

The wide world of sports cards



Cigaretten-Bilderdienst, G.m.b.H. of Hamburg, Germany, a photo service for German cigarette cards in the 1930s, produced cards to be placed (neatly) into albums. Jesse Owens appeared in cards featuring the 1936 Berlin Olympics.



“Other” sports starting with track and field

By George Vrechek with Ed Pike

A few years ago, I wrote a series of *SCD* articles: You can't collect everything, but why not try? I attempted to quantify all the single sports cards ever issued, conveniently skipping the plethora of cards produced after 1980. I looked at vintage baseball, football, basketball, hockey, boxing and golf cards to estimate that there were perhaps 150,000 cards issued, and that to collect even half of them would be significant. The articles prodded some collectors to expand their collections.

Cards for all the other sports

I was so exhausted thumbing through catalogs for the major sports that I arbitrarily assigned a number of 3,000 cards (2%) to all the “other” sports. It was also convenient at the time not to address cards for other sports outside the U.S. and Canada. This sports catch-all included boxing, golf, track and field, wrestling, swimming, billiards, tennis, cycling, skating, skiing, horse racing, cricket, lacrosse, soccer and every conceivable sport. There seemed to be no printed catalogs for the other sports. As I investigated, I learned that the scope of such cards is so broad that it would be impossible to describe in a brief article, but why not try?

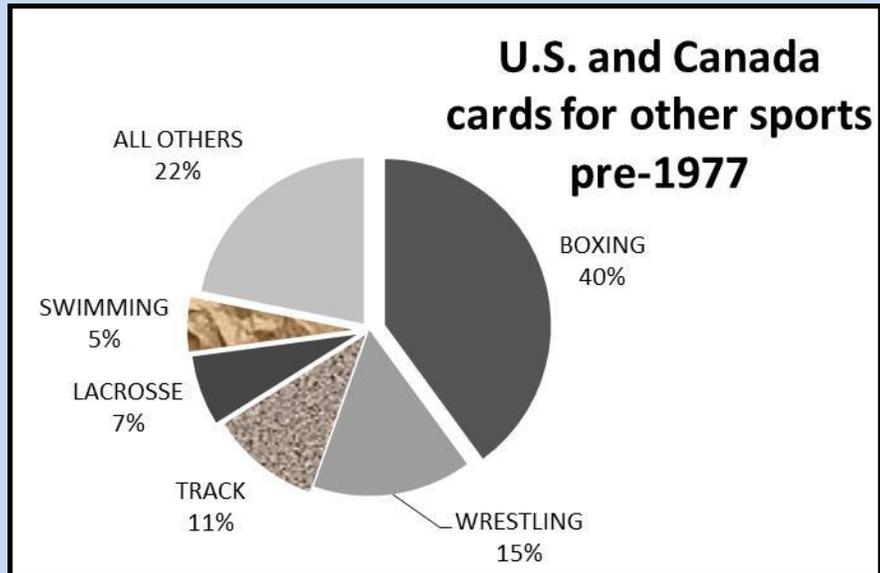
The big picture, U.S. and Canada

The distinction made with baseball cards between vintage and modern is not as applicable to cards in the other sports. Whereas baseball card production exploded after 1980, cards issued for other sports began a more gradual expansion. Nonetheless, based on my latest research, I estimated at least 5,600 cards were issued in the U.S. and Canada for other sports prior to 1981, almost double my initial guess.

The 1977 Sportscaster series accounts for 1,791 of those cards and is another story itself. The cards from all other sets are comprised of roughly 40% boxing, 15% wrestling, 11% track and field, 7% lacrosse, 5% swimming, 3% golf, 3% soccer and 16% all other sports.

Other countries

I found that cards from the U.S. for other sports are a drop in the bucket compared to cards issued in the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, France, Italy, Sweden and elsewhere. U.K. card collector, Tim Thornham, roughly estimated for me that vintage sports-related cards issued in just the U.K. likely exceeded 50,000, and that sports cards are perhaps 10% of all U.K. issues.



German tobacco issues in the 1930s add thousands more cards to the count.

A closer look at track and field

Let's start by exploring other sports with track and field cards. Ed Pike of San Francisco, California, ran track in school and has collected cards of track and field athletes. His first track coach offered him a '63 Aaron out of a scrap book or ice cream for beating his 880-yard dash goal; he went with the Aaron.

I asked Pike, what we would find out there if we went beyond the 147,000 cards or so that are in the major sports, a title undoubtedly insulting to all fans of the other sports. Pike provided most of the information that follows.

One website, Track and Field and Road Racing Trading Cards (<http://athleticcards.com/>), has a fantastic checklist of such cards issued by all countries going back to the 1880s. Of 584 issues, 160 are from the U.S., 158 from U.K. and 73 from Germany.

Places to look for vintage track and field	
U.S. issues	# of cards
Sportscaster	307
T218	56
Pan Handle Scrap	46
Spalding Sports Champions	27
E229 National Licorice	21
Topps Magic	17
N29	15
N43	15
Others	89

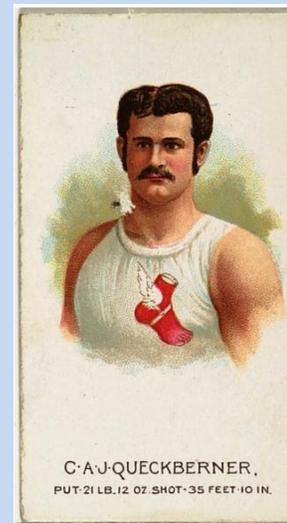
Nineteenth century tobacco cards

In the tobacco card era, people were interested in all the sports of the day, only a few of which, like baseball, were played by professionals. Track and field was represented in the early tobacco multi-sport sets. Allen & Ginter's 1888 (N29) and 1889 (N43) 50-card World Champions sets were made to last, with impressive lithography quality and beautiful design. Both series include a range of running and field events including pole vault, high jump and long jump.



British runner Walter G. George (N43) set a record for the mile in 1886 of 4 minutes, 12 seconds, which stood for 30 years.

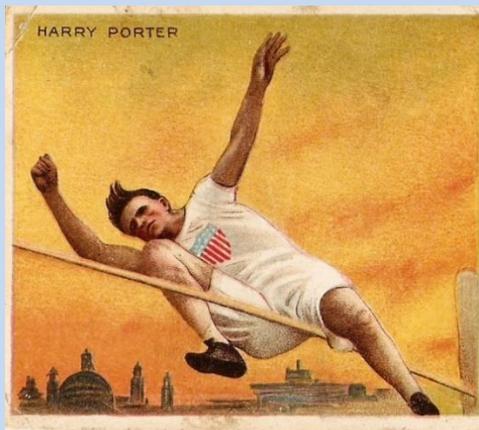
1888 N29 Allen & Ginter Cigarettes, C A J Queckberner, shotput



Old Judge also had cards of track and field and other sports. They are given a separate series of N174, though in design they are like the expansive baseball issue. N344 (Thomas H. Hall's Between the Acts & Bravo Cigarettes) include 10 pedestrians who would walk over a hundred miles a day in six day competitions, a wildly popular spectacle in their era. Frank Hart is in this set, likely the first African - American pictured on a sports trading card. N332 S.F. Hess cards are extremely rare with a trio of track and field athletes Pike has been pursuing.

Fifty-card sets with other athletes include N28, N162 and N165. Classification of cards as track and field can be in inexact science. Were "club throwers" early hammer throwers or were they irate golfers?

Like the baseball cards of the late 1800s, track and field cards took a nap for several years in the U.S. as the tobacco companies consolidated and temporarily eliminated the insert cards, which had been used to attract customers. Odgen's U.K. issues were a notable alternative, with a variety of sports figures including world record holders in track and field.



The 1910 T218 set included 56 track and field athletes, some in dramatic poses.

Inserts return, the T218 set

In 1910-11, the resurgence of U.S. tobacco issues included some outstanding series produced for track and field fans. The most abundant, and perhaps most beautiful, is the 153-card T218 Series of Champion Athletes including 56 track and field athletes. T218s are found with Mecca or Hassan backs, and infrequently with Tolstoi backs (see SCD 12/27/13). Imperial Tobacco Company of Canada issued a hard to find parallel series (C52) with most, but not all, of the same athletes. Curiously, in several cases more than one card shares the same number.

The 1910 T51 Murad Tobacco College Series featured generic athletes including some in track and field.



1913 Pan Handle Scrap

Pan Handle Scrap T230, with its distinctive orange borders, features many track and field Olympic champions and two swimmers. If you want to collect more swimmers, Pan Handle Scrap also has the T221 “swimsuit issue” with 100 cards of women swimmers. Pan Handle cards are almost always found creased, apparently due to their glossy lamination. The backs contain extensive biographies. One African-American athlete is Howard Drew, notable among issues of that era. At least two non-glossy heavy cardstock proofs exist, showing the athlete’s event on the front. Why was this information eliminated in the final production run? We can only speculate.



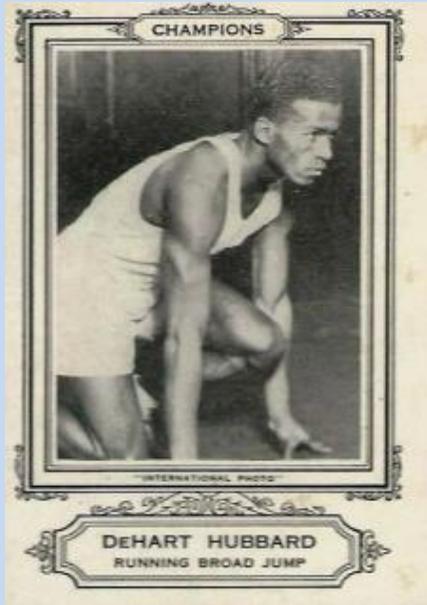
Pan Handle regular edition, and blank backed non-glossy proof with the additional text on the front noting his Olympic victory. Miss Onida in the T221 Pan Handle Scrap “swimsuit issue”

The large format multi-sports issue T227 includes three track and field cards, which are less famous than the baseball cards such as Ty Cobb. The Fatima T222 multi-sport set is another large format issue with four track and field athletes. This issue is distinctive for the use of black and white photography and relatively little additional design.

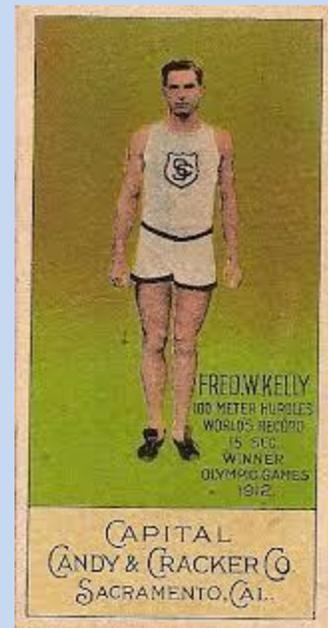
The 1920s - Y&S Licorice and other sets

Another issue focused on track and field is E229 Y&S Licorice. These 1920s cards, which are smaller than the T218 set, feature nice color lithography. The most notable athlete is Alfred Gilbert, who went from soaring in the pole vault to inventing the erector set. The main back variation is the D353 Juergens Bakery version of the set. Very rare variations, as evidenced by their absence in the American Card Catalog and virtual absence from the marketplace, are So CRISPo BISCUTS and blank back versions, which are likely proofs or samples.

E229 of Alfred Gilbert



The 1926 Sports Co/Spalding Champions multi-sport series was issued by a company formerly located a block from Pike's office. For 15 years Pike walked by their former building and dreamed of sneaking into the basement and finding a box of dusty, abandoned cards from decades ago. The small, paper-thin set features a wide range of some 416 athletes, most famously Babe Ruth. There are 27 track and field athletes with interesting facts on the back.



1928 Spaulding Champions, DeHart Hubbard

Probably the rarest issue from this era is the Capital Candy set, with 10 known athletes mainly from track and field, including Jim Thorpe. All of two athletes in this series are listed in the major grading companies' population reports, one of which is in Pike's collection; he is looking for the rest. Not much is known about this uncatalogued series.

Capital Candy, an extremely rare issue

1930s, German issues

U.S. cards of track and field athletes limped along during the 1930s, however production increased elsewhere. The German Sanella set is best known for its Babe Ruth card with four back variations. The 112-card set features primarily track and field athletes with similar color paintings. Like many German issues, the colorful, thin cards have survived in quality and quantity, despite being designed to be pasted into albums. One eBay seller told me the German issues were extremely popular and published in huge volumes – millions.



German issues from the 1930s: Salem Bilder, Die Welt in Bildern, and Bulgaria Sport

Bulgaria Sport (another German issue) features small black and white photos; the most famous are Schmeling and Ruth. Less famous, but more available, are track and field athletes with over 100 men and women from Germany, U.S. and other countries. Eddie Tolan is one notable athlete, forerunner to Jesse Owens as an Olympic sprinting champion.

The Los Angeles and Berlin Olympics were popular in the 1930s, resulting in a boom for German production. Owens appears four times in the paper-thin Reemtsma Cigarette set, which is easy to find and inexpensive. Sets feature black and white or colorized photos. German and U.K. sets include women athletes, which were absent from most U.S. issues of the day.



German cards in the 1930s were more likely to feature women athletes than American issues.

Several German sets feature both Owens and friend Luz Long of Germany. Though they were competitors, Long reportedly helped Owens avoid fouling on his third and final attempt to qualify for the final round of the Olympic long jump. A few cards show these friends together, in contrast to the snub Owens received from Adolph Hitler after winning four gold medals contrary to Hitler's racist ideology.



Pike's deckle-edged, blank-backed Owens/ Long card #53 is not listed in PSA directory. Anyone with information on this series is encouraged to let him know

British cards

U.K. collector Tim Thornham provides an overview, "Various issuers were prolific. For example, in the early days, pre-World War I, James Taddy issued over 1,000 football (soccer) and cricket cards, which are now much-prized and rare collector cards. Between WWI and WWII, Godfrey Phillips issued the Pinnacle collection of football cards, which ran to around 5,000 cards. After WWII, trade card issuers such as A&BC Gum, Barratt/Bassett, Topps, FKS and Panini regularly issued sets covering the season's top football stars. Some of these more recent sets have attracted a new era of collectors. Apart from football and cricket, other popular sports covered include golf, boxing, jockeys and racehorses, greyhounds, tennis, rugby, speedway, billiards, wrestling and jiu-jitsu. Perhaps surprisingly, athletics

(track and field) was barely covered by early issues, although a range of sets covering the Olympics has been published in recent years.”

Track and field cards continued in U.K. issues by Churchman, Gallaher and Ogden. One interesting and colorful example is a card issued by a weighing machine, which stamped the date and purchaser’s weight on the back. We wonder how many purchasers, dissatisfied by the result, discarded these cards. Another interesting, though (literally) less colorful issue is the sepia Kings of Speed set with athletes like Owens scattered in the set along with airplane, automobile and other speedsters.

Owens card stamped with your weight on the back



The 1940s through the early 1970s relatively quiet

A few multi-sport sets were issued such as Topps Magic Photos (often barely visible ghost-like images, the magic did not last) and Berk Ross including Owens. The 1956 Adventure Gum series features double Olympic decathlon champion Bob Mathias, skier Snowshoe Thompson (1827-1876) and others. The series is typically found in high grade. Wheaties also issued a series of track and field tips, without picturing individual athletes.



The 1956 Adventure Gum series included Lou Jones finishing the 400-meter race at the 1955 Pan Am Games.

1977 Sportscasters, the biggest bump

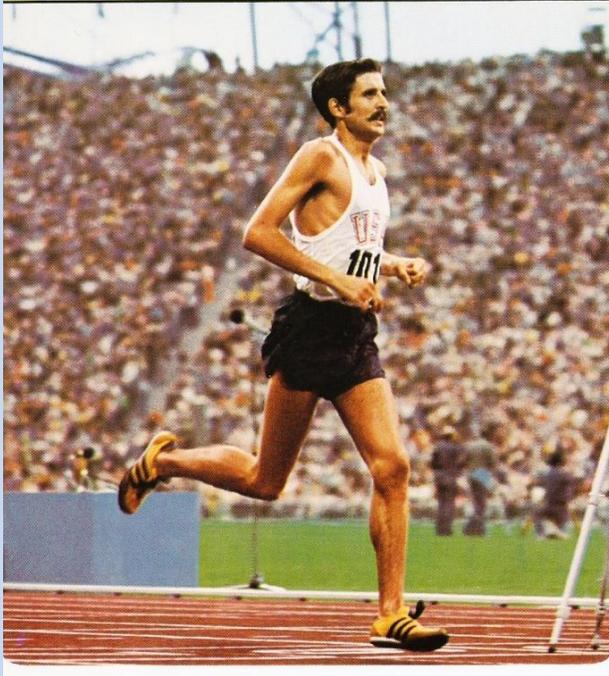
Of all the 697 vintage cards we counted for track and field cards in the U.S. and Canada, 307 of them come from the 2,184-card 1977 Sportscaster set (U.S. version).

Sportscaster cards are full of information, cover a wide-range of interests and are readily available. Their colors remind you of 1977. Cards were produced in many languages and were printed in Italy and Japan. The cards also include 393 athletes in baseball, football, basketball and hockey. The biggest challenge has been to get a rubber band around the 4.75 by 6.25 inch cards and to figure out how to organize them. They have small numbers for country, series and card number on the backs.

Track and Field



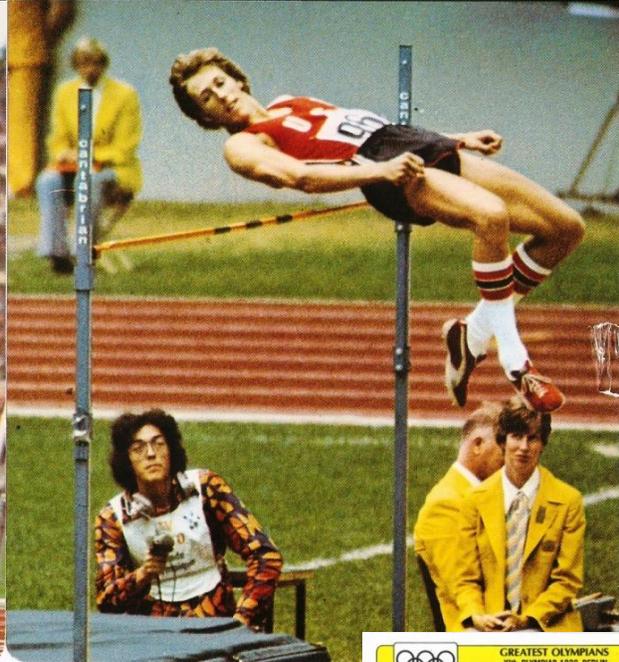
Frank Shorter



Track and Field



Dwight Stones



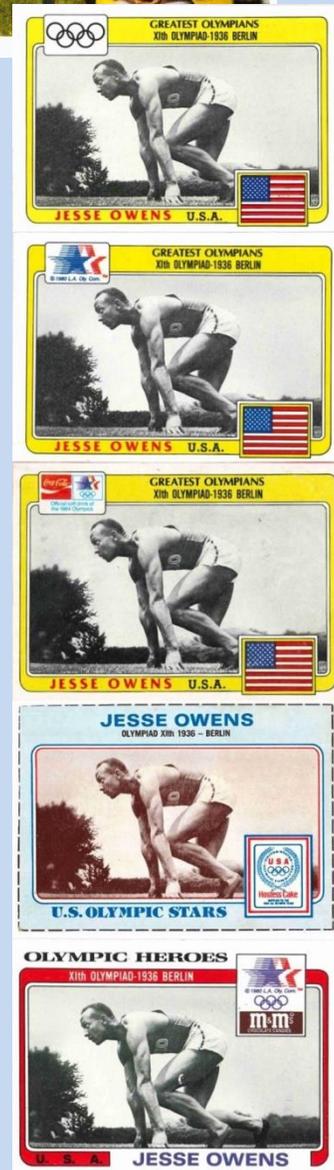
The 1977 Sportscaster set provided thousands of cards in many languages.

1984 Olympics

U.S. production of track and field cards came back to life with the 1984 LA Summer Olympics. The basic Topps set was issued in rack packs and is easy to find. This series was paralleled by a variation with the Olympic rings rather than the LA Olympic logo and includes Owens, Ali and Frazier.

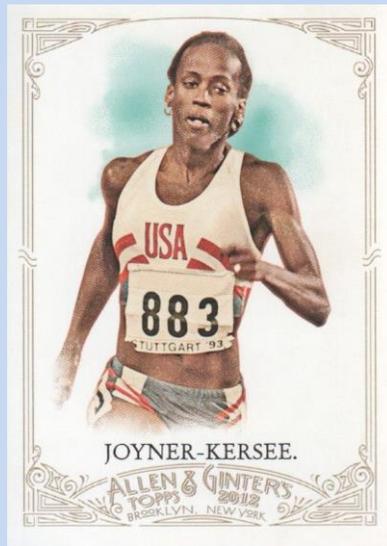
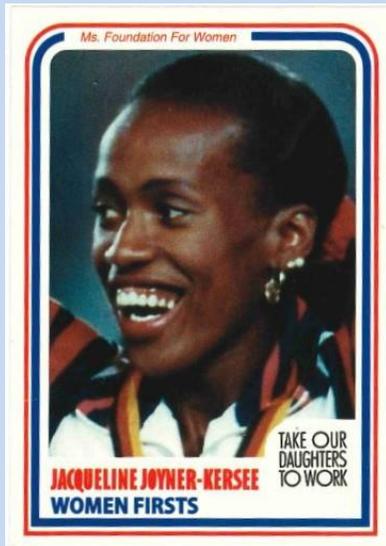
Three food series feature an alternative version of a sub-set of these cards. An M&M boxed set was likely a mail-in offer while Hostess cards were printed on product packages like the more familiar baseball cards. Least common is a Coke variation featuring the Coke logo joined with the Olympic logo, red print on the back and otherwise similar card design. This series may have been a test or limited regional issue. Cards show the impression of soda cans and can be found individually or in strips, likely cut from product packaging, indicating that they were issued and not just proofs. Owens is found in all five variations.

Owens appeared in Topps-produced sets such as this issue in five different formats.



More recent cards

Cards of track and field athletes saw some of the same explosion in production as found in the major U.S. sports, and there were some interesting issues produced. Creative cards for heptathlon and long jump champion Jackie Joyner-Kersey are in the Asthma All-Stars, Take – Your Daughter to Work Day and Goodwill Games sets. The 1991 Impel series includes Winter and Summer Olympics. Allen & Ginter and Goodwin reactivated names are found on cards of a few notable track athletes. *Sports Illustrated Kids* has issued about a hundred cards of current and past athletes over the years. In the U.K., Topps and Panini cards of soccer players became popular.



- *Joyner-Kersey in the Take Our Daughters to Work set*
- *Topps issue of Olympic track star Jackie Joyner-Kersey*
- *Sports Illustrated Kids card of Usain Bolt*

It may be more meaningful to pursue cards of Carl Lewis, Michael Johnson and Usain Bolt than professional pedestrians from the 1800s, plus their times are better.

The wide world of sports cards has something for everyone. If you have been bogged down chasing Topps 1952 high numbers, you might enjoy the variety and affordability of cards of athletes in the other sports. You can work up a sweat by pursuing track and field cards. If you chase down all the runners, you can pursue the wrestlers, skaters and swimmers.

Ed Pike is an energy efficiency engineer and collects track and field, hockey and vintage baseball cards. Feel free to contact him at ehpiii@aol.com.

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