Closet coaches find niche at game convention

Strat-O-Matic: a pursuit for the romantic realist

To an outsider, Strat-O-Matic looks like something a kid would get for Christmas and then cast aside as though it were a broken toy.

But Strat-O-Matic sports games are not so easily outgrown. Rather, these statistically oriented works of art are things one grows into.

The games — football, baseball, hockey and basketball — go beyond mere amusement, appealing to a fan's interest in statistics, in the past, in the dynamics of human conflict. They could even be said to provide an oasis of peace in a chaotic world.

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Like its rival, the APBA Game Co., Strat-O-Matic has legions of fanatical adherents. About 50 "Strat-O-Matic fanatics" from as far away as California gathered in Gary, Ind., June 5 and 6 to share their gaming experiences and engage in competition at the Lyman Bostock Memorial Convention.

Most participants entered the baseball tournaments, one using the "advanced" version of the game, the other employing the "basic" version the company has produced since coming into existence in the early 1960s. Nine competed in the "super advanced" football tournament, and a handful of gamers battled for the hockey trophy.

Players had chosen teams in advance on a first-come basis; the selection was such that everyone was able to get a competitive club. Strat-O-Matic produces new teams every year, creating ratings and computerized cards based on the statistics of the previous year. Hundreds of football and baseball teams have been printed.

Most of those attending the convention were in their 20s and had first ordered Strat-O-Matic (until recently, the games could only be purchased by mail) more than a decade ago. With the exception of the tournament using the relatively new hockey game, the competition was dominated by Strato veterans, people who had played thousands of games and made a million dice rolls.

"It's great to have these conventions, to be around other gamers," said James Sanders, who originated the Lyman Bostock Convention last year and expanded it this time. "When I'm with other players is when I realize the rest of the world is crazy."

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Sanders was a soldier in Vietnam when he ran across an ad for Strat-O-Matic baseball in a sports magazine. He ordered the brochure, sent away for the game, and began playing with a friend.

"Whenever the Viet Cong would stop shooting, we'd start rolling the dice," Sanders recalled. Had the need arisen, he could have played alone.

Now a policeman in Gary, Sanders has "seen everything," and Strat-O-Matic continues to give him an escape from trouble and discord. It is a simple transition to make, for the game does not take one into an unreal world, but into a world that recreates and refines the more innocent aspects of our own.

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Strat-O-Matic represents a unique blend of hard actuality — statistics, probabilities, an athlete's limitations — and fantasy. The "real world" and the controlled realm of S-O-M came together for Sanders when he conceived of the convention, not the first of its kind but the first bearing the name of Bostock, the Angels outfielder who was murdered in Gary four years ago.

"I helped put Lyman Bostock in the ambulance," Sanders said. "He had half his head blown off. His uncle came out and said, 'That's my nephew Lyman Bostock.'"

Despite his past experiences, Sanders was deeply moved by the incident. He wanted to remember Bostock in a way that would have enduring meaning. And he wanted to do what he could to perpetuate this "child's game."

The annual convention accomplished both objectives. Sanders himself played eight football games.

"If it's an addiction," he said, "it's an addiction that helps me — on all levels."

— Matt Lorenz

After losing the opener 24-10 to the 1962 Packers (one of a special set of "old-timer teams"), my club scored two impressive wins: 31-10 over the 1980 Chargers and 30-10 over the 1975 Pittsburgh team, the one that beat Dallas in the actual Super Bowl X.

Though the '72 Steelers did not have Jack Lambert, their defense was awesome; it recorded 13 sacks and nine turnovers in the two routs. Dan Fouts got his 300 yards for the Chargers, but the Steel Curtain intercepted four of his passes. The 1975 Steelers, coached by defending tournament champion Craig Dashut, managed a mere 185 yards.

Then the championship dream died.

Trailing 26-20 to the 1969 Chiefs and facing fourth and 8 on the enemy 40 with a minute left, I called a short pass to Ron Shanklin. I rolled a 6 with the white die (4,5 and 6 refer to the defensive cards) and a 10 with the red dice, yielding a result of "receiver." I picked up two dice, glanced at Shanklin's card, and rolled.

It was a 3. Pass incomplete, game over. Choke.

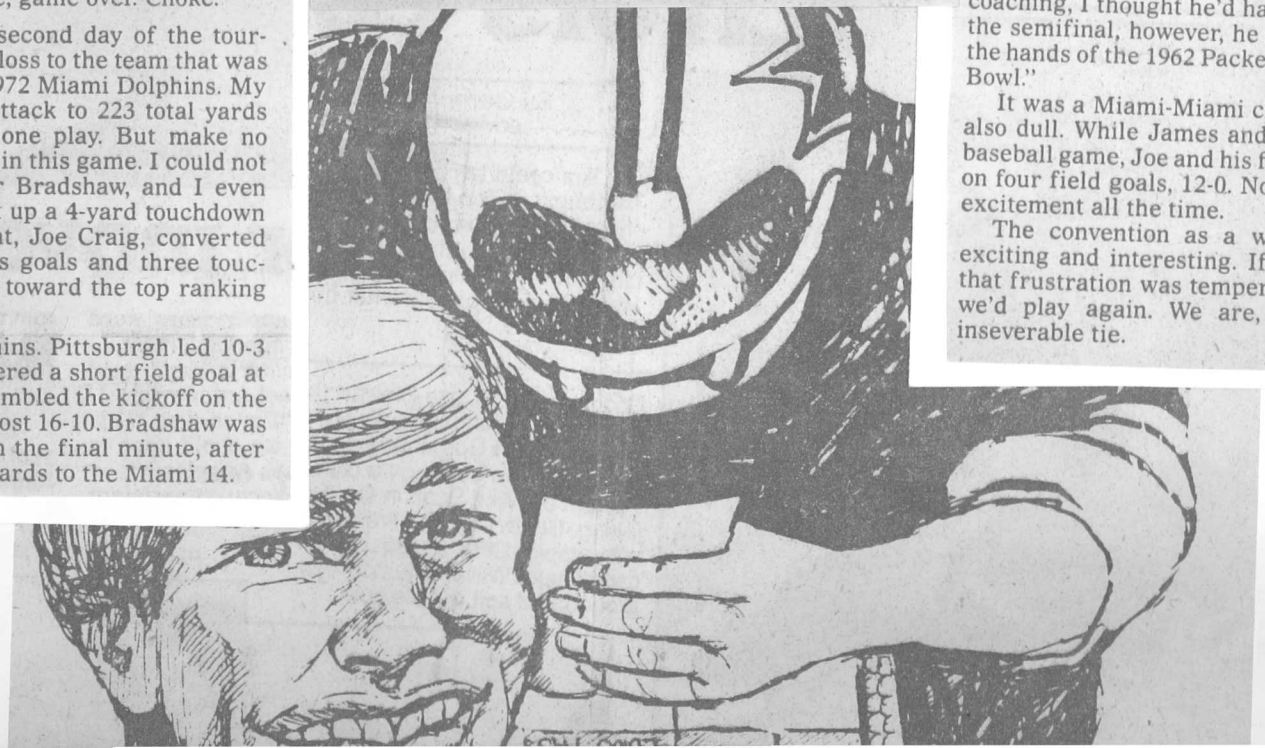
Things got worse on the second day of the tournament, starting with a 39-24 loss to the team that was supposed to be perfect, the 1972 Miami Dolphins. My defense held that powerful attack to 223 total yards and only 82 rushing, 29 on one play. But make no mistake, luck does play a role in this game. I could not stop rolling interceptions for Bradshaw, and I even rolled a blocked punt that set up a 4-yard touchdown drive. My garrulous opponent, Joe Craig, converted these mistakes into six fields goals and three touchdowns, continuing his drive toward the top ranking in "regulation" tourney play.

Then came the 1973 Dolphins. Pittsburgh led 10-3 after three quarters, surrendered a short field goal at the beginning of the fourth, fumbled the kickoff on the 21, gave up a touchdown, and lost 16-10. Bradshaw was intercepted in the end zone in the final minute, after Franco Harris had raced 48 yards to the Miami 14.

Remember Alan Ameche? We shut him down and outgained his team, the 1958 Colts, but two fourth-quarter field goals paved the way to another Pittsburgh defeat, 19-16. That loss came at the hands of the convention organizer, James Sanders, a black policeman from Gary.

The mighty Steelers were down now, out of it. It was time for an upbeat finale — or a last harrah. Relaxed and lucky enough to pick off passes on two highly improbable interception chances, we were cruising along against the 1971 Cowboys in the fourth period, leading 27-10. I had no cause for alarm when, with three minutes left, my rival threw a 12 on a 2-11 interception chance. The freak rolls even out, I thought.

But opposing coach Sam, a bearded white guy from East Chicago, went on a hot streak the likes of which I'd never seen. I had my linebackers double-covering his wide receivers, but he still completed a short pass on the card of his split end, Bob Hayes. The roll was a "long gain" (anywhere from 35 yards to a touchdown), and Hayes took it 42 yards for a score.



I expected Sam to turn conservative, but he outsmarted me by throwing. There would be no field goal, just a few short passes and a 13-yard scoring toss to tight end Mike Ditka. The Cowboys won, 33-27, gaining 432 yards to spoil eight games of strong defense by the Steelers. I fired myself shortly thereafter.

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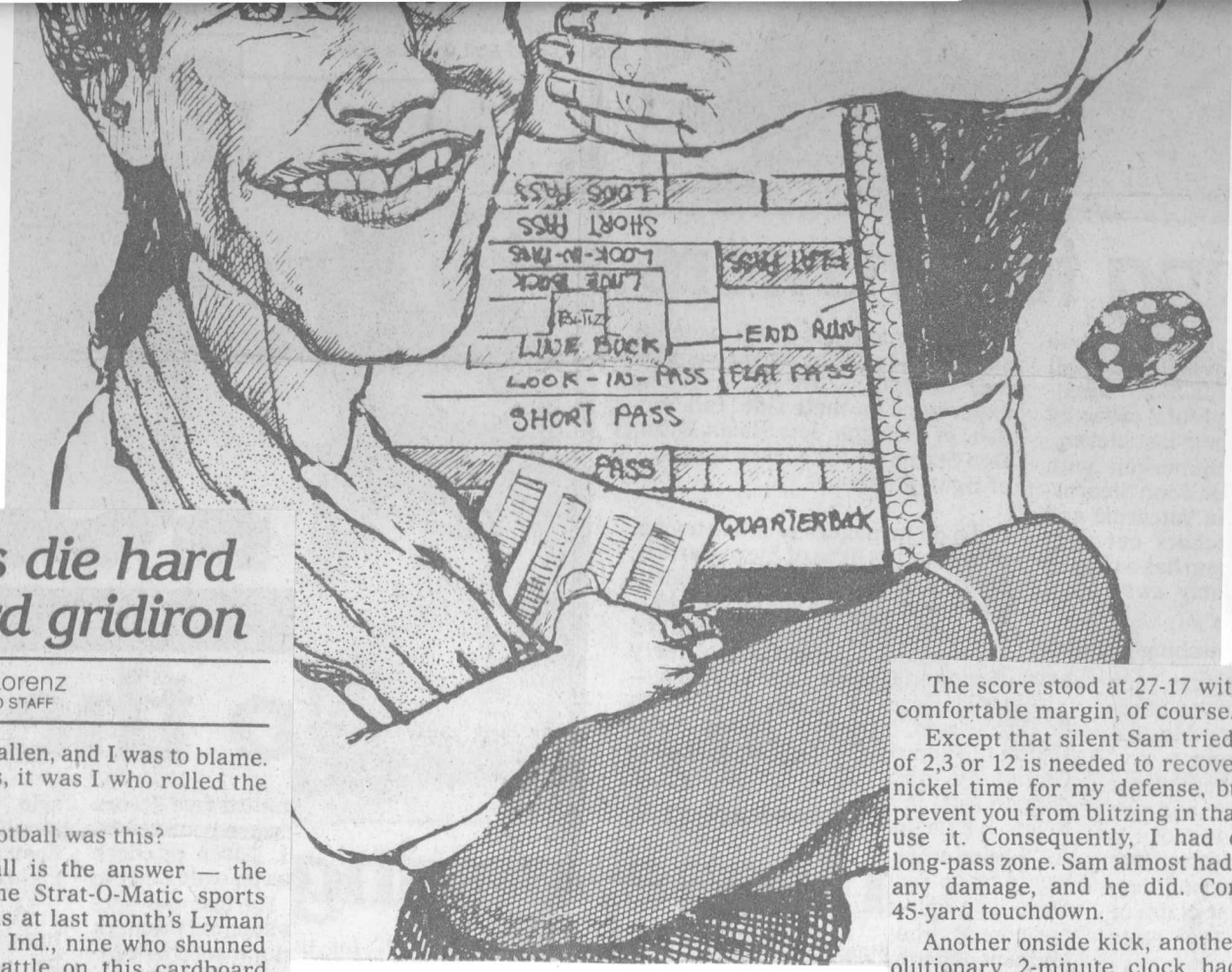
There were playoffs, of course, and I found myself taking sides. Gary "Ming the Merciless" Peck's 1973 Dolphins had finished third in round-robin play with a 5-3 record, and though I admired his defensive coaching, I thought he'd had some cheap victories. In the semifinal, however, he avenged an earlier rout at the hands of the 1962 Packers to advance to the "Super Bowl."

It was a Miami-Miami championship game. It was also dull. While James and I got in a Yankee-Yankee baseball game, Joe and his fatigued 1972 Dolphins lost on four field goals, 12-0. Not even S-O-M can provide excitement all the time.

The convention as a whole, however, was both exciting and interesting. If I left feeling frustrated, that frustration was tempered by the knowledge that we'd play again. We are, after all, joined by an inseverable tie.



Title dreams die hard on cardboard gridiron

By Matt Lorenz
NEWS WORLD STAFF

The mighty Steelers had fallen, and I was to blame. It was I who called the plays, it was I who rolled the dice.

The dice? What kind of football was this?

Strat-O-Matic Pro Football is the answer — the most sophisticated of all the Strat-O-Matic sports games. There were nine of us at last month's Lyman Bostock Convention in Gary, Ind., nine who shunned the "lesser" games to do battle on this cardboard gridiron. We had come to determine the greatest football team — and Strato coach — of all time, and no offensive or defensive tactic would be overlooked.

Perhaps it was in my tactical approach that I made my mistake. Maybe I became too conservative in choosing plays and moving my defensive men around the game board. Maybe I should have anticipated those fluke dice rolls.

For better or worse, my coaching decisions had far-reaching consequences. Playing with the 1972 Steelers, I lost four excruciating games and finished the round-robin tourney 2-6.

The score stood at 27-17 with two minutes left — a comfortable margin, of course.

Except that silent Sam tried an onside kick. A roll of 2,3 or 12 is needed to recover; he threw a 3. It was nickel time for my defense, but Strat-O-Matic rules prevent you from blitzing in that alignment, so I didn't use it. Consequently, I had only one man in the long-pass zone. Sam almost had to roll "receiver" to do any damage, and he did. Complete. Long gain. A 45-yard touchdown.

Another onside kick, another 3. Jim Sanders' revolutionary 2-minute clock had given the Cowboys enough time to come back; they had the ball on our 45 with 1:20 left.

I tried not to panic, even guessing run a few times in case Sam attempted to cross me up. He passed his way to the 12-yard line and did run, sending Staubach around the end. He fumbled. All I needed to hang onto the win and regain my coaching credibility was a subsequent roll between 7 and 11 (defense recovers). Sam rolled a 6.

The Steel Curtain made its last stand, forcing a field goal try. It was successful, and Dallas — getting the good fortune that was its trademark until last year — won the coin toss and received the kickoff in overtime.