

Leisure SPORTS

Sunday, February 17, 1980
Newsday's recreational sports report

However, Free Agents Need Not Apply

By Bob Herzog

The scene resembled a high school cafeteria during lunch hour. Food and drink were downed in gulps while papers were scattered on every table. Sheet after sheet of lists and charts were shuffled. Facts and figures were memorized.

But this class was not cramming for a history exam, though the test awaiting these 25 men and boys would demand their attention and their ingenuity. This was the Thursday night meeting of the Strat-O-Matic Club of Long Island, a group devoted to the ardent pursuit of their hobby—the Strat-O-Matic tabletop baseball game.

This particular Thursday was draft night. The first of three 82-game leagues would be starting up, and the all-important draft to fill out the rosters was to take place under the familiar orange roof of the Howard Johnson's in Roslyn Heights. The restaurant serves as the league's headquarters. Every Thursday the club rents one of the dining rooms to play its dice-activated board-and-card game, which is based on the mathematically realistic game marketed nearly 20 years ago by Hal Richman, president of the Strat-O-Matic Game Co. of Glen Head.



Newsday Photo by Paul J. Bereswill

Arthur Marblestone of Massapequa agonizes over draft selections

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had frozen Amos Otis of the Royals and Chet Lemon of the White Sox, hoping they'd be rated for another outfield position besides centerfield, which had excellent '79 ses-

six players from each team are protected, so Leonard was actually the 121st selection.) Gary Roenicke of the Orioles went next. Kurzbarn-Birke, picking 17th, went for Cecil Cooper with their first-round pick.

"The playoff spots will be determined tonight, right here in this room tonight, by the draft," ventured Steve Laskin of Brooklyn, whose teams have made the playoffs in all five years of the league's existence. Laskin contends, "You won't find better Strat-O-Matic players anywhere in the country. We know baseball, and we know this game. We psyche, we think, we study the numbers and we play for real."

Laskin is not exaggerating. Team owner Bill Krolikowski, 39, a junior high school teacher in New York City who lives in Bellerose Terrace, has 30 of his students involved in Strat-O-Matic baseball leagues. "The kids come in about 7 in the morning, and we play until home-room ends at 8:30," said Krolikowski, who calls his franchise the 'Polish Jokes.' "We also play at lunch and sometimes after school. The kids love it, I love it, and the math teachers like it, too. I've got the kids keeping their own statistics." Krolikowski's selection of Carl Yastrzemski in a late round of the draft drew jeers from the gathering. "Hey,

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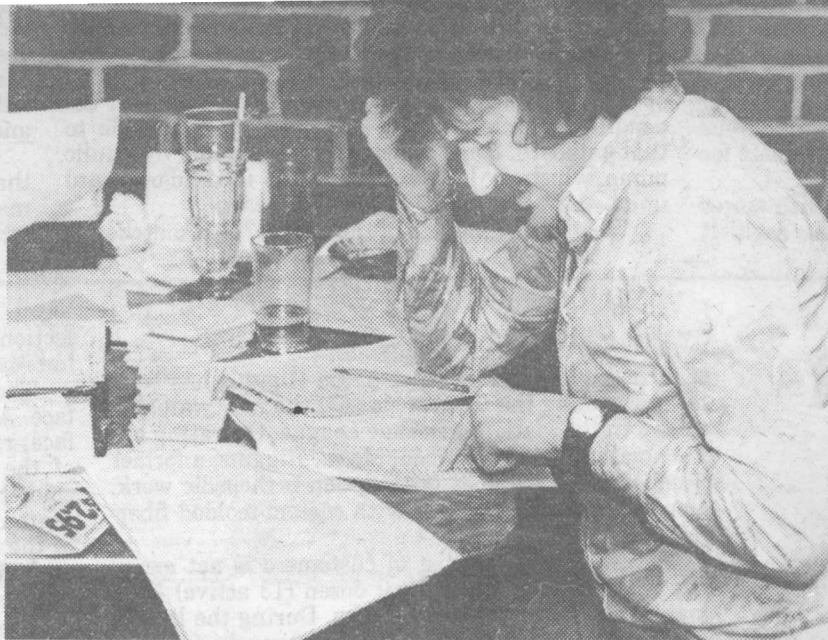
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The 25 owners (there are 20 teams in the league, but some are co-owned) are truly Paper Tigers. Each "player" is really a player card, which accurately reflects his record from the previous year. The crack of the bat is actually the roll of three dice.

Before the draft, each team freezes six players "to maintain some team identity," according to league commissioner and team co-owner Steve Kurzban of Bayside. The other 19 spots of the 25-man roster are filled in the draft, and there was clearly a seriousness of purpose to the Feb. 7 gathering.

Kurzban, who shares a franchise



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Arthur Marblestone of Massapequa agonizes over draft selections

with Russ Birke of Bellmore, helped organize a 10-team scouting service before the draft. The effort produced a complete list of every playing card in the 1979 set, along with batting and pitching statistics of every imaginable ilk, including, for instance, appearances and effectiveness against lefties and righties.

"It was like the NFL's BLESTO [a central] scouting organization," Kurzban said. "Guys read the sheets on the can each morning and on the train to and from work. You know who gets rich from this league? The telephone company. As soon as the cards came out [in January], the phones never stopped ringing. People wanted to make trades and discuss draft strategy."

Kurzban and Birke were involved in the most significant trade. They

had frozen Amos Otis of the Royals and Chet Lemon of the White Sox, hoping they'd be rated for another outfield position besides centerfield, where both had excellent '79 seasons. But when the cards came out and both were rated for centerfield only, a trade had to be made.

After a number of calls, Kurzban-Birke sent Lemon, Burt Hooten and Joe Ferguson to a team known as the Germs (co-owned by two 16-year-old boys) in exchange for Darrell Porter, Ken Griffey and a first-round pick in the draft. "Hooten will be tough to replace," Birke said, "but in Porter we've got probably the best catcher in the set."

The first player chosen in the draft was Jeff Leonard of the Astros, a productive righthanded hitting outfielder last season. (Remember,

the Orioles went next. Kurzban-Birke, picking 17th, went for Cecil Cooper with their first-round pick.

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Howie Belgrad's draft picks were studied, not jeered. Belgrad, 25, a purchasing agent for a steamship company who lives in Massapequa Park, was last year's champion. He plans on the same formula as last year—a hitting lineup. He protected Dave Parker, Ron Cey and Willie Randolph, among others. "I averaged five runs a game last year, and I'll try to draft for the same kind of a lineup this time," he said. "I like a two-platoon system, so I can score runs no matter who is pitching."

In this league, an impressive lineup on paper is all you need.