

Topps No More

POWERHOUSE
EXEC REACHES FOR
NEW HEIGHTS WITH
IRA FRIEDMAN
ENTERPRISES

BY SCOTT THOMAS



Last fall NSU announced longtime Topps executive Ira Friedman's transition toward founding his own firm. In a November discussion with NSU, the former director of new product development expressed quiet, firm confidence in Ira Friedman Enterprises LLC, his website, craniacsworld.com, and CRANIACS, the firm's self-created trading card property co-developed with renowned artist Joe Simko. Brand ideas flowed with precision and ease. The entrepreneur related how his 35-year background with the world's foremost card maker informed his creative decisions and business sense.

Friedman's first love is publishing. In the mid-1980s

he re-entered the magazine industry in New York City after a stint at Lucasfilm, Ltd. Friedman soon identified an opening or niche he could fill. "We had *Stickers Magazine*, which took off like a bat outta hell," he declared. "It involved kids collecting stickers and catered to a very popular trend at that time. [We had] interviews with the creators of many of these sticker designs, kids sharing their experiences and the artwork they were creating from stickers. I had a lot of sticker makers as advertisers." Today, *Stickers Magazine* exists as a journal emblematic of the '80s decade. Several different eBay sellers list back issues ranging from \$90 (Issue No. 2 Spring 1984) to \$150 (Punky Brewster cover, Summer 1985).



Ira with the Martian Commander, as licensed to Spirit Halloween as part of a comprehensive Mars Attacks program this past Halloween season. The display was complete with lights, sound, moving head, and blue-colored mist coming out of his blaster.

To the Topps

In the course of soliciting new advertisers, Friedman approached The Topps Company. No one firm then or since could match the history of the Manhattan-based corporation. Topps' sports and non-sport card products predominantly carried bonus stickers, an insert enhancement established firmly in the 1970s for virtually all their entertainment-based releases. By this point, Friedman issued a 'zine based on the 1984 American comedy horror film *Gremlins*. Here was a key overlap; the trading card monolith manufactured their standard 36-wax pack (w/bubble gum) merchandise assemblage along with a separate 180-sticker album product. A meeting of the minds ensued.



Ira is shown on this "Yuppie Chow" Wacky Packages (upper right-hand corner), as drawn by Drew Friedman and colored by Pat Pigott.



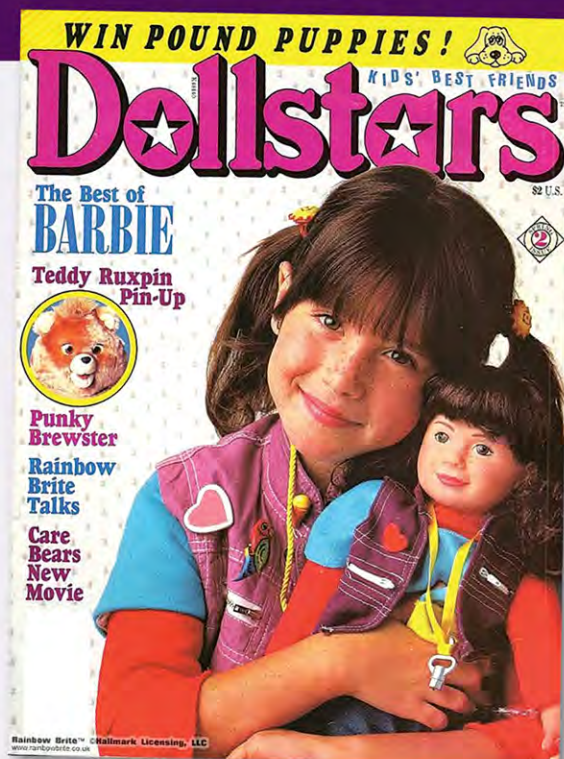
"I said, 'Sy, I'd like to come out and see you and show you this magazine I created and think it's something Topps might benefit by advertising in,'" as Friedman recalled the phone conversation. "Sy" was Seymour P. Berger, the second most powerful man in the Topps hierarchy and a public figure known as the father of the modern baseball card. A conference took place. "[And then] he said to me, 'Well, you should come over down the corridor, and I'll introduce you to the president and CEO of the company, Arthur Shorin.' [Topps] never did advertise in *Stickers Magazine* but we developed a really nice rapport. We kept in touch."

The magazine publisher continued expanding his periodical titles. In addition to his one-shot souvenir movie magazines, another children's journal, *Dollstars*, debuted. Subsequently, in August 1986, teens and young adults read their own bi-monthly movie fan glossy, *Splice*, with adverts targeting the 16-to-25-year-old demographic. As his small staff made their public presence sighted, a large figure loomed and watched. The previous Topps encounter impressed both sides, and Friedman's earlier Lucasfilm experience worked to a distinct advantage.

"It was not as if it was a lifelong ambition to work for Topps," he said. "Lucasfilm was a great experience that benefitted me because I maintained the Star Wars relationship while at Topps. Sy Berger was a mentor. I worked closely with Sy from the very first day I walked in the door. He was the guy doing all the licensing, and he worked both the sports side of the business as well as the entertainment side."

Fast Fads and Hot Topics

From the pan into the fire. Friedman got to work immediately. His first project, *Batman*, is the yellow wax-wrapped 132-card set from 1989. Simultaneously, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, the ubiquitous new youth pop culture



figures, proved the young executive could move quickly in capturing a hot brand by conceiving, developing and delivering two trading card series along with three subsequent movie set collections. There'd been fads (*New Kids on the Block*), curiously an endearing TV star (*Pee-wee's Playhouse*), a developing television institution (*The Simpsons*), and the wrap-up of the most reliable, consistently prominent title in company annals (*Garbage Pail Kids*).

By 1989, the trading card industry experienced an earthquake that brought profound change. The modern era of manufacturing commenced. Upper Deck's premiering baseball card series signaled a more eye-catching, glossier pasteboard with bolder imagery and more expensive price points. The non-sport realm soon witnessed this new technological regime. Topps reacted slowly to production evolution; their 1993 baseball set finally provided consumers with full UV-coated obverses and backs. Similarly, in 1994, Friedman helmed the company's most compelling artistic work in years, *Universal Monsters Illustrated*.

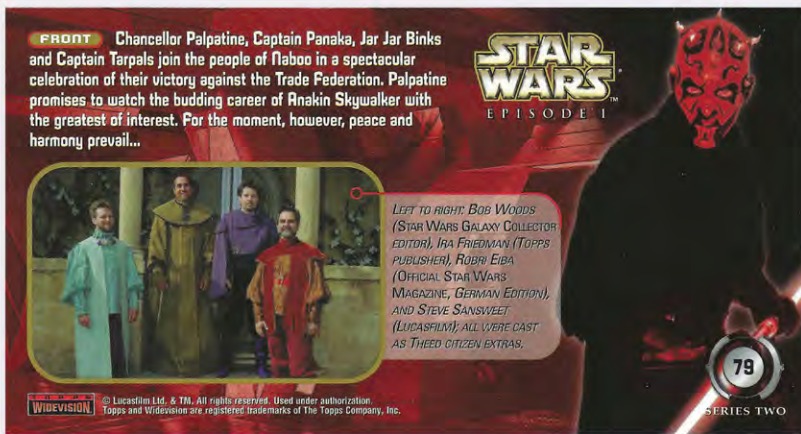
"We assigned specific artists to interpret the iconic characters in the way they saw fit," Friedman recalled. "A lot of creative freedom was given to the artists who participated. We had Mike Mignola, who went on to create the Hellboy property that became a motion picture franchise. I remember Todd McFarlane, a young superstar artist at that time, doing a chase card of The Creature from the Black Lagoon; it was a glow-in-the-dark insert." The four-card HorrorGlow sub-issue also included a Wolf



Man piece illustrated by Joe Quesada, later a Marvel Comics editor and creative decision maker. And in the early 1990s, Friedman added that the comic book industry had become a gigantic business with individual artists becoming overnight superstars.

Fast forward beyond dozens upon dozens of Topps merchandise offerings over the years that the property developer could proudly point toward and modestly claim partial to complete stewardship. More important were the licensing partnerships forged with diverse corporate groups. However, in late 2021, the battleship Fanatics, a digital sports marketing platform captained by Michael Rubin, approached and tie-roped the destroyer-class Topps Company. "There was a transition period," Friedman recalled. "It became clear to me that it was time to go back to my earlier entrepreneurial roots, rather than be a very, very small part of a gigantic organization."

Friedman promptly formed a private firm, Ira Friedman Enterprises. Last year, the CRANIACS concept was born with the input of renowned artist, Joe Simko. The CRANIACS storyline, which is now being disseminated in the *Series Zero (0)* trading card set released last October, forwards a direct sci-fi story of colliding planets. Two civilizations, one of prehistoric human existence and the other of far-futuristic attributes, are fused together into one world. Friedman believes the modest opening introductory narrative and character imagery on pasteboard can springboard into an epic adventure and a continuing trading card line. "I'm pleased to share that our CRANIACS trading cards are now in consumer hands and selling," said Friedman. The inaugural series #0 was released online and in a limited number of retail hobby shops nationwide. The online offering sold out in three hours and the retail product is quickly disappearing off shelves. Ebay



Ira appeared as an extra in *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace*. You'll find him shown on the back of card 79 in 1999's *Star Wars: Episode 1, Series 2*.



is hosting many card auctions and CRANIACS is now getting traction in the secondary market. Given that CRANIACS is off to such an impressive start, we're now announcing a follow-up card release (series #1) in the new [2024] year."

He also foresees other marketing avenues for CRANIACS if the concept takes flight in the pop culture realm. "We're talking to potential licensees to create appropriate merchandise," he said. "We are looking to a handful of close-knit partners who can produce merchandise to further enhance the storytelling to a potential audience and expand beyond card collectors." Friedman dares to dream of an animated television program with an audience comprised of youngsters and adults, a similar demographic entertained by the Mutant Turtles. But such projects require time and some luck to become reality. Friedman knows the build-up period.

"This is not Star Wars at this stage, so we're not going to have thousands of partners," the affable industry veteran admitted. As for the future, Friedman concluded, "I feel like I've been in training for this for the last many decades. I'm enjoying being the underdog out there. I'm no longer a part of this huge monster company. [We're] small, hungry, fast-on-our-feet, and quick to maneuver. We want to build a strong foundation. From there we will get to the next level." NSU