

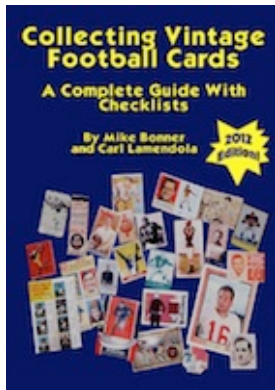
Collecting Vintage Football Cards

A Complete Guide With Checklists

By Mike Bonner
and Carl Lamendola

2012
Edition!





Nationally recognized football card experts Mike Bonner and Carl Lamendola have written the ultimate vintage guide. Forty one lively, well-researched articles are supplemented with unique checklists and links to images of rare items. A must for advanced collectors and novices alike.

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COLLECTING VINTAGE FOOTBALL CARDS:

A Complete Guide with Checklists

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ISBN 978-1-61434-874-0

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Published in the United States by Booklocker.com, Inc., Port Charlotte, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2011

First Edition

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By Mike Bonner
and
Carl Lamendola



Henry Ward Beecher's 1887
Goodwin Champions N162 card,
the first football card.

Chapter One — Early Football Cards

A Rough History of Football Cards

Since 1989, an incredible outpouring of football cards has been fueled by a surge of interest from collectors around the country.

The vigor demonstrated by the hobby is ironic because until the 1980s, football cards existed as a poor cousin to the hobby of baseball card collecting.

Even though the first football cards appeared about the same time as the first baseball cards, they were not as popular as their baseball counterparts. Mainstream football cards practically vanished after their debut over a century ago. When they came back to life during the cultural explosion that accompanied the end of World War II, popular interest made it clear that they were going to be around for the long haul, but in a secondary role.

Still, that hasn't stopped collectors from acquiring them in great amounts, and it hasn't

stopped card companies from making ever more glitzy products.

However, our main interest in putting together this vintage guide has been to look at the oldest and rarest of these cards. Though few in number, compared to baseball, football cards are fascinating and revealing examples of American popular culture.

Where do football cards, and for that matter, trading cards in general come from? Sports cards themselves owe their existence to competition among tobacco companies in the late 1880s.

In those days, tobacco firms were in a furious battle to attract customers to their products. At the time, cigarette smoking was considered a manly and harmless habit.

One day, an unknown marketing genius conceived the idea of enclosing small cardboard pictures of celebrity and sports figures in cigarette packs, as a promotion.

The idea took off and soon everybody had cardboard pictures in their cigarettes. There were images of boxers, pool players, singers, musicians, cowboys, explorers, soldiers, vaudeville stars, and baseball players, among many others. Anybody who was famous was likely to be the subject of a cigarette card.



Album page for the 1887
Goodwin Champions N162 set

The most avidly collected of these pictures were the ones of baseball players. Adolescent boys and young men especially seemed to like them.

By 1920, several thousand boys baseball subjects had appeared on cards.

Football players were not so lucky. Professional baseball had roots in the United States from the Civil War forward and was a natural for card makers. No football equivalent to major league baseball existed until the early 1920s.

The first American professional football league, the National Football League, was founded in 1921.

Thirteen teams with names like the Canton Bulldogs, the Chicago Staleys, the Dayton Triangles, and the Rock Island Independents burst upon a sports-crazed America in the Roaring Twenties.

A multi-sport card set was issued by Spalding's Sports Company of America brand in 1926. The Sports Company set had approximately 30 college football stars and is notable for being the first card set to be issued separately from a tobacco product.

The football hobby considers the Sports Company set a minor issue, as the cards feature only west coast players. The Sports Company cards are

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scarce and practically unknown to most hobbyists.

It wasn't until 1933, when Goudey Gum released another multi-sport set called the Sport Kings, that football cards reappeared nationally. Three storied football names appear among the Sport Kings set—Red Grange, Knute Rockne, and Jim Thorpe. But with only three football cards among stars of many sports, the Goudey set is by football card standards only a minor set.

A more important set of 36 cards was issued by National Chicle Gum two years later. It featured pro football players like Bronko Nagurski, Dutch Clark, Beattie Feathers, Bernie Masterson, and a college coach of some renown, Knute Rockne. The Rockne card is No. 9 in the National Chicle set.

Sport Kings and National Chicle cards have between them six of the ten most valuable football cards. No more football cards were produced until 1948, when chewing gum brands grew popular in the postwar years. From 1948 to the present, at least one football card set has been produced annually.

In the history of the hobby, most years only produced one set. Until recently, multi-set years in football cards were rare. Despite what seemed to be fertile ground for a new national sport, the NFL struggled in fits and starts before the affluent and leisure-rich 1950s guaranteed success.



The 1952 Bowman Jim Lansford “Large” card, No. 144, a coveted collectible

The 1960s also saw considerable growth in the sport but profits were small because a competition raged between the two major leagues, the AFL and

the NFL. Not until the 1970s, when a merger ended the competition, did pro football begin to supplant baseball as the national passion. Interest in football cards have followed the rise of the sport across the country.

When the Topps Chewing Gum monopoly finally ended in 1989, a pent up wave of new cards was swiftly unleashed on collectors. The backwash from that wave is with us even now, and all but the sharpest hobbyists have felt its financially treacherous undertow.

During the autumn of 1989, the number of major card sets jumped to four. The following year five appeared. The big explosion came in 1991, when thirteen sets were issued. In 1992, proving it was no fluke, twenty major nationally distributed sets of pro football stars made it to market. Football cards have inundated the hobby market in a most remarkable fashion.

Things have settled down somewhat since that great burst of enthusiasm, But today it is still a collector's market.

There are several explanations why sane people should choose to make a hobby of collecting slips of cardboard bearing images of professional athletes and others. Collectors can learn interesting facts, make money, and have something to talk about. The hobby even gives people somewhere to go on the weekends. Card shows are popular in many American cities.

As far as collecting goes, trading cards have most things beat for variety, cost, convenience, and quality. Besides sports, dozens of types of trading cards are being sold. Releases include soap opera stars, musicians, war heroes, cars, motorcycles, cartoon characters, movie and TV spin offs, animals, politicians, and criminals, to name a few.

The subjects suitable for display on trading cards are just about limitless. Advances in computerized printing technology and the peculiar American craving for celebrity mementos have encouraged the recent explosion in trading card production. Today it's much like the days when trading

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cards first appeared in cigarette packs. But without the smokes.

Like most pro sports, football cards come major and minor. In the football card hobby, major cards and sets are distinguished from minor sets by factors of availability, quality, and collector interest. Major football sets, or “mainstream sets” as they are often called, are the products of companies like Topps Chewing Gum and enjoy nationwide distribution.

Minor sets are usually produced by local companies for local fans and collectors, although the larger companies occasionally make minor sets. Football cards owe everything to their cousins in the baseball card hobby. Baseball is where it began.

But football card collecting has achieved a solid second place, with basketball and hockey cards rising fast. The biggest new customer base for the hobby is men over thirty, although the youth market (mainly boys between six and sixteen) is stronger than ever.

Buying and selling sports cards is like a stock exchange in human images. Here’s how it

works: Usually you want to buy the first card issued of a player as a professional. In hobby parlance, it’s the rookie card. With luck, your player makes it to the championship or some other feat of obvious excellence.



Marion Motley’s 1950
Bowman rookie card, No. 43

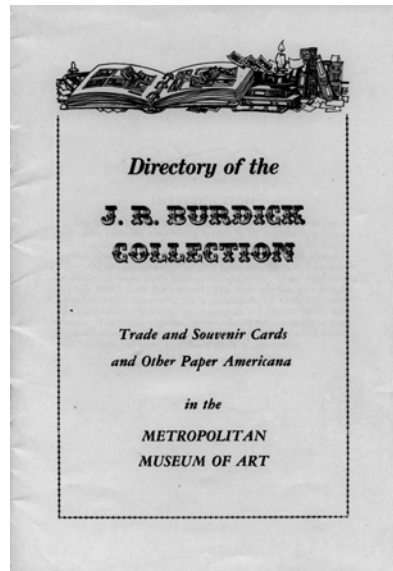
Now that rookie card you bought early on might be worth hundreds of dollars. With the ease of buying and selling on the internet nowadays, savvy collectors can sometimes make a killing. The trick is, you have to know which players will have great careers and which ones won’t. Very few do.

Another thing that determines value for a card is condition. Collectors are picky about wear. Creases and other defects can drive down the price, even among rarities.

Card centering is another big concern for hobbyists, especially vintage collectors. Many early cards were cut so that the image was shifted to one side or the other of the card face. Fleer football cards of the 1960s are notorious for this problem. A badly centered card is far less valuable than a well centered card, other things being equal. The original pioneer in the trading card hobby is a gentleman by the name of Jefferson Burdick.

A lifelong sufferer from rheumatoid arthritis, Burdick poured his energies into the pastime of collecting paper ephemera, especially trading cards. He invented the hobby as a hobby, putting together a vast collection of baseball cards and codifying most of the formal terms erudite collectors use to talk shop. Burdick is known as the “Father of Card Collecting” and his book, *American Card Catalog*, is the classic work on the subject.

Books and magazines containing price guides are handy references, but as writers we wanted to go beyond the set descriptions, fully educating ourselves in this frequently fascinating, sometimes frustrating field. To know football cards you must know football.



Cover of the Burdick Collection Directory, New York Museum of Modern Art

Card values are invariably tied up in the career of the player shown on the card. High visibility offensive players like quarterback, running back, and

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wide receiver are generally more valued than linemen, linebackers, or defensive backs. But there are exceptions. Another rule of thumb is that old cards are usually more valuable than new cards.

Similarly, scarce cards are more valuable than common cards. Exceptions exist to these rules as well. Although it is tricky to grasp what makes cards valuable, there are several positive things to consider: Football card collecting can be a lot of fun. A major reason is the wide variety of colorful and extremely intriguing football cards in existence.

Some of the more eagerly sought after cards include the Mayo John Dunlop card, the 1935 National Chicle Nagurski card, the 1952 Bowman Large Lansford card, the 1965 Topps Joe Namath card, and the 1983 Jogo CFL Warren Moon card. Recently issued items are less rare in most cases, but are no less interesting.

Significant cards and sets abound in the football hobby. Not only are these cards significant as aspects of our popular culture, they are valuable as aids to

understanding American obsessions in general. What do football cards really represent? If you're a follower of sports, cards may be a chance to invest in the career of your hero, if only at the tiniest level.

A few collectors follow the career of a single player, seeking out memorabilia for that player alone. Others have broader tastes, chasing cards for a team, a college, or yearly sets covering an entire sport. For the convenience of collectors, companies have often responded by producing complete "factory sets."

Factory sets are the annual set of one card each issued by a company for players in a particular sport. Unlike a "hand set" or "hand collated" set, a factory set didn't have to be put together from card packs. It came from the card company as a complete set.

Collecting cards of sports figures remains the central and most enduring pillar of the trading card industry. Football cards have emerged as a glamour sector of the industry. Other collecting fads may come and go, but there will always be interest in sports cards.

Baseball, with a long continuous history dating to the tobacco era more than a century ago, should always be the most popular. But football cards are getting close. Collecting cards is but one of the countless collecting hobbies that have modern Americans hooked.

Acquiring everything from Hummels to metal lunch boxes has become a national mania. Not for nothing does the popular bumper sticker say: "He or she who dies with the most stuff wins." For adults, collecting football cards for their investment potential can be of absorbing interest.

While this can (and does) make the hobby profitable for some, it can easily go awry, as unlucky collectors who have made poor choices will attest. It is good to remember what financier Malcolm Forbes said about collecting:

"Surround yourself with the things you love, regardless of investment potential. That way, even if they lose value, you will have nice things."

It is gratifying to note as well that football cards are finally beginning to do justice to a swift, violent sport. The

number of players pictured has increased at the same time design values have vaulted upward.

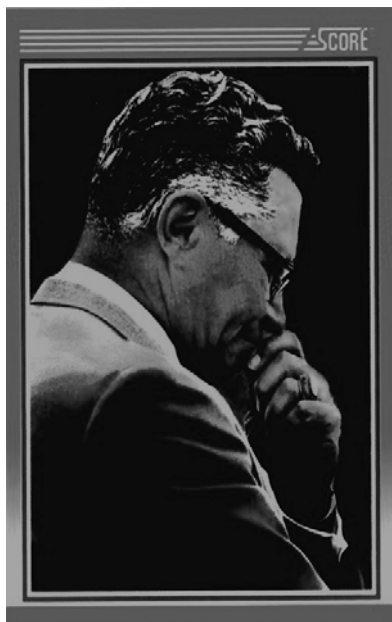
This represents a welcome change from the years up to 1989, before the Topps monopoly ended. Most early football cards were crude, poorly designed, and few in number.

Now even an average player can expect to be pictured on a card during his career. Maybe even two or three times. Careers in this high speed game are short. The chief poet of modern football, Vince Lombardi, saw the game as place where a man, helped by his comrades, would "run to daylight."

Lombardi's phrase is a simple and powerful evocation of football's near hypnotic impact on spectators.

The highest award in professional football is named after Lombardi, the game's greatest coach. Every year the winning Super Bowl team receives the *Lombardi Trophy*. A chance to participate in football's crowning pageant is the goal every NFL player carries with him on the field. It

is the opportunity to become one with the legend of the sport. Football picture cards help us remember the men who have been our gladiators. Formidable and heroic players may live forever in the memory of fans, but it is also nice to have a tangible keepsake, however small. What follows is the landscape of football cards, and, wherever appropriate, brief glimpses of the game itself.



The 1990 Score card of legendary pro football coach, Vince Lombardi

Football Scraps: The Earliest Specimens

Before football was even a fully-evolved sport, there were some football cards floating around. They were not cards in the traditional sense, but were more like paper souvenirs along the lines of advertising premiums, cut outs, and paper dolls. Pioneer collector Jefferson Burdick gave many of these unique items formal designations in his classic work, *American Card Catalog*.

Advanced hobbyists know them by the collective term “scraps.”

The word “scraps” comes from a portion of Burdick’s main collection, as described in the ACC. Sections 27 and 31 of the book differentiate these scrap specimens from other cards. The material in Burdick’s book details his renowned collection, (now housed in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.) The Burdick collection holds four full albums and five boxes devoted to 19th century scraps.

The era to which the scrap items belong runs from the years immediately following

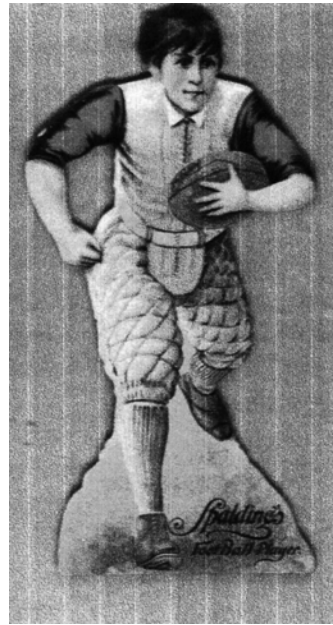
the Civil War to about 1887, when the first recognized football card, Henry Beecher, appeared. Early football was a fluid game, more like rugby than how we now play the game. In the early years young men at elite eastern colleges were the chief participants.

Because he helped write most of the key rules, Yale legend Walter Camp is widely regarded as the father of American football.

At Camp's insistence, American collegians discarded the early rugby-style game during a span of three years, 1880-1883. Records show that Camp talked the college rules convention into adopting the line of scrimmage, the center snap, 11 players to a side, and giving up the ball if it hadn't been advanced five yards (later changed to 10) in three downs. Otherwise the teams retained the egg-shaped ball from rugby instead of using a round one, and the action still centered on tackling the guy carrying it.

After Camp and his friends finished tinkering with football, it became the quintessential American game—swift, violent, unpredictable, and exciting, full

of sudden shifts of fortune and hard, glorious struggles. It provided a showplace for pure athletes like Jim Thorpe and tactical geniuses like Amos Alonzo Stagg. Although the sport originated in rugby, by 1883 American football was truly its own game, a thing apart.



Paper scrap from Spalding's
1896 die cut tribute to Walter
Camp (front)

Soon afterwards, American football swept through the ranks of collegians. In another innovation, Camp put a new

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scoring system in place, including points for touchdowns, conversions, safeties, and field goals



Paper scrap from Spalding's 1896 die cut tribute to Walter Camp (back)

Additional changes greeted the game in 1906 when concerns about violence were raised. President Theodore Roosevelt, a great fan, insisted that the colleges ban mass momentum plays like the Flying Wedge because they were too dangerous. By the time World War I broke out in 1914,

American football was very nearly the complete modern sport.

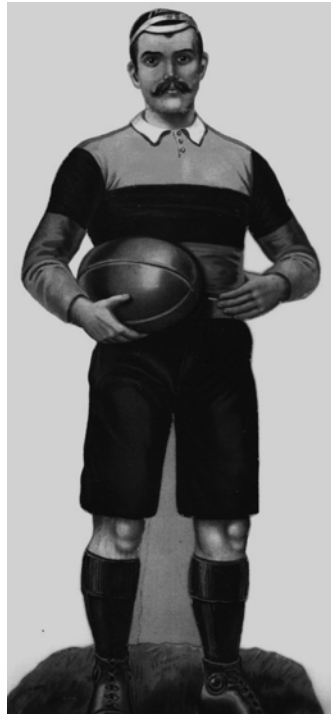
In the old days, as now, advertisers looked at any new fad, especially in sports, as a way to sell products. The new game of football earned its share of such attention. Most of these early promotional items are lost forever, but a few survive. Collectors eagerly seek material from football's formative years.

An interesting pre-Camp example of an early football "scrap" is the Raphael Tuck Company paper doll of an early college rugby player. This scrappy fellow measures 12" tall and 5 1/2" across at the base.

The Tuck piece came equipped with a little easel for standing him upright. Although the date of the Tuck scrap cannot be established exactly, an educated guess would place it around 1880.

Is it possible to guess which game the young man was playing? Football or rugby? Sports memorabilia expert Bill Mastro leans strongly towards the idea that rugby is the game the Tuck player represents.

“The little hat says the Tuck piece is a rugby issue,” Mastro said. “Small hats were popular among rugby players back then.”



Scrap from the Raphael Tuck set of college rugby players, a 12” tall paper doll

Football collector Chuck Walsh thinks the essential clue lies in the abbreviated pants the player is wearing.

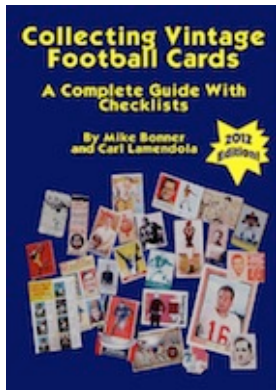
“The short pants are a dead giveaway,” Walsh said. “They are in a style geared to rugby.”

Another Tuck Co. scrap clearly identifies itself as a rugby issue. This is an entire paper doll panorama showing rugby players in a match featuring two British schools, Newport and Cardiff.

According to the set’s directions, arranging the paper dolls on their bases would “give you the famous Newport and Cardiff Rugby Football Match in full play.”

Cardiff was chartered as a school in the British system in 1883, which means the rugby match depicted on the paper cut outs had to have taken place after that date. But by 1883, American schools had already adopted the Camp version of the game.

Before 1883, Americans played rugby with just a few minor variations. From 1876-79 Princeton, Harvard, Columbia and Yale played a slightly Americanized variation of rugby. Camp himself said later on that he had not invented American football, he had simply improved on what was already there.



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