

A Frustrated Athlete Scores

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

LOTS of people may think the Mets' centerfielder, Lenny Dykstra, put Strat-O-Matic baseball on the map after walloping the ninth-inning home run that beat Houston in the third game of the National League Championship Series this fall.

It was then that Dykstra was quoted as recalling that the last time he performed such heroics was while playing the game with his brother.

But according to Harold B. (Hal) Richman of Port Washington, who invented the game and is founder and president of the Strat-O-Matic Game Company, a privately held concern based in Glen Head, the game was on the map long before.

After all, he pointed out, Strat-O-Matic baseball is already enshrined in an exhibit of games at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Coopers-town, N.Y.

Still, Mr. Richman acknowledged, Mr. Dykstra's fond memory touched a responsive chord in many of the game's players, and clippings and phone calls flowed in from around the country. "There was a lot of enthu-

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siasm from our fans," said Mr. Richman. "They love to see our name in print. There is a special feeling between our company and the people who play our games."

Besides the baseball game, the company produces a professional football game, a professional basketball game, a professional hockey game and a sports trivia game. Next year, Strat-O-Matic, which sells its wares by mail and through retail outlets, will bring back a revised version of its college football game, and expand the compatibility of the computer versions of its baseball game.

Strat-O-Matic baseball and its counterparts are what the 50-year-old Mr. Richman calls "personality sports board games," meaning that they are based on the abilities of actual athletes. In baseball, for example, numbers on dice direct the players to a card for either the pitcher or the batter, and then to a particular entry on the card based on actual performance probabilities.

"In other words," Mr. Richman said, "Don Mattingly of the Yankees would hit for a very high average, have a considerable number of extra-base hits and rarely strike out. So all characteristics, good and bad, are re-



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Harold B. Richman, inventor of Strat-O-Matic baseball.

flected on the card, and in the long run the player's average will adhere very closely to real life."

If there were a card for Mr. Richman, it might show that he was born in New York City, moved to Great Neck with his family when he was 9 and started creating games when he was 11.

"I loved to play baseball," he recalled. "I played all the sports. I played all the time, but I was not any good. The way to satisfy the thirst that could not be achieved by playing sports was to create games."

And at 11, he created the primitive forerunners of the games he sells today. "They had nowhere near the detail or the statistical accuracy of the games we have today," he said. "But I did learn my craft doing that. The idea is to be able to incorporate something that is statistically realistic and something that plays very well."

Mr. Richman's father, Irving, an insurance broker, hoped his son would join him in business, and when his son graduated in 1954 from Great Neck High School, he entered Bucknell University as an accounting student. But he decided he was not fond of accounting and not eager to make insurance his career. Upon graduation in 1958 with a degree in commerce and finance, Mr. Richman said, "I decided I was going to give the game business a real try."

His mother, the former Helen Wallach, who was selling real estate, introduced him to a man in the toy business whom she had met in the course of business. Mr. Richman recalled: "He said to me, you have a lot of tal-

ent, but it's not commercial; and you should do it."

Encouraged, Mr. Richman went home and began revising his baseball game. And he went to work in the toy industry, hoping to interest someone in marketing his baseball game but meeting only rejection.

In 1960, with \$3,500, Mr. Richman decided to produce and market his game. A \$400 advertisement in *Sports Illustrated* drew 25 responses for games priced at \$4.25. "I was shocked, depressed — my world had come to an end," he said.

Next, he advertised in *The Sporting News* and *Baseball Digest*. The response encouraged Mr. Richman to refine the game further and to make another try, but by the end of 1962, he was out of money. "It looked like it was the end," he said.

But he decided on one more try. "I went to my father and told him 'I wanted to borrow from him — \$5,000. If I fail, I'll work for you.'"

For the first time, Mr. Richman produced a game with cards incorporating all the major-league baseball teams. He began advertising it in the spring. There was a trickle of orders, and he began to despair.

"Then in June, the kids got out of school. Business picked up significantly. I worked 80 straight days from 11 in the morning to 7 at night filling orders. It was the greatest feeling of my life." Strat-O-Matic was on its way.

"Creating games for me is not a business," Mr. Richman said. "It really has been a way of life."