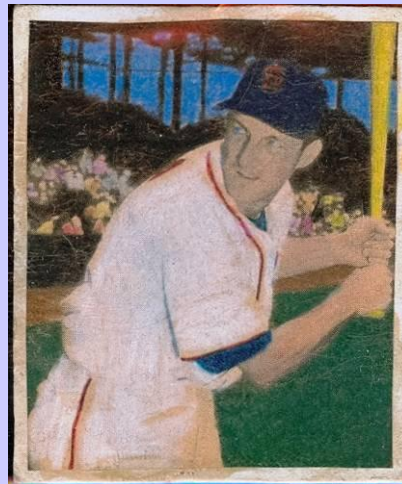


# Mysterious 1956? Baseball and Football Cards



By  
George Vrechek



*Stan Musial*



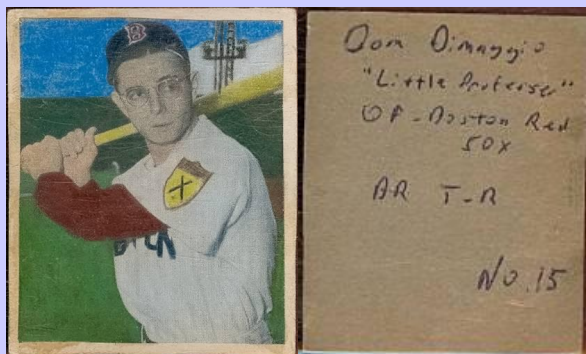
*Jim Parker, Ohio State*

## Collector acquires unique mock-ups and the investigation begins, Sy Berger and Richard Gelman take a look

Would anyone out there like to trade 1956 Bowman football cards? There is probably only one person in the world who is capable of responding to such an offer. But wait; you say there is no such thing as 1956 Bowman football cards. You might be right, but you need to talk to Landon Sims.

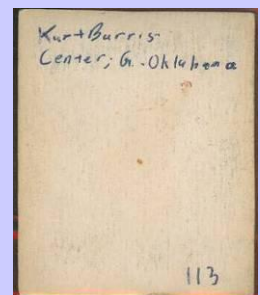
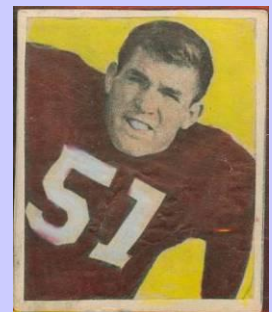
### Small wooden box find

Sims started collecting cards as a kid in the 1980s, remembering the 1986 Topps set, wrestling cards, and other such products of the prolific card issue era. He has gradually become enthused about older cards. A flea market show near his hometown of Hot Springs, Arkansas, has been a source for occasional



collecting finds. At one such recent show a dealer had a small wooden box of some new items. The box included cards from the proverbial "estate." The contents substantiated that this was indeed from someone who had been active as a collector years ago. There were 1955 Topps Doubleheaders in

beautiful shape. There were also some unknown baseball and football cards that



looked like they had been almost home-made, but by a professional artist. They were the size of the 1950 Bowmans and looked similar to the Bowmans in style and appearance. The blank cardboard backs had the hand-written names of the players, positions, and teams. The generally poor handwriting was consistent and accurate enough to not look like it was written by a young collector.

### The catalog page

Also in the box was a catalog page dated September 1957 with the heading of card dealer Sam Rosen of New York City, stepfather of early Topps product development director Woody Gelman (1915-1978). I later learned that Gelman had facilitated Rosen getting into the business, a convenience to Topps in that they could forward the many time-consuming collector requests they received for missing card numbers to Rosen. Rosen would buy the cards he needed from Topps. The catalog page contained hand-written numbers with 128 times two equaling 2.56, 1.76 and 1.32 added together to get 3.08, and then all numbers added again of 1.28, 1.28, 1.32, and 1.76 to total 5.64 - a whopping \$5.64 in payment. Someone had drawn a circle around the descriptions of the 1957 football cards for sale at \$1.76 for the first series of 88 cards and \$1.32 for the second series of 66 cards. The numbers 1.28 and 1.28 are a little more mysterious. They could stand for 128 Bowman football cards from 1954 at 2 cents each, or (in Landon Sims's opinion) they could stand for 128 of his mysterious football cards at 2 cents apiece. Topps

SAM ROSEN  
110 West 34th Street, New York 1, N.Y.

September 1957

Dear Collector:

The following is a detail list of the various cards I have for sale. Although there is a fairly good assortment of all types, I do not have them in sets. Sets are complete where there is a price marked for set.

You may order complete sets or single cards to complete any set listed. All prices are subject to change without notice. Orders are sent postage prepaid.

Am interested in buying your duplicate cards. Kindly write for my prices and advise in detail name of producer, type and quantity. Can use up to 10 cards of one number. Cards must be in AI condition.

Do not send any cards until I advise you.

---

SPORT CARDS

			Cards in Set	Set	Single
TOPPS	1951	Baseball (red backs)	52	\$1.00	2¢
	1951	" (blue backs)	52	1.50	3¢
	1952	" #1 to 130	401	3.80	3¢
	1952	" #131 to 190 (white backs)		3.00	5¢
		" #191 to 310		3.60	3¢
	1953	" #311 to 407			5¢
	1954	"	274		3¢
	1954	"	250		2¢
	1956	"	208		2¢
	1957	"	340		2¢
BOWMAN	1948	Baseball	48		5¢
	1949	"	240		5¢
	1950	"	252		5¢
	1951	"	324		3¢
	1952	"	252		3¢
	1953	" (colored)	164		3¢
	1953	" Black & White	64		3¢
	1954	"	224		3¢
	1955	"	320		2¢
	TOPPS	1955	Football	100	2.00
1956		"	120	2.40	2¢
1957		" (1st series)	88	1.76	2¢
1957		" (2nd series)	66	1.32	2¢
BOWMAN	1950	Football	144	7.20	5¢
	1951	"	144		3¢
	1952	" (small or large)	144		3¢
	1953	"	96		3¢
	1954	"	128		2¢
	1955	"	128		2¢
TOPPS	1955	Hockey	60	1.20	2¢
		Double Header	66	1.32	2¢
		Baseball team picture	176		5¢
		" Major League All Stars	5,64	11.28	5¢
				11.28	5¢

1955 Doubleheaders were also available for 2 cents each or \$1.32 for the set. Topps 1952 high numbers were rather pricey though at 5 cents each. No sense buying any of those ancient cards. The Rosen catalog states they didn't have sets of all cards and the 1954 Bowman football cards were not advertised as being a complete set. There was no mention of the miscellaneous football or baseball cards per se on the catalog sheet. Perhaps they priced the mystery cards at the same price as the other Bowman football cards – two cents each?

After some negotiations with the flea market seller, Landon passed on the Doubleheaders but bought the "miscellaneous" cards. Sims heard that a 1948 Bowman baseball set, a 1949 Bowman baseball set, a 1948-9 Leaf baseball set, and a 1948 Bowman near complete basketball set had also been in the estate but were no longer available.

### Mystery cards

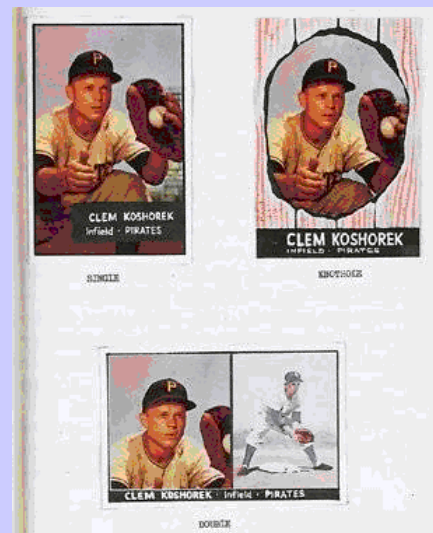
I'll let Landon describe the "miscellaneous" cards he bought: "The cards include 17 baseball cards (numbered to 18 with one number missing) and 130 football cards (most of them numbered on the reverse with numbers up to #174). The cards are all cut to 2 1/16 by 2 1/2 inches; the same size as the 1948-50 Bowman baseball cards. The cards are all hand painted over photographs on pieces of paper that have been glued to the card. The field background and jerseys are all drawn in with paint or a type of pencil or both. The artwork is stunning. These are all like miniature one-of-one hand-painted cards. The cards also have similar pictures to the early Bowman cards. At the time, I had no idea what they were other than hand painted cards from an early sports card dealer. After visiting Books a Million and thumbing through some old catalogs, I found that Bowman had issued proof cards. These were different than mine in that the proofs went through production and had different backgrounds and looked like '52s but were a little larger. I then went on a quest. Did Bowman have any other proofs that were hand painted? What did they look like? There were some early football cards that players received that were hand painted and given to the player. I knew that Bowman did proofs like these but what set were these?"



### Vrechek is on the case

At about this point, Landon got in touch with me to assist in the investigation sending me several cards for inspection. My first impressions were that the cards were colorized photo mock-ups for sets that were never issued and that the cards were created at Bowman over a brief time span and transferred to Topps upon the sale by Bowman. They were certainly well done and looked old enough to have been around with Eisenhower.

I remembered an article from a few years back featuring photos of baseball cards Bowman was considering for use in their 1956 set. There were three proto-type cards, featuring either Klem Koshorek of the Pirates or George Shuba of the Dodgers. One card style was similar to the 1953 color Bowmans, another looked like the later Hires Root Beer issue of 1958 using a knothole, and the third version was a card similar to the 1957 Topps football card design with two pictures of the player. REA Auctions sold three Koshorek cards in 2011 for \$10,440 according to their website. An interesting comment on the auction description was "Plans for the 1956 Bowman set were entirely unknown in the collecting world until 1983 when the two Bowman reports (market research reports containing the cards) were discovered in the personal files of Topps art director and hobby pioneer Woody Gelman, who had saved them as keepsakes of Bowman's final days."



### **Topps comes in like conquering heroes**

The football cards purchased by Sims looked they were prepared in the same manner as the baseball cards and none of them looked anything like the 1956 baseball mock-ups. I checked my baseball card history by referring to Dave Jamieson's wonderful *Mint Condition* book: "By 1956 Bowman had had enough. The escalating production cost and legal fees had squeezed its profit margins to new lows. Just as the 1956 baseball season was about to begin, the company agreed to transfer all of its gum- and card-making machinery and, more important, all of its contract rights with players to Topps in exchange for a modest \$200,000." Sy Berger of Topps recalled, "We went down like conquering heroes and took over the Bowman place." I also re-read my own previous 2009 *SCD* article dealing with the "card wars" of 1951 through 1955 and players appearing in products of either Topps and/or Bowman. The Topps website mentions the sale of Bowman to Topps was actually completed in January 1956.

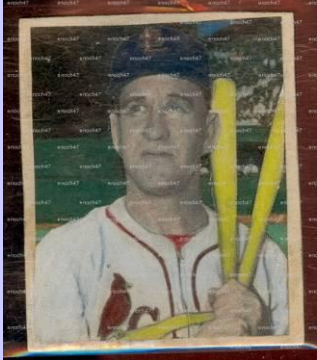
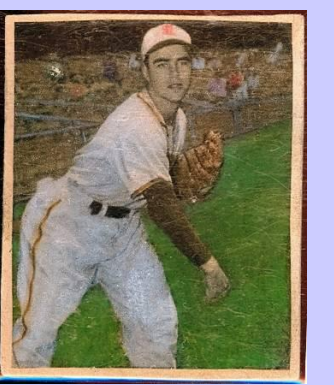
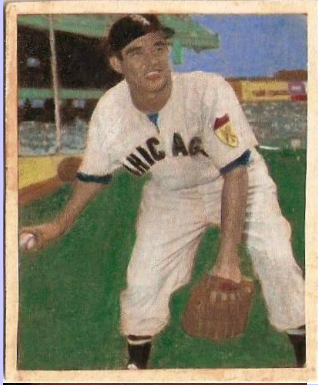
### **Baseball players and their teams**

I started with the 17 baseball cards to get an idea of when the cards were produced. The players pictured were as follows (card numbers and teams are based on the hand-written information on the back of the cards):

- #1 Warren Spahn, Milwaukee Braves
- #2 Jimmy Piersall, Boston Red Sox
- #3 Gil Hodges, Brooklyn Dodgers
- #4 Del Crandall, Milwaukee Braves
- #5 Ray Jablonski, Cincinnati Redlegs (pictured in a Cardinals uniform)
- #6 Duke Snider, Brooklyn Dodgers
- #7 Chico Carrasquel, Cleveland Indians (pictured in a White Sox uniform)
- #8 Stan Musial, St. Louis Cardinals
- #9 Nellie Fox, Chicago White Sox
- #10 Jimmy Hegan, Cleveland Indians
- #11 Ned Garver (no team indicated but pictured in a St. Louis Browns uniform)
- #12 Vinegar Bend Mizell, St Louis Cardinals
- #13 Enos Slaughter, New York Yankees (but with St. Louis Cardinals crossed out and pictured in a St. Louis uniform)
- #14 not included in the find, unknown
- #15 Dom DiMaggio, Boston Red Sox
- #16 Red Schoendienst, New York Giants (but pictured in a Cardinals uniform)
- #17 Marty Marion, St. Louis Browns
- #18 Al Rosen, Cleveland Indians

Typical of the 1950s, most of the star players stayed with the same team throughout most of their careers. Several of these players had been Bowman "exclusives." Fox and Piersall had only appeared on Bowman cards between 1952 and 1955. Carrasquel was only on Bowmans in 1953, 1954, and 1955. Slaughter and Schoendienst were Bowman exclusives in 1954 and 1955. Musial and Marion appeared through 1953 with Bowman only. Crandall was a Bowman exclusive in 1955. Hodges, Garver, DiMaggio, and Snider generally appeared with both companies during the "war years." On the other hand, Hegan, Rosen, and Spahn were missing from Bowman in 1954 and 1955 but continued with Topps. Mizell had only been on Topps, save a 1953 Bowman. Jablonski had only been on Topps cards.

*Spahn, Hodges, Schoendienst, and Fox  
Carrasquel, Piersall, Hegan and Garver,  
Crandall, Snider, Rosen, Mizell,  
Slaughter, Jablonski, Marion, and Musial*



## Observations about the players

Information I gleaned on the players pictured (courtesy of baseball-reference.com) included the following clues:

- Crandall and Spahn are in Milwaukee Braves uniforms. The Boston Braves didn't ask permission to move to Milwaukee until March 1953.
- Jablonski didn't make it to the majors with the Cardinals until April 14, 1953, and was traded to the Redlegs on December 4, 1954. He's in a Cardinals uniform but his card back has him as a Redleg. He was traded to the Cubs on November 15, 1956.
- Carrasquel was traded to the Indians October 25, 1955. He's in a White Sox uniform but the card back says Indians.
- Musial was never on a Topps card until 1958. He wasn't on a Bowman card either after 1953.
- Ned Garver was traded from the Browns to Detroit on August 14, 1952. He was traded to the A's December 5, 1956. He was hurt for most of 1956. His card back doesn't mention his team.
- Slaughter was traded from the Cards to the Yanks in April 1954. He went to the A's on May 11, 1955, but was back with the Yankees on August 25, 1956. He is in a Cardinals uniform, but the card has "Yankees" on the back.
- Dom DiMaggio only played in one final game in 1953.
- Schoendienst was traded from the Cards to the Giants on June 14, 1956. He came to the Braves June 15, 1957. He is in a Cardinals uniform but the back says Giants.
- Marty Marion was released November 24, 1953, after appearing in 3 games that year as the St. Louis Browns playing manager. From 1954 through 1956, he managed the White Sox and retired after the 1956 season.
- Flip Rosen's final game was September 30, 1956.
- No one in a Yankees uniform is among the 17. Mantle was exclusively with Bowman in 1954 and 1955 but wasn't with the group. Could he be card #14?

## When were the back descriptions written?

The cards were so professionally and consistently produced, that I started with the postulate they were assembled to create a set to be issued at one time rather than created over a number of years. Therefore I assumed the fronts of the cards were all prepared at the same time and that the backs of the cards were written at the same time, although not necessarily at the same time as the fronts. Looking just at the backs of the cards, I found that most of the team designations fit into a window that was only open from June 14, 1956 (Schoendienst's trade to the Giants) to November 15, 1956 (Jablonski's trade to the Cubs). If the backs were all described at the same time, all the players would have been properly listed as of the five month 1956 window other than Garver, Slaughter, DiMaggio, and Marion.

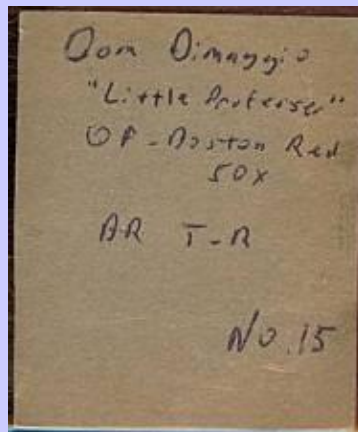
Garver was with the Tigers in 1956, hurt most of the year and not traded to the A's until December 1956. He is listed without a team designation. Although he was a member of the Tigers during the five month window, the writer could have just left the team name off due to his uncertain situation.

Slaughter is listed as a member of the Yankees but with Cardinals crossed out. He went from the Yankees to the A's in May 1955 but came back to the Yanks August 25, 1956. (The Yanks and A's shuttled players between themselves seemingly at will in those days.) Perhaps the writer first listed the Cardinals (as pictured) and then updated it to the Yankees after August 25, 1956?

### Three month window?

The above explanations would support a conclusion that the card backs were hand-written between August 25, 1956, and November 15, 1956, a three month window. The unexplained card backs are then Marion and Dom DiMaggio. Marion left the Browns in November 1953. He was still in baseball but managing the White Sox in the “three month window.” DiMaggio played his last game May 9, 1953, and quit baseball after being benched. I’ll stretch out with another assumption that the card creators decided to include these two retired players with the team shown on their uniforms as displayed including St. Louis rather than Baltimore. What they were doing in the set at all though is a good question. More importantly, if Bowman sold their business to Topps in January of 1956, what was Bowman doing writing on the backs of card mock-ups in late 1956? Maybe someone else wrote on the backs (like the Topps conquering heroes?), but the fronts of the cards must have been prepared before Bowman sold in January 1956?

*“Little Professor” Dom DiMaggio has a card in this mystery set even though he only appeared in one last game in 1953. The same image was used for his 1952 Red Man card.*



### Two teams of 9?

What kind of “set” was this anyway? Eighteen players could make up two teams. The 17 known players were pretty close to making up a team for each league, which seemed to me to be more than a coincidence. The missing card #14 needs to be able to play first for the American League and either pitchers Spahn or Mizell needed to move to the outfield for the Nationals to make up a nine-player team for each league. With Jablonski at third for the National Leaguers this didn’t look like any kind of All Star team. I detected a St. Louis flavor to the player selection. Seven of the 17 players were pictured in either Cardinals or Browns uniforms, 2 more each came from nearby Chicago and Milwaukee, and only 6 came from the rest of the league.

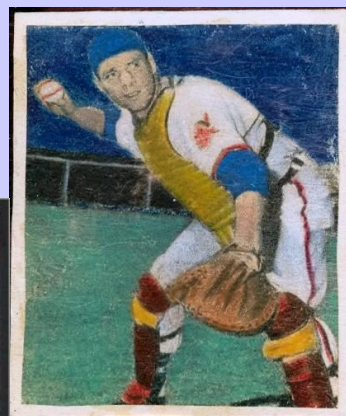
Bowman printed multiples of 18 of these smaller cards on a sheet in the past, although these cards had to be created on individual pieces of cardboard. Maybe they just grabbed 18 representative players for the mock-up of what was envisioned as a larger set. They started with their “exclusives,” added a few more players, and hoped that they could include Musial with the rest. Putting all of these wacky assumptions together, maybe this set was two teams of prominent players Bowman thought they still had under contract that would be sold in the St. Louis market

and the backs of the cards were written not by Bowman but by Topps people in late 1956. But maybe they weren't.

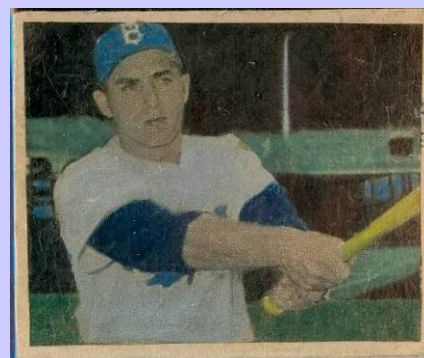
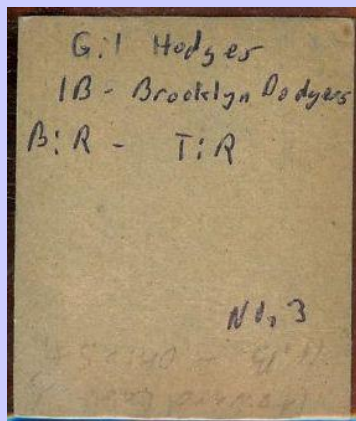
*Jim Hegan's image was from a 1949 team photo and used for his 1951 Bowman card and a 1952 Num Num card.*

### When were the card fronts created?

Given the differences between the team uniforms in the photos and the team designations on the card backs, it is logical to assume that the fronts of the cards were prepared sometime before the backs were written. You can't really use the uniforms pictured to date the production period for the fronts since they used old photos that ranged over several prior years. For example, you have Garver in a Browns uniform, but he was traded from the Browns to the Tigers in August 1952. Spahn and Crandall are in Milwaukee uniforms which weren't worn until 1953. Slaughter in a Cardinal uniform would have to come from before April 1954. Marion as a Brown couldn't have been later than 1953.



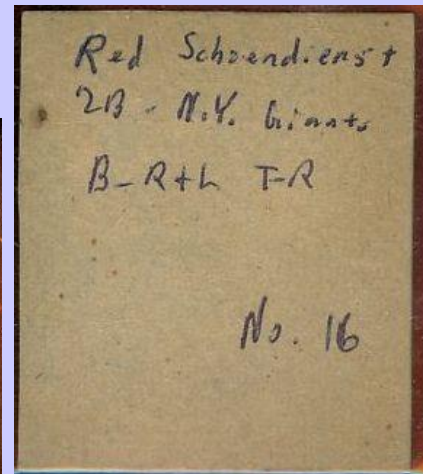
The images themselves are surprisingly unique. While Topps and Bowman would reuse photos for years, few of the mystery set photos appeared in other sets. The Piersall image is particularly noticeable and interesting. The exceptions I found to the photo uniqueness were images of Hegan and DiMaggio. Hegan is apparently from a 1949 team photo that was used for his 1951 Bowman card and also Num Num cards from 1952. Dom DiMaggio was cropped and used for the 1952 Redman tobacco issue. None of the images had ever been used by Topps based on my review. The card images came from photos created over many years spanning at least 1949 through 1953. If you assume that the fronts of the cards were prepared at about the same time, the fronts of the cards had to have been prepared sometime after 1953, but it doesn't make much sense that it was after January 1956 when Bowman sold the business. I'll go way out on a limb for a moment and guess that the card fronts were prepared shortly after the 1953 season. You could also argue that the cards were prepared haphazardly over a period stretching from 1952 to 1955.



*Gil Hodges was one of only two New York players in the "set."*

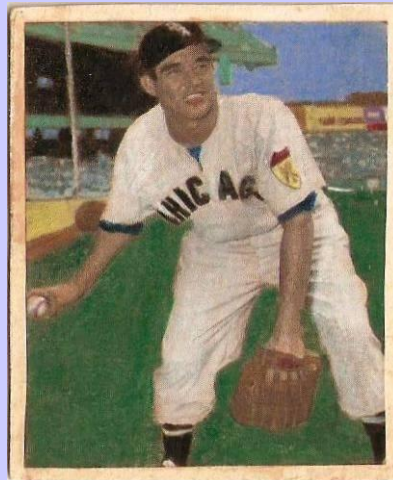
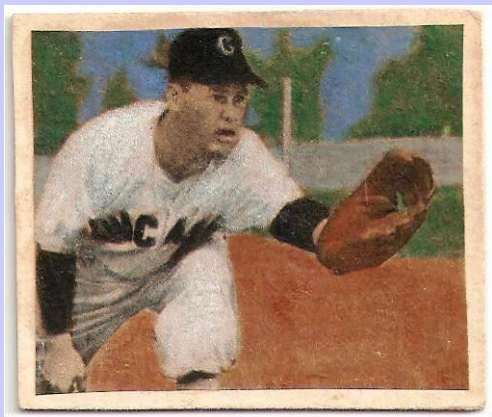


*The back of Schoendienst's card lists him as a New York Giant. He was traded from the Cards to the Giants in August 1956.*

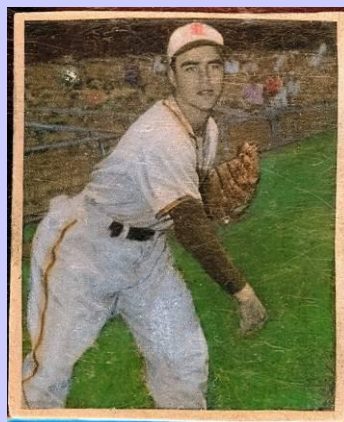


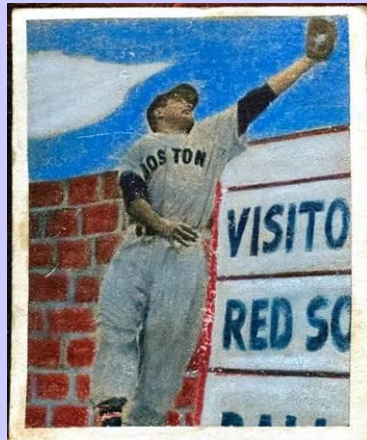
*Nelson Fox is shown in an older style Chicago White Sox hat.*

*Carrasquel has a newer Sox hat but the back of the card lists him as a Cleveland Indian. He was traded to Cleveland in October 1955.*



*Ned Garver's card doesn't mention his team but he is pictured in a long-gone Browns uniform. The pose is similar, but not identical, to his 1950 Bowman card.*





*Was Musial's inclusion wishful thinking? Spectacular image of Jimmy Piersall*

### **Ask Sy**

Could it be that even though the cards looked like Bowman cards, they weren't created by Bowman or at least the descriptions on the back were not by Bowman employees? One guy, who might actually know the answer to that question, would be 88-year-old Sy Berger, retired Topps guru. Sy worked as an employee or consultant for Topps for 55 years. But before we call Sy to test his memory, let's look at the next bit of cardboard, the 130 football cards Sims acquired.

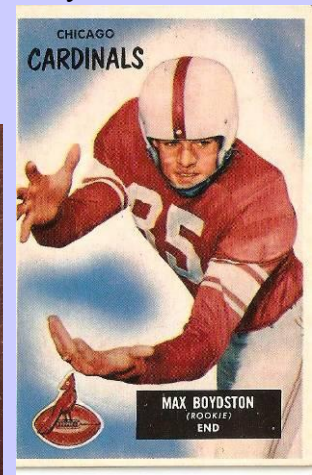


### **Football cards**

*Drum Majors, Bernie Flowers, Jim Hower and Babe Parilli  
Jack Ellana, Lewis Mcfadden, Jimmy Phillips, and Jim Parker*



My impression about the football cards was similar to that of the baseball cards. They look like they were prepared at about the same time and in the same style as the mystery baseball cards and the early Bowman “small cards” from 1948 to 1950. The colorized photo artwork on these mock-up cards vary somewhat, leading to the thought that more than one person worked on the cards. The players are pictured in their college uniforms and the hand-written back descriptions relate to their college teams and positions. At least two cards, Andy Kozar and Max Boydston, utilized the same photos that Bowman used on prior professional football cards of these players, lending credence to the assumption that the cards originated from Bowman. Boydston’s Bowman card showing him as a Chicago Cardinal rookie in 1955 was probably created using a photo of him from his earlier Oklahoma Sooner days. In some cases the writer added notations like “All-A 1954.” The cards were hand-numbered on the back with not all numbers accounted for and the highest number being 174. Most of the players were recently active in college and most were members of All-America college teams. Maybe Bowman had lost the rights to NFL players and was going to respond with a set in 1956 that was similar to the Topps All American football set of 1955?

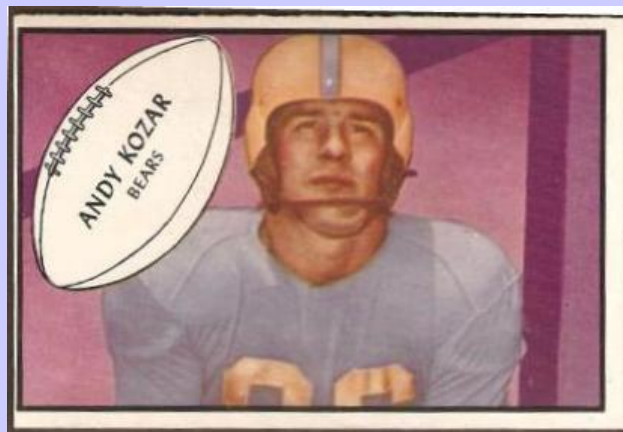
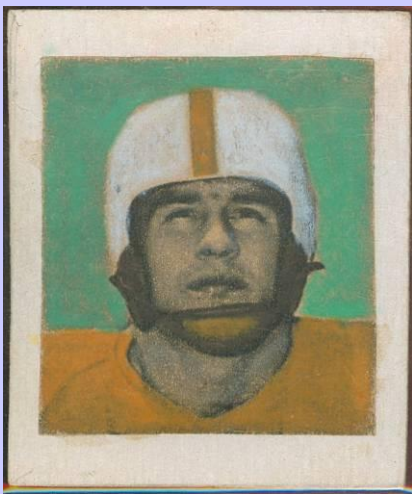


*It is hard to tell whether Bowman doctored Boydston’s Oklahoma uniform to create his 1955 rookie card or whether his Cardinals uniform was doctored to show him as a Sooner in the mystery set.*

*A table full of cards makes up this mystery “set” of prominent college players.*



*Andy Kozar appeared on a 1953 Bowman Chicago Bears card (despite being in the military until 1955). His expression remains the same but his uniform isn't as they show him as a collegian at Tennessee in the mystery set. He graduated from Tennessee in 1953.*



### **Players included**

I'll let Landon Sims describe his thoughts on these cards: "I have duplicates of some players (Knox and Kowalczyk), one close up one running. Most all these are from the 1954-1957 College All-America teams with many coming from 1955 and 1956. Glen Davis, Doc Blanchard and Doak Walker were also All-Americans in the past. The only All-Americans from 1957 are Clendon Thomas, who led Oklahoma in rushing in '55 or '56 and was a Heisman Candidate those years, has a card and Walt Kowalczyk, who was also very well known in '56. I also found striking resemblances to the photos used for these guys on their 1955 Bowman cards. The cards are all painted and colored except for the faces. Some are better than others but the quality on some is unbelievable. Every football card is either a team captain or an All-American."

I'll list some of the players in the "set" and the last year that they played college ball: Alan Ameche 1954, Doc Blanchard 1946, Preston Carpenter 1955, Howard Cassady 1955, Glen Davis 1947, Len Dawson 1956, Bernie Flowers 1952, Sid Fournet 1954, Paul Giel 1953, Frank Gifford 1951, Paul Hornung 1956, Jim Hower 1956, Vic Janowicz 1951, Ronnie Knox 1955, Walt Kowalczyk 1957, Ron Kramer 1956, John Majors 1956, Earl Morrall 1955, Jim Mutscheller 1951, Lewis McFadden, Johnny Olszewski 1952, Babe Parilli 1951, Clendon Thomas 1957, and Doak Walker 1949.



*Walt Kowalczyk, Frank Gifford, Tommy McDonald, and Sid Fournet*

**Was the set prepared in 1955 or 1956?**

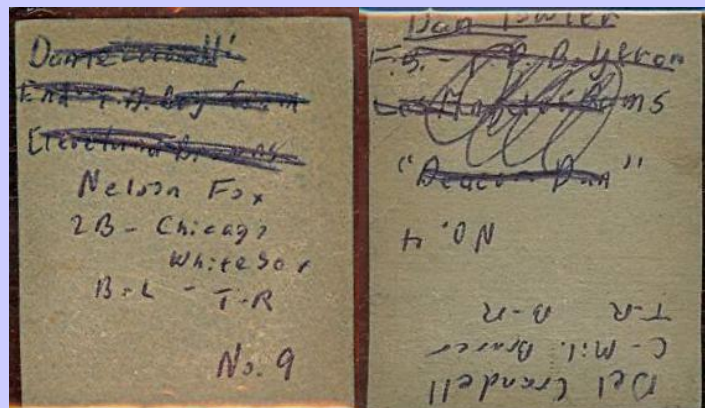
As far as I was able to tell, any of the players who didn't leave college until after the 1956 season had promising careers in 1955 e.g. Hornung, Majors, Thomas, and Kowalczyk. Kowalczyk is one of the "keys" in that he didn't graduate until 1958 but was a highly touted high school player and started all three years at MSU. He (barely) fit the criteria of being a known college star as of late 1955. The players selected would likely be identified as recent college players of renown, if not yet All-Americans. They added well-known collegians from a few prior years like Misters Inside and Outside of Army, Frank Gifford, and baseballers Vic Janowicz and Paul Giel.

Given Bowman's sale to Topps in January 1956, it seems likely that these cards were prepared in late 1955. Why would Bowman have worked on a football card set after the sale to Topps? Nonetheless, the Walt Kowalczyk card might be telling us that for some reason the set wasn't put together until late 1956.

*Some of the backs of the baseball cards list NFL players like Dante Lavelli and Dan Towler with the notation "TD Boy" and then the names are crossed out.*

**"TD Boy" football set even more mysterious**

Adding to the confusion and mystery are the backs of the baseball cards described in part one of this article. Several of the cards of baseball players have the handwritten (I'd say "scribbled") names of



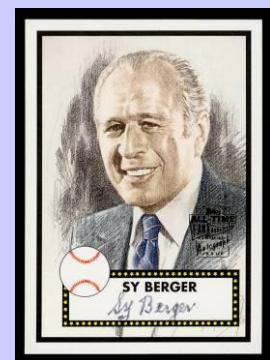
football players crossed out. Nellie Fox's card back lists Fox's information below the crossed out name of "Dante Lavelli, End, TD Boy, Cleveland Browns" On Del Crandall's card is the crossed out name of "Dan Towler, FB, TD Boy, Los Angeles Rams, Deacon Dan." Wilbur Mizell's card has "Tom Fears, End, TD Boy from Los Angeles Rams, Chrome Dome" crossed out on the cardboard. None of these players are in the collegiate mystery set. Towler's last season was 1955; the others played through 1956. Perhaps the Bowman boys thought initially about doing a set of NFL players in their NFL uniforms called "T.D. Boys", got the word that such a set wouldn't fly due to the contract rights, and then used the same darned cardboard to mount the 18 baseball cards?

### **Multiples of 18?**

The 130 cards Sims purchased included 126 different football players (with two views of four of the players.) If you added in 50 more cards out of the blue, you'd have a nice total of 180 cards which equates to 5 times 36. I've seen uncut sheets of 1950 Bowman baseball cards with 36 cards on a sheet. That would help explain why the football card back numbering would go up to at least 174.

### **Time to call Sy**

While going through the process of trying to understand the mystery behind the cards, I always thought it would be great to talk to someone who was there at the time. Fortunately for the hobby, Sy Berger was definitely there at the time and is still with us today. With the above information in hand, I placed a call to the 88-year-old Berger who had worked for Topps for 55 years. I last talked to Sy about the "card wars" with Bowman between 1951 and 1955 (*SCD* articles of March and April 2009). Sy was very cordial in sharing what information he recalled from this mid-1950s period. He apologized that he "couldn't remember" as much these days but then proceeded to recall in detail many events from 55 plus years ago.



I told him about the cards that Sims had purchased and asked him if he knew anything about them. Sy started by recalling the baseball player rights at the time. Sy told me that "they were fighting with (Bowman) as to who had rights. I got the idea and talked to (Joe) Shoirin, a brilliant man, and I went to the minors and signed everyone up for \$5. If they were pictured (made the major leagues and got on a Topps card) they'd make more money." The football rights were even less of a problem in that Berger remembers befriending then NFL commissioner Bert Bell. According to Berger, Topps got the rights away from Bowman for all the NFL players by dealing directly with Bell. Bowman would have had no players they could picture for the 1956 season, just like Topps had no one they could picture in a NFL uniform for the 1955 season.

Sy added, "We didn't need anything from Bowman" since Topps had most of the future players signed. Sy stated that he "told Woody Gelman exactly what to do." Sy never "touched any Bowman" cards in progress after the purchase in January 1956. He couldn't really say though that Gelman hadn't picked up some Bowman cards in progress. Sy also added that "he had no business with who printed the cards and where they were printed. (He) was running around (signing up players) having a good time."

## **Input from John L. England and Ray Medeiros**

I thought I would also check with a few hobby veterans. I talked with 71-year-old John England, long-time collector from Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Since there seemed to be few old-time collectors from Arkansas, I asked John if he knew of any collector from Hot Springs who would have purchased the mystery cards. John has been a collector, hobby writer, and card store owner. He operated his card shop in Fort Smith, Arkansas, from 1973 to 1996. He traveled the state and was buying and selling cards starting in 1952 and sold his massive vintage collection to Larry Fritsch in 1984. John recalls meeting no one in Hot Springs or anywhere else in Arkansas who was a serious collector in the 1950s.

Postcard stadium guru Ray Medeiros recalled, "In 1948 and 1949 I purchased snapshots of major league ballplayers of the 1930s and 1940s from a fellow in Hot Springs. While I still have some of the snapshots, I can't recall the collector's name. He would be very old, if he were alive today." I checked with veteran Philadelphia collector Irv Lerner, who is very knowledgeable about Topps and Bowman in the 50s. He was as stumped as the rest of us.

## **What to make of all this?**

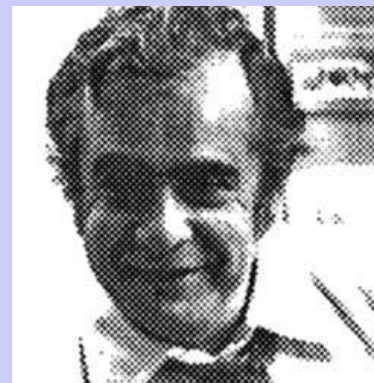
After trying to piece together the story of these mysterious baseball and football cards, I was left with as many questions as answers. I can't be positive but I think the fronts of the baseball cards were prepared in late 1953. I think the fronts of the football cards, though, were prepared in 1955. These assumptions are supported by the consistency of the artwork, the player uniforms, and the youngest players selected - Walt Kowalczyk in football and Ray Jablonski in baseball. The backs of the baseball cards were likely described in late 1956 after Bowman's sale to Topps based on the team designations of Schoendienst and Jablonski (their trades to the teams indicated were in late 1956).

Recapping the many questions in my mind, I first wondered why Sam Rosen and Woody Gelman would have sold these one-of-a-kind cards for two cents a piece in 1957 and caused me all this investigative work. Why didn't Gelman hang onto them like he did with the 1956 prototypes in the recent REA auction? Was it possible that someone other than Bowman put the sets together or perhaps Bowman was doing it on behalf of some customer? Why would they go back to the 1950-sized cards? Was colorizing photos still drastically less expensive than full color photography at the time or were they going for a vintage look and size? Why would they have included retired players Dom DiMaggio and Marty Marion as well as a defunct team, the St. Louis Browns? Why were only 17 or 18 baseball cards mocked-up including Musial who had not allowed anyone other than Rawlings to print his image between 1954 and 1957? What happened to the 50 or so missing football cards based on the card numbers going up to at least 174? Based on including Knox and Kowalczyk, the cards couldn't have been produced much earlier than late 1955 (prior to the sale to Topps) but could they have been produced in 1956 when the baseball card backs were described?

*Woody Gelman, courtesy of Richard Gelman*

## **The handwriting**

I had just about despaired of figuring out much more about the puzzle of the mystery cards, when I thought about what Sy Berger had said. Berger told me that "he told



Woody Gelman exactly what to do.” But wait a minute; Berger at 88 must have been born in 1923. Gelman was born in 1915. Why would a 41-year-old creative guy in 1956 do exactly what a 33-year-old guy told him to do? Maybe the crummy handwriting was indeed that of the creative art director, Woody Gelman?

Jim Zak is a 68-year-old Chicago-area collector and dealer who ran a card store I visited years ago. I knew that he had known Woody and his son, Richard Gelman, personally and that Jim had edited Gelman’s *Card Collectors* publication in the 1960s. I called and asked Jim if he knew what Gelman’s handwriting looked like. Jim said, “It was terrible!” Bingo! I thought. Jim also said that he recalled that Topps “had talked to Bowman about not only player contracts but their method of colorizing photos” on their 1954 and 1955 cards. Jim recalled Gelman as being a “leader and independent.” I sent samples of the writing on the backs of the cards to Jim. Jim didn’t have any samples of Gelman’s handwriting around and could not determine if the handwriting was Gelman’s or not.

SCD’s Bob Lemke suggested I call Jeff Fritsch. Jeff’s late father, Larry Fritsch, purchased the bulk of what was left of Gelman’s 10 million cards in the 1980s. Jeff didn’t have any Woody Gelman writing samples handy either. Through the efforts of collector Leon Luckey I was able to contact veteran collector Fred McKie. Fred was kind enough to send me some short samples of Gelman’s writing. Several of the letters looked similar, particularly the capital letters K, S, and B. The handwriting looked pretty close to me, but McKie’s samples were all capital letters and neither of us are handwriting gurus.

### **Richard Gelman**

Another light went off in my head. I hadn’t pursued Richard Gelman, Woody’s son. Through *Mint Condition* author Dave Jamieson, I got in touch with 69-year-old Richard Gelman who quickly confirmed that the writing on the back of the cards was not his father’s. He didn’t know whose writing it was.

Richard Gelman started helping his father and step-grandfather with card sales while he was still a kid. He recalled his step-grandfather died in 1957 and it’s not clear whether it was Rosen or Woody Gelman that actually sold the mystery cards. Richard remembered that the Topps creative people like his father would carpool to work and come up with many ideas for sets and junk most of them. They would put together a few samples but not 130 football cards. It was entirely possible that the folks at Bowman were doing the same and that the mystery cards were from Bowman’s own larger junk pile. Richard thought it would be unusual for his father to have sold any of his own mock-ups or test issues in that most such efforts were passed on to Richard and he sold them after his father’s death. At one time Richard had 30 million cards. I sent Richard copies of the cards, but they didn’t ring any bells, other than he agreed that they looked like a product of Bowman.

### **Sy Berger calling**

I sent copies of the cards and their backs to Sy Berger. I was surprised to get a message on my answering machine a week later, “This is Sy Berger calling for George.” In fact Sy called me again and talked for nearly an hour. Sy couldn’t shed much light on the 55-year-old mystery cards. Sy reiterated, “I was never a collector. I was a gatherer.” Sy covered a range of subjects. He mentioned hanging onto some of the Topps artwork from 1953 and their recent sale. He was organizing a trove of additional memorabilia including photographs, magazines, and dinner



programs for disposition. Sy's father lived to 96 and his mother to 88; Sy is hoping for some more good years as well. He gets occasional requests to autograph Topps cards which he will sign as long as the request is not onerous. Sy could talk about baseball and cards into the wee hours as he recalled instances involving Johnny Pesky, Tommy LaSorda, and Woody Gelman in this memorable phone call, but he couldn't shed any more light on the mystery cards.

### **The exciting conclusion?**

Although I didn't unravel the mystery of the cards, I felt that it was likely that Bowman turned over their in-progress files, artwork, and these mystery cards to Topps, all of which got to Gelman's product development group. The names of the players were not on the backs of the mystery cards when Gelman took possession (still puzzling), but must have been described separately.

Someone other than Gelman then wrote the player information on the card backs during 1956. Topps didn't retain the cards and they wound up with Gelman personally. Rosen or Gelman sold the cards for not much money to some unnamed collector who lived in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at some time. After the collector's death, the cards went to a dealer, and then were purchased by Landon Sims. If I had to pick a name for these mystery cards, I'd call them "one-of-a-kind Bowman major league baseball and college football mock-up cards created before 1956 that were described on their backs in 1955 or 1956 and never issued."



If our alert readers have another thought on these cards, I would welcome any feedback. Collector Landon Sims has sold a few of the baseball cards via eBay. He may hang onto these wonderful mystery cards or weigh his collecting options... or maybe issue a set of 1956 Sims All American football cards, hopefully with bubble gum.

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