

FADING STARS

The author takes a look at the final seasons of baseball's MVPs.

By
George
Vrechek

When we were kids in the early days of post-War baseball cards, no one I knew had any great interest in "rookie" cards. We were generally looking for the most recent card of a player, the one that showed his most recent team and current statistics.

We had to be satisfied with that bent-up old 1953 Bowman of Stan Musial until a new card finally showed up for Stan at the end of 1958. Casey Stengel's '53 black & white shared the same fate while we waited for a new card of Casey.

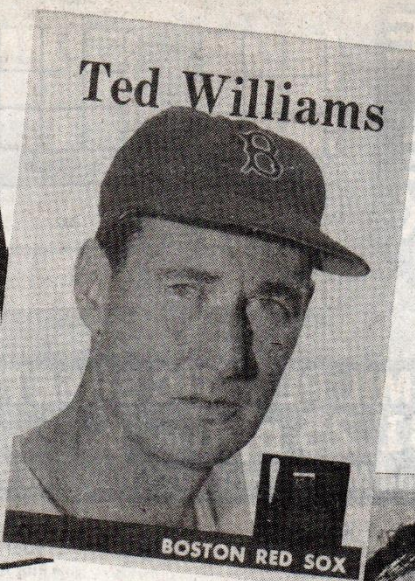
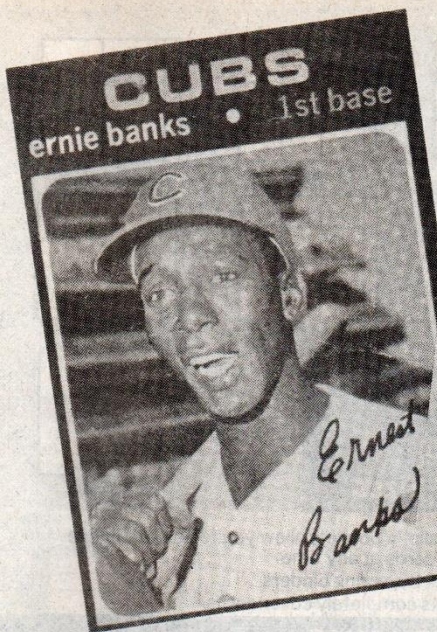
Today, the last card of a player is generally his cheapest. As some previous SCD writers have suggested, the final card of a player should be given greater importance than it is. It has been suggested that a card be issued the year after a "star" player retires so that his

lifetime statistics can be shown in their entirety.

What about seeing the last year's statistics of the players?

Unfortunately, the last years of many players, including some Hall of Famers, are not ones that they would like us to remember. There are a few players who went out with a flourish, but we find the trend with many is to retire well past their peak years. With today's higher salaries and the interest of the fans in seeing the greats—as is demonstrated by the popular "seniors" golf tour—it is probable that this trend will continue.

Forty-seven-year-old starting pitchers, 45-year-old player/managers may continue to enjoy their last years at peak salary and popularity, if not performance.



Only four MVP winners recorded a .300 or better batting average in their final season. Ted Williams heads the list with a .316 final mark. Only one pitcher, Sandy Koufax, won more than 20 games in his final season.

Dave Masterson and Timm Boyle have written a book about *Baseball's Best, the MVPs*. This enjoyable book includes details on each MVP since 1931 when the Baseball Writers Association of America created a permanent, officially-sanctioned award. Each MVP is illustrated along with his lifetime statistics.

What would baseball fans do without the endless supply of statistics?

Interestingly the players' final years are noticeable reminders that no one lasts forever. Hank Aaron's average goes from .301, to .268, to .234, finally finishing at .229. Homers decrease: 40, 20, 12, 10. Musial goes from .330 to .255 to retirement. Frank Robinson finishes at .224, Mays finishes at .211, McCovey at .204, and Banks at .193. And Ernie looks

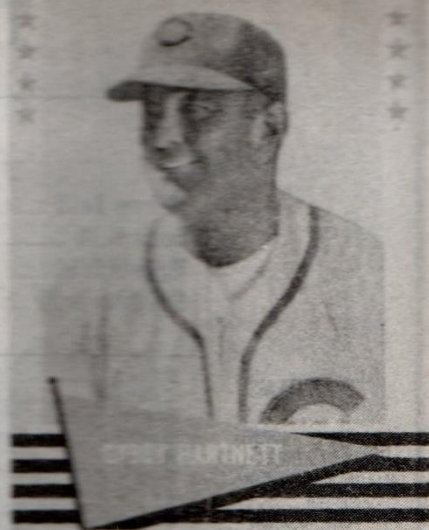
so happy on his 1971 card. Mays, however, looked pretty tired on his final card as a 1973 Met.

Of all the MVPs from both leagues since 1931, only five players finished their careers by hitting above .285 in their final season. And three of those five players had their careers cut short, either by death (Munson, Clemente) or injury (Cochrane).

The noteworthy exception to declining averages in declining years is Ted Williams. In 1960, at age 42, Ted finished his final year hitting .316 in 113 games and hitting a home run in his last at bat. (Let's forget that a noted author has suggested they were grooving it for Ted that last day.)

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Ted Williams



Of all the MVPs in both leagues since 1931, only five have hit .285 or better in their last season in the majors. Ted Williams leads this group by recording a .316 average his final season. Hartnett batted an even .300 in his final season.

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Actually the .316 was a decline of sorts for the incredible Williams, representing the second-lowest average of his career. Williams, who appeared on his last Topps card in 1958, was the subject of an entire Fleer set in 1959. He also appeared in Fleer's 1960 set.

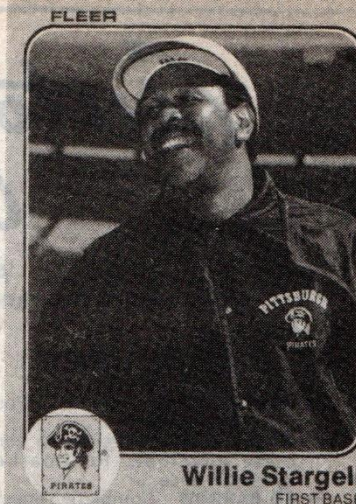
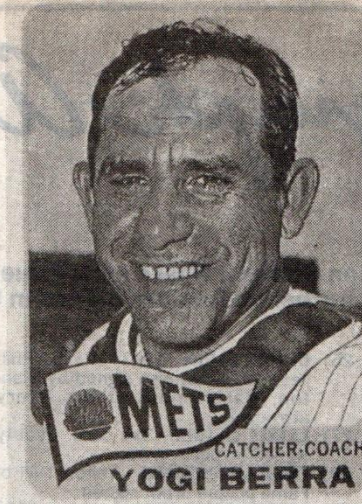
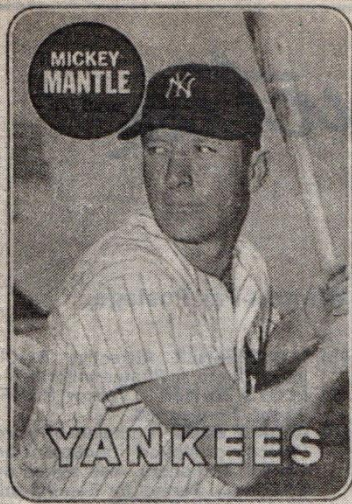
The other .300 finisher was Gabby Hartnett who batted an even .300 in 64 games for the 1941 Giants. His last "card" appearance was on the Dixie lids of 1937-38.

Another 13 MVPs hit respectable averages of between .250 and .282 in their last years. This list includes Jackie Robinson, Joe DiMaggio, Stan Musial, Johnny Bench, Yaz, and the Fox(x)es Jimmy and Nellie.

However, the majority of now-retired MVPs (65 percent) finished with years batting less than .250—averages about equal to that of today's \$800,000 short-stops. It is admittedly unfair to lump people like Lou Boudreau into this category, coming to bat twice as a Red Sox manager in 1952 and hitting .000, but this is a not-very-serious article about statistics and this unpaid guest writer ought to be able to use Boudreau to help make a point.

The big averages in this group go to two-time MVP Hank Greenberg at .249 and 25 homers, Boog Powell and Joe Morgan at .244, three-time MVP Roy Campanella at .242 (the year before the car accident), Elston Howard at .241 (which followed a .178 year), and lov-

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Three-time MVPs Mantle and Berra had so-so final season averages. Mantle finished at .237 and Berra came in at .222. Three years after his MVP season, Stargell finished his career with a .233 average.

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able Dick Allen at .240.

Three-time MVPs Mantle and Berra finished at .237 and .222 respectively, while still accumulating lifetime averages of .298 and .285. (Berra batted just nine times as a 1965 Met "catcher/coach" as listed on his Topps card of that year.) Stargell finished as a .233 pinch-hitter three years after his MVP year.

Joe Gordon's .236 and Rizzuto's .231 weren't that far from their .268 and .273 lifetime averages. Frankie Frisch helped my story by hitting .219 in 32 at bats as a 39 year-old occasional player/mostly manager.

Orlando Cepeda hit .215 and then retired to jail for a 10-month term. Hard-luck Zoilo Versalles hit .200 or under in five of his 12 big league campaigns. His final year was no exception at .191.

Harmon Killebrew dropped to .199 in

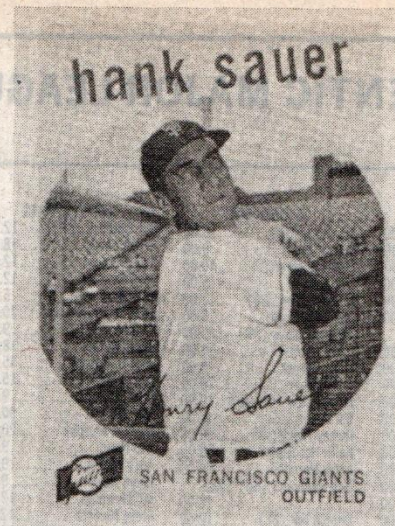
his 22nd and final season. Joe Torre hit a miraculous .363 at third base as the 1971 MVP, but retired six years later with .176 in only 51 at bats.

Now comes the .159 and under club—mostly good glove men and managers who were of help to their clubs even after their hitting tapered off. Brooks Robinson made the Hall of Fame with only two .300-plus seasons out of 23. His last three years went .201, .211 and .149.

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Robinson finished his career with a .149 mark.



The 1952 MVP, Hank Sauer, hit .067 in his final season.



Gehrig recorded a .143 average after playing in only eight games in his final season of 1939. His last card appearance was in the 1934 Goudey set.

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Dick Groat left at .156; Maury Wills at .129. Marty Marion and Lou Boudreau were managers who played little and registered .000 in their last year, as did coach Phil Cavarretta. Chuck Klein's lifetime average was .320, although as a player-coach in his final five years he hit .218, .123, .071, .100 and .143.

Pete Rose will probably retire some year after going four-for-four on Open-

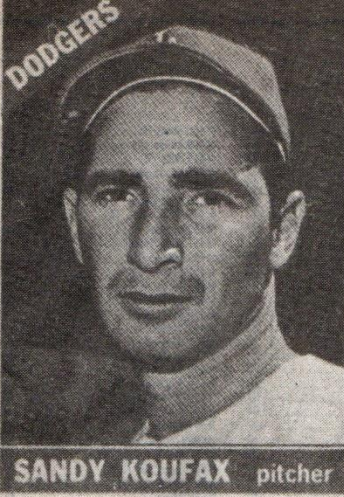
ing Day to leave as a 1.000 hitter.

In 1953 I traded all my cards except one for a single card of new Cub Ralph Kiner, even though he was still pictured in a Pirate uniform. The one card I kept was that of my favorite Cub, Hank Sauer, the previous year's MVP. However, by 1959, Hank was down with the mortals, hitting .067, and his 1959 card is only worth 50 cents in Mint condition. Fortunately, I traded to get my 400 1951-53 cards back.

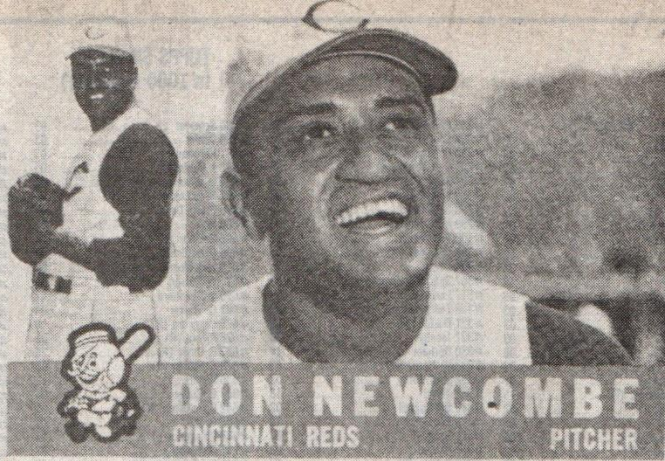
Even Lou Gehrig's streak of 2,130

consecutive games and 12 years of hitting over .300 came to an end. He could play only eight games by 1939, hitting just .143. One could imagine Gehrig retiring like Ted Williams—slowing down by only hitting .300. Gehrig practically had his own card set in 1934 with Goudey. Despite five more years in the majors, 1934 was his last card appearance. Wheaties may have signed him to an exclusive contract for cereal boxes.

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SANDY KOUFAX pitcher



DON NEWCOMBE
CINCINNATI REDS PITCHER

Only one MVP pitcher won more than nine games in his last season in the major leagues. Sandy Koufax finished his career with a 27-9 record and a 1.73 ERA. Newcombe won six games in his last season in the majors leagues.

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The still-active former MVPs don't look like they will vary drastically from their predecessors. Rose, Reggie, Carew, Schmidt, Baylor, Foster, Lynn, Rice, Parker and others will probably stay in the game as long as they can.

What about the MVP pitchers? There have been 16 pitchers awarded the MVP. Although they may have been effective as spot starters or relievers in their later years, only one pitcher won more than nine games in his last year. Sandy Koufax retired at the age of 30, having developed arthritis in his pitching arm. His final season record though was 27-9 with a 1.73 ERA. But Sandy doesn't look too happy about it all on

his final appearance on a regular card in 1966.

The next big three in terms of final season wins are Spud Chandler (nine), Lefty Grove (seven), and Don Newcombe (six). Chandler's "rookie" card and last card were one and the same, a 1940 Playball being his lone appearance in a major set.

Carl Hubbell and inmate Denny McLain had four wins, while Bob Gibson had two. Bobby Shantz, Jim Konstanty, Bucky Walters, Dizzy Dean, Hal Newhouser and Rollie Fingers (?) had three wins among them in their final years.

The MVPs may have stayed a few seasons beyond their best years, but there is evidence that management may have waited a year or two too long to bring at least some of the stars of the past to the majors. Although their first-year statistics also include some 10 and 20 at-bat seasons, their first year averages were impressive.

Generally their rookie cards wouldn't have been in the "sleeper" category. (Their "rookie" cards would have really been hot numbers if only they could have appeared on a "limited" distribution update, glossy or "rare and scarce" bronze extra).

The majority of them hit over .290 their first year. Ted Williams started at .327, Cochrane at .331, Gehring at .462, DiMaggio .323, Musial .426, Berra .364, Cepeda .312, Medwick .349, McCovey .354, Klein .360, Gehrig .423, Banks .314, Cavarretta .381 etc, etc.

If I had been an MVP with, say, a .325 lifetime average I think I would have quit when my average went below .250 and then started a "seniors" league just

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with final score — \$5.00 each, 3 for \$14.00, 5 for \$22.00

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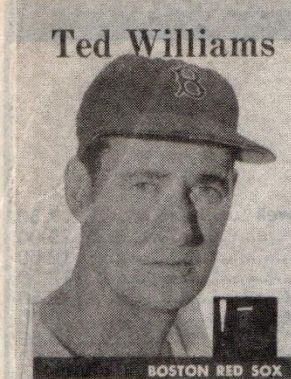
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Bears 8x10 Color Photos
Group shot of Payton, McMahon

5 Color 1985 Super Bowl Champs 49ers
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Bears Pennants \$3.50 each
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Ted Williams

BOSTON RED SOX



ROBERTO CLEMENTE
OUTFIELD



MICKEY COCHRANE



RAY HARTNETT

The four MVPs with the best final season averages are shown. Williams hit .316 in his final campaign while Clemente hit .312 in his final season of 1972 before being killed in a plane crash.

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for those over 40. Maybe then I could have been a .325 hitter again.

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Retired MVPs' Averages in Their Final Season

The First Five

Williams316
Clemente312
Cochrane .....	.306
Hartnett .....	.300
Munson .....	.288

Respectable Finishes

Lombardi .....	.282
Jackie Robinson .....	.275
Jimmy Foxx .....	.268
Nellie Fox .....	.268
Rosen .....	.267
Gehring .....	.267

DiMaggio .....	.267
Yastrzemski .....	.266
Jensen .....	.263
Musial .....	.255
Elliott .....	.255
Maris .....	.255
Bench .....	.255
F. McCormick .....	.250

Could Have Been Better

Greenberg .....	.249
Powell .....	.244
Morgan .....	.244
Campanella .....	.242
Elston Howard .....	.241
Dick Allen .....	.240
Mantle .....	.237
Joe Gordon .....	.236
Stargell .....	.233
Rizzuto .....	.231
Aaron .....	.229
Frank Robinson .....	.224
Berra .....	.222
Frisch .....	.219
Cepeda .....	.215
Camilli .....	.212
Medwick .....	.211
Mays .....	.211
Ken Boyer .....	.206
McCovey .....	.204

The Under .200 Club

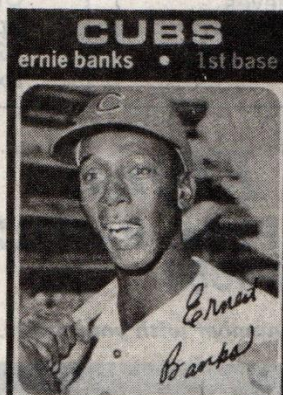
Killebrew .....	.199
Banks .....	.193
Versalles .....	.191
Torre .....	.176
Groat .....	.156
Brooks Robinson .....	.149
Klein .....	.143
Gehrig .....	.143
Wills .....	.129
Sauer .....	.067
Marion .....	.000
Cavarretta .....	.000
Boudreau .....	.000

Pitchers	Wins	Losses	ERA
Koufax	27	9	1.73
Chandler	9	5	2.46
Grove	7	7	4.37
Newcombe	6	9	4.48
McClain	4	7	6.39
Hubbell	4	4	4.91
Gibson	3	10	5.04
Shantz	2	5	3.12
Konstanty	1	1	4.65
Walters	0	0	4.50
Average	4	5	4.44
Cooper	0	0	0.00
Dean	0	0	0.00
Newhouser	0	0	0.00



TWINS

HARMON KILLEBREW



CUBS

ernie banks • 1st base
Ernie Banks



SENATORS

Zoilo Versalles | SHORTSTOP



METS

JOE TORRE
Joe Torre

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