

PLAY BALL!

The boys of summer start the joys of summer in 25 days

By NEAL RUBIN
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Some evidence exists that a football game was played Sunday in Southern California. You couldn't prove it by the Strat-O-Matic Game Co.

Its switchboard has been jammed since early last week — by baseball fans. For them, and for Strat-O-Matic, Opening Day is just around the corner.

Strat-O-Matic, the top-selling baseball board game, releases its updated player cards — the ones with stats on the 1986 season — about this time every year. Topps Chewing Gum's baseball cards hit the shelves early this month. Bill Mazeroski's Baseball, probably the most respected of preview magazines, is about to go to press.

BASEBALL DEVOTEES divide the year into two parts: the season, which runs from spring training through the World Series, and the anticipation, which begins the day the World Series winners ride in their victory parade.

This is the heart of the baseball pre-season, prime time for thumbing through worn copies of "Ball Four" and cheering the final scenes of "The Natural." Super Bowl? What Super Bowl?

Spring training begins in 25 days. The Tigers play the Yankees April 6. So hit the books and catch the movies. Gauge your progress with a quiz. It won't be long before they're hitting baseballs.

"WE'RE ALL EXCITED about baseball," says Del Newell of Kalamazoo, whose Strat-O-Matic Review reaches nearly 2,000 subscribers from as far away as

England and Israel. Last year, he and nine friends kicked off their Strat-O-Matic league on Super Sunday; better to play baseball on a table in the basement than watch football on television.

As publisher of a newsletter, Newell, 45, gets early access to many of the prized cards. The less fortunate pummel Strat-O-Matic's Glen Head, N.Y., office with phone calls, asking when the cards will be available. "They hope to start shipping the 29th or 30th," he says. "That's also when they have Opening Day — when the cards go on sale to people who have called in orders.

"There might be a thousand people who stop in. Some of them fly into (LaGuardia airport), take a cab to the game company out on Long Island, pick up the cards, take a cab back to the airport and fly out."

BUBBLE-GUM CARDS are easier to get. Topps' 1987 series, with its distinctive new wood-grain border, already are gracing counters at some drug and grocery stores.

"Our market research has shown that the kids want them earlier and earlier," says Norman Liss of Topps, in Brooklyn, N.Y. "We never stop working on them. Designs are constantly being made. It goes on year-round."

Topps' early deadlines mean catcher Lance Parrish will be pictured in a Tigers uniform, regardless of where he spends the season. The free agent catcher, now available to the highest bidder, adorned the cover of Bill Mazeroski's Baseball last year, unless he signs a con-

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in a few days his whereabouts will be unrecorded in the '87 edition.

"It just breaks our heart when there's a significant deal or a signing after our deadline," says Shane O'Neill, whose Preview Publishing of Seattle prints 450,000 copies of the magazine. "People have a tendency to remind us of the deals we miss, rather than the speculation we get right."

SPECULATION TAKES up a sizable portion of the baseball anticipation season. Will Parrish sign with the Phillies? Was Darnell Coles a fluke or do the Tigers finally have a third baseman? Who will suffer Jack Morris' wrath — his employers, or his opponents?

"The sport lends itself to discussion," says O'Neill, 42. "Even during a game, you can have a real nice conversation about a game you saw five years ago. It has a nice, relaxed pace, even in the off-season. There's something to talk about year-round."

Toy and game manufacturers make sure there is always something to play as well. Toys 'R' Us offers half a dozen computer disks and cartridges, all claiming to provide everything but the mustard.

Sports Illustrated Statis Pro Baseball (\$17.99) includes statistical representations of more than 700 major leaguers, though it doesn't specify which season. "Not even Steinbrenner can own that many players," it crows. "But YOU can!"

At the other end of the sophistication scale, for three- to six-year-olds, stands Hank Spitball (\$3.97), a 3-D plastic puzzle of a Furskins bear taking a mighty cut at a big yellow ball.

Don Mattingly Carrom Baseball (\$29.99) challenges players, presumably children, to slide wooden discs past wooden "fielders." Kay-Bee Toy & Hobby has the 1985 version of the real McGraw, Strat-O-Matic (\$29.99), and a startlingly familiar Cabbage Patch Kid (\$23.99).

The doll comes with a Tigers uniform, a blue Tigers batting helmet and a mop of curly hair.

It looks like Lance Parrish.

For information on Strat-O-Matic games, write 46 Railroad Plaza, Glen Head, N.Y. 11545. To subscribe to Strat-O-Matic Review, write P.O. Box 27, Otsego, Mich. 49078; cost is \$7.25 for 12 issues.