

1981

## What Would Babe Think?

*Take me out to the ballgame,  
Take me out to the park,  
Homeruns and flyballs will fill the air,  
We won't see the players, because  
they're not there.*

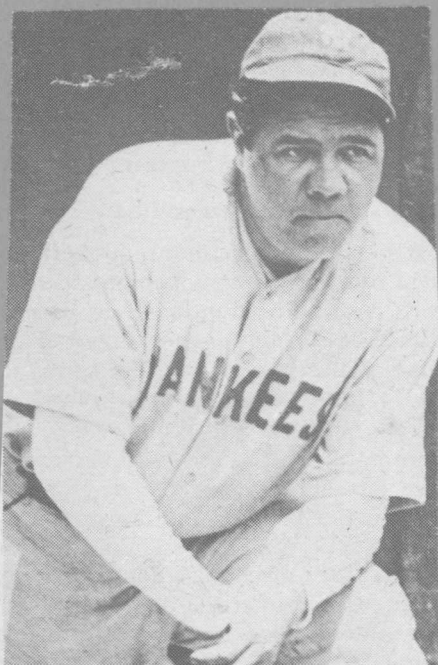
*You can root, root, root for the home  
team —*

*If they don't win, it's a glitch;  
It's still one, two, three strikes you're out  
When the CPU calls the pitch.*

**By Tim Scannell**

CW Staff

BOSTON — With out-of-the-park homeruns, triple plays and even an occasional player sent to the showers, it sure sounds like baseball. But in this case, at least, the grassy playing fields are really card tables and



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the players are the statistical products of a computer's programs.

Although the teams of both the American and National Leagues have been on strike for nearly two months, since June 30 a radio station here has been broadcasting seemingly "live" Red Sox ball games that apparently come from Boston's Fenway Park.

Using a computer-produced game called Strat-O-Matic, announcers at WITS radio regularly deliver a play-by-play account of sometimes grueling contests that have never occurred. While listeners thrill to the taped sounds of the crowds and cheer their favorite team on to victory, the only action that takes place is the roll of the game's dice.

"Announcers create pitches, complete with balls, strikes and hit players," Richard Chmura, vice-president and general manager of WITS sports department, explained. "It sounds so

real we got calls from people when we first started broadcasting saying, 'Hey, why didn't you tell us the strike was over?'

"In fact, we had a guy who lives in Kenmore Square near Fenway who swore he could hear the crowd cheering."

Compiled by an IBM 370/138 computer, the game contains detailed records on each player that show his chance of making a catch, a double play or an error during a typical game. Each player's league statistics and averages from the previous year are gathered by the Strat-O-Matic Game Co. in Glen Head, N.Y. These statistics, along with a number of arbitrary fielding and running ratings and other sports information collected by the staff, are sent to Banner Computer Services, Inc., a service bureau located in New York City, that processes the information.

"The computer puts these statistics into percentages and then works out

dice probability percentages that are placed on the cards," Hal Richman, Strat-O-Matic's president, said. The computer makes about 200 decisions per player. In all, it takes the computer roughly 400 hours to assemble an entire season for the firm's basic game and about 1,400 hours to compile the advanced version.

In Boston, WITS has been using both the basic and advanced editions of the game for its big-league broadcasts. Because the station depends heavily on the use of sound effects to provide the feel of the park, the game is usually played by local celebrities prior to the game's actual broadcast. The station's two play-by-play announcers then use the results of the game and these sound effects to script an entire nine-inning baseball game. The whole game, with its runs, outs and foul balls, takes about an hour to complete, WITS sports manager Chmura pointed out.

Because the Boston station is the flagship for an 83-station network, the dramatized games are broadcast throughout the country, he said.

Although WITS is taking its digital season seriously — Chmura was recently named commissioner of the Strat-O-Matic games by the radio station's staff — it is not trying to fool people into accepting the computer-produced game as a substitute for Abner Doubleday's temporarily canceled sport.

Stations in Washington, D.C., Detroit, San Diego and other cities recently used the board game to simulate last month's All-Star Game that pits outstanding players of the American League against similarly talented players of the National League. As expected, because Strat-O-Matic is essentially a game of chance, the winner of the league battle depended upon what radio station you were tuned in to at the time.

"It's not baseball, but it's the next best thing to it," Strat-O-Matic Commissioner Chmura observed.

It was events like this, radio stations broadcasting simulated games using Strat-O-Matic, that lead to Strat-O-Matic being displayed in the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.