

Super-senior players still got game?



Part 1, The National League Squad

January 1, 2013



By
George Vrechek

Collectors have a natural penchant for organizing their collections. As youngsters we may have sorted our cards by number or favorite players. The kids on my block in the 50s played baseball dice games with their cards. Snake eyes, or a one and a one, was a homerun whether Ted Williams was batting or Ted Abernathy.

Organizing the teams

While the game didn't make any statistical sense, it did make sense to us to have your "singles" organized by team, all ready to go for the dice games. The teams were kept current by checking the daily sports section for player transactions. If Enos Slaughter got traded to the Yankees, his card was promptly removed from the St. Louis Cardinals' stack and moved to the Yanks. Sometimes we created cards for rookies not yet appearing on their own card or put the right uniforms on traded players by doctoring a duplicate of a similar-looking player.



Minor leaguers, retirees, and deceased

If a player went back to the minors, he went into a stack at the back of my card box. If I knew he had retired, he went into another stack. There weren't too many deceased player cards, but they may have had their own section as well. Had I continued organizing and updating my cards from the 50s, I would now have no one with any team (unless you count those employed as goodwill ambassadors or spring training coaches). I would have a large stack of deceased players, and a small group of guys still with us as retired major league players.

Thinking about living former major league players from the 50s and before is similar to being surprised that our grade school teachers are still doing quite nicely. As kids, we thought them ancient, but now find they may have been only 15 years or so older than we were. However, usually the only time older players make news is when they die. *SCD* reports the passing of former athletes in most issues.

The 100 oldest survivors

Wikipedia has a list of the 100 oldest living former major league baseball players. Players move up the rankings by age or disappear. No one ever moves down the list. Former Senator pitcher Connie Marrero made news last year when he became the number one player on the list at age 101. A news photo reminded me of his 1953 Topps card; it was good to hear that he was still among the retired players in my theoretical baseball card box.

I checked the list of 100 and found that nearly half of the players had appeared on a baseball card. The rest of the players were either only in "the show" for a few games or had the misfortune of playing during WWII when cardboard for baseball cards was as scarce as nylons. Players listed ranged in age from 88 to 101 with the majority being in the 88 to 92 bracket. For this article I used information from the list thought to be current as of January 2013. Unfortunately, the list of 100 will have changed again by the time you read this.

Picking teams for an almost real game

Incredibly, the 46 players who appeared on cards from the lucky 100 divided nicely into National and American League teams and each position was represented. I thought it would be great to get this gang together, along with those who never made it onto the cardboard. But rather than

having them sit and sign cards and balls, I'm thinking they would really like to play a game, sort of like players in the *Field of Dreams* movie. This isn't entirely whimsical; the late Chicago real estate businessman Ferd (yes, Ferd) Kramer put together an annual national tennis tournament for players over 90. The event attracted some pretty good players. Double Duty Radcliffe lived to 103 and threw a pitch in a minor league game at age 96. John Whittemore threw the javelin and shot put in a masters track event at age 104. Herman Smith-Johannsen participated in a ski event at age 104. There are super-senior softball, tennis, and even hockey leagues.

Maybe some enterprising show promoter will run with my concept and put together a baseball game for the ages, or at least the aged. But just in case no one does, I thought I would assemble on (SCD) paper fantasy All-Star teams of the oldest living players who appeared on baseball cards – the Super-Senior Baseball Card All-Stars. I get to decide who plays where and when they bat, which is a bit dangerous since I haven't seen any of these guys play in 50+ years, and some may no longer be in shape. Here are my teams anyway.

National League

Monte Irvin, batting first and playing right field

- 94 years old, born 2-15-19
- Played 1949-56 with Giants and Cubs; 1938-1948 with the Negro and Mexican Leagues
- Batting average 293, HOFer
- Appeared on many cards: 1950 – 1956
- Irvin's 1951 Bowman has his birthdate as 2-25-21, not an uncommon discrepancy
- Living in Houston, oldest living African-American player
- Involved in the Negro League Baseball Museum
- Has probably lost a step but should do fine leading off. Wait until you see the A.L. battery. They'll have trouble keeping him from stealing a base.



Red Schoendienst, batting second, playing second base

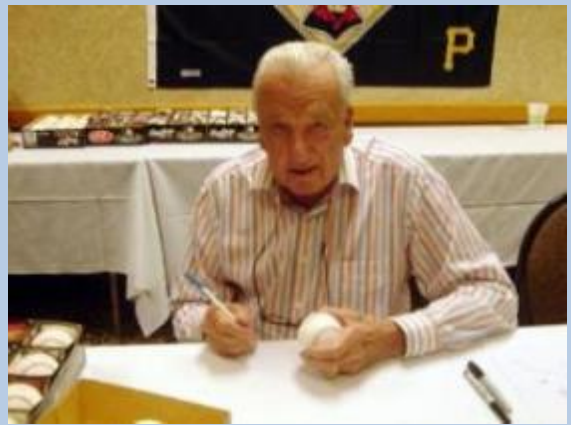
- 90 years old, born 2-2-23
- Played for Cardinals, Giants, and Braves 1945-1963
- Batting average 289, HOFer
- Appeared on cards as a player and manager 1948-1976
- Still a special assistant coach for the Cardinals in 2012, has worn a baseball uniform for 67 consecutive seasons, may be in the best playing shape of any
- Had dinner at my aunt's home in Milwaukee in the 50s and left his photo inscribed to me which I still have, of course



Ralph Kiner, batting third, playing left field

- 90 years old, born 10-27-22
- Played for Pirates, Cubs, and Indians 1946-1955

- Batting average 279 with 369 homers, HOFer
- Appeared on cards 1948-1955
- Started in broadcasting in 1961 and still does guest broadcasting appearances for the Mets
- Oldest active announcer.
- When he was traded to the Cubs, I traded my entire card collection for Kiner's 53 Topps card.



Stan Musial, cleanup hitter, playing first base

- 92 years old, born 11-21-20
- Played only for the Cardinals 1941-1963
- Batting average 331 with 475 homers, HOFer
- Appeared on Card cards 1948-1963, his 1953 Bowman took a beating in the dice games since it remained his "latest" baseball card until late in the 1958 season
- Received Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011
- Wife Lillian died last year, they were married 71 years



Andy Pafko, batting fifth, playing center field

- 92 years old, born 2-25-21
- Played for Cubs, Dodgers, and Braves 1943-1959
- Batting average 285 with 213 homers
- Appeared on regular cards plus many exhibit cards 1949-1969, his #1 1952 Topps card fetches high prices in even low grades which never made any sense to me
- One of two remaining players to have been with the Cubs in a World Series (1945)
- Was the starter at a golf club bordering his home in Mount Prospect, Illinois; golf has probably kept his hitting sharp.



Al Dark, batting sixth, playing third base

- 91 years old, born 1-7-22
- Played for Braves, Giants, Cubs, Cards, and Phillies 1946-1960
- Batting average 289
- Appeared on cards as a player and manager 1949-1978
- Managed from 1961 to 1977
- Oldest living manager of a World Series team



Solly Hemus, batting seventh, playing shortstop

- 89 years old, born 4-17-23
- Played for Cards and Phillies 1946-1959
- Batting average 273
- Appeared on cards 1952-1961 as a player and manager
- Operates an oil business in Texas



- Mobility impaired after a fall in Alaska; may have to have a backup ready, if Solly can't go at short

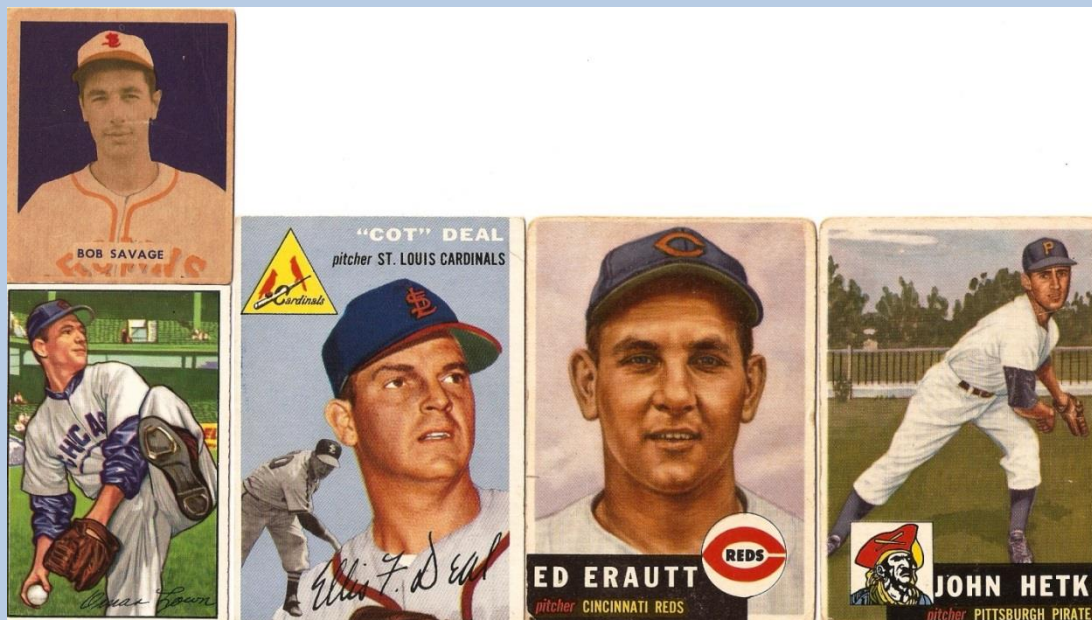
Mike Sandlock, batting eighth, catching

- 97, born 10-17-15
- Played for Braves, Dodgers, and Pirates 1942-1953, managed to get into 195 games
- Bullpen catcher and utility infielder
- Batting average 240 with 2 lifetime homers
- On Topps cards in 1953 and 1954, there is a printing difference on the left side of his 1953 card
- Able to catch Johnny Lindell's knuckler and went with him in two package trades
- Golfs two or three times a week and hit a drive 200 yards last year.
- Drives to Sunday mass from his home in Greenwich, CT
- Active in an organization to help older players
- Third oldest living major league veteran
- At 97, Mike might not want to go 9 innings, but he seems to be in pretty good shape, he's our senior guy, and we have backups ready.



Harry Perkowski, batting ninth, pitching

- 90 years old, born 9-6-22
- Played for Reds and Cubs 1947-1955
- Won 33 and lost 40
- Appeared on cards 1952-5
- Good fielder, sore arm sent him back to minors, retired in 1960
- During WWII was with amphibious forces in Africa, Sicily, Italy, and Normandy invasions
- Living in Beckley, West Virginia, not far from the coal mining area where he grew up
- Recently gave up bowling and dancing, but I think I can coax him into making one more start. His arm should be better by now.



The bullpen

In the pen I've got Eddie Erautt (88), Cot Deal (90), Johnny Hetki (90), and Dick Starr (91). Turk Lown (a great name) (88) went 55-61 lifetime, mostly as a reliever, and I'll use him as my closer. Some of these players didn't make it onto too many baseball cards. I may need some more pitching down the road (see "Prospects" below.) I'm counting on my HOF hitters blowing this game open early.

Catching in the bullpen and ready to come in, if Mike Sandlock needs help, will be Tim Thompson. Tim was a Tiger, an Athletic, but fortunately also a Dodger because I need him to be a National Leaguer, otherwise Mike has to go all the way.



The bench

With four HOFers in the lineup, it was tough to get a starting nod. I'm fortunate to have strong bench players who can cover every position in the event one of my starters needs a rest.

The bench players with ages and positions: Chuck Kress (91, 1B), Graddy Hatton (90, 2B-3B), Vern Benson (88, 3B), Eddie Basinski (90, 2B-SS), Chuck Harmon (88, 3B-OF), Harry Elliott (89, OF), Marv Rackley (91, OF), and Wally Westlake (92, 3B-OF). Rackley and Basinski only had 1947 Tip Top cards, but we needed them on the squad, and they made the cut. Elliott's only Topps card in 1955 managed to come with three printing differences on the back.



Rackley and Basinski made the squad thanks to their Tip Top Bread cards from 1947

The manager

Every team needs a manager. While Schoendienst, Dark, and Hemus have all had experience, I think it is too much to ask them to both play and manage. Therefore, I'm tapping future super-senior prospect Tommy LaSorda (85) to handle managing this squad, as well as the media. I'm not going to give him any coaches though, lest we get even sillier. The guys on the bench can handle the coaching boxes, and no one is going to take any coaching advice anyway.



Tommy LaSorda didn't pitch too long, but he sure could manage and will handle this squad, and the media.

Players without cards

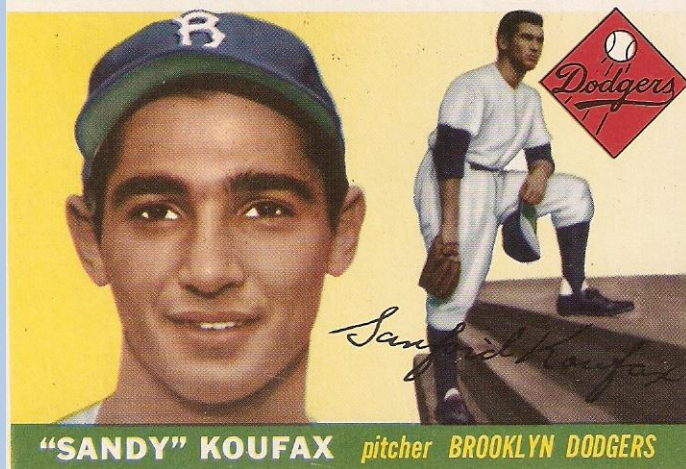
Unfortunately, if you didn't have a baseball card, you didn't exist in my 50s baseball dice games, and you didn't make it onto my super-senior fantasy team. Most of the players without cards only played in a few games. However the "non-carded" group of National Leaguers includes Lennie Merullo (95 years-old) who played 639 games at shortstop for the Cubs between 1941 and 1947, Luis Olmo (93) who appeared in 438 games for the Dodgers and Braves between 1944 and 1951, and Moon Mullen (96) who played in 118 games at second for the 1944 Phillies. Art Kenney (96) pitched in two games for the Boston Bees in July 1938. I'd like to have these boys on the team, but rules are rules. If they can dig up "regular" cards of themselves from someplace, I'll gladly add them to the squad.

Prospects

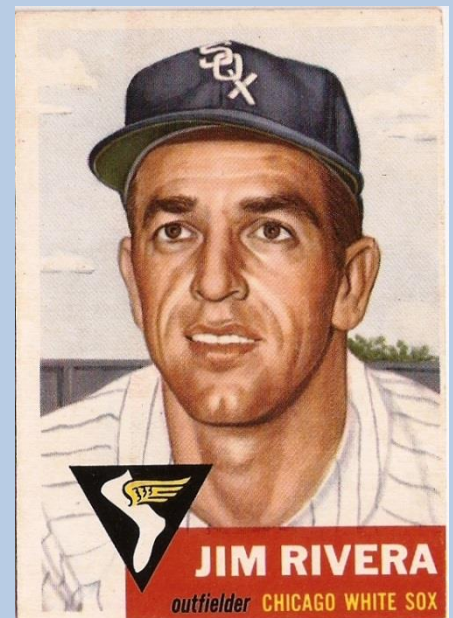


Although this group is relatively young, all good super-senior teams need to look to the future for potential players. While no one can be guaranteed by the Almighty of making the top 100 oldsters, among the youngsters who have a pretty good chance of moving into future lineups are

the following: Ernie Banks (82), Willie Mays (81), Hank Aaron (79), Bob Gibson, Sandy Koufax, and Frank Robinson, all 77. Frank Robinson can go in either league.



Future NL prospects look pretty good



Part 2, The American League Squad

While my National League squad can boast of Hall of Famers Monte Irvin, Red Schoendienst, Ralph Kiner, and Stan Musial, the American League squad is long on experience. The AL team has the oldest HOFer, 94 year-old Bobby Doerr, as well as the most experienced pitcher and number one man on the list of 100, Connie Marrero, age 101.



American League Lineup

Jungle Jim Rivera, batting first and playing center field

- 90 years old, born 7-22-22
- Played 1952-61 with Browns, White Sox, and Athletics
- Batting average 256
- Appeared on many cards 1953 – 1961
- An exciting belly-sliding runner
- Real name is Manual Joseph Rivera
- Spent 1945 to 1949 in prison, but then stayed out of trouble thereafter - mostly
- Kept playing in the minors until he was 41
- Plays golf, should still be able to run



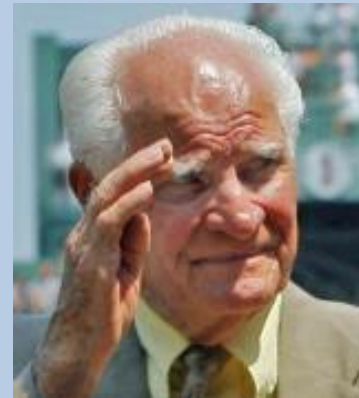
Sam (Sabath) Mele, batting second, playing first base

- 91 years old, born 1-21-22
- Played 1947-1956 for the Red Sox, White Sox, Senators, Orioles, Indians, and Reds
- Batting average 267
- Appeared on many cards as a player and manager 1949-1967
- Scouted for the Red Sox for 25 years until 1993
- Lives in Quincy, Mass and sounded pretty good in an interview with the Twins in 2009, but may have lost a step following surgeries on his back, both knees, and one hip
- Mentioned he still signs cards for free through the mail



Bobby Doerr, batting third, playing second base

- 94 years old, born 4-7-18
- Played 1937-1951 all with the Red Sox
- Batting average 288 with 223 homers, oldest living HOFer
- Appeared on cards from 1938-1951, has 2 cards in the 1938 Goudey Heads-Up set
- Scouted and coached until 1981
- Attended the Fenway Park 100th anniversary celebration in 2012



Al Rosen, cleanup hitter, playing third base

- 89 years old, born 2-29-24
- Played 1947-1956 all with the Indians
- Batting average 285, All-Star 1952-5
- Appeared on cards 1950-1961
- 1978-1992 President of Yanks, Astros, and Giants
- In the National and International Jewish Sports HOFs
- With his baseball business experience, Al may run this entire fantasy operation for me.



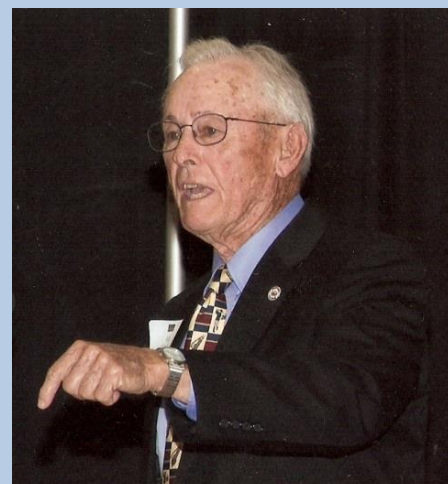
Eddie Robinson, batting fifth, playing first base

- 92 years old, born 12-15-20
- Played for 7 different A.L. teams 1942-1957
- Batting average 268
- Appeared on cards 1949-1960
- Kept coaching, scouting, and working as a baseball executive into the 1980s



Gil Coan, batting sixth, playing left field

- 90 years old, born 5-18-22
- Played for Senators, Orioles, White Sox, Giants 1946-1956
- Batting average 254, set a record for his 500 average (in 42 at bats) in 1947
- Appeared on cards 1949-1955
- Purchased an insurance agency in Brevard, NC, when he retired turned the agency over to his son Gil Coan, Jr., and grandson, a Padre draftee
- He had just come back from feeding the cattle on his farm when I talked to him recently. Look for a future article on my great conversations with Gil Coan.



Neil Berry, batting seventh, playing shortstop

- 91 years old, born 1-11-22
- Played in only 172 games for White Sox, Tigers, Browns, and Orioles 1948-1954
- Batting average 244
- Appeared only on Bowmans 1949-1952
- Mostly a utility infielder and not much known about his post-baseball career, but the A.L. is a little short on shortstops and we need him, just have to find him

Ed Fitz Gerald, batting eighth, catching

- 88 years old, born 5-21-24
- Played for Pirates, Senators, and Indians 1948-1959
- Batting average 260
- Appeared on cards 1949-1960
- Coached 1960-4, played at St. Mary's College of California

Connie Marrero, batting ninth, pitching

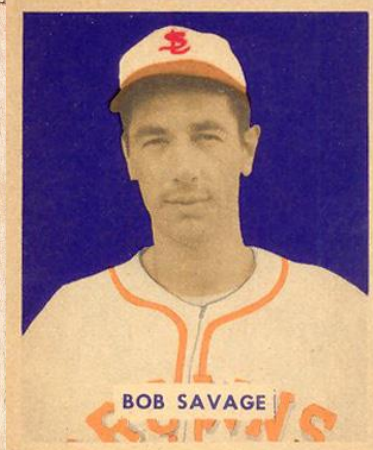
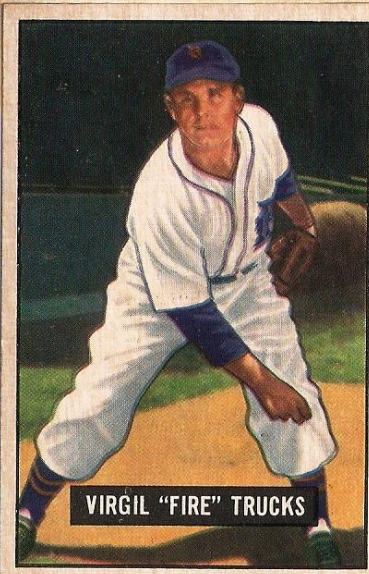
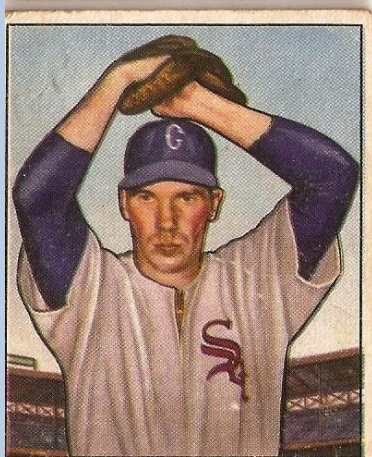
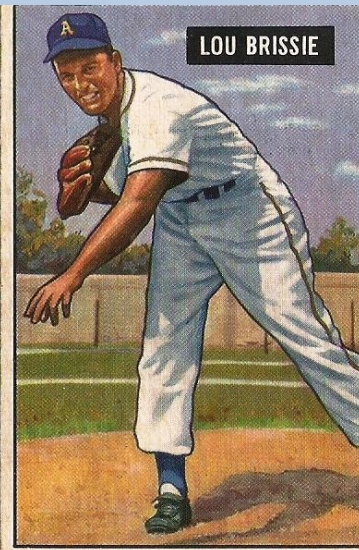
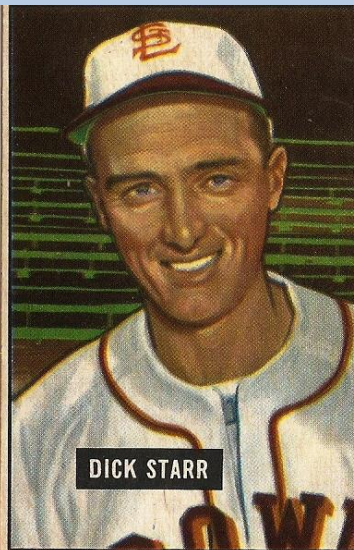
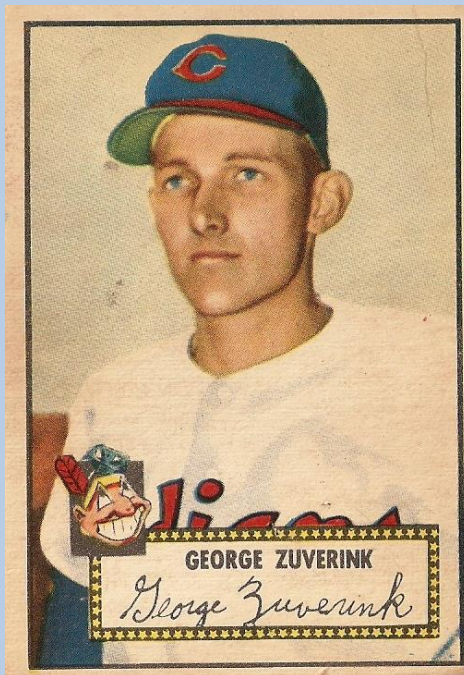
- 101 years old, born 4-25-11
- Played for Senators 1950-1954
- Pitched in rural Cuba until finally becoming the ace (20+ wins per year, ERA under 2) of the Havana Cubans of the International League 1947-9, returned to the Havana team for 1955-7
- Won 39 and lost 40 for the Senators
- Appeared on cards 1951-4, his 51B has his birthdate as 5-1-17, his 53T has 5-1-15
- 39 years old when he finally got to the majors, pitched professionally until he was 46



- Connie was born when Ty Cobb, Joe Jackson, Walter Johnson, Honus Wagner, Christy Mathewson, and Eddie Plank were setting records; T206s were just out; there were only 46 states
- Lives very modestly in Cuba, finally got a \$10,000 per year pension from MLB in 2012
- Connie recently gave up cigars, can't hear, is blind, and can't walk. However, he is the most experienced pitcher in the world, and I'm designating him as my starter. Connie recently told an interviewer, "I'm ready to pitch again, but I don't have a catcher." Well, we have youngster Ed Fitz Gerald catching for Connie.

**The bullpen
Virgil Trucks**

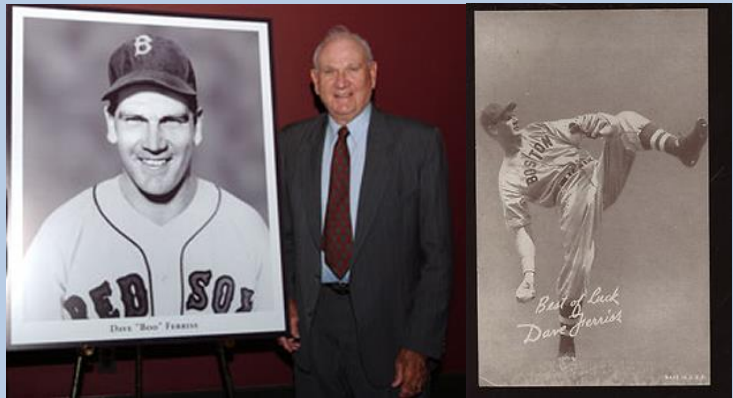
Just in case Marrero has an off day, I have 95 year-old Virgil Trucks ready to be the first out of the pen. Virgil went 177-135 between 1941 and 1958. He played for five A.L. teams and has plenty of baseball cards. He has outlived four wives and is the last surviving member of the 1945 Detroit Tigers World Champions. He looks good on paper, however Virgil fell last year and injured his leg and head so we may have to have some of the other boys warmed up as well.



Bob Ferriss

Bob Kuzava

Bob is 89 and pitched in both leagues for 8 teams between 1946 and 1957. He went 49-44 and saved the seventh games of both the 1951 and 1952 World Series for the Yankees. He is in the Hall of Fame (the Polish-American HOF) and still lives in Wyandotte, Michigan. If both Connie and Virgil can't go, Bob gets the nod.



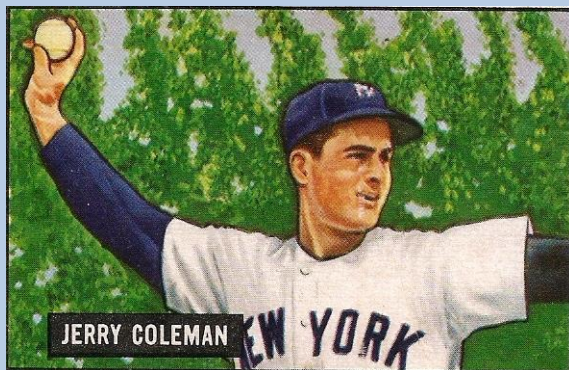
Also in the pen will be Bob Savage, Dave Ferriss, George Zuverink, and Lou Brissie. All these boys are between 88 and 91 so they should still have lively arms. To help warm up the pitchers, I have binders full of catchers - Matt Batts (what a great name) (91), Joe Astroth (90), and Charlie Silvera (88).

The AL bullpen above: Pitchers Zuverink, Starr, Brissie, Kuzava, Trucks, and Savage. The catchers are Silvera (today), Batts, Astroth, and Silvera in 1952.

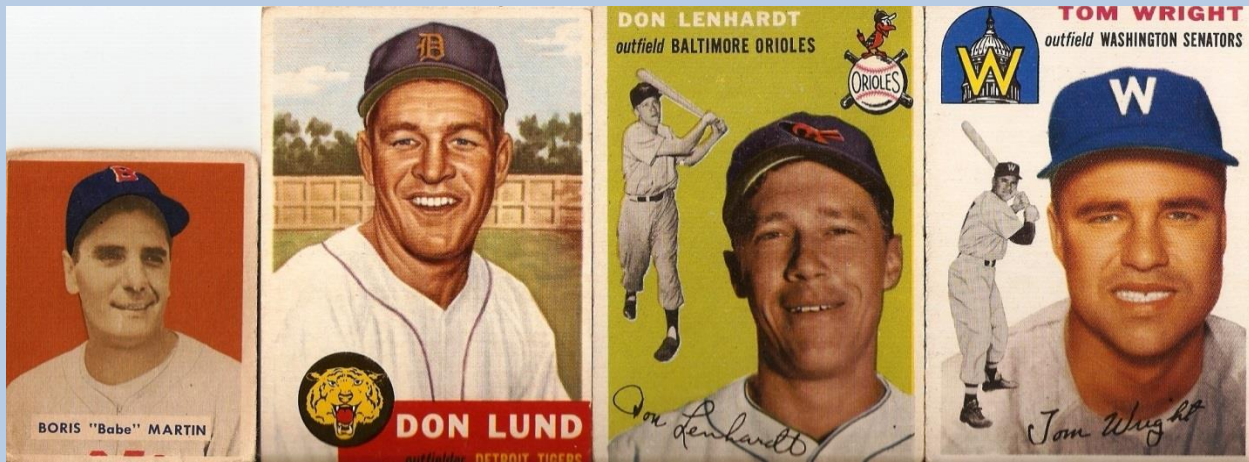


The bench

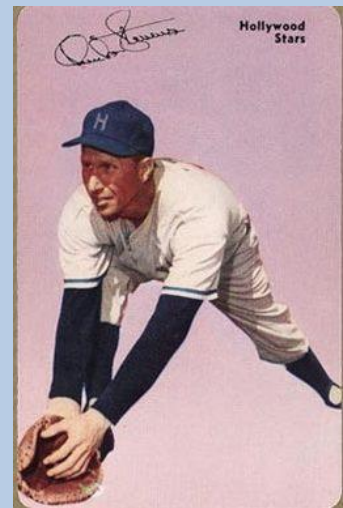
Second baseman Jerry Coleman (88) had an 8 year career hitting .263 in the Yankee heyday, but has to sit with Bobby Doerr available. However, Coleman is still a baseball analyst for the Padres and has been in broadcasting since 1960. I'm going to ask him to do the play-by-play with youngster Vin Scully (85) in the broadcast booth until he's needed to come into the game.



Jerry Coleman can do the broadcast until he has to enter the game



I have four outfielders available – Babe Martin (92), Michigan football player Don Lund (89), Don Lenhardt (90), and Tom Wright (89.). First baseman Chuck Stevens (92) played in 211 games for the Browns in the 40s, and fortunately I found him on a 1953 Mother's Cookie PCL card to just qualify for the team based on our strict rules regarding appearing on a regular card.

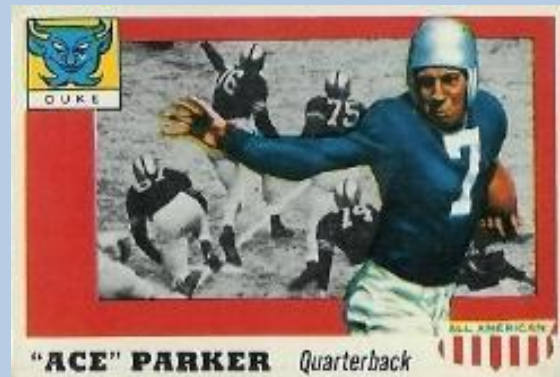


Ace Parker

I am going to bend the rules and add an infielder who didn't appear on a baseball card. Ace Parker (100) got into only 94 games for the Athletics back in 1937 and 1938. His lifetime average was .179 with 2 homers. Parker is the last living player to have played in a game with Roger Hornsby. He and Bobby Doerr are the last to have played in a game with Lou Gehrig.



What did he do otherwise? He played a little football between 1937 and 1946. Despite missing 3 years for WWII, he played enough to earn induction into the National Football Hall of Fame in 1972 based on quarterbacking the old NFL Brooklyn Dodgers and the AAFC New York Yankees. He also rushed, punted, kicked extra points, and played defense. His career passing yards are about the same as today's records – for a single season. Born 5-17-12, he is the second oldest living professional baseball player and the oldest living professional football player. He also played basketball at Duke University.



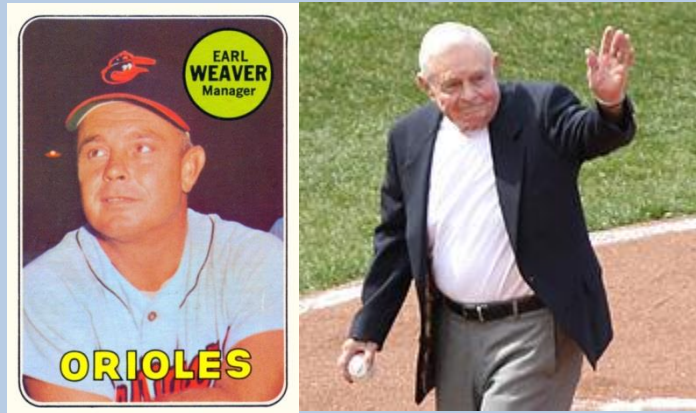
After his playing career, he managed baseball teams for the Durham Bulls and Duke University until 1966.

Parker is also a good golfer and played near his home in Portsmouth, Virginia, until a few years ago when his health deteriorated. He never made it onto a regular baseball card, but he is featured (#84) in the 1955 Topps All-American football set – close enough to qualify for my team.

The manager

I'm going to bring in a future super-senior prospect to manage this squad, Earl Weaver. While Earl is only 82, I think he has enough experience already to be able to handle the club. Weaver never made it to the majors as a player, but made the Hall of Fame based on his managerial record (1,480-1,060) with the Orioles from 1968 to 1986. He was on many baseball cards starting in 1969. If Earl gets himself thrown out of this game, former manager Sam Mele will take over. We'll forget about coaches.

Earl Weaver (82) is a little young for managing this squad, but has the experience

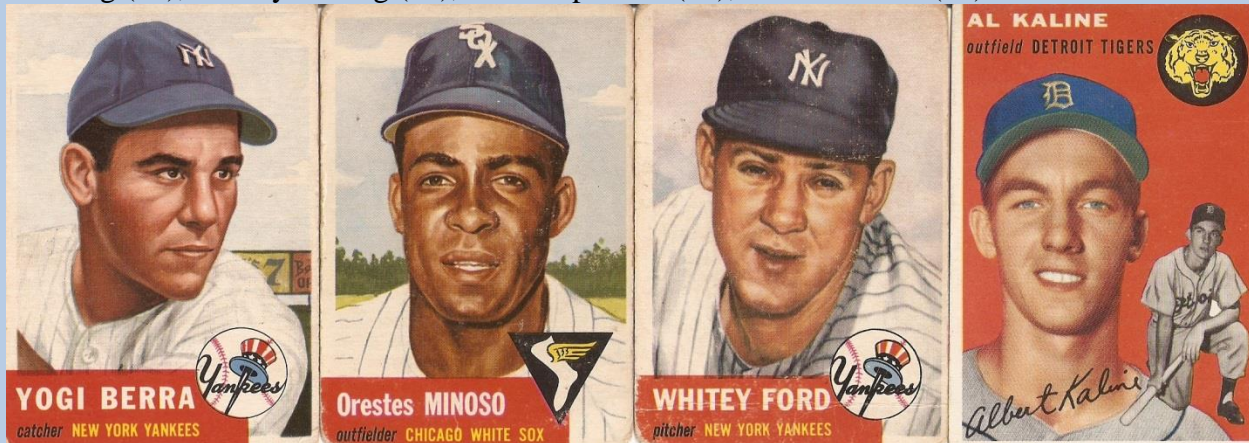


Players without cards

If you didn't have a bubble gum card, you didn't make it onto my team. The "non-carded" group of American Leaguers includes outfielder Eddie Carnett (96 years-old) who played in 158 games for the White Sox and Indians between 1941 and 1945. The rest of the American Leaguers have names only their relatives might know – Mike Palagyi (95) pitched in one game for the Senators 8-18-39. Lou Lucier (94), Fred Caligiuri (94), Carl Miles (94), and Steve Nagy (93) are among the others.

Prospects

Super-senior teams need to look to the future for potential players. While no one can be guaranteed of getting into the top 100 oldsters, among notables who can make a future squad are the following: Yogi Berra (87), Minnie Minoso (87), Billie Pierce (85), Whitey Ford (84), Jim Bunning (81), Whitey Herzog (81), Louie Aparacio (78), and Al Kaline (78).



Others

A game of this importance should have someone significant to throw out the first pitch. Jiroemon Kimura is my first choice. Mr. Kimura lives in Japan and is 115 years old. He is the oldest living person at the moment. Maybe it would be safer, if he rolled out the first pitch.



Hall of Famer Doug Harvey (82) is the oldest umpire I can find. The game must be tougher on the umps than the players. We'll have to go with just one ump.

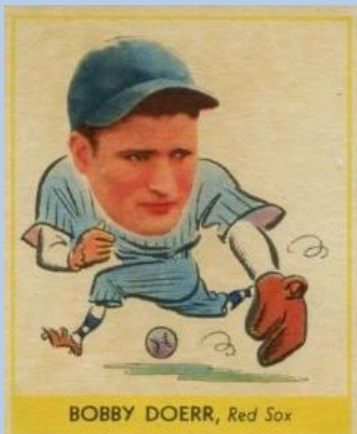
Gil Coan told me the last time he played in an old-timers game several years ago, he tore his rotator cuff trying to throw from center field. We may need to modify the rules for this game and have medical personnel available, just in case.

Jiroemon Kimura was born 4-19-1897 and will be asked to roll out the first pitch. Photo is from December 2012 when he

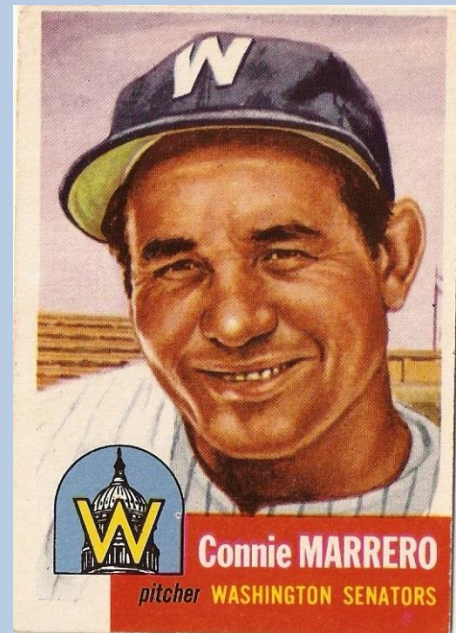
became the oldest living man ever on record.

Best wishes

Baseball card producers did a good job of including players on cards, if they were in the majors for at least a season. When I look back at the baseball cards from the 1950s and earlier, I now see a few cards come to even more life. Bobby Doerr (94) was on two cards in the 1938 Goudey Heads Up set and is still going strong. Red Schoendienst (90) plans to be at spring training in 2013, following in the footsteps of Jimmie Reese (one of Babe Ruth's roommates) who hit fungos for the Angels until he died at age 93. Ralph Kiner (90) and Jerry Coleman (88) plan to be in the broadcast booth this year. Connie Marrero (101) hopes to keep munching on unlit cigars. We wish them good health for the coming season.



The most experienced pitcher in the world, Connie Marrero, 101



Bobby Doerr (94) first appeared on a 1938 Goudey Heads-Up

Lineups for the game

	AL		NL	
1	Jim Rivera	CF	Monte Irvin	LF
2	Sam Mele	RF	Red Schoendienst	2B
3	Bobby Doerr	2B	Ralph Kiner	RF
4	Al Rosen	3B	Stan Musial	1B
5	Eddie Robinson	IB	Andy Pafko	CF
6	Gil Coan	LF	Alvin Dark	3B
7	Neil Berry	SS	Solly Hemus	SS
8	Ed Fitz Gerald	C	Mike Sandlock	C
9	Connie Marrero	P	Harry Perkowski	P

Information for this article was been obtained from many sources and was current as of January 1, 2013. Unfortunately as the years go by the lineup of the oldest surviving major leaguers will have to change. While believed to be accurate, the information may not be as solid as what you would find on the backs of their baseball cards.

George Vrechek is a freelance contributor to Sports Collectors Digest and can be contacted at vrechek@ameritech.net.

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