

At Strat-O headquarters, secret's in the cards

Opening Day draws hundreds of board game fans

By Larry O'Rourke

Staff Writer

GLEN HEAD, N.Y. — Most days around 2 p.m., The Iron Horse tavern, like the rest of Glen Head, is in slow-motion.

But one afternoon a year, before commuters return from work in the city, before the evening-crowd shuffles in, the Iron Horse is rushed, as much because it's a warm place to sit as for its food and drink.

And the conversation sounds like baseball's winter meetings.

"Who's the No. 1 pick?" asks Phil Berger, a visitor from Astoria, N.Y.

"Dave Smith will go pretty high," answers Bob Conroy, a visitor from Yonkers.

"He's just a reliever?" Berger asks.

"Yeah," Conroy answers.

"How many innings (can he pitch until he tires)?" Berger asks.

"Two," Conroy says.

Conroy and Berger were two of a couple hundred or more people from several states who skipped work or school Friday and came to Glen Head to pick up the new edition of the Strat-O-Matic Game Company's baseball cards.

"It's amazing," said Hal Richman, the man behind Strat-O-Matic. "One day a year, people from all over descend on Glen Head, Long Island. They start lining up at 10 o'clock and the rush lasts until about 3 p.m.

"We've always had Opening Day. It's the first day the new cards are mailed."

Unlike the baseball cards that come with bubble gum, Strat-O-Matic baseball cards aren't adorned with pictures. But to the people who play Strat-O — the avid player's shorthand for the game — they're more alive. And just as valuable, if only in terms of the number of hours they use them.

Based on the statistics of the previous major league season (great teams of the past are also available), the cards enable would-be Davey Johnsons and Billy Martins to recreate pennant races. Or, like Berger and Conroy, to throw all the players into a pool and then hold a draft.

"There are board games that have more sales, but Strat-O-Matic has much more fanaticism," said Richman.

Strat-O-Matic is headquartered in a nondescript warehouse extension tucked between lawnmower repair shops, small office buildings and taverns like the Iron Horse. It's a pretty sure bet that most of the commuters who catch their daily train at the Glen Head station a couple hundred yards away have never noted the game company's presence.

But to the people who form a line outside the game company once a year, and show up in ones and twos at other times, the white building extension with green trim may as well be Mecca.

"I can't wait for the UPS truck," said

Mark Krob, a long-distance telephone company employee who traveled to Long Island from his home in Reston, Va. "What's worse is when a package comes from another company."

At around 12:30 p.m., 30 minutes before the game company's door was scheduled to open, Krob was holding a new set of Cleveland Indians cards.

"Every year they seem to have a few strays that get passed outside," Krob said in explaining how he managed a sneak preview of his favorite big-league team's cards.

Krob was standing in a group that included Steven Minskoff and Fort Lee resident Howie Gordon, who are employed by a Manhattan law firm, and Doug Tucker, a law librarian from Brooklyn.

"If you're a good Strat-O-Matic baseball player, it takes 15 minutes to play a game — unless you're taking stats, and everybody keeps stats," Minskoff said.

Minskoff and Gordon were also anticipating a business flight to Florida as they stood in line.

"We have a 4 o'clock flight," Minskoff said. "I worked this out — Strat-O-Matic comes first."

"(Minnesota's Gary) Gaetti will have a great card," Minskoff said. "I want to see (National League MVP Andre) Dawson's card."

"I'm not even a really avid player, but See STRAT-O, Page G-6

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|----------------------------|--------------|----------------------|------------------|--------------|----------------|
| PAT PACILLO | | DON MATTINGLY | | firstbase-1 | stealing-E |
| PITCHING CARD | | NEW YORK (AL) | | running 1-12 | |
| 4 | 2- CATCHER'S | 1 | 2- groundball | 2 | 2- foulout (c) |
| 2- CATCHER'S | CARD X | 3 | 3- groundball | 3 | 3- groundball |
| 3- CATCHER'S | CARD X | 4 | 4- popout (1b) | 4 | 4- HOMERUN |
| 4- GROUND- | BALL(3b) X | 5 | 5- groundball | 5 | 5- HOMERUN |
| 5- groundball | (2b) C | 6 | 6- popout (2b) | 6 | 6- HOMERUN |
| 6- GROUND- | BALL(2b) | 7 | 7- SINGLE** | 7 | 7- DOUBLE** |
| 7- strikeout | 1-11 | 8 | 8- lineout (2b) | 8 | 8- SINGLE |
| 8- TRIPLE | 12-20 | 9 | 9- lineout (2b) | 9 | 9- TRIPLE |
| 1- F | DOUBLE | 10 | 10- popout (1b) | 10 | 10- SINGLE |
| 7 | DOUBLE | 11 | 11- lineout (2b) | 11 | 11- SINGLE |
| 9- flyball | (c) | 12 | 12- popout (2b) | 12 | 12- SINGLE |
| 10- FLYBA | (c) | | plus injury | | |
| 11- GRO | BAL | | | | |
| 12- GR | BA | | | | |
| 1987 BATTING RECORD | | | | | |
| AT BATS | DOUBLES | TRIPLES | HOMERUNS | | |
| 569 | 38 | 2 | 30 | | |
| AVERAGE | WALKS | STRIKEOUTS | | | |
| .327 | 51 | 38 | | | |

STRAT-O/

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it's kind of an event," Gordon said.

For the couple hundred times a year that the average Strat-O fanatic will play the game, he or she will sit and thumb through cards for hours, plotting strategy and threatening lineup changes.

"You can stay up late at night and wonder why (Cleveland relief pitcher) Ernie Camacho isn't doing the job," Krob said.

Scott Kelly has lost a lot of sleep over the past 25 years. Kelly, who works for a press clipping service, takes all the cards he's purchased over 25 years, designates 12 teams that will play 162-game schedules, drafts players and takes about a year to complete a solitaire season.

"I'm home all the time," Kelly said. "My wife knows where to find me. On draft days I'll make one chair for left fielders, one for center fielders..."

"I do hand-made statistics — no computers or anything. Keeping stats is the fun part of the game. I have 12 years (seasons) of stats. Some guys have career stats with me. I have file cabinets filled with teams."

Even before they pay the \$21 to acquire the new set of major league cards, plans are made to sneak a quick look.

"Afterwards, we're going somewhere to look at the cards," Tucker said.

For Berger, Conroy and Tucker, who are members of a draft league that plays its games on Saturday nights in a New York City bar, that somewhere is The Iron Horse, where they pay only the slightest attention to the menus left by the waitress, then keep things simple by ordering burgers.

Their eight-team league allows for 25-man rosters and five-man taxi squads in case of injuries. Those are numbers that leave some big names riding the bench or undrafted.

"A lot of the players in real baseball are overrated," Berger explains after having

some time to look at the new cards. "Andre Dawson was the MVP, but he has an awful card."

"He (Dawson) should play every day, he's the MVP, but you're cutting the league (to eight teams)," Conroy said.

While almost every Strat-O player admits to an occasional complaint about a certain player's card being "awful," most also admit that the game — which combines strategy with dice rolls that are based on mathematical odds and statistics — generally reproduces realistic numbers.

"You can learn a lot about the players," Krob said. "You learn what players are solid fielders, who hits homers, and who hits into doubleplays. But you can overlook these things if you don't play a full season."

"In all the years I've been playing," Kelly said, "the highest batting average I've had was .352. I've had two perfect games and that's about right. I don't want ridiculous stats."

Although Strat-O-Matic sells football, basketball and hockey games, Richman said baseball, the first game that the company produced in the early 1960s, is its hottest seller.

"Baseball is more statistically inclined (to board gaming)," Richman said. "The stats describe the baseball player."

And make people like Kelly and Tucker slip out of the office — or away from their old cards — long enough to get the earliest look at the new cards.

"It's the same crowd," Kelly said. "The same size, no matter what the weather. Guys stand here and say 'this is the last year,' but they're back."

"I had an accident on the way here a couple of years ago, but still made it," Tucker said. "My car was banged up, but it was still driveable, so I kept going."