

baseball cards

I felt like hell. I lay in the top bunk shivering with a fever and battling nausea unlike anything I had experienced before. I lay there wishing I would die.

As my younger brother walked into the room, my stomach betrayed me before I could make it out of the bunk. As a result, I threw up over the side.

The former contents of my stomach splattered Jim Brown, Walter Payton, Alan Page and Terry Bradshaw. The football cards, which my brother had unwisely left in a shoe box on the floor next to our bunk beds, were ruined instantly.

Into the dumpster went Roman Gabriel, Mercury Morris and others. Luckily, my baseball cards were stashed in a different set of shoeboxes across the room. Baseball cards had a special place in my heart, and I wasn't going to put them in a place where something could force their early retirement.

For a kid, nothing beat tearing the waxy paper off a new pack of baseball cards and shuffling through them, praising the all-stars and dreading the worthless checklist card.

You'd trade with your friends and, if you were lucky, some kid who didn't know beans about baseball. That way, you could unload a handful of scrubs for a George Brett or Robin Yount. You couldn't wait until Friday when that \$5 allowance would buy you a Coke, a couple pinball games and six sealed

THE MAGIC INSIDE A BOX OF BASEBALL CARDS WITHSTANDS

THE PASSAGE OF TIME BY MARK LUCE



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packs of Topps cards down at the convenience store.

Of course, those days are over in more ways than one. First, there's no more gum inside the packages. And in the middle 1980s, the once simple joy of getting a pack of Topps became instead a puzzling experience as tons of different brands and styles in colorful foils hit the market.

Suddenly, it wasn't about the players; it was about things like value, investment and return. The simple pastime of collecting baseball cards became an exercise in economics.

Ball players cashing in on their Sharpie signatures and late-night hucksters screaming about bargains on baseball cards they claim are suitable for framing hasn't helped the hobby's image either.

So as the Fall Classic begins, you should think about that shoebox of cards your Mom threw away or sold at a garage sale. Rather than lamenting its loss, you should do one simple thing. You should fork over out \$60 and buy yourself a full set of Topps baseball cards — not the Topps Reserve, Topps Gallery Baseball, Topps Heritage, Topps Opening Day or Topps Stadium Club — just plain-old Topps Baseball Cards. Look through the cards once to check out how they've changed. Then put them away. Repeat the same program every year.

It won't feel the same as when you were younger, but before too long you'll have something of value — economic and sentimental — that you can pass on to kids or grandkids. It's history in a long, slender box. While the players will change, the magic inside of that box never will.

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