

PERFECTLY PROPHETIC

THE STORY OF THE RISE OF PRO FOOTBALL
WAS FORETOLD NEARLY 60 YEARS AGO
WITH 1957 TOPPS FOOTBALL

BY DAVID LEE

In 1957, Topps released its second NFL card set, taking over the pro football card market after acquiring Bowman the previous year. The 1957 Topps Football set is one of the most recognizable and most star-packed sets in history, containing Rookie Cards of Bart Starr #119, Johnny Unitas #138, Raymond Berry #94, Paul Hornung #151 and Dick "Night Train" Lane #85.

At the time of the set's release, Unitas and Starr were unheralded, afterthought quarterbacks. Starr was a 17th-round draft pick in 1956. Unitas was actually drafted in the ninth round by the Steelers in 1955 but was released before the season started. He played for a semi-pro team before landing with the Colts in 1956. Both legends were lucky to make it into the set, but history shows the two were meant to be there.

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A deeper look into 1957 Topps reveals a prophetic checklist that was perfectly positioned to foretell the rise of pro football in the years following its release. The timing was perfect, as if those who built the checklist had a glimpse into the future. The late 1950s may have been the most important time in the history of pro football. The sport was gaining incredible national momentum. A year after the release of the 1957 Topps set, the Colts and Giants met in the 1958 NFL Championship Game — referred to as “The Greatest Game Ever Played.” The game featured 15 Hall of Fame players and coaches. An estimated 45 million people watched the TV broadcast. The Colts won in overtime 23-17. It is credited with legitimizing football as a professional sport, giving baseball serious competition in America’s pro sports landscape. The next year, Lamar Hunt founded the American Football League. It would soon rival the NFL until the two leagues officially merged in 1970.

The 1957 Topps set features 13 Colts and 13 Giants, including key players from that championship game such as Unitas, Berry, Lenny Moore #128, Art Donovan #65, Gino Marchetti #5, Frank Gifford #88, Roosevelt Brown #11, Charley Conerly #109 and Emlen Tunnell #32.

It’s interesting that the top four Rookie Cards in this set are two Colts—Unitas and Berry—and two Packers—Starr and Hornung. All four are Hall of Famers, and their first cards prophesized their teams’ dominance through the late ’50s and ’60s. In the 11 seasons following the release of the set (1958-68), the Colts or Packers won or appeared in 10 NFL Championship Games. In addition, the Packers won

the first two Super Bowls, and the Colts represented the NFL in Super Bowl III and won Super Bowl V.

All those key cards tied to ‘The Greatest Game Ever Played,’ and to the Colts’ and Packers’ decade of dominance helped make 1957 Topps a foundation for the football card industry.

At 154 cards, it is one of the largest vintage football sets ever produced. Other heroes of the time appearing in the set are Y.A. Tittle #30, Tommy McDonald #124, Earl Morrall #104, Chuck Bednarik #49 and Bobby Layne #32. It’s hard to imagine the list being even better, but it could have been. It was very rare for rookies to be included in those early Topps sets. But Topps made an exception for just a few 1957 rookies, including Hornung, who was a Heisman Trophy winner and the No. 1 overall draft pick. A key rookie in 1957 who didn’t make it into the set was No. 6 draft pick Jim Brown, whose Rookie Card appeared in 1958 Topps.

“It’s definitely one of the key vintage sets,” says Nick Redwine, owner of Nick’s Sports Cards in Dallas, Texas. “I’d say 1957 Topps and 1955 Topps All American are





Mike McCormack



TACKLE-BROWNS



Leo Elter



BACK - REDSKINS



J. C. Caroline



BACK - BEARS

'DOUBLE FUN FOR YOUNGSTERS OF ALL AGES'

There are three known advertising panels that were used to market the set to stores and distributors. Each one shows three card fronts stacked vertically. The backs have marketing copy covering the top one-third and an example of a card back on the bottom third. A portion of the copy reads, "Tops 1957 Professional Football Picture Card Bubble Gum. TWO handsome, full-color pictures of America's top stars on each card! It's double fun for youngsters of all ages."

One ad panel features Al Dorow, Harlon Hill and Bert Rechichar on the front with an Ollie Matson back example. Another features Bobby Watkins, Gino Marchetti, Clarence Peaks and an Ollie Matson back. The third panel has Mike McCormack, Leo Elter, J.C. Caroline and an Elroy Hirsch back.

All three panels are very difficult to find and are valued at around \$700 each.

TOPPS 1957 PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL PICTURE CARD BUBBLE GUM

Two handsome, full color pictures of America's top stars on each card! It's double fun for youngsters of all ages.

On the back, statistics, a colorful biography and cartoon closeup of each star.

There's never been a series to rival the variety and excitement of TOPPS 1957 PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL.

Another moneymaker for you from the makers of Bazooka and Blony, countermeasures world over.

SAMPLE CARD

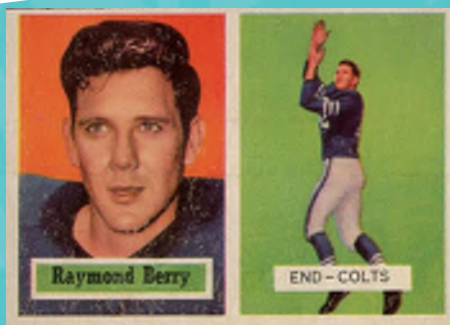
46 ELROY HIRSCH
 FWD • LOS ANGELES RAMS
 HOME: Los Angeles, California
 COLLEGE: Wisconsin Tm. Fm. 12
 Ht. 6'01" Wt. 191 Age 32

One of the most respected players in Pro Ball, Hirsch was the Rams' No. 2 receiver last year. In one play he electrified the crowd by catching a pass and traveling 76 yards for a score.

PLAY RECORDED RECORD				
Yds.	Revs.	Avs.	TDs	Wt.
191	30	6.3	17.2	0
191	315	5823	16.7	47



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the two most popular vintage football sets. The '57 set is just loaded. The story of Unitas and Starr could be talked about forever. If anyone gets a decent copy of any 1957 card, they're likely going to get it graded."

ICONIC DESIGN

The 1957 Topps set was the first Topps Football set measuring 2 1/2 by 3 1/2 inches, setting the standard for the industry for nearly the following six decades. While the horizontal layout is nothing new, the two-panel, two-photo design was ahead of its time. It became one of the most iconic and most recognizable designs ever. It has been redone many times in modern reprint and anniversary inserts, including autographs and memorabilia cards celebrating the set's unique impact on history.

The fronts of the cards are divided down the middle with a full white border on all edges. There is a profile head shot on the left side and a full-body action shot on the right. These photos are superimposed over a solid-color background with different colors on either side. Red, light blue, green and yellow are the most common colors used. The card backs are also bisected, with the left side containing the player info, stats and a bio. The right side has two comic drawings illustrating facts about the featured player.

PRINTING AND DISTRIBUTION

The set was released in two series, with the first containing 88 cards and the second including 66. Several cards in the second series were double-printed, including the Unitas and McDonald RCs. The cards were available in 1-cent penny packs that had one card, 5-cent packs of six cards, and 12-card cello packs.

The 5-cent wrappers are pretty iconic and highly recognized as well, with the cartoon football player about to catch a ball, and the words "Topps Pro Football Bubble Gum" inside a white football shape. The imperfect off-set color printing gives it a great vintage look. Penny packs had the same text, but appearing larger and repeating around the wrapper along with drawings of football players in different poses.

ERRORS, CHECKLISTS AND GRADING

The checklist card has two versions, both at the top of the value list in this set, pricing at \$750 each in good condition and without being marked up. One has a Bazooka gum back and the other has a Twin Blony gum back. "The checklist is an exceptionally tough card to find," says Pat Blanford, Vice President of Kevin Savage Cards in Maumee, Ohio. "Many kids back then just threw them away."

The popular error card is Bill Sherman #58. One version has his position and team missing, and the other has no team name. These errors are valued at roughly \$200-\$300. The correct version is just \$4.

The 1957 Topps set is one of the most popular vintage sets for grading. Like most sets, the first (Eddie LeBaron #1) and last (Fred Morrison #154) cards tend to be the hardest to find in great condition. The cards have a pretty

sturdy card stock for their era. See the graded report sidebar on this page for the top five most popular cards graded by Beckett Grading Service.

Completing a 1957 Topps set isn't necessarily difficult since the cards are not too hard to find, but it is one of the most costly vintage football sets. If you count just one version of the checklist card, you're looking at six cards priced at \$200 or more. If you aim to build an ungraded set in decent condition, you'll need to decide what condition issues you are willing to accept. Since the cards have a full white border, centering is the main issue. The good news is that the white border tends to hide corner wear, as opposed to color borders that can reveal more wear. However, the color backgrounds can make dings, creases and scratches more apparent. A quality Unitas graded example, such as a PSA 8, can command around \$4,000-\$5,000.

