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Managing a Game's Winning Streak

By Michael Naidus

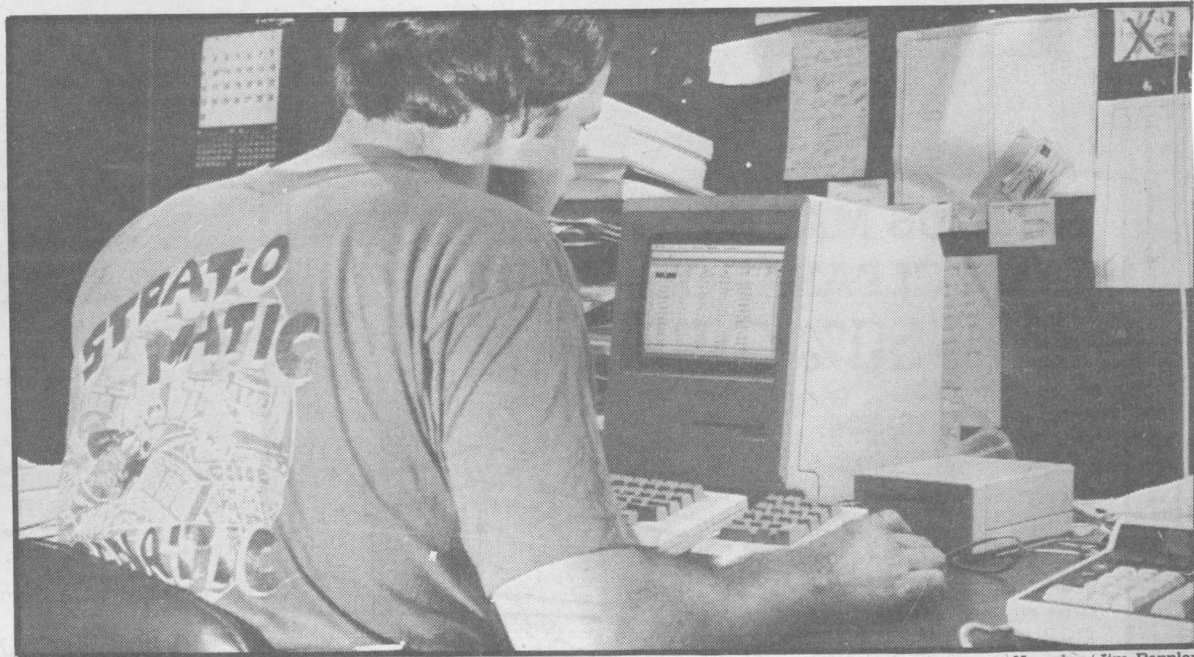
Glen Head — As an 11-year-old Yankee fan growing up in Great Neck, Hal Richman loved board games — especially sports games. Trouble was, the products available to baseball lovers who weren't baseball players were of minor-league caliber.

So like any good American entrepreneur, Richman filled the void by inventing a statistically accurate baseball game: Strat-O-Matic. And he proceeded to lose all the money he raised — twice — before the game took off.

Twenty-four years later, Richman is president of one of the largest sports-games companies in the country, Strat-O-Matic Co. Inc. An estimated 1 million baseball "managers" roll dice and match computer-generated cards that simulate player performances based on their statistics from the previous season, according to industry sources.

"It was sort of my last chance at making a go of it," says the 48-year-old Richman. "I had borrowed \$5,000 from my father and the deal was that if I failed that time, I'd go into his insurance business."

The third time proved to be the right time for the younger Richman, who turned Strat-O-Matic



Bob Yonke places basketball statistics for an upcoming game into computer

Newsday / Jim Peppier

the younger Richman, who turned Strat-O-Matic Baseball into a moneymaker for the first time in 1963 — two years after its founding. The game has changed substantially since the first version, which featured an 80-player all-star roster and sold 21 copies at \$4.25 each, but its concept remains the same: to allow players to own and manage their own "major league" franchise. Now, the game includes cards for 641 major leaguers and sells for \$23.50.

The company, now housed in a small building near the railroad station, grew with the popularity of the game. Richman declined to discuss the firm's finances or sales figures, citing increased competition.

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APBA, based in Lancaster, Pa., is Strat-O-Matic's closest competitor, according to its president, Dick Seitz. He says the APBA game is more realistic and more advanced than Strat-O-Matic because it uses a different probability system. The basic concept of the game, first created in 1951, is nearly identical: it allows players to manage a ballclub with results that should mimic major leaguers' prior performance. "I think that's what we're all striving for — allowing people to put themselves into a realistic baseball season," he said. Competition has also arrived via computer versions of the game,

which allowed players to watch their moves in action.

But Richman said he is counting on Strat-O-Matic's reputation as "the industry's standard-bearer" to ease the financial strain caused by competitors and unlicensed pirates.

In fact, the company has an annual "opening day" in January and thousands of players queue outside the office to be among the first to buy a new set of cards. "We've been here for 25 years and I think we have what you'd call a cult following," Richman said.