

# Fong's interest in baseball more than academic

Bobby Fong was hooked in second grade.

The son of Chinese immigrants who settled in Oakland, Calif., Fong was still refining his language skills in 1958 when he heard some classmates talking about San Francisco Giants outfielder Willie Mays.

## PROFILE

### BOBBY FONG

Baseball was a major topic of conversation in California that year, the first season for the newly relocated New York Giants and Brooklyn Dodgers.

But Fong was puzzled.

"I asked my teacher, 'What is baseball?'" he recalled recently. "She said, 'If you really want to understand America, you have to know about baseball.' I've been overcompensating ever since."

Now 53 and the president of Butler University, Fong has turned that early lesson into an enduring hobby.

He's an avid baseball card collector, crunches stats like the pros and just joined the board of directors for the Indianapolis Indians. And now that the major-league season has started, he will be plenty busy keeping up with on-the-field action.

"I have favorite teams I follow, but any baseball game gives me a thrill," Fong said.

That's obvious by his list of "favorites"—the Giants and Oakland A's, teams of his childhood; the New York Yankees, where Mickey Mantle made a mark; the Boston Red Sox, near alma mater Harvard; the Milwaukee Brewers, for its Indians connection;

and the Chicago Cubs and Cincinnati Reds, which are close enough to watch in person.

Fong has even blurred the lines between his pastime and his day job, researching and writing about baseball for a range of publications catering to academics and aficionados alike.

"What makes something of scholarly interest is not the subject, but how the subject is treated," he explained. "I can write about Oscar Wilde or baseball. But the methods, the research skills, the analysis, that's all the same."

Even the baseball cards had a redeeming value, since Fong taught himself math by studying the statistics on the back.

He started collecting in 1958, not long after discovering baseball.

Every day after school, Fong and his younger sister would visit the sewing factory where their mother worked. She often gave them 5 or 10 cents to visit the neighborhood market, where two Twinkies cost 13 cents and a half-pint of milk sold for a nickel.

Fong had other plans for his money.

"I bought two packs of baseball cards," he said.

He kept that up until his family moved out of Chinatown a few years later and didn't give the cards much thought for decades.

Still, Fong kept them all through high school, college at Harvard and graduate school at UCLA. Then in 1988, when he was an associate professor of English at Berea College in Kentucky, he bought a



IBJ Photos/Robin Jenstad



Butler University President Bobby Fong is proud of his collection of baseball cards and other mementos. And this year, he joined the Indianapolis Indians board of directors.

box of cards at Wal-Mart on a whim.

And he was hooked again. Fong has kept his collection current since then and is working on filling in the gaps.

He has every Topps card since 1968 and is within 50 cards of the entire run from 1953 to 1965. Fong also has the 1954 Bowman series, including a rare card featuring Red Sox slugger Ted Williams, and almost all of the gold cards issued by the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Another prized possession is a baseball signed by Negro League standout Satchel

Paige and others during a reunion in Kentucky in 1981.

Fong sees his collection as an outlet, not an investment.

"This is something I do for myself, for the pure joy of doing it," he said. "I still have the first card out of the first pack I bought. That's meaningful to me."•

—By Andrea Muirragui Davis