

**BB game invented by husband
of former Sheila Mednitsky has
become popular internationally**

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FAMILY ENTERPRISE--A family that plays together, the Richmans of Port Washington, N. Y., (Hal, Sheila and their children, Adam and Ann), are all involved in Strat-O-Matic Baseball, a game created by Hal Richman 20 years ago which has since become an international phenomenon. They're in the production room of the

company's Glen Head facility where the game pieces are coordinated and prepared for mailing. Mrs. Richman is the former Sheila Mednitsky of Hazleton. She's a daughter of Mrs. Esther Mednitsky of 175 N. Vine St., this city. (Susan Francy-Jenkins photo)

(The following story, written by Mike Reiner for the Port Washington, N. Y., News and other newspapers, is about baseball game inventor Hal Richman and his wife of Port Washington, and their children. Mrs. Richman, the former Sheila Mednitsky of Hazleton, is a daughter of Mrs. Esther Mednitsky of 175 No. Vine St., this city.)

A place on his high school sports teams eluded Hal Richman back in the 1950s, for although he played many, many hours of baseball, basketball and football, he was, in his own words, "an average athlete." In order to quench an unsatiated thirst for sports achievement, the teenaged Richman invented a baseball board game.

Eventually, he called it Strat-O-Matic.

Twenty years later, a cult-like attraction to the game has developed internationally - to the extent that Strat-O-Matic was the only salvation this year for many strike-hungry baseball fans, and the game has been nominated for inclusion in the Cooperstown Hall of Fame.

Inventor Richman, now 45 and a resident of Port Washington, started the whole thing off when he was 11 years old.

"At age 11 I developed my first baseball game - a very rudimentary game - because there was nothing on the market at the time that I found realistic," said Richman. "I started playing around with dice - I had no idea what the probabilities were, I used to roll the dice hundreds of thousands of times to get a representative sample - and from there I created a very rudimentary product which became Strat-O-Matic Baseball in 1961."

The premise of Richman's game - and its siblings, Strat-O-Matic Football (1968), Basketball (1973), College Football (1976) and Hockey (1978) - is to offer realistic play of the sport at home on a board.

"It's not as if we have to create a completely new idea; we try to simulate a sport," Richman said. "The problem is that there is a reality already created in a sport. You have to stay within that reality."

"At the same time," he added, "you have to have something playable. The right degree of play-value and realism in a product is what makes it successful."

Richman's combination of these two things is manifested in a set of statistic cards which represent the players of a major league team. A player's record in a given year is computer-analyzed and the result is a card with various plays and a number next to each. By rolling a pair of dice and matching the numbers against opposing player cards, the game transpires.

"All our games are based on the actual player's ability to perform in real life," Richman said. "For instance, you have a Reggie Jackson. We'll measure his ability to hit home runs, his ability to get injured or hit left or right handed pitchers. We do quite a bit."

Similar formats are used in Richman's other sport games. Each one features an advanced game for experts and a basic one for beginners, the duality attained by printing on both sides of the game card. The baseball version, however, is the oldest and most popular.

Strat-O-Matic Baseball was introduced to Sports Illustrated readers April 10, 1961, in that magazine's preview issue of the baseball season. "Be a Big League Manager," proclaimed the ad, "you pick the lineups, direct the actual play of big-league games... All-Stars such as Mays, Mantle and Law perform according to their current records."

Despite the sales pitch, Strat-O-Matic didn't catch on at first. "It was very difficult the first few years," said Richman. "In 1961 I invested \$3,500. I lost all my money." The young gamemaker worked out of his father's basement in Great Neck.

Strat-O-Matic fared no better in 1962. The next year, however, "I made some money," Richman said. The game gained momentum, and within two more years he had to move from the basement to a Port Washington office to accommodate the growing company. In 1969, the operation moved again, this time to Railroad Ave. in Glen Head opposite the train station, where it remains today.

The Strat-O-Matic sets are assembled in Glen Head; the pieces - board and box, dice, playing pieces, cards and charts - are made by subcontractors and shipped to the company. Conception of the game itself, however, is a little more complicated.

"The actual creation of all our products has taken much time," Richman said. "The game we're working on now" - a revised version of the basketball game - "has been done over a three-year period. Basically you play and play the product, for play-value and for statistical realism."

"The game changes form over the period of Richman himself changing it, and, of necessity, he is to playing it. "Our hockey game form over a two-year period a dozen times, maybe two basketball game, with six was very unhappy with months, some great changes with great impact

Sheila Richman, who is in division of her husband's business (actually she and an assistant in division), asserted that "baseball, football, college hockey - are the best on the market. Hal really felt his basketball was not number one, and he took in his work that he decided to revise it."

Richman's games used to be only be mail order. In the past, however, retail sales have been in Sheila Richman's direction

A few letters that Sheila found in her husband's files - letters from several large companies who wished to acquire

the product Richman wanted to sell only on his own - prompted her to set up a retail division with the telephone. Aided by her previous experience as a department store buyer, she sold to many stores across the country. Some of the company's clients include A&S, Marshall Field in Chicago, Herman's and FAO Schwarz.

In selling A&S on the product, Sheila Richman said she tried to extol its merits to a merchandising manager who had never heard of the game. Before she could finish, the store's buyer walked in and recognized Strat-O-Matic from his childhood - and the manager decided immediately to host a Strat-O-Matic convention at A&S, which was a sell-out, even when extended to two days.

The entire Richman family has gotten involved in Strat-O-Matic, including Adam David, 11, and Ann Dara, 13, who help demonstrate the game at trade shows.

"One of the nicest things of this business is that, even though it was Hal's creativity that brought the product fruition, now our whole family is involved," Sheila said. "The children are always willing to help test, and they're very enthusiastic about all the publicity we've gotten over the years."

Not surprisingly, young Adam has a "keen sense for game creativity," according to his father and Ann once finished third in a countywide game creation contest ("I didn't help," Hal said).

"The children's evaluations really help," reported Sheila. "If in a layout they see something missing or something they don't like, they're honest and helpful... a child's eye is a very important eye in the production," she said.

The game, in the business world, is a success. According to Richman, Strat-O-Matic, of all the sports-personalities board game companies, pays the highest royalties to the athletic associations for use of the teams' and players' names.

Its success with the public, however, is evidenced much more dramatically. The day the cards are ready for the new baseball season, for example, is a major event for the company.

"When the new cards come out, we have several hundred people outside our doors," Sheila said. "They could have gotten the cards by mail, but there is almost a status thing about being the first on the block to have the new cards."

"We had a grandfather fly in from Canada, had a chauffeur drive him out here to pick up \$9 worth of cards and just went right back," she said. "His grandson was vying for a seat in a league."

Strat-O-Matic leagues which have materialized throughout the country developed independently of the company; the only way the Richmans find out about one, in fact, is when a fan sends a newspaper clipping or requests permission to use the name - such as the Strat-O-Matic Review, a Michigan news publication.

The game's attraction doesn't stop at the United States border. The Richmans have heard of one man from Edmonton, Alberta, who was transferred to a new job 375 miles away but refused to give up his franchise in the Edmonton Strat-O-Matic league. He undertook a 750 mile round trip every other week to continue competing.

And, for Strat-O-Matic Football, there is a Saudi Arabian league where a group of men raffle off 12 teams every year and report the game results in their newspaper. "They don't have much recreation in Saudi Arabia; obviously this is important to them," Richman said.

During the recently settled major-league baseball strike, frustrated fans

turned from the empty ballfields to their Strat-O-Matic boards. But it didn't stop with the fans.

"When the strike began, the news media were very hungry to replace all the space that was occupied by baseball," Richman said. "One tremendous problem in New York was Sportsphone which had averaged 150,000 calls a day prior to the strike, and was down to 25,000 calls a day. They were really in trouble."

"Among their executives, they had several play Strat-O-Matic. They came up with the idea of running the '69 Mets against the '78 Yankees, played one game a day in their office and broadcast the results line by line."

Sportsphone calls jumped to 50,000 a day, according to Richman, and the other Sportsphones in Cleveland, Detroit and Chicago picked up the idea. Media attention spread the news.

WITS in Boston and its 28 affiliates played the Red Sox schedule with Strat-O-Matic, with coverage so realistic that one fan living near Fenway Park heard the broadcast and thought the strike was over. In Cleveland Municipal Stadium on July 14, two weeks before the actual All-Star Game took place, a Strat-O-Matic version was played, with the lineups chosen by Sportsphone polled fans and former Cleveland Indian pitcher Bob Feller there to throw out the first dice.

Perhaps the greatest honor for the game came with the recent recommendation by John Halpern of WKYC (NBC) in Cleveland, to put Strat-O-Matic into the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, the first board game which would be so acknowledged. Richman, who was unable to attend the presentation of the game to hall officials, said a decision should be forthcoming soon.

Significantly, the game itself would be the recipient of the honor, rather than its inventor, and Richman indicates that he would not have it otherwise. When Strat-O-Matic fans visit the Glen Head office to pick up the new cards, Richman often stays in the background.

"When I created the product I was on the same plane with it. After 20 years of Strat-O-Matic Baseball, it's like a snowball rolling down a hill, becoming larger and larger. It's much, much greater than I," he said. "Most people envision the creator of Strat-O-Matic to be something like computer HAL out of '2001' whereas he's a rather ordinary fellow."

Ordinary? Perhaps... but then, not just any man is the spark of a world-wide phenomenon.