

Armchair Managers' Revenge: Tabletop Baseball

Many baseball fans have watched games at home, at the ballpark, or in bars and have said that they could do twice the job that bum managing the local team was doing. All of us have second guessed the manager at least once. Some more than others, right?

Relief from that frustration is available in one of the many brands and forms of tabletop games. Participants can manage their own teams against an opposing team using all of the strategy involved in real baseball like bunts, hit and run, stealing and defensive switching and maneuvering.

The market for tabletop baseball is large. So large, in fact, that there isn't room enough to cover them all. The games do seem to be based, however, on three basic concepts: Use of either a spinner, dice and/or cards.

It appears that tabletop baseball was born in 1930. In that year, the game "National Pastime" was created. It involved cards with numbers on them and dice. The roll of the dice determined what the batter did. Well, the printer of "National Pastime" was one of many businesses to go under during the Depression and it did so before many sets of "National Pastime" were printed. Also, during the Depression, the first spinner-type game appeared. This creation is known as "All-Star Baseball", and is still available today.

In 1951, one of the front runners of today's games appeared on the scene. Based on the "National Pastime" format, "APBA" baseball hit the market. Thirty years later, it is still going strong, one of the leaders of the field. The year 1957 brought another spinner game called "BLM", but nationwide popularity never came.

In 1961, the tabletop industry was joined by another major member. The game is called "Strat-O-Matic" and after it caught on, a deluge of new types of games sprang forth. Very few have had great success, but one that has is "Sports Illustrated Major League Baseball." For comparison purposes, here is a look at these two games, their development and their creators.

The town of Great Neck, New York had at least one cellar light burning all night on a few occasions as 25-year-old Hal Richman worked in the basement of his father's home. The end result was "Strat-O-Matic". As is the case in many beginning small businesses, Richman struggled. Sales were done strictly through the mail and his first year totals were less than awe-inspiring: 350 sets sold. The second year was "a little better, but still difficult," says Richman, now 44.

To stimulate business, Richman sought an endorsement. So, he pursued J. G. Taylor Spink and the *Sporting News*. After repeated attempts to persuade, Richman was turned down by Spink.

"At that point, I decided that there was only one thing to do and that was do it myself," Richman said. Do it, he did.

Year three had SOM turning the corner and by the end of the fourth year, Hal Richman's "Strat-O-Matic" was profitable. He also hired his first employee.

In the late 60's, Richman moved his now successful operation from Great Neck to Glen Head, New York. At that time, a young man by the name of Jim Barnes was playing both "APBA" and "Strat-O-Matic," but felt something was missing.

"I just wanted to see if I could build a better mousetrap," said Barnes. "I felt that there wasn't quite enough variation in the games on the market, so I sought somewhat of a different approach." So Barnes eliminated the use of dice and replaced them with "FAST ACTION" cards, as they are called.

Barnes described himself as a "frustrated coach interested in player performance." His deep interest in statistics led him to developing a graphic sports feature called Sportography, which eventually came to be distributed nationwide by United Features. United confided to Barnes that his was the first new idea in about 80,000 (from outside sources) that they had used.

It was in this setting of working with statistics that led Barnes to creating the

Sports Illustrated game (better known as "Statis-Pro"). His beginnings were similar to Hal Richman's. Barnes sold 250 sets of his game his first year. He sold 1,300 sets in his fourth year.

It is at this point where games like "Statis-Pro" and "Strat-O-Matic" differ. The Avalon Hill Game Company, which features *Sports Illustrated* titled games, contacted Barnes about taking his "Statis-Pro" under their wings. This would lend prestige to the game with the type of endorsement that Hal Richman had sought a few years before with the *Sporting News*. It also meant additional advertising through *Sports Illustrated*.

In 1978, Jim Barnes and "Statis-Pro" signed on with Avalon Hill and became a *Sports Illustrated* game. What this meant is that Avalon Hill bought Barnes' idea. They would now produce the game and pay Barnes a percentage of the profit. He could then continue his career as a graphic columnist. Barnes estimates that Avalon Hill sold somewhere around 30,000 sets of "Statis-Pro" in 1980. Barnes also points out that 90% of the sales of the game are retail sales and not mail order.

A big question that arises is, how are the cards made? According to Richman, it is all computerized now.

"The computers are programmed for different set-ups," he said. None of the cards are identical, with 13 different basic patterns being programmed into numerous different combinations. An interesting feature of SOM is use of the age-old percentage of right-handed pitcher against right-handed batter and vice versa. So, here is one of those situations where a manager will bring in lefty Joe Sambito to pitch to Bake McBride because McBride hits right-handed pitchers so well.

Richman points to the charge of automatic luck involved with dice and brings out the fact that one out of six times, the dice will turn up "7." Basing his game on this premise and the infrequency of other numbers turning up, he refutes the luck element. The game is so programmed that if a man hit no homers in a season in real life, he shall

not hit one in SOM.

So in both games, the luck element is reduced as much as possible and both games will produce statistics comparable to real life performances over a normal season.

Another question is, what do real life players think about these games? No direct comment is available by individual players, but as a group, the players benefit in terms of dollars and cents. Although no exact dollar figures are available, these games do pay royalties to the Major League Baseball Players Association.

Richman claims that "Strat-O-Matic" makes the largest royalty payment, which is 5% of his total gross, a figure he does not reveal. Suffice it to say that with all of the games on the market, the Player's Association takes in at least \$50,000.

The intensity of the competition is probably paralleled only on the field. Many leagues exist around the country, where players in a community organize to play each other. Six, eight, ten or twelve team leagues exist in many cities. Many of these leagues also communicate

with each other nationwide. "Strat-O-Matic", for instance, has an official news organ printed in Otsego, Michigan entitled "Strat-O-Matic Review." This publication tells its readers what is going on in many of the leagues around the country, prints ads about towns that wish to start leagues and information on other "SOM" games, like football, which is quite popular. The fanatics really get into things such as the SOM Review and use it as a marketplace. Collectors of tabletop games are now buying and selling old sets through these publications. According to Richman, some of the old SOM sets are going from \$150-\$300. Numerous classified ads in the *Review* show these old sets available for sale across the country with several eager buyers reading.

Perhaps the fanaticism of these games comes into focus by this story from Richman:

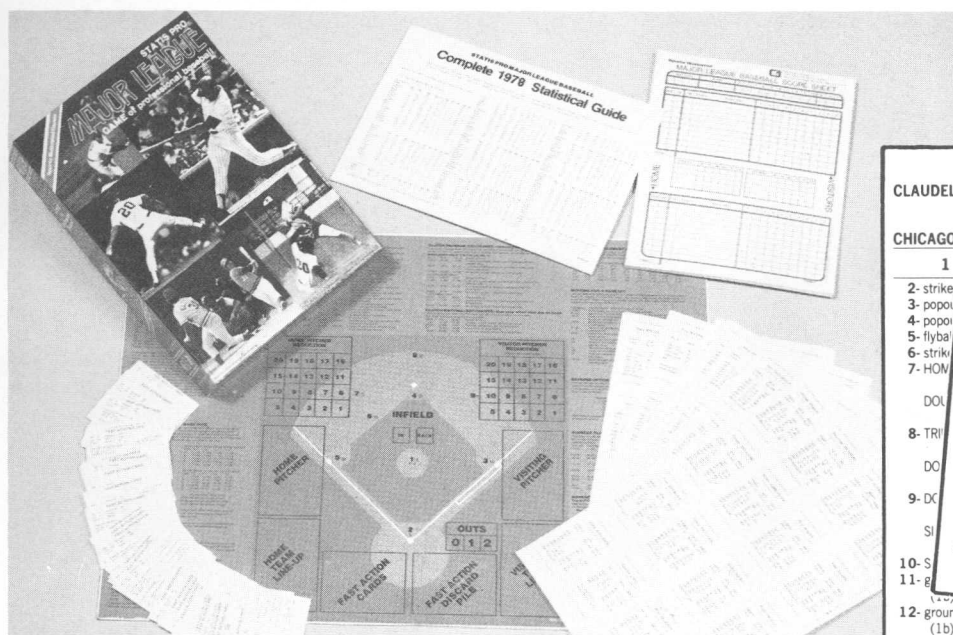
"One day at the office, I noticed this limousine pull up outside," he recalled. "Well, this well-dressed gentleman steps out of the car and comes inside. I find out that he is here on behalf of his grandson trying to get into a league in Canada

and had only two days in which to obtain his playing cards in order to play in that league. This man came from Canada by air, caught an airport limo, at least \$50 from the airport, and came by the office to buy \$9 worth of player cards for his grandson and then hop back on a plane for Montreal."

The new cards come out in January each year and Richman says that some people cannot wait until they are mailed. Some come from at least five different states to pick them up in person.

Most of these games have national tournaments, or what have you. The cover of one of the Avalon Hill brochures features the football championships held in Ann Arbor, Michigan. "Strat-O-Matic" held their 1980 all-sports championships in Evanston, Illinois. Participants pay their own expenses.

So, as one can see, tabletop games have come a long way from their meager beginnings. They have given many a frustrated manager more frustrations, but also some consolation. It has put many of us in the same situation that we have cursed real managers for, but certainly we will never boo ourselves.



BOB STANLEY		1 pitcher-starter relief	
PITCHING CARD		BOSTON RED SOX	
4	5	6	
2- WALK	2- GROUND-BALL(ss) X	2- groundball (p) B	
3- CATCHER'S CARD X	3- GROUND-BALL(lb) X	3- FLYBALL (rf) X	
4- GROUND-BALL(3b) X	4- flyball (cf) B	4- flyball (rf) B	
5- groundball (2b) C	5- popout (3b)	5- lineout (1b)	
6- flyball (cf) B	6- popout (1b)	6- SINGLE* 1-9	
7- GROUND-BALL(2b) X	7- GROUND-BALL(ss) X	7- lineout (2b) 10-20	
8- DOUBLE** 1-5	8- popout (ss)	8- SINGLE 10-20	
9- SINGLE** 6-20	9- TRIPLE 1	9- SINGLE 10-20	
10- FLYBALL (lf) C	10- HOMERUN 1-5	10- SINGLE 11- groundball (1b) C	
11- GROUND-BALL(p) X	11- FLYBALL (lf) X	12- flyball (lf) B	
12- CATCHER'S CARD X	12- groundball (p) B		
1979 PITCHING RECORD			
WON 16	LOST 12	E.R.A. 3.98	INNINGS PITCHED 217
HITS ALLOWED 250	WALKS ALLOWED 44	STRIKEOUTS 56	HOMERUNS ALLOWED 14
12- groundball (1b) A plus injury	outs as possible		
1979 BATTING RECORD			
AT BATS 471	DOUBLES 33	TRIPLES 5	HOMERUNS 13
AVERAGE 280	WALKS 28	STRIKEOUTS 93	