

Rookie Card Guidelines & Best Practices

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[1] Scope

This document aims to help collectors better understand how the rookie card has evolved and recommends a logical, systematic set of best practices.

The source is time-tested best practices created by hobbyists and is still relevant today in many hobby circles. Also included with these rookie card best practices are current-day rookie card guidelines established by the Player's Association, the legal authority, in 2006.

This is *not* a legal document and functions more like a resource for educational purposes.

[2] Definitions

Base Set refers to a group of trading cards within a particular product. Typically sequentially numbered to the manufacturer-specified amount.

Flagship Rookie Card is a trading card identifier (slang) given to cards that represents a base set rookie card from a card manufacturer's most important, longest-standing product.

Image Variant Rookie Card is a rookie card with a variant image, usually subtly, from its more common counterpart. However, the photo on the card front may differ, but the card back and card number are primarily the same.

Insert Card a card that is randomly inserted into packs. They are not part of the base set and tend to have a unique design or theme. They are also known as Chase cards.

Pack a package of cards that are sealed by the manufacturer for hobby or retail sales. Packs can contain one or more cards.

Player's Association (PA) is the union organization representing an athlete in their Collective Bargaining Agreement, including but not limited to the athlete's name, image, and likeness.

Post-Rookie Theme Card (PRT) is a trading card identifier given to cards that feature an athlete after their debut season, and in some ways, the card design has elements that feature a rookie theme.

Pre-Rookie Card (PRC) is a trading card identifier given to any cards that feature an athlete before participating in the highest competition level within their respective sport.

Pro-Level Roster is a list of active players on a sports team playing at the highest level of competition within their respective sport. For this document, the "*highest level of competition*" entails the MLB, NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLS.

Rookie Year Card (RY) is a trading card identifier given to cards released during an athlete's debut season but fails to comply with a true rookie card designation.

True Rookie Card (TRC) is a trading card featured within the base set, manufactured, and distributed by a fully licensed card manufacturer. It features an athlete once that athlete has debuted at the highest level of competition within their respective sport.

[3] Guideline #1 Proper Licensing

(a) A rookie card must be licensed by the League and the Player's Association.

1. The athlete featured on the trading card must be a member of the Player's Association for their respective sport. The organization has the legal right over the athlete's name, image, and likeness and permits the card manufacturers to print trading cards of their athletes.
2. A rookie card must also be licensed by the League, which gives the card manufacturer the legal right to use the name, image, and likeness of the team represented.
3. Licensing rights can be found on the back side of the card, typically towards the bottom or one of the edges. There, you should notice League and Player's Association logos or written verification. This proof of licensing indicates cards have been manufactured with full legal permission.
4. Trading cards that only feature one license or no licenses as of 2006 to the present day do not qualify for a 'true rookie card' designation under these guidelines.

5. This does not bind trading cards prior to 2006. However, the hobby consensus prefers their rookie cards to be fully licensed.

[4] Guideline #2 Pro-Level Roster

(a) A rookie card must only be manufactured *after* a player has made a pro-level roster.

1. Before 2006 card manufacturers included prospect players in their base sets, some hobbyists viewed these as rookie cards while others did not. The disagreement was in the fact that these athletes had not debuted in the League yet. Adding to the problem is that many of these athletes never made it to a pro-level roster.
2. In 2006, the ruling by the PA indicated that only active roster players can have rookie cards produced and only if that athlete qualifies for rookie designation. Expanded roster players, AAA, and the like should only have rookie cards produced once they make the pro-level active roster.
3. Card manufacturers can include an athlete on the expanded roster promoted to an active roster midseason. However, consent from the Player's Association is needed. If applicable, the athlete must also meet rookie expectations according to their Collective Bargaining Agreement.

[5] Guideline #3 Rookie Card Identifier

(a) A rookie card must be branded with an identifier on the card front.

1. This rule only applies to sports cards from 2006 to the present.
2. Concessions have been made for expanded roster players and/or affiliated players. Athletes can appear on themed insert/subset cards *without* the rookie card identifier.
3. The design element of this identifier isn't exclusive to the League or the Player's Association. The creative component of this identifier is given to the card manufacturer.
4. The RC logo/identifier is placed on the card front to quickly and easily identify the rookie card of a featured athlete.
5. Prior to 2006, most rookie cards did not have an identifier. Rookie cards were established by hobby consensus and or Beckett Publications.

[6] Guideline #4 Distribution

(a) Hobbyists should have a fair and equal chance at owning the said card.

1. In its purest form, a rookie card must come from a product allocated in pack form and distributed in the continent intended by the manufacturer at production.
2. Although this principle still carries hobby weight, one must consider internet technology and the various pack/box packaging methods used today.
3. A pack/box formation can include a single pack of cards or multiple packs per box. Also, there are no limitations on the number of cards per pack. A pack of cards could have one or multiple cards in it.
4. According to Internet World Stats, in 2006, 15.7% of the world used the internet. As of December 2022, it is estimated that 69% of the world's population has internet access, roughly 5.4 billion people. The internet and its many outlets have given collectors many options for their sports card purchases and are now an acceptable form of 'fair and equal chance.'
5. For this document, the following distribution methods do not qualify for a true rookie card designation, and a rookie year (RY) designation is more appropriate.
 - i. Exclusive Memberships - this is a product specifically created for those belonging to an exclusive club. Typically, membership is only available for a limited time.
 - ii. Redemption Cards - often, these cards are numbered like an insert or chase card, and the manufacturer's difficulties in getting them distributed promptly disqualify them.
 - iii. Regional Cards - cards distributed to a particular region, district area, or stadium do not qualify for a true rookie card designation.
 - iv. Imported Product - trading cards from another country or nation are ambiguous to the North American sports card market and disqualified for a true rookie card designation. (Also see [3] and [4] above). However, a player may have true rookie cards featured in other foreign markets made by foreign card manufacturers.

[7] Rookie Card Best Practices

(a) This document declares the following rookie card recommendations as time-tested and appropriate:

- A rookie card must appear in the base set. This principle is foundational to the rookie card.
- If a player has more than one card featured in the base set, and neither comes from a subset, whichever card the hobby consensus chooses as the more desired card shall be considered the true rookie card.
- Parallel rookie cards of the base set qualify for a true rookie card designation. The overall hobby consensus post-2006 now accepts these as so.
- Print on Demand - this method of manufacturing is an acceptable form of distribution due to the worldwide use of the internet. Although not in pack form, the majority of collectors still have a chance at owning the said card. However, a base set concept should still apply (i.e., Panini Instant, Topps Now)
- Cards from licensed or unlicensed manufacturers depicting athletes in Minor League, Junior League, International Play, or Collegiate uniforms are *not* considered true rookie cards. *(a PRC identifier is given for these types of cards to bring lines of clarity.)*
- Insert cards, subset cards, or food and beverage cards released in an athlete's rookie season *do not qualify* for a true rookie card designation. *(An RY identifier is given for these types of cards in bringing lines of clarity.)*
- Flagship rookie cards are subject to change depending on which manufacturer holds which license at any given time. A flagship product represents the brand's most important, longest-standing product.
- Image Variant, SP, SSP, or the like are considered true rookie cards as long as the card back and the card number are the same.
- According to this document, sports cards produced and distributed for international use and exported to other continents are acceptable rookie cards in the North American card market. However, the product should be printed by a known, reputable North American card manufacturer. Rookie Card Guidelines and Best Practices should be evident.

[8] Disclaimers

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- The original version was released to the general public on Sunday, April 30, 2023.
- July 19, 2023, the name of this document was changed from The 10 Commandments of the Rookie Card to “Rookie Card Guidelines & Best Practices.”
- On July 19, 2023, the definitions of “code” and “expanded roster” were removed from [2] Definitions.
- On July 19, 2023, all expanded/active roster information found under [4] Pro-Level Roster was removed.
- On July 19, 2023, Print-On-Demand was removed from [6] (5) and added to [7] Rookie Card Best Practices.
- July 19, 2023, multiple small changes were made in verbiage to create a more favorable tone for the masses. Words like code, commandments, and rules were replaced.
- On November 7, 2023, for the definition of a “true rookie card” under section [2] Definitions, the word “*after*” was replaced with the word “*once*.”
- On May 1, 2024, [7] Print on Demand: Examples of base sets were given. Panini Instant and Topps Now base sets qualify for TRC. However, ancillary sets, gimmick cards, or anything that requires a paid subscription do not.