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Sports Writer

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All-American sports (?) story

Harold Richman's story is one of those classic American sports tales, in which a guy believes in himself when nobody else will, he single-mindedly battles and clings to his dream and, in the end, he perseveres.



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But there's a twist to this sports story. In this time of year, when thousands of armchair sports freaks vicariously live out their dreams by watching bowl games and talking baseball trades, Richman is a hero.

You see, Richman can't run a mile in four minutes. He's never pounded a fastball into the upper deck at Yankee Stadium. You won't see him executing a 360-degree thunder-dunk down at

the neighborhood basketball court.

"When I was younger, I was an individual who loved sports," Richman said Tuesday by telephone from his office in Glen Head, N.Y. "But I was actually not a very good athlete. I couldn't make any of my high school teams. I was unable to create the glories on the field."

So what Richman did, starting at about the age of 11 as a New York Yankee fan in the late 1940s, was to create glories on a different kind of field — a small, cardboard baseball diamond, about one one-thousandth the size of Yankee Stadium.

His creation was a dice-activated baseball board game. Using individual player cards and a number of charts, each roll of the three dice could lead to thousands of potential outcomes.

The result has been unbounded success for Richman, 51, the founder and creator of Strat-O-Matic Game Co. Inc., undoubtedly the best — and most realistic — that the sports board game industry has to offer. That may bring arguments from other sports board game manufacturers, such as *Sports Illustrated*, Avalon Hill and APBA, but the last available statistics from the Major League Baseball Association indicate that Strat-O-Matic topped the list in terms of royalties paid, which means that it topped the list in sales.

In fact, there is a Strat-O-Matic baseball game on display at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

"For board games, we certainly are number one," Richman said. "We have to feel we have the best product out there."

But for Richman, and Strat-O-Matic, things weren't always so rosy. "It was a moonlighting operation," Richman recalled of the company's first few years. "It was very difficult going at first."

From his creation-rich adolescence, Richman knew he wanted to market sports games. After he graduated from Bucknell University in 1958 and served for a while in the Army, he worked for a toy company with the ulterior motive of selling the idea of his products — baseball, basketball and football games — to the company. They initially seemed enthused at Richman's ideas, but the day he was to make his final sales pitch was ill-timed. The boss had recently been burned on a previous investment and was in no mood to try another!

Richman's idea was nixed.

Next, Richman wrote to J.G. Taylor Spink, the former editor of *The Sporting News*, about marketing the game through the magazine. Richman and Spink exchanged a few letters, but no deal was struck.

Finally, after being rejected by a few other companies, he decided to go it alone. Strat-O-Matic officially became a company in 1961.

"I invested \$3,500 and lost it all the first year," he said. "The second year I lost about the same amount."

The third year, however, Strat-O-Matic Baseball showed a modest increase in sales, and Richman actually made some profit.

"The third year I was elated," Richman said. "There were indications I could make a living from it, possibly a success."

Richman was able to operate with no overhead, or else the business might have faltered. He lived at his parents' house and worked on Strat-O-Matic from their basement.

"I had a strong back, and I was willing to work long hours," he said.

That work, and dedication to the dream, paid off. The company really rocketed, in terms of mail-order sales, in about 1965. In 1969 he introduced a pro football game, and in the early '70s a pro basketball game. He added a pro hockey game later and, this year, introduced college football. The baseball game has added old-timer sets in recent years (recreations of the 1930, '50, '56, '61, '69 and '70 seasons) and a version of the game on computer discs.

Despite recent ventures into other games, the flagship product of the company is baseball. Having tried almost all of the different brands, I can't imagine a more perfectly designed reproduction of the sport. The lone difference is that the board game only takes about 25 minutes to play, either head-to-head or solitaire, and it's fun for people from age 6 to 96.

Every big-leaguer has an individual card made after each season, which charts his ability in virtually every facet of the sport. Players get injured. Pitchers get tired in the late innings. Long flyballs in Busch Stadium become home runs in the friendly confines of Wrigley Field.

About the only thing they don't do is spit tobacco.

The best way to get the game is to write for a brochure at Strat-O-Matic in Glen Head, N.Y.

Strat-O-Matic currently employs seven people, with the bulk of its sales through mail orders, although it is working on retail sales. Richman wouldn't say what Strat-O-Matic Co. Inc. is worth today, but it's a safe bet that his last name is very fitting.