

## THE STRAT-O-MATIC FANATICS

Dogged band of baseball nuts ends the debate on whether board games are just kid stuff

By JAMES MCKEEVER

The dice aren't behaving, and Joe Cassidy reaches for another smoke. Scott Garrelts has just fired a four-hitter and Cassidy has lost another tough one, 4-2.

"I hate this game," says Cassidy.

THE GAME CASSIDY SO HATES — and loves — is Strat-O-Matic baseball, a dice-and-cards board game that has been satisfying sports fanatics for more than two decades. Like Bullwinkle cartoons, table games such as Strat-O-Matic have long been the subject of great debate.

Are they for kids or for adults?

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tic baseball, but that's merely a bonus. The game's designers figure in such specifics as a batter's performances against left-handed and right-handed pitchers, whether a pitcher tends to tire in late innings, and how well a player performs in "clutch" situations.

Realism is crucial to devoted fans of the game, and their need for accuracy often extends to other parts of their lives.

Between innings in his battle with LaRose, Cassidy looks up toward the television set above the restaurant's counter. The war movie "Midway" is on, but no one is really paying attention; bombs explode, soldiers run for cover and Japanese officers discuss strategy. In English.

Cassidy hears them speaking English and is disappointed. He thought "Torol Torol Torol!"



Hal Slate/THE POST-STANDARD

Paul LaRose, left, and Joe Cassidy play a Strat-O-Matic game at Vadala's Restaurant.

### League standings

Team	Wins	Losses	GB
Vadala	22	10	—
Whalen	16	16	6
Rainbow	15	17	7
Capriotti	9	23	13

Team	Wins	Losses	GB
LaRose	20	12	—
Kalter	20	12	—
Guard	13	19	7
Cassidy	13	19	7

**This Week's Games:**  
Guard vs. Vadala

Strat-O-Sphere.

Cassidy, a mailman, drops two straight games to LaRose, but rallies to win the third, 5-3. Will Clark homers off Tom Henke in the bottom of the ninth to win it. With Todd Guard's team beating up on Stu Whalen's squad, Cassidy may never get out of last place.

Stu Whalen is also mystified by the performance of his star pitcher, Mike Scott of the Houston Astros. Scott, last year's National League Cy Young Award winner, has lost three straight Strat-O-Matic decisions for Whalen after winning his first four games.

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LaRose started a Strat-O-Matic baseball league last year. He and seven other baseball nuts — all adults — get together once a week, spring, summer and fall, to match wits, strategy and luck. They meet at somebody's home, at Juanita's Mexican Kitchen, which LaRose owns, or, as they did one night recently, at Vadala's Restaurant in Solvay.

The ominous "CLOSED" sign in the establishment's front window let passersby know that there was serious business taking place within, but it was all hits and runs, not burgers and buns. No one even bothered to knock.

Dave Vadala of Liverpool runs the restaurant and is one of the eight team owners. In the league's first World Series last year, Vadala's team lost to LaRose's, four games to two.

"The dice went cold," explained a still-bitter Vadala. "He couldn't beat me at all during the regular season, but (for the championship) he got all the dumb rolls."

So far this season, the league is experiencing a major *deja vu*. Vadala is in first place in one division with 22 wins and 10 losses, and LaRose is tied with Al Kalter of Liverpool for first in the other with a 20-12 record.

"He's got it in for me this year," LaRose said of Vadala.

Rivalries are indeed a part of Strat-O-Ma-

*"Midway" is on, but no one is really paying attention; bombs explode, soldiers run for cover and Japanese officers discuss strategy. In English.*

*Cassidy hears them speaking English and is disappointed. He thought "Tora! Tora! Tora!" was on.*

*"Tora! Tora! Tora!" was a lot better," Cassidy says. "The Japanese spoke Japanese like they should."*

LaRose's league began last year when he posted a sign in Juanita's dining room, looking for serious Strat-O-Matic players. The in-house advertising worked, and a group of eight Strat-O-Fanatics would get together for five or six hours at a time and play 10 consecutive games.

This year it's more relaxed, LaRose said, with a typical four-game series taking no more than three hours.

"This way, we keep everybody happy, especially all the wives," said LaRose.

A few owners dropped out after last season, so LaRose put up another sign. That's how Alan Rainbow and Todd Guard of Liverpool joined the league. Actually, Rainbow's wife, Rosemary, saw the sign in Juanita's and suggested that he try it.

Rainbow brought Guard into the league, and now the two friends are struggling below the .500 mark. Rainbow has played Strat-O-Matic for about 17 years.

"It's pretty realistic," he said. "You can play a game in a matter of minutes, and there's a good deal of strategy involved. There's a lot of luck, too. I've never done it

Guard	13	19	7
Cassidy	13	19	7

#### **This Week's Games:**

Guard vs. Vadala  
Kalter vs. Rainbow  
LaRose vs. Whalen  
Cassidy vs. Capriotti

over the long haul, and I want to see if it's accurate."

LaRose's league plays a 112-game season, 50 shy of a full major-league schedule.

Even though most major-leaguers perform in Strat-O-Matic close to what they did in real life, Rainbow has a major bone to pick with Don Mattingly, generally considered to be the best hitter in the major leagues.

Last season for the New York Yankees, Mattingly batted .352 with 31 home runs and 113 runs batted in. Rainbow made Mattingly the first pick of this year's Strat-O-Matic draft (all player cards are based on their 1986 performances), but the Yankee first baseman has been mired in a terrible Strat-O-Slump.

Rainbow didn't roll a home run for Mattingly until the 28th game. Against Strat-O-Foes, Mattingly is hitting well below .300, has struck out 20 times (he fanned only 37 times in more than 677 at bats last year) and has made four errors. He made just six last year in 160 games at first base for the Yankees.

To pick up the slack, Rainbow's team has Cincinnati outfielder Eric Davis, who leads LaRose's league with 11 home runs into the

League Cy Young Award winner, has lost three straight Strat-O-Matic decisions for Whalen after winning his first four games.

Scott's earned run average is less than 3.00, but he has given up six home runs, including three in a recent 6-1 loss to Todd Guard's team. Whalen was left shaking his head after the loss, and even Guard was at a loss to explain Scott's slump.

"He's got an amazing card," said Guard.

Designers of the game admit that it is not 100 percent accurate and that luck plays a part in the outcome of individual performances and games. But that's also one of its attractions. Why would anyone buy the game if things turned out exactly as they did in "real life"?

Besides getting his baseball "fix," which includes keeping detailed statistics each week, Whalen sees yet another benefit to the game.

"You start to appreciate guys you never did before," he said. "You have your favorite teams and your favorite players, but now you get these other guys on your own team and you pull for them."

Guard agreed.

"Your loyalties get separated," he said. "I'm a Twins fan, but I only have one Twin on my team."

*In the fourth and final game of the Cassidy vs. LaRose series, Dwight Evans homers — in the bottom of the ninth — to give Cassidy his second straight victory. But Guard's team wins another, and Cassidy cannot escape the cellar.*

*"I was lucky to get a split," Cassidy says. "But I wanted more."*