

## Bringing Bucky Back to Boston

Michael Malone

A month ago, I stared at the many boxes of old baseball cards stacked on the top shelf of my closet, and decided I'd give some away. The cards don't do much good sitting untouched in my closet, the thinking went. Left out in public — in the grocery store, the library, the movie theater — a random card might put a smile on someone's face.

While I took on this task with other people's smiles in mind, I got a few of my own too. It felt good to be leafing through baseball cards four-plus decades after it was a regular part of my day. It was fun to see Expos, guys with mustaches and shaggy hair, players with a wad of tobacco in their cheek, and players named Dick. I also found that online sources are a terrific complement to the facts and figures on the back of a card in sketching out a player's life story.

As a lifelong Mets fan, I started the process in mid-December with a Met: the 1977 card for pitcher Bob Apodaca. Apodaca had a bleak 12-17 career record, the card told me, but a glittering 2.69 ERA.

Such was the life of a Mets pitcher in the '70s.

Our family was going out to dinner at Outback Steakhouse to celebrate my son getting into his first-choice college. I casually slipped Apodaca into the cardboard triangle on our table advertising Outback's Boozy Bevvies.

Farewell, Bob Apodaca, enjoy your Pina Koala.

I figured I'd give out 15 cards, the number in a Topps pack when I was a kid. I got the idea from Josh Wilker, author of *Cardboard Gods*, who wrote on his blog of the same name about leaving cards in random places, such as nestling former Tigers' hurler Dan Schatzeder into a gas pump in Chicago.

"I hope people find them and get something out of them," Wilker wrote.

Me too.

Next up was a 1981 card for Brewers' slugger Gorman Thomas. Stormin' Gorman had 137 homers as of 1980. He had earned 14 letters in four sports in high school. I left him on a table in the common area at work, where people leave books, T-shirts, phone cases, and other stuff sent to them that they do not want to bring home.

### Boston Bound

The Malones headed up to the Boston area for Christmas, visiting my mother-in-law. The day after Christmas, I took the kids to a Starbucks in Concord. I had a Dwight Evans Red Sox card in my wallet but, feeling cheeky, left the 1981 Bucky Dent Yankees card on our table instead. As any beleaguered Bostonian of a certain age would tell you, Bucky Effing Dent slugged that three-run homer over the Green Monster in the one-game playoff in 1978 and sent the heartbroken Sox home.

At another Starbucks, back in New York a few days later, I left a 1981 Jim Gantner, Brewers second baseman. Gantner grew up in Fon Du Lac, Wisconsin, and played his entire career with the Brewers, attaining a .273 lifetime average.

The night before New Year's Eve, I was seeing a concert at Brooklyn Bowl. Making the trip with me was the 1978 card for Pepe Frias, the Montreal infielder sporting a satin Expos jacket as he took BP. Frias had zero lifetime home runs, according to the card, but hit .500 in his final 26 at bats in 1976.

I placed Frias on a table where you sit when you're old and tired and can't stand up for the whole two hours of a rock show anymore.

On to New Year's Eve, which saw me visit my local Shop-Rite. I brought a 1974 card for pitcher Aurelio Monteagudo with an ignominious TRADED banner across his chest. The Phillies got Billy Grabarkewitz, Chris Coletta, and "journeyman reliever" Monteagudo, the card said, and Monty "could be an important factor out of the Philadelphia bullpen in 1974."

Alas, *Baseball Reference* shares that he did not play in 1974.

I left Monteagudo on a stack of Monster energy drinks near Shop-Rite's checkout aisles.

Curious about why Monteagudo was out in 1974, I looked him up on Wikipedia after I got home. He played that year in Venezuela. Years after he retired, Monteagudo was killed in a car accident in Mexico. "He, Aurelio Rodríguez, and Aurelio López are the only three players in MLB history named Aurelio," Wikipedia said, "and all three were killed in car accidents between the ages of 44 and 52."

Whoa.

It was eight days after Christmas when I returned to work and found Gorman Thomas still on the table of misfit toys, covered by a t-shirt that said, "No matter how deep we are buried, we will grow like seeds."

I pulled Gorman out and brought him home. He could grow like a seed back in my closet.

## Mo Money Mo Problems

A few days later, I was headed to the bank on 5th Avenue in Manhattan, and my card selection strategy evolved. After all, who better to leave in the bank than Don Money, Brewers first and third baseman? (OK, Tigers first baseman Norm Cash would work too.)

A quick scan of Money's 1981 card revealed that he had more RBI (83) than strikeouts (70) in 1977. Wikipedia added that he played in Japan but had a "cockroach-ridden apartment" in Osaka, not the "tree-lined setting" he was expecting. After a month in Japan, a frustrated Money headed home to Vineland, New Jersey.

He likely found his tree-lined setting there. The Vineland website promises, "where it's always growing season."

I looked over the list of cards I deposited and, not for the first time in my life, realized I was spending a little too much time with Brewers. One more, I reasoned, slipping the neglected Gorman Thomas card into my wallet and heading to Captain Lawrence Brewery to meet some friends. A few hours later, we headed out, but Stormin' Gorman remained perched upon our table.

Next up was Eddie Whitson, his 1981 San Francisco Giants card, left on the counter of the grubby deli where I get lunch on 43rd Street. The card noted that Whitson "played semi-pro ball for the Erwin, Tennessee Blue Devils."

A far more interesting factoid would be Whitson breaking Yankees manager Billy Martin's arm in a fight at a Baltimore hotel, but that did not happen until 1985.

## Mr. Mojo Risin'

As the new year progressed, a friend and I were off to see a rock band play at a golf club near my home. So it seemed fitting to leave Jim Morrison's 1980 White Sox card in the napkin holder on our table. The card shared the stats from nine minor league seasons for Morrison, and a pretty unspectacular career highlight: he "belted Homer vs. Yankees 7-31-79."

If I had to guess, I'm guessing the Sox beat the Yankees "Five to One," as Morrison once sang, that night.

A few days later, it was Hall of Famer Jim Kaat's turn to be left behind. Kaat won a stunning 16 consecutive Gold Gloves, from 1962 to 1977, the card shared. I left his 1980 Yankees card in a cafe in our town, affixed to a bulletin board full of business cards, next to a real estate lady whose card said, "Live where you love, love where you live."

I was back in New York City the next day, looking for a good bakery to leave Bake McBride in. His 1980 Phillies card shared that he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Westminster College, and an illustration had Bake painting a baseball player on his easel.

Wikipedia shared that Bake's initial nickname was Shake 'n Bake. It also said his given name is Arnold, a far less cool moniker than Shake 'n Bake.

I left Bake in an Ole & Steen joint just south of Bryant Park, on a stand offering napkins and utensils. Due for another trip to Shop-Rite, I brought the 1980 card for Steve Trout, White Sox pitcher. Trout's father Paul, known as Dizzy, pitched in the majors, the card said, and Steve set high school records in 1976 for victories and strikeouts.

I left Trout in between the shrimp and the tilapia in a Shop-Rite fridge.

## Doing Right by Dwight

I felt like I owed Dwight Evans a proper resting place after pinch-hitting Bucky Effing Dent for him at the Massachusetts Starbucks a couple weeks before. So I brought his 1981 Red Sox card to the New York Public Library.

Evans's 100th major league home run won the game in the 9th inning versus the Royals in 1979, the card said. I found a classy spot for Dewey, a marble windowsill in the landmark library for him to rest on for eternity, or until the janitor tosses him.

Two cards to go!

Heading to Sam's Club, I brought the 1982 Orioles card for pitcher Sammy Stewart along. The card said he had a 20-21 record. Like Bob Apodaca, Stewart's 3.15 ERA hinted at a better record.

I left Stewart's card on a stack of Lucky Charms, hoping the leprechaun's luck might catapult him to a winning record.

Upon returning home, I looked Sammy Stewart up on *Baseball Reference*. He finished his career a winner, at 59-48.

That pleased me, but Wikipedia offered a far more grim account of the pitcher's life. Stewart got addicted to crack, was homeless, was arrested 26 times, and spent a significant amount of time in prison. He pawned his 1983 World Series ring.

Stewart died at 63 in 2018. An obit in the *New York Times* saw Jim Palmer call him a "lost soul."

It appeared Stewart got clean late in his life; the obit said he was an instructor at a baseball and softball facility in North Carolina.

I had to end this mission on a positive note. The Malones were set to check out a preview of the Disney Plus series *Choir*, about the inspiring Detroit Youth Choir that appeared on *America's Got Talent*, at a local theater. So I grabbed a Detroit Tiger to join us.

It was the 1974 card for designated hitter Gates Brown. The card offered a pretty uninspired factoid: “Gates makes public appearances for the Tigers,” and then a far more compelling one: Brown set the American League record for career pinch hits in 1972.

Wikipedia shared that Brown played baseball in prison as a teenager.

Brown died in 2013 at age 74. But his name is in the MLB record book, Wikipedia said, with those 107 career pinch hits.

### **Mission Accomplished!**

Did leaving 15 baseball cards in random places change the world around me? Nope. Alas, I have to believe most of the cards were tossed in the garbage. But I also have to believe one or two ended up in the hands of a baseball fan. Maybe it’s a guy my age, who had his own Gates Brown or Eddie Whitson card as a kid. Maybe he put the found card on his fridge, and smiles when he sees it. Maybe he passed along the card to his child or grandchild. Maybe he’d be compelled to leave his own card, say, a 1980 Biff Pocoroba Braves card, at the deli or doctor’s office. Even if all 15 end up in the trash, my mission wasn’t for nothing. I enjoyed having baseball cards in my life once again, and thumbing through the stacks brought back many happy memories.

Just as important, the task helped shrink the interminable wintry wait between the World Series ending and pitchers and catchers turning up, once again, for spring training.

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**Michael Malone’s** journalism has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*, and his fiction in *The Westchester Review* and *Beer & Weed Magazine*. He is a reporter and editor at the television-industry trade publication *Broadcasting + Cable*. He lives in New York with his wife, two kids and dog, and will continue to play 40-and-over softball for Healy’s Travelers for as long as his body, and his teammates, will permit it.

SL

Poetry

## **Centerfield**

Jeffrey Alfier

In any season that couldn’t freeze us indoors  
we gathered for pickup hardball,  
all homework in abeyance —  
droll textbooks tossed on beds  
or floors back home. We played  
in the wide yard of a widow too infirm  
or hoarse to run us off her land.

Centerfield ended at her back door, our fielder  
the same kid each time, a classmate  
we thought weak of glove and bat,  
but demure enough to dissemble on our behalf  
over a broken window or trampled roses.  
If it was icy or wet, we’d remind him  
against wearing his best shoes — such shiny corfam.

Some days his mother would come  
and tap shyly on the widow’s door,  
wave and smile, apologize for her son’s trespass  
before escorting him home with innings yet to go,  
leaving us with but two outfielders,  
our catcher pounding his fist  
in the pocket of his glove.

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**Jeffrey Alfier’s** most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). His journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. He is also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work.