

## LEISURE SPORTS

# The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of

*For Strat-O-Matic baseball fans, the world (and World Series) turns on a roll of the dice*

By Joe Krupinski

**W**HILE roads flooded and tree branches toppled during a driving rainstorm on a Saturday afternoon in April, dozens of "baseball games" were being played enthusiastically in the cozy atmosphere of Norway Hall in Glen Head.

"There are no rainouts here," said tournament director Howard Belgrad of Massapequa Park, as some 60 players of Strat-O-Matic Baseball created a steady din by alternately cheering, jeering and disputing their shifting fortunes in the tabletop game. "This is the only room we haven't been kicked out of. We must have made too much noise when we previously rented space at the Hicksville Motor Lodge, Howard Johnson's [in Roslyn] and Beefsteak Charlie's [in Levittown], because we were never invited to come back. All we're trying to do is bring Strat-O-Matic out of the closet and make it a respectable activity."

Since the game was invented 26 years ago by Harold Richman, described by Belgrad as "a mathematical genius from Port Washington," an estimated one million people in America have emulated big-league managers by playing Strat-O-Matic (cost of the game is about \$26) with family and friends during their leisure time.

It's a game based on the actual season statistics of major-league players chosen in a pre-match draft. The batting and fielding plays, hits and outs of each inning are determined by the roll of dice and subsequent reading of instructions on computer cards.

Now the most fanatic participants may also test their skill and luck against each other in so-called tournaments organized both locally and across the country.

"You've got to be ruthless," said Ed Scofield, a 25-year-old attorney from Stratford, Conn., who won his second consecutive tournament last month. "There is no place for nostalgia in this game, no loyalties to your favorite big-league players. You draft the players, based on their stats, who are going to help you the most. You juggle your lineup like Earl Weaver used to do."

Scofield compiled a won-loss record of 24-9 to reach the World Series. His most productive batters were Pittsburgh outfielder Mike Brown, who batted .350 and hit 14 doubles, and Houston catcher Alan Ashby, who cracked 10 home runs. "It's a combination of picking a pretty good statistical team and getting a few breaks with the dice," Scofield said.

Just like in the big leagues, competition occasionally gets heated. "Some guys actually think they're managing a team and they can get quite emotionally involved," Belgrad said. "I've seen a normal guy bang his head against the wall after a play went against him. I've seen somebody throw his opponent's dice across the room in anger. They think they're Billy Martin, spitting and cursing."

Generally, however, good sportsmanship prevails among Strat-O-Matic aficionados. "It's a great way of getting rid of life's problems," said Fred Goodman of Plainview, a 23-year-old law student. "You're putting your head into a game instead of taking your frustrations out on other people. You may get excited, but nobody takes it personally."



Newsday Photo Montage / Marlon Hall

Paul Cunard and Charlie Lachman play Strat-O-Matic baseball to the imaginary cheers of thousands

Goodman recently spent a week and a half compiling a 10-page statistical scouting report for the tournament that he sold to fellow entrants for \$6 apiece. "If I spent as much time on my studies as I do on this," he said, "I'd be at the top of my class." Goodman's next project is a book about Strat-O-Matic tentatively titled "The Boys of Winter."

Although Valley Stream lawyer Joe Schettino is an avid Mets fan, attending as many as 20 games a season, he never drafts a Mets player for his Strat-O-Matic games. "I consider it a jinx against my team," he said.

Anthony Abilo of Bayside is nicknamed "Cy Young" by fellow players because of his penchant to draft sound pitchers ahead of potentially heavy hitters. "I've won six of eight games so far, three of them by shutouts," Abilo said proudly. "Roger Clemens [of the Red Sox] just pitched a one-hitter for me." His pitching rotation also included Fernando Valenzuela of the Dodgers, Rick Rhoden of the Yankees and Mike Krukow of the Giants.

Joe DeChiaro, a 24-year-old Bronx mailman, plays a tape of Yankees highlights to accompany his own Strat-O-Matic games, providing a reaction to a tabletop home run with the amplified help of an actual broadcast blast by Dave Winfield. "Some people get aggravated at me," DeChiaro said. "But I also play the 'Star Spangled Banner' before every game and everybody stands for that."

Bruce Fogg, a 37-year-old insurance agent from Wallingford, Conn., entered the tourney with his 15-year-old son, Brian. "We drove here by van and

camped overnight in the parking lot," the father said. "I played Strat-O-Matic while at college and in the Air Force, but somehow lost track of my [game] set. Brian found it in the basement under a bunch of junk about five years ago and we've been playing it again ever since."

Tony Disibbio and Stan Jenik, two railroad workers from Tucson, drove 2,500 miles as part of a two-week vacation on the East Coast to play in the Strat-O-Matic tourney. "I don't do drugs or alcohol; this is my addiction," Disibbio said. "Everybody's real friendly and we're having ourselves a blast."

Steve Laskin of Brooklyn, who bought the original Strat-O-Matic Baseball as a 10-year-old when the game first came out in 1961, cordially allowed the two Arizona visitors to sleep at his apartment over the weekend. "Unbelievable. They stayed up all night studying their cards," Laskin said. "There's nothing in the world but Strat-O-Matic for some of these people. In one tournament last year a guy was going for the pennant. When we reminded him that he had to pick up his wife at the airport, he told us, 'I'm not leaving while I'm winning.' She had to take a cab home."

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A local sponsoring organization, Pro-Strat, will hold its next tabletop baseball tournament June 26-28 in Glen Head. There is an entry fee of \$50. Prizes total \$2,000 in cash, with \$1,000 going to the World Series winner and \$400 to the loser. Call Howard Belgrad (516/795-4762) or Steve Laskin (718/769-6658).