

1930 — Ah, That Was a Year .

Table-top baseball game resurrects a truckload of .300 hitters, but it wasn't

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Left, Hack Wilson of the Cubs, whose 190 RBI in 1930 still stands as a major league record. Above, the Yankees' Lou Gehrig holds trophy presented to him Aug. 17, 1933, when he set a major league record for playing in 1,308 consecutive games. He went on to establish the record at 2,130.

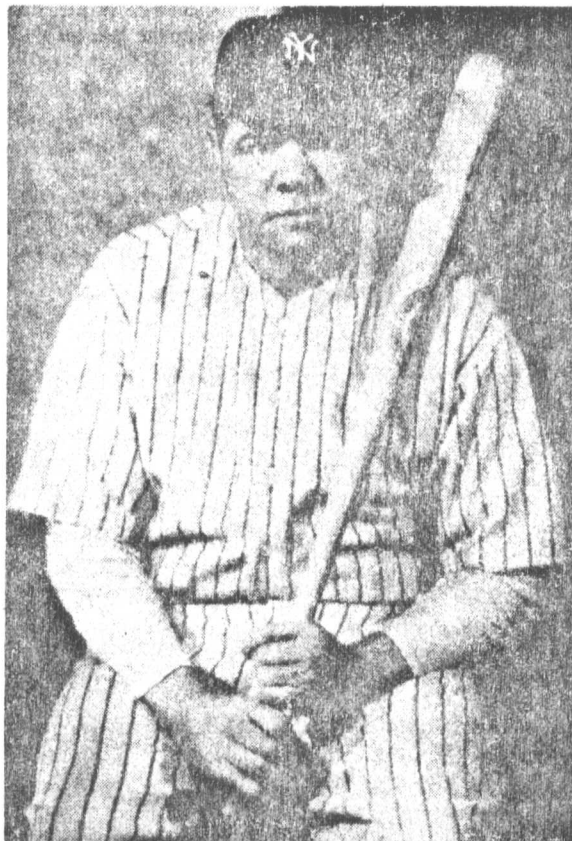
By Bob Herzog

OKAY, all you armchair managers. Tired of filling out your lineup cards with .250 hitters earning half a million dollars a year? Want a little more offense? We're talking big numbers here. How about a last-place club with a .315 team batting average, including two .380 hitters? How about a Yankee team featuring Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth that batted .309 as a team and finished third? How about a replay of the 1930 season?

That's the latest being offered to serious table-top baseball game players by the Strat-O-Matic Game Company of Glen Head. Company president Hal Richman surveyed his customers three years ago when he decided to reproduce entire seasons from the past. The "people's choice" turned out to be the 1961 season, featuring Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris in their celebrated chase of Babe Ruth's 60 home runs. The 1930 season ranked second in the poll, conducted by Strat-O-Matic Review, an independent publication serving the thousands of Strat fanatics. The 1956 season, featuring the last Yankee-Brooklyn Dodger World Series, was third choice.

Richman elected to market the 1956 season first, offering it to buyers in 1982. "We already were selling three teams from 1961 in our oldtimers sets," he said. "As for 1930, I thought it was an aberration. It was the season the National League, desperately trying to catch up to the dominant American League, doctored the baseball. They made it livelier by raising the seams. The result was the highest average ever for an entire league — .303 — and the only time in baseball history a league was over .300. I didn't think this was truly indicative of the hitting skills of that era, so I went ahead with the '56 season."

That venture was so successful that Richman decided to continue marketing complete seasons from the past along with his primary operation of current-season card sets for baseball, football, hockey and pro basketball games. "The 1956 season was very important to the company," said Richman. "If our fans hadn't purchased enough sets, it wouldn't have been



Babe Ruth, in photograph that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution

worthwhile financially to continue doing past seasons."

Strat-O-Matic put out the 1961 season in 1983, but there was still a demand for 1930. "We kept getting letters and inquiries about it," Richman said. "People would say, 'It's still part of baseball history, even if the ball was doctored.' Our customers are really into statistics, and they love those hitters."

The voice of the people was heard, and Strat-O-Matic is offering the 1930 season this year. But before it ever became available for purchase, the complex procedure of

creating the vital player cards had to be undertaken. This was no simple task since records for the kind of detail Strat-O-Matic builds into its game were not kept.

"We could get many of the hitting and pitching records," Richman said. "But no one kept home runs allowed by individual pitchers or how batters fared against lefthanded or righthanded pitchers. To get this, we had to go to the boxscores themselves and keep our own records."

For this time-consuming work, Richman called on veteran administrative assistants Steve Barkan, 34, and Bob Yonke, 33. Barkan, in his 16th year at Strat-O-Matic, researched the National League and Yonke, a nine-year Strat man, did the American League.

Richman estimated it took 800 man-hours for the project. "The hardest thing was to recreate every play in a game from the boxscore," said Yonke. "We had to figure out when a relief pitcher entered a game, what inning a home run was hit in, those kinds of things. When it couldn't be determined from the boxscore, or when there was no highlight, we went to the newspaper of the city involved for a more detailed account."

Much of the information came from The Sporting News, and newspapers in Boston, Chicago and New York, which had more than one team. "We kept our own worksheets to show what each hitter did against lefty and righty pitchers in each game," said Barkan.

He and Yonke would take reams of microfilm copy from various libraries and work long hours in the cramped quarters of the Strat-O-Matic building located near the railroad station in Glen Head. "I didn't know that many players from the 1930 season," admitted Yonke. "But working on the project each day, I was able to watch the season evolve and follow it. It was a learning experience."

Among the things Yonke learned was that great hitters like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig hit lefties and righties equally well and that top starting pitchers like Lefty Grove won several games in relief.

Barkan, a baseball buff who was more familiar with the 1930 season than Yonke, observed similar statistics in the National League. "Babe Herman batted .393 that year, .390 against lefthanded hitters," Barkan said of the southpaw ex-Brooklyn Dodger. "And Carl Hubbell relieved quite often, too."

Then there were the oddities, the nuggets of information that broke up the tedium. "They didn't change lineups much in those days," Yonke noted. "Gehrig batted fifth for most of the season, with Tony Lazzeri fourth and the Babe third."

"It was fun reading the old headlines in the papers about Ruth," Yonke said. "In every city the Yankees played, there were stories about him. 'Babe has a cold,' or 'Ruth not playing today.' He must have been amazing." Yonke discovered that Ruth had 32 home runs on July 4 in 1930, and was on his way to bettering his 60 homers of 1927 when he suffered several injuries later in the season and finished with 49.

Barkan marveled at the season Hack Wilson of the Cubs had that year. "People might know he drove in a record 190 runs," Barkan said, "but did you know he had only 91 on August 1. That means he drove in 99 runs in the last two months of the season!"

Chuck Klein of the Phillies may have been even more phenomenal. "He batted .386 with 40 homers and 170 runs batted in," Barkan said, "and the only thing he led the league in was outfield assists — 44, and that's a record that still stands. What would he make today if he became a free agent after a year like that?"

Klein joined Lefty O'Doul (.383) on a Phillies' team that lost 102 games and finished last despite a .315 batting average (a 6.71 ERA certainly contributed). That reflects what kind of a year 1930 was. The overall average for all of baseball was .296, a figure topped only in the pre-1900 days. The overall earned run average was 5.64, another figure unequaled in this century.

"If a team was behind a lot, the starter would go eight or nine innings," said Barkan. "In one game at Baker Bowl in Philadelphia, the Phils lost 22-6 and the

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starting pitcher went eight innings. In fact, Baker Bowl was a real bandbox and noted for high-scoring games. In one four-game series there, the Cubs scored 79 runs. I used to dread doing a boxscore from that park."

The Yankees of Ruth, Gehrig, Lazzeri, Bill Dickey and Earle Combs finished a distant third to the powerful Philadelphia A's of Al Simmons, Mickey Cochrane, Jimmie Foxx and, of course, Grove, who won 28 games, lost only 5, saved 9 and had a 2.54 earned run average.

"The fascinating part for all of us was how much baseball history we all learned from this," said Richman. "We are the first people anywhere to come up with the stats for home runs allowed by a pitcher back then, or the lefty-righty breakdowns for hitters. Did you know that Lefty Grove gave up only nine home runs in 291 innings, while Lefty Gomez, in his first year with the Yanks, allowed 12 homers in 60 innings?"

Richman's face glowed when he recited such statistics. "How about George Fisher of the Cardinals? He batted .374 in 254 at-bats, and got cut early the next season. He was an atrocious fielder. Or did you know that Goose Goslin [a lefthanded hitter who batted .308 that year and .316 for his career] could not hit lefties?"

By now, Richman was on a roll. "Strat-O-Matic is making people aware of just how good or bad some of the players from a different era were," he said. "And not just the big names. We discovered that one of the greatest fielding second basemen of that period was Oscar Melillo of the St. Louis Browns [who led the



Newsday / Karen Wiles

Above, Steve Barkan and Bob Yonke peruse a 1930 issue of the Sporting News in their not-so-trivial pursuit. At right, Chuck Klein of the Phillies did everything that year, but won very little.



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league in assists, double plays and chances], but no one knows much about him because he only batted .256. Then there's Taylor Douthit, the centerfielder for the Cardinals [the 1930 NL pennant winners]. He led the league's outfielders in putouts and was a fine fielder, but again, you don't hear much about him."

Richman did much of the preliminary work himself before turning the research over to his staff. "I got a great kick out of this," he said. "To see men like Ruth and Gehrig come to life on old newspaper pages was very exciting. The writers were much more critical of

the players' performances in those days, and it was fun to read."

The project has allowed thousands of Strat-O-Matic players to enjoy a step back in time and to recreate a season unique in baseball's storied past. But Barkan and Yonke are not among those players. "People think because we work here that we play the game all the time at home," said Yonke. "No way. After all the game-playing we do in tests, and all the research that goes into creating the player cards, the last thing I want to do after work is play Strat-O-Matic."