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## A 'School' for Math, Prose and Character

By NEAL KARLEN

Abram J. Shorin, the inventor of the modern baseball card, died recently in Miami Beach at the age of 91. His passing generated little ink on the obituary pages. He deserved better, for I, like many men of my generation, owe a huge scholastic debt to him and his cardboard creation.

Even though my 1971 grammar school diploma was issued by Minneapolis's Fern Hill Elementary School, I've always known that my real primary studies began at the Abram J. Shorin Institute of Heroes, Statistics and Life.

Mr. Shorin founded the Brooklyn-based Topps Chewing Gum Company with his brothers Ira, Joseph and Philip. In 1951, inspiration struck. He came up with the idea of packaging his family's pale pink gum around cardboard pictures of baseball players. The backs of the cards were filled with microscopic statistics culled from each player's career.

Baseball cards had been around off and on since the 1880's, when cigarette companies first packed tiny pictures of ballplayers in tobacco tins as premiums. By the time Topps introduced them, it had been almost a generation since any company had put out a decent, well-marketed set.

It wasn't until 1967, when I was 7, that I purchased my first nickel pack. I was immediately entranced by the artistry of that set. Willie Mays's heroic bust pose made him look ready for Mount Rushmore. Mickey Mantle, soon to retire because of injuries, stood elegantly poised awaiting a pitch. Unfortunately, the pudgy slugger Harmon Killebrew of the Minnesota Twins, my favorite player, looked like Fatty Arbuckle's double.

I didn't merely grow up with Abram Shorin's creations in coming summers; I was molded by them. I found that the backs of my bought and traded cards provided far more stimulating data than any textbooks did. I was an indifferent grammar school

pupil, never able to recall whether Ecuador was north or south of the equator or what to do with a divisor.

But from trying to decipher the agate-type r.b.i. and e.r.a. statistics on the cards, I learned that math need not be the enemy. My liberal education was also enhanced: long before I'd ever heard of Ernest Hemingway, I learned the power of rat-a-tat minimalist prose by memorizing hundreds of tiny player biographies.

The cards provided my first real lessons about character. Looking at the '67 Mays and Mantle, I knew I was in the company of gods. Staring at the vacant, confused look on the '66 Sandy Valdespino, I knew I was in the company of a petrified scrubeenie.

I learned about omens. When Billy Martin's '71 Detroit Tigers card arrived, he was still considered a boy genius who'd vanquished personal demons. On that card was a hint of the bad vibes to come. Posed holding a bat, a glowering Martin is making an obscene gesture to the photographer - and, if you want to get melodramatic, to America's youth.

The cards taught me to read between the lines for meaning. In '70, for example, the best thing Topps came up with for the back of George Mitterwald's card was "George's hobbies are golf and basketball." You knew Mitterwald should probably keep his day job.

My card education ended in the summer of '71. Within a couple of weeks of discovering girls, I packed the cards in shoeboxes and tucked them into the back of my closet. There they stayed until the early summer of '81, when vacation from college began. A few weeks earlier, I'd marched around the administration building protesting some policy or other. Now I was arguing with my mother about not throwing out my long-undisturbed stash. "So, Mr. Trotsky," she said, "you're 21 - and you still want your baseball cards?"

Yes, I said, those cards might be worth something some day. I think I meant in dollars and cents. But it wasn't until I read Mr. Shorin's obituary that I realized their true worth. I burrowed into my old closet, took out some shoeboxes and started looking.

I was amazed to discover I instantly remembered Sandy Koufax's e.r.a. in '65 and Sandy Valdespino's expression in '66. Mitterwald still looked young. Mantle still looked sad. Remembering Abram J. Shorin's lessons, I said thanks and bid him rest in peace in bubble gum heaven.

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