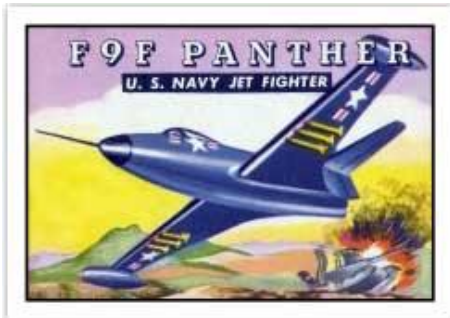


## 1952 Topps Wings: A Theory on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Series Printing



I bought my first Topps Wings cards from Terry Duvall in March of 2003. I bid on two of Terry's cards (#119 and #123) on eBay, just for the heck of it. I had some of them as a kid and thought it would be fun to get a couple to see if they were as cool as I remembered them to be - they were! I bought a few more cards over the next couple of months. The colors and artwork on some of the cards were

fantastic. Number 100, to the left, is a good example. In June of 2003, I won card #152 that happened to be graded and slabbed by Sportscard Guarantee, LLC. The card looked awesome in the SGC holder. I knew at that point I wanted to finish the set and have them all graded by SGC. I next bought a bunch of SGC-graded cards from the legendary Bill Bengen and have been working on the set ever since.

Topps Wings cards consist of 200 aircraft subjects: color paintings of planes of the late 1940s and early 1950s vintage. The paintings were produced from photographs supplied by the New York Herald Tribune. The set was assigned American Card Catalog number R707-4. A silhouette-based "NAME THIS PLANE: FRIEND or FOE" quiz appears on the card backs. The cards were sold in both 1¢ and 5¢ wax packs, as well as 5¢ cello packs. The cards measure 2 5/8" x 3 3/4". The complete set of 200 Wings cards were reissued with larger side borders by Doeskin Tissues in the fall of 1955. They have "Doeskin" printed on the back in the copyright area. The Doeskin Wings set was assigned the ACC number F381. The Doeskin Wings cards measure 2 5/8" x 4 3/8". Complete packages of these tissues, including the card, are sometimes offered on eBay.

As with most Topps products of the early 1950s, the cards were probably printed on sheets of 100 subjects. Since the set has a total of 200 cards, it was most likely printed and sold in four series, 50 cards at a time. The cards seem to be available in a fairly even distribution with no great rarities, although, as with most cards of the 1950s, the last series cards are harder to come by than the others. In order of difficulty, I would rank series 3 (cards 101-152) the easiest to obtain, followed by series 2 (51-100), then 1 (1-50), and lastly series 4 (153-200). The first and last cards of the set are extremely difficult to obtain in near mint or better condition.



They are usually found off-center and pretty much looking like the cat dragged them in. The exact issue year for Topps Wings cards seems to be a mystery. Bob Nolan writes in The Wrapper, No. 97, that he remembers buying them in January of 1952. I have a vendor box that shows a 1952 copyright. Sportscard Guarantee, LLC insists they're a 1953 issue. Others claim they came out in 1954. I remember buying them as a kid but feel certain it was later than 1952. I certainly remember **not** buying them and 1952 Topps baseball cards at the same time. Probably they came out in varying forms in all three, or even more years. For another

interesting look at the set, check out Kurt Kuersteiner's article in issue No. 207 of The Wrapper.

As my collection grew, I got a feel for the cards in the set, which numbers were more difficult to obtain than others, and how the cards were printed and distributed. Here's what I've learned. For some reason, there were a few cards that you just couldn't find in decent shape. Included in this list are cards numbers 1, 118, 149, 156, 174, 193, 197, and 200. The high numbers I could understand. Card #153, the Bristol 171 Mk-3, is one of the worst-looking planes I've ever seen. Beginning with card #154, Topps ran off eleven straight helicopters. I'm sure these were thrown out by the scores in 1952. But, if the 3rd series was so plentiful in the marketplace, why were cards #118 and #149 so hard to find? The answer came to me in the form of one of my best eBay purchases, ever. In July of 2006, my friend, Alex Abela, and I won a fantastic lot of cards on eBay. The lot was described as:

**"Wings Topps Spotter Cards & Box 110 Total Excellent - Cards are in excellent condition, clean sharp corners, 110 total with original box. This may be a complete box of wax packs, opened and put back in the original box".**

That's exactly what we got. I've never seen such nice cards before, or since. They *did* appear to have been opened, put back in the box, and forgotten for 54 years. On the box, aside from the 1952 copyright notice, it stated that the box contained 24 5¢ packs. If the packs contained five



cards each (like the 1952 Topps baseball card 5¢ packs), that would mean that the box originally contained 120 cards. Another thing caught my eye. On the back of several cards was what looked to be a gum stain. Not a wax stain that's usually confined to the two vertical edges of the card backs, but a rectangular stain the size of a piece of bubble gum. Knowing that the gum was usually found on the top of

the first card in each wax pack, I surmised that the box contained cello packs, where the gum was found behind the bottom card of the pack. There were 21 cards in the box that showed evidence of gum on the back. If two packs were removed from the box originally, that would account for there being 110 cards left. It would have been better if I had found 22 cards with gum stains, for the math to come out exactly right - maybe I missed one. For the record, all copies of the following cards had gum stains on the back: 101(2), 106(2), 109(2), 117(2), 133(2), 134(3), 140(2), 142(2), 143(2), and 146(2).



As nice as the cards were, it was the distribution of cards that interested me the most. Of the 110 cards in the box; there were ten cards from the 1st series and 100 from what I now believe to be the 3rd series. If you were paying attention to the



first part of this article, you would remember that I defined the 3rd series as cards #101-152, not #101-150. In the box, there were at least one of all cards from 101 to 152, except for 2 cards #118 and #149. The following table lists the complete box breakdown.

| # of Cards Found | Card Numbers Included  | Total<br>110 |
|------------------|--|--------------|
| 0                | 4, 118, 149  | 0            |
| 1-each           | 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 116, 121, 136, 138                            | 12           |
| 2-each           | 8, 101-110, 113-114, 117, 119-120, 122-133, 135, 137, 139-148, 150-152 | 86           |
| 3-each           | 111, 112, 115, 134   | 12           |

Maybe those two cards were not part of the 3rd series but held out by Topps and printed with cards #153 to 200 to make up the 4th series. As you may recall, Topps did the same thing with its 1953 baseball card set - holding cards out of one series and printing them with the next series<sup>11</sup>. This action supposedly increased sales by having kids chase cards that weren't out yet.

There's another piece of evidence that makes me think that this theory is true. On the card backs is the "FRIEND or FOE" quiz. The first two series of cards logically dealt with this by having the answer to the quiz appear on the next card in sequence. For example, the answer to the "FRIEND or FOE" quiz on card #9 (which shows the silhouette of a Cutlass) was found on card #10.

The answer to the quiz on card #100, can be found on card #1. Each card stated "Ans: See Next Card XX". The 3rd and 4th series go about the quiz in an entirely different way. On the back of these two series' cards, it states: "Answer: See Card XXX". The answers to the quiz were scattered all over the place. Lots of planes are not shown in silhouette on any cards at all. Many

cards have the same silhouette on their backs. However, all 3rd series cards had the answers contained within the series. The quiz answers to cards #151 and #152 were found on cards #110 and #125 respectively. The fact that they were in the box and the fact that their quiz answers were contained on other 3rd series cards convinced me that cards #151 and #152 belong in the 3rd series. But what about cards #118 and #149? Eureka! The answers to their quizzes appear on 4th series cards #180 and #173. That makes them a part of the last series and explains why they weren't in the box and are harder to find than other 3rd series cards.

Well, that's my theory. The 1952-3-4 Topps Wings cards 3rd series contains the 50 cards numbered 101-152, without cards #118 and #149. The 4th series contains cards numbered 153-200, including cards #118 and #149. Does the same kind of thing hold for the first two series? I think probably not. Maybe cards 1-100 were all released at the same time. Maybe Topps used the hold-out method with the last two series to increase sales. Is this kind of analysis going to win me a Pulitzer? Probably not, but to me, it was a lot of fun.

All Topps Wings cards can be seen in living color on the [Skytamer](#) Web site.

I would be extremely interested in corresponding with any readers who share my fascination with the Topps Wings set. If any reader can verify or poke holes in this theory, please send an e-mail to the Webmaster, below.

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[<sup>1</sup>] Anyone wishing to read more about the printing of Topps 1952 and 1953 baseball cards should read George Vrechek's in-depth analysis posted to "The Library" on the Old Baseball Card Web site.

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## **1952 Topps Wings: A Theory on 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Series Printing – Follow-up**

In issue #227 of *The Wrapper*, I wrote an article proposing a theory on the printing of series three and four in the 1952 Topps Wings set. The premise of this theory was that cards number 118 and 149 were held out of the third series and included in the fourth series. In other words, series three contained cards numbered 101-152, and the fourth series contained cards numbered 153-200, plus numbers 118 and 149. Topps would later employ this same bit of sleight-of-hand with their 1953 baseball card set. Kids would assume they were looking for 50 contiguous cards and spend all their hard-earned money chasing cards that had not yet been printed or distributed. I had some pretty convincing circumstantial evidence to support my theory: the distribution of cards in a near-full vending box and the way that the "FRIEND or FOE" quiz was answered on cards numbered 118 and 149.

At some point, after I wrote this article, I stumbled on some 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> series partial sheets of Wings cards being auctioned on eBay. I was lucky enough to win the sheets at a not too preposterous price. At



least part of my theory was proven correct! One of the sheets contained number 149 nestled in the middle of the other series four cards. The series three sheet shows card number 151, sitting in the top row next to number 138.



The following diagrams of the two sheets, as seen from the front, show card placement. The tables to the right list the cards contained on the sheets and the remaining cards from each series that are not present. Dotted Lines show where the sheets I have were cut from the 100 image masters.

Topps Wings - 3rd Series Partial Sheet - Front View

|      |     |     |     |     |
|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|      | TOP |     |     |     |
|      | 112 | 141 | 138 | 151 |
|      | 110 | 102 | 114 | 145 |
| LEFT | 122 | 136 | 130 | 132 |
|      | 104 | 137 | 147 | 119 |
|      | 121 | 105 | 123 | 103 |
|      | 120 | 131 | 128 | 126 |

| Inc. | Not Inc. |
|------|----------|
| 102  | 101      |
| 103  | 106      |
| 104  | 107      |
| 105  | 108      |
| 110  | 109      |
| 112  | 111      |
| 114  | 113      |
| 119  | 115      |
| 120  | 116      |
| 121  | 117      |
| 122  | 124      |
| 123  | 125      |
| 126  | 127      |
| 128  | 129      |
| 130  | 133      |
| 131  | 134      |
| 132  | 135      |
| 136  | 139      |
| 137  | 140      |
| 138  | 142      |
| 141  | 143      |
| 145  | 144      |
| 147  | 146      |
| 151  | 148      |
|      | 150      |
| 24   | 152      |
|      | 26       |

I believe this is a portion of the top, left-hand quarter and a portion of the first row of the bottom, left-hand quarter of the full sheet of 100.

Topps Wings - 4th Series Partial Sheet - Front View

|      |     |     |     |     |     |
|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
|      | TOP |     |     |     |     |
|      | 164 | 155 | 157 | 162 | 166 |
|      | 169 | 168 | 198 | 173 | 158 |
| LEFT | 174 | 195 | 171 | 149 | 177 |
|      | 181 | 194 | 165 | 199 | 176 |
|      | 172 | 196 | 161 | 191 | 175 |

| Inc. | Not Inc. |
|------|----------|
| 149  | 118      |
| 155  | 153      |
| 157  | 154      |
| 158  | 156      |
| 161  | 159      |
| 162  | 160      |
| 164  | 163      |
| 165  | 167      |
| 166  | 170      |
| 168  | 178      |
| 169  | 179      |
| 171  | 180      |
| 172  | 182      |
| 173  | 183      |
| 174  | 184      |
| 175  | 185      |
| 176  | 186      |
| 177  | 187      |
| 181  | 188      |
| 191  | 189      |
| 194  | 190      |
| 195  | 192      |
| 196  | 193      |
| 198  | 197      |
| 199  | 200      |

I believe this is the top, left-hand quarter of the full sheet of 100.

25 25

Shaded card numbers are either Low Pop or condition sensitive cards as per the PSA Population Report of 1/22/12.

These two partial sheets prove that card number 151 was printed with the 3<sup>rd</sup> series, and card number 149 was printed with the 4<sup>th</sup> series. I can only assume that card number 152 was printed on the part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> series sheet that I don't have. The same must hold for card number 118 – it's printed on the missing part of the 4<sup>th</sup> series sheet.

With this mystery solved, let's turn to a couple of other things about Wings cards that have bothered me for a long time. Some cards seem to have giant borders, while others have much more narrow borders. Although there don't seem to be any short-prints, some cards are a lot tougher to find in nice condition than others. Some cards, mostly from the 4<sup>th</sup> series, are extremely difficult to find in well-centered condition. This is important if you are trying to build a world-class set. To better understand what was going on here, I looked more closely at the cards in my collection and studied the PSA Population Report for Wings cards.

The real reason that most 4<sup>th</sup> series cards are found in off-centered conditions has to do with the size of the aircraft image on these fifty cards. In most cases, the images on the last fifty cards are both higher and wider than the other 150 cards in the set. Since all the cards in the set are the standard (at the time) 2-5/8" x 3-3/4" size, a larger card image means that the card surface left for the borders must be reduced. Reduced borders call for more accurate printing and precise cutting of the sheets into individual cards. Inaccuracies lead to off-centered cards. The same type of thing, only in reverse, occurs with some of the cards in the 2<sup>nd</sup> series. A lot of these cards can be found with relatively huge borders. Large borders are the result of smaller card images. Unfortunately, some of these large-bordered cards can be off-center, too.



#60 – 58x86mm



#197 – 60x89mm

In my collection, I have about fifty raw cards that I used as guinea pigs for these measurements: the images on the first fifty cards averaged about 59mm high by 87mm wide. Some of the images on the second fifty cards were as small as 58 x 85mm. The cards I looked at in the 4<sup>th</sup> series were all 60 x 89mm. For the record, the images of the 3<sup>rd</sup> series averaged 59 x 88mm. There are exceptions to these measurements in all series. The table, below, summarizes these (average) image measurements by series. You would think that Topps could have been a little more precise with all images across all series. But, if that were the case, there'd be nothing for us card geeks to write about. (Or is it we card geeks?).

| <b>Series</b> | <b>Height</b> | <b>Width</b> |
|---------------|---------------|--------------|
| 1             | 59            | 87           |
| 2             | 58            | 86           |
| 3             | 59            | 88           |
| 4             | 60            | 89           |

To better understand which Wings cards are scarce in top condition, I analyzed the PSA Population Report as of January 22, 2012, and discovered that there were several cards that either had low populations or low grades. Some cards had both. The tables, below, show cards that have either low pops or are difficult to find in near mint (7) or near mint/mint (8) grades. You can understand why cards number 1 and 200 are on this list – they probably suffer from the dreaded rubber band syndrome. They are both usually found off-center, as well. Since I don't know their relative positions on their printing sheets, it's difficult to come to any conclusions about placement and centering problems. If you look at the sheet diagrams, above, you can see some of the other (shaded) cards that suffer from being hard to find in nice condition. The only tough cards in series three, that I can comment on, are numbers 120 and 122. Many times you can see evidence of the print guideline (+) in number 120's top border. Number 122 is located on the left edge of the sheet. Most of the tough series four cards, shaded in the above diagram, are located along one or another edge of the sheet. This may account for some of the centering problems with these cards.

Besides numbers 1 and 200, the other toughest cards that are both hard to find in high grades and have low total populations are 2, 5, 10, 11, 118, 125, 168, 175, 181, and 199. The last four of these appear on the 4<sup>th</sup> series sheet layout, above. Card number 175 is in the lower right corner of the sheet and number 181 is on the left edge. This placement may have something to do with their relative scarcity in high grades. The below tables show all cards with less than ten 7s and 8s combined and less than eighteen graded examples.



1952 Topps Wings Cards - PSA Population Report 1/22/12

| No.        | 7s-8s<br><10 | Pop.<br><18 |
|------------|--------------|-------------|
| <b>1</b>   | 3            | 15          |
| <b>2</b>   | 3            | 11          |
| <b>118</b> | 4            | 14          |
| <b>181</b> | 5            | 12          |
| <b>200</b> | 5            | 14          |
| <b>5</b>   | 6            | 17          |
| <b>10</b>  | 6            | 17          |
| 11         | 6            |             |
| <b>125</b> | 6            | 16          |
| <b>168</b> | 6            | 15          |
| <b>175</b> | 6            | 13          |
| <b>199</b> | 6            | 15          |
| <b>99</b>  | 7            | 14          |
| <b>167</b> | 7            | 16          |
| <b>174</b> | 7            | 15          |
| <b>178</b> | 7            | 17          |
| 97         | 8            |             |
| 115        | 8            |             |
| <b>155</b> | 8            | 13          |
| 163        | 8            |             |
| <b>166</b> | 8            | 12          |
| 170        | 8            |             |
| <b>173</b> | 8            | 14          |
| <b>182</b> | 8            | 17          |
| 190        | 8            |             |
| <b>197</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>198</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>100</b> | 9            | 12          |
| 120        | 9            |             |
| 122        | 9            |             |
| 124        | 9            |             |
| 139        | 9            |             |
| <b>162</b> | 9            | 15          |
| <b>195</b> | 9            | 13          |
| 6          |              | 17          |
| 19         |              | 16          |
| 22         |              | 17          |
| 87         |              | 17          |
| 101        |              | 17          |
| 107        |              | 15          |
| 117        |              | 17          |
| 152        |              | 17          |
| 154        |              | 16          |
| 156        |              | 16          |
| 157        |              | 16          |
| 184        |              | 13          |
| 185        |              | 15          |
| 192        |              | 17          |
| 193        |              | 17          |
| 49         | 34           | 39          |

| No.        | 7s-8s<br><10 | Pop.<br><18 |
|------------|--------------|-------------|
| <b>2</b>   | 3            | 11          |
| <b>100</b> | 9            | 12          |
| <b>166</b> | 8            | 12          |
| <b>181</b> | 5            | 12          |
| <b>155</b> | 8            | 13          |
| <b>175</b> | 6            | 13          |
| 184        |              | 13          |
| <b>195</b> | 9            | 13          |
| <b>99</b>  | 7            | 14          |
| <b>118</b> | 4            | 14          |
| <b>173</b> | 8            | 14          |
| <b>200</b> | 5            | 14          |
| <b>1</b>   | 3            | 15          |
| 107        |              | 15          |
| <b>162</b> | 9            | 15          |
| <b>168</b> | 6            | 15          |
| <b>174</b> | 7            | 15          |
| 185        |              | 15          |
| <b>199</b> | 6            | 15          |
| 19         |              | 16          |
| <b>125</b> | 6            | 16          |
| 154        |              | 16          |
| 156        |              | 16          |
| 157        |              | 16          |
| <b>167</b> | 7            | 16          |
| <b>197</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>198</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>5</b>   | 6            | 17          |
| 6          |              | 17          |
| <b>10</b>  | 6            | 17          |
| 22         |              | 17          |
| 87         |              | 17          |
| 101        |              | 17          |
| 117        |              | 17          |
| 152        |              | 17          |
| <b>178</b> | 7            | 17          |
| <b>182</b> | 8            | 17          |
| 192        |              | 17          |
| 193        |              | 17          |
| 11         | 6            |             |
| 97         | 8            |             |
| 115        | 8            |             |
| 120        | 9            |             |
| 122        | 9            |             |
| 124        | 9            |             |
| 139        | 9            |             |
| 170        | 8            |             |
| <b>173</b> | 8            | 14          |
| <b>174</b> | 7            | 15          |
| <b>175</b> | 6            | 13          |
| <b>178</b> | 7            | 17          |
| <b>181</b> | 5            | 12          |
| <b>182</b> | 8            | 17          |
| 184        |              | 13          |
| 185        |              | 15          |
| 190        | 8            |             |
| 192        |              | 17          |
| 193        |              | 17          |
| <b>195</b> | 9            | 13          |
| <b>197</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>198</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>199</b> | 6            | 15          |
| <b>200</b> | 5            | 14          |
| 49         | 34           | 39          |

| No.        | 7s-8s<br><10 | Pop.<br><18 |
|------------|--------------|-------------|
| <b>1</b>   | 3            | 15          |
| <b>2</b>   | 3            | 11          |
| <b>5</b>   | 6            | 17          |
| 6          |              | 17          |
| <b>10</b>  | 6            | 17          |
| 11         | 6            |             |
| 19         |              | 16          |
| 22         |              | 17          |
| 87         |              | 17          |
| 97         | 8            |             |
| <b>99</b>  | 7            | 14          |
| <b>100</b> | 9            | 12          |
| 101        |              | 17          |
| 107        |              | 15          |
| 115        | 8            |             |
| 117        |              | 17          |
| <b>118</b> | 4            | 14          |
| 120        | 9            |             |
| 122        | 9            |             |
| 124        | 9            |             |
| <b>125</b> | 6            | 16          |
| 139        | 9            |             |
| 152        |              | 17          |
| 154        |              | 16          |
| <b>155</b> | 8            | 13          |
| 156        |              | 16          |
| 157        |              | 16          |
| <b>162</b> | 9            | 15          |
| 163        | 8            |             |
| <b>166</b> | 8            | 12          |
| <b>167</b> | 7            | 16          |
| <b>168</b> | 6            | 15          |
| 170        | 8            |             |
| <b>173</b> | 8            | 14          |
| <b>174</b> | 7            | 15          |
| <b>175</b> | 6            | 13          |
| <b>178</b> | 7            | 17          |
| <b>181</b> | 5            | 12          |
| <b>182</b> | 8            | 17          |
| 184        |              | 13          |
| 185        |              | 15          |
| 190        | 8            |             |
| 192        |              | 17          |
| 193        |              | 17          |
| <b>195</b> | 9            | 13          |
| <b>197</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>198</b> | 8            | 16          |
| <b>199</b> | 6            | 15          |
| <b>200</b> | 5            | 14          |
| 49         | 34           | 39          |

One other thing that I can't understand about the 1952 Topps Wings set, is the lack of love it gets on the SGC and PSA Registries. There are over 5,600 Wings cards that have been graded by PSA and SGC. There is only one complete set on the SGC Registry (mine), and two on the PSA Registry (both owned by the same collector). It's a great set, full of excellent artwork, vivid colors, and great historical imagery. What's not to like?

I hope the reader now has a little more understanding of how this set was printed and distributed. I had a lot of fun writing this article and figuring out some of the problems the collector will face in trying to put together a Topps Wings set in top condition. I invite all Wings collectors (and would-be collectors) to contact me at the above e-mail address with thoughts, additions, and corrections to this article.