleheader in Cleveland. Owens, winner of four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics, dressed in a Cleveland uniform and won by at least a yard. Owens’ appearance in a Cleveland Indians uniform was a year prior to Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier. George Case returned to the Senators for 36 games the next year, hit .150, and retired.



### **Back to back .303 seasons**

Coan recalled, “They thought I was going to be really something when I got to the majors.” His record in the minors was phenomenal, but many players were still in service in 1944 and 1945. In his estimation he was just a regular ball player and never became the star that some had predicted. He did have back-to-back 1950 and 1951 seasons for the Senators when he hit .303. He finished 23<sup>rd</sup> in the AL MVP voting for 1951.

He hit two three-run homers in one game, inside the park home runs, numerous triples, and continued stealing bases. However, injuries had a significant impact on his playing time and his averages in other years. Coan mentioned fractures of the skull ('50), leg, ('52), and arm ('53). Coan recalled sliding into Owen Friend's knee in 1950 trying to break up a double play and fracturing his skull. He came back six weeks later, and in his first game back his head starting swelling again. Several times after spring training in Florida, he came away with a leg infection. Also his missing thumb made it difficult to firmly grasp a caught ball.

### **Winding up his MLB career**

In February 1954 he was traded to Baltimore for Roy Sievers. Sievers turned out to be a home run-hitting star for Washington. Baltimore (the hapless St. Louis Browns before 1954) was losing even more games than the Senators in those years. Coan hit .279 in 94 games for the (54-100) Orioles in 1954, but was traded to the White Sox for the waiver price in mid-1955. He was finally on a winning team, but got in only 17 games with the Sox before being traded to the New York Giants in August 1955 for extraordinary pinch hitter Ron Northey. Coan played in four games for the Giants in April 1956 with one at bat. Coan finished his major league career with a lifetime batting average of .254, although he never hit close to .254 in any year. His yearly averages were always significantly higher or lower than .254.



### **Racing a racehorse**

He joined the Giants' top minor league club, the Minneapolis Millers, for the balance of the 1956 season hitting .286 with 12 homers and 140 hits in 489 at bats. The club was managed by Eddie Stanky and included numerous former and future major leaguers. They played in the brand new Metropolitan Stadium. On August 27, 1956, Coan participated in one last promotion. It was Millers Appreciation Night and 10,640 fans filled the park. Teammate Don Grate set a record by throwing a baseball 445 feet. That same night the still “fleet-footed” Coan raced a horse from the right field wall to home plate. Coan was given a head start on the horse and managed to win the race remembering, “They got this horse from some local race track, the starting gun went off, the horse was pounding the ground behind him, and gaining on me.” For his efforts he received a \$25 check from the Minneapolis Fire Department.

The Tigers claimed him on waivers after the season. New Tigers' GM John McHale was only 8 months older than Coan. They couldn't reach an agreement on salary, and Coan voluntarily retired before the 1957 season to devote full time to his insurance agency business.

### **Salary and pension**

His starting baseball salary of \$275 a month was much better than his paper mill days, but like most ball players he needed to work in the off-season to make ends meet. He said his salary in

1951 for the second season of back to back .303 averages was \$14,500. He instantly recalled that he had played for 9 years and 30 days which qualified him for a good major league pension based on 10 years on an active major league baseball roster. He was among those players first covered by a pension established in 1947. He said the monthly pension has gone up quite nicely from maybe \$30,000 per year 20 years ago. I estimated that his current annual pension is almost as much as he made in his entire baseball career.

### The hazards of old-timers games

He has participated in old-timers games with Washington, Baltimore, and Chattanooga. He was on the first “modern-era” Baltimore Orioles team in 1954 and is included in Oriole reunions and history. I asked, if he was up for one more game and read him the list of players that I had picked to start for my American League Fantasy Super Senior All Stars. The squad includes former Washington teammates Connie Marrero (101), Sam Mele (91), Ed Fitz Gerald (88), Dick Starr (92), Eddie Robinson (92), and Bob Kuzava (89). He said that “sounded like a pretty good team that could contend,” but that he would have trouble playing the outfield again. He tore his rotator cuff in an old-timers game in Chattanooga 20+ years ago. A ball came to him in center field, he went to throw it back to the infield, and it went about 20 feet when his rotator cuff gave out.



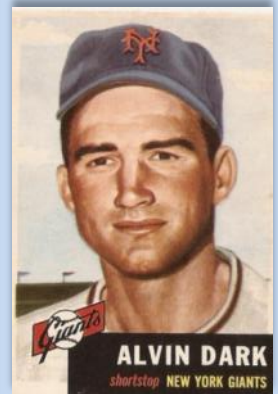
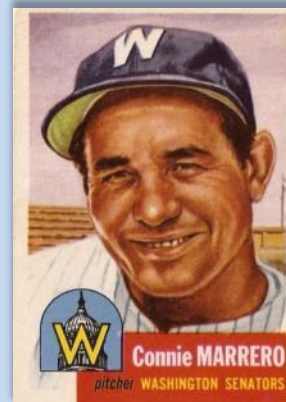
### Grandson Jay Coan

Coan’s grandson Jay now manages the insurance agency and he has been a card collector. He describes his grandfather as, “sharp as a tack.” Jay confirmed that Gil feeds cattle every day, and that he is active in the First Methodist Church as well as Brevard College. Jay described when his grandfather, then 73 years-old, attended a Brevard College baseball practice in 1995. “He was just watching batting practice and started to jaw a bit with some of the players. The players encouraged him to take a few swings. He said he wouldn’t do it, but they kept after him and said things like he probably couldn’t hit anymore until finally he stepped into the batter’s box. With a smooth swing he absolutely crushed the ball. His swing was so smooth and he was so nonchalant about it. You could tell from the sound that he hammered the ball, and the players just dropped their jaws.”

### Teammates

Coan kept in touch with former Giants teammate Al Dark who was on my National League squad. Coan added, “When I knew Al, he was with the Giants and lived in Easley, SC. We’d play golf together.” They both started MLB in 1946 and are the same age. Dark played until 1960. Coan called Al Dark a real star, unlike himself. Dark lives in the San Francisco area.

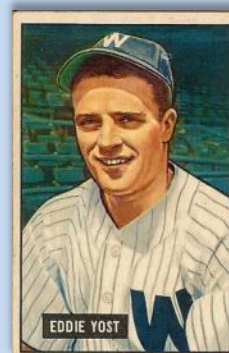
Coan was also aware that former teammate pitcher Connie Marrero (101) was still alive and had elected to go back to Cuba rather than stay in the US. Coan sent





me a 1951 publicity photo staged by a New York sports writer of him waking up Marrero at their hotel, so that he could pitch against the Yankees that day.

*Marrero (born 4-25-1911) is the oldest living former major leaguer. (Photo and notations from Gil Coan)*

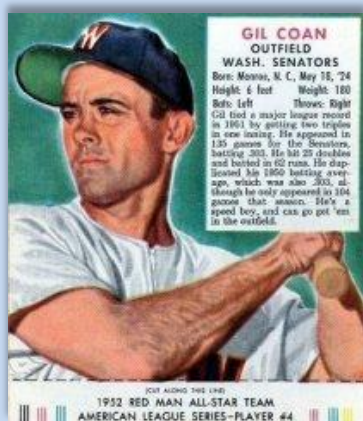


He would have liked to have played one more game with former Senator third baseman Ed Yost who died in October 2012. Coan and Yost were roommates for eight years with the Senators. Yost played from 1944 to 1962. Coincidentally, he also had a lifetime batting average of .254, just like Coan's. In 1951 when Coan led all Senators in votes for the MVP, the next closest Senator was Ed Yost.

### Hobby involvement

"I have almost no memory of baseball cards except Topps," Coan said. "I remember Hillerich and Bradsby (Louisville Sluggers) gave me a set of golf clubs for signing with them in 1946. Today I can order these bats for \$70 each."

He has attended several card shows, but none since a Baltimore show a few years ago featuring former Senators who had played at Griffith Stadium. Coan mentioned, "Last year I signed a contract with the Major Leaguer Baseball Players Alumni Association for signing 400 cards for \$1,500. This was paid, but they promised to give me 50 cards and Topps has not." In 2011 Topps created 65 replica 1952 cards of living major leaguers, found the players involved, and had each of them sign cards in the presence of a representative. Coan has been agreeable to signing cards and photos sent him as long as the requests are not onerous.



Coan commented on his recent experience involving his 1952 Red Man Tobacco card. "I called and then wrote to the company president last year to try to get some of those cards. He was real nice, told me he had his people search for evidence of these cards. They have never found anything, but he sent me a case of Red Man Chewing tobacco. However, I quit chewing many years ago."

A PSA9 1951 Bowman Gil Coan card reportedly sold for \$10,453 in 2011. However, if you wanted a beat up 1951 Bowman of Coan, you could have opted to "buy it now" on eBay for \$1.89. This disparity reflects a severe penalty, if you actually handled Coan's old cards.

### Insurance and farming

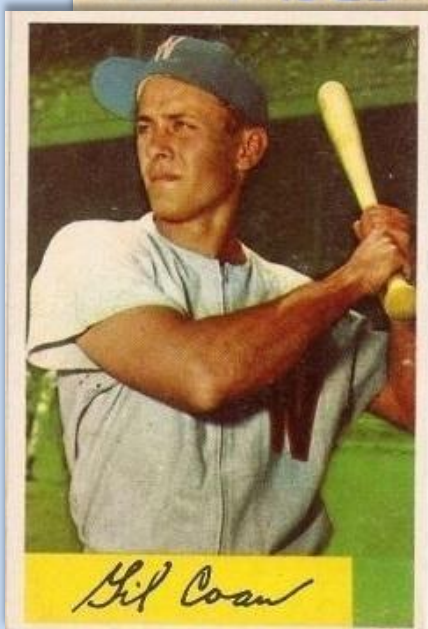
After retiring from baseball at age 34, Coan bought a one-half interest in Brevard Insurance Agency in Brevard, North Carolina. He bought the remaining one-half interest in 1962 and continued to be active as an insurance agent until his retirement at age 65. He also started buying farm property in 1961, and bought his current farm of 158 acres in 1974. His son now owns the farm, but Gil Sr. stops by to feed the cattle and keep an eye on things. The baseball field at Brevard College is named Gil Coan Field. Gil and Dovie, his wife of 71 years, live three miles from Brevard (pop. 7,600) overlooking Glen Cannon Country Club.

Coan told me, "I think I was a part of baseball history that fans appreciated more than any other. Baseball gave me an entrée that would have never been available otherwise." Talking to Mr. Gil Coan was a pleasure.

*Gil Coan speaking at Brevard College in 2009  
(From Gil Coan)*

*This article appeared in the October 18, 2013, SCD.  
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Digest and can be contacted at [vrechek@ameritech.net](mailto:vrechek@ameritech.net)*

*Coan was in every Bowman set from 1949 to 1955.*





Coan appeared on Topps cards in 1952 and 1953, the 1952 Red Man Tobacco set and miscellaneous other issues.



**TOPPS**  
**133**

**GILBERT FITZGERALD COAN**  
Home: Brevard, N. C.  
Born: May 18, 1924, Monroe, N. C.  
Ht. - 6' — Wt. - 180  
Bats: Left — Throws: Right

Gil's Batting Average took a severe drop in '52. He had 293 marks in both '50 and '51 for the Senators. After breaking in with Kingsport in '44, Gil had a terrific season with Chattanooga in '45 when he led the Southern Association in Batting (.472), Homers (16), Triples (28), Doubles (49) and Hits (201). He was with the Senators in '46 and after hitting .340 with Chattanooga again in '47, Gil came back to Washington to stay.

BATTING RECORD		
	PAST YR.	LIFE
GAMES	307	665
AT BAT	322	2283
RUNS	50	307
HITS	68	538
DOUBLES	11	79
TRIPLES	6	39
HOMERS	5	34
R. B. I.	20	229
BAT. AVE.	.205	250

**DUGOUT QUIZ**

Which player holds the record for hitting safely in consecutive games?  
1941

**FIELDING RECORD**

	PAST YR.	LIFE
PUTOUTS	185	1429
ASSISTS	4	45
ERRORS	5	43
FIELD AVE.	.984	.972

Ans.: Joe Judge, 58 straight

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