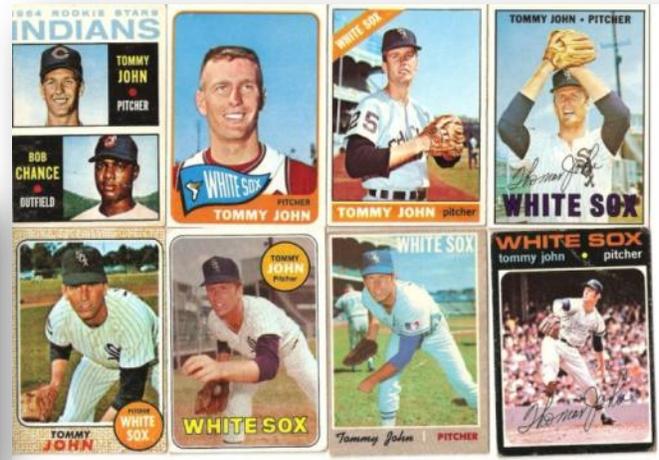
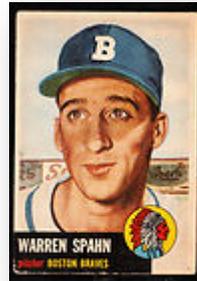


Spahn and John Saw Them All

By George Vrechek



Warren Spahn and Tommy John saw them all. Saw what? You ask. Both were crafty lefties with long careers but in different eras and (mostly) different leagues. Between them they won 651 games over 47 years in the majors. (They also lost 476 games between them.) What did they see? Between them they saw their faces on Topps cards each year for 39 years in a row.

Spahn was there for Topps in 1951 signing for maybe \$100 to get pictured in Topps inaugural issue. He was one of the few stars who stayed with Topps each year through the “card war” years with Bowman. He smiled for the Topps photographers each year through 1965 bowing out as a balding 44-year-old pitcher/coach with the Mets and Giants.

Tommy John got his half of a rookie card in 1964. As Spahn left in 1965, John began his own uninterrupted run of 25 more years of Topps cards finishing in Yankee pinstripes at the age of 46. He was even pictured in 1975 when he took a year off to recover from what he called ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction, and what we call Tommy John surgery.

I enjoyed collecting cards of each player. I organized John’s cards in a binder noticing how he aged a little each year. I rooted for him to keep playing and keep getting pictured on cards. Surprisingly the Topps photographers seemed to take a new picture of him each year. Both Spahn and John wound up on all sorts of Topps issues including O Pee Chees, Venezuelans, Burger Kings, double-headers, tattoos, giants, minis, bucks, and stand ups.

Over the 39 years these players appeared, Topps card designs varied like new automobile designs. In the early years during Spahn’s career, designs morphed quickly with the changing technology. Topps had three different sizes, colorized photos, autographs, drawings, black and white photography, cartoons, quizzes, portrait and landscape orientation, full-color photos, and graphics all of which changed a bit each year and gave each year a distinctive look. By the time Tommy John’s career started, Topps seemed happy to enjoy their monopoly by mostly staying with the formula and tweaking the look

occasionally - change the dashboard, tweak the trim, add some color, show the stats on the back. Rarely would the designers get a chance to get very wild.

If you placed Spahn's and John's cards on a table in chronologic order and asked someone (like me) to describe each player's card and the card design in as few words as possible, this is what you'd get.

- 1951 Thin Spahn, black and white, old uniform, small, perforated, taffy, game, Spartan
- 1952 Pleasant smile, big, color, stats, red or black back, colorized photos
- 1953 Wistful Spahn, arty, whimsical, "B"oston hat, cartoons, paintings expanded imagination
- 1954 Two real pictures, Warren shows you the ball, good-looking Brave emblem
- 1955 The 1954 design morphs to the horizontal Spahn, two pictures again, color
- 1956 Another two-picture morph with actual (irrelevant) background
- 1957 Spahn arrives in full-color photography, a clean classic, full stats, modern
- 1958 A happy Spahn as he strikes you out, one photo cutout over green, full follow through
- 1959 Knot-hole look, back to full stats, 3 chances to get his birthday right
- 1960 Spahn looks quizzical, you want me to what?, back to the horizontal for the last time
- 1961 The look is 1957 but clunkier
- 1962 The woodsy look is in
- 1963 Spahn with two real photos, chippy bottom border
- 1964 The veteran Spahn get his own bland card, rookie John shares a card, Spahn hits his last of 35 career homers.
- 1965 Hatless Spahn's ears have grown but hair hasn't, White Sox John wears Indian uniform
- 1966 Clean-cut Tommy John, 1957 card look with banner
- 1967 Tommy looks sharp, maybe better than 1957 design
- 1968 Orange waffles around Tommy, fuzzy, spring photos
- 1969 Topps merges 1968 with 1967 and throws in a pink back
- 1970 Gray border, the Confederates
- 1971 John in action for the first time, chippy black border is a bold look, greenish back photo
- 1972 Wild and crazy Tommy with psychedelic Dodger logo
- 1973 Like 1968 but crummier, black border goes to the flip side, generic figure throws lefty
- 1974 Let the bland begin (we do have a monopoly, don't we?), greenback
- 1975 Wildest Topps borders yet, Tommy has his own surgery
- 1976 Bottom borders aplenty, little generic lefty pitcher
- 1977 Banner, greenback, bland-o-rama. John hits his last of 5 career homers.
- 1978 Script font for Dodgers, stitches on ball, orange back, John's last career at-bat
- 1979 like 1976 but different, John goes from Dodgers to Yanks, only second action photo
- 1980 A non-stimulating combination of 1974 and 1977
- 1981 Big hat on front for hopefully first and last time, red back
- 1982 Zoomy hockey puck graphics, green back
- 1983 Topps revisits 1963, John visits as an Angel
- 1984 Square-up of the 1983 card

- 1985 Cockeyed banner
- 1986 Half-black edge, chip away, Tommy's with the A's.
- 1987 See 1962, Tommy finishing with Yankees again
- 1988 See 1966 and 1967, John's been playing so long you need a magnifier to read the stats
- 1989 Tommy is worn out after so many Topps designs, name is aligned with roller coaster

Players come and go. The average stay in the major leagues is maybe 5 or 6 years. The chance of playing more than 20 years in the majors is miniscule. Warren Spahn and Tommy John played long and hard. They saw it all, including a run of Topps cards for 39 years that included the wild, the innovative, the classic, the bland, and the re-hashed. A great time it was.



1964 ROOKIE STARS
INDIANS

