

Sunbury, Pa., Sat., Sept. 19, 1987

Bucknellian's games mirror real football

By Wayne Baker
staff reporter

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GREAT NECK, N.Y. — A game was added to the 1985 college football schedule. Oklahoma, flush from its Orange Bowl triumph over Penn State, was matched against Bucknell.

The Sooners put a 91-0 hurting on the Bison.

Fortunately for the Thundering Herd, it was only a mythical game, played with a board, dice and cards.

But the mismatch pleased a Bucknell graduate, Harold Richman.

That's because the score, plus several others pitting Bucknell against some of football's major powers, convinced him that his new college football tabletop game was as realistic as he had hoped.

Richman, who got his diploma at Bucknell in 1958, said that he needed to pit Division 1-A teams against each other, plus some games of Top 20 teams against 1-AA schools to test the balance of his new game.

"We had to make sure that the game performed when we had two extremes face each other. One of the people on our staff is an avid Oklahoma fan. I had my choice of Ivy League schools or a school like Bucknell, so naturally I chose Bucknell. But we didn't have the ad in mind when we chose Bucknell," Richman said.

The "ad" was an advertisement he wrote and inserted in several college football yearbooks, such as Street and Smith's college annual.

The ad read in part, "Oklahoma 91, Bucknell 0. An absurd yet meaningful mismatch played with the totally new Strat-O-Matic college football game."

The college game is the latest designed by the company Richman founded in the early 1960s. His firm also markets pro football, baseball, basketball, and ice hockey games.

The new college game hits the market this week. As the ad concludes, "for those of you who are curious, Bucknell was not included in our game — in spite of vigorous protesting by the designer, a Bucknell graduate." Besides traditional major football schools like Penn State and Alabama, the game does have some Ivy League squads, plus the service academies. The game is based on 386 statistics of teams and players.

To test the game, Richman took the Bucknell team and entered it in a tournament along with the Sooners, Michigan State and Kansas. The closest Bucknell got to one of the other three was about 70 points.

"We did not have the ad in mind when we played Bucknell, but the Le-

As noted by your ad, the game was designed by a Bucknell graduate, illustrating once more that Bucknellians will design, shape and influence the world; people from Oklahoma will play football. — from a letter from a Bucknell graduate.

high-Georgetown (NCAA basketball tournament) game was in my mind at the time. The worst game for Bucknell was the 91-0, but they got as close as the high 70s once.

"Then, after Bucknell met Georgetown (again, in the NCAA hoops playoffs, this past March), I realized using the Bucknell-Oklahoma game would make a catchy ad. I'll bet Bucknell got more applications for admission because of that Georgetown game."

After the magazines came out, he got a few inquiries about the ad; one came from Bucknell football and basketball play-by-play man Bob Behler. Richman said Behler has played his company's games since he was a teenager.

Richman's favorite response to the ad came in a letter from Douglas W. Smith of Atlanta, a 1975 Bucknell grad.

Smith said that a "Sooner" had sent him a copy of the advertisement. Wrote Smith, "My response is obvious. As noted by your ad, the game was designed by a Bucknell graduate, illustrating once more that Bucknellians will design, shape and influence the world; people from Oklahoma will play football."

The Strat-O-Matic games combine use of athlete and team cards, the coaching strategy of each player of the game, and rolls of the dice.

Athletes' performances and strategy, Richman said, "are interwoven. I don't think you can separate one from the other. The big fun of pro and college sports is what you can create and what you can do based on your own whims."

He said that a good game player, who understands strategy, has a two-to-three-touchdown advantage over

an opponent.

His firm has about eight employees, and he subcontracts manufacture of player cards and other pieces.

He declined to reveal sales or income data, however, "because our competition will pick up on everything they can."

The company, privately held, has become successful enough to provide Richman with a "comfortable" income.

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Richman's company was far from an overnight success.

It was a combination of his failed athletic career, his tenacity and an aversion for his father's insurance business that led to his success.

His interest in tabletop sports games began before he reached his teens.

"I was a sports fanatic, but I was only an average athlete," the Long Island native recalled. "I was never able to satisfy my zeal to perform among the stars."

One thing he could do was work on his thirst for better realism in sports games, though.

"I must have started working on a baseball game when I was 11. I knew I was dissatisfied with the games that were then available. I had no idea of what dice and probabilities were, but I must have rolled dice 5,000 times to create those probabilities."

He gradually began to work on his game models.

At 25, in 1961, he said, "I tried to get one of my games taken by a toy company where I was working. The president had just tried some sailboats. The boats looked nice, but they didn't float, so the president was reluctant to go along with my ideas. It was lucky for me he felt that way."

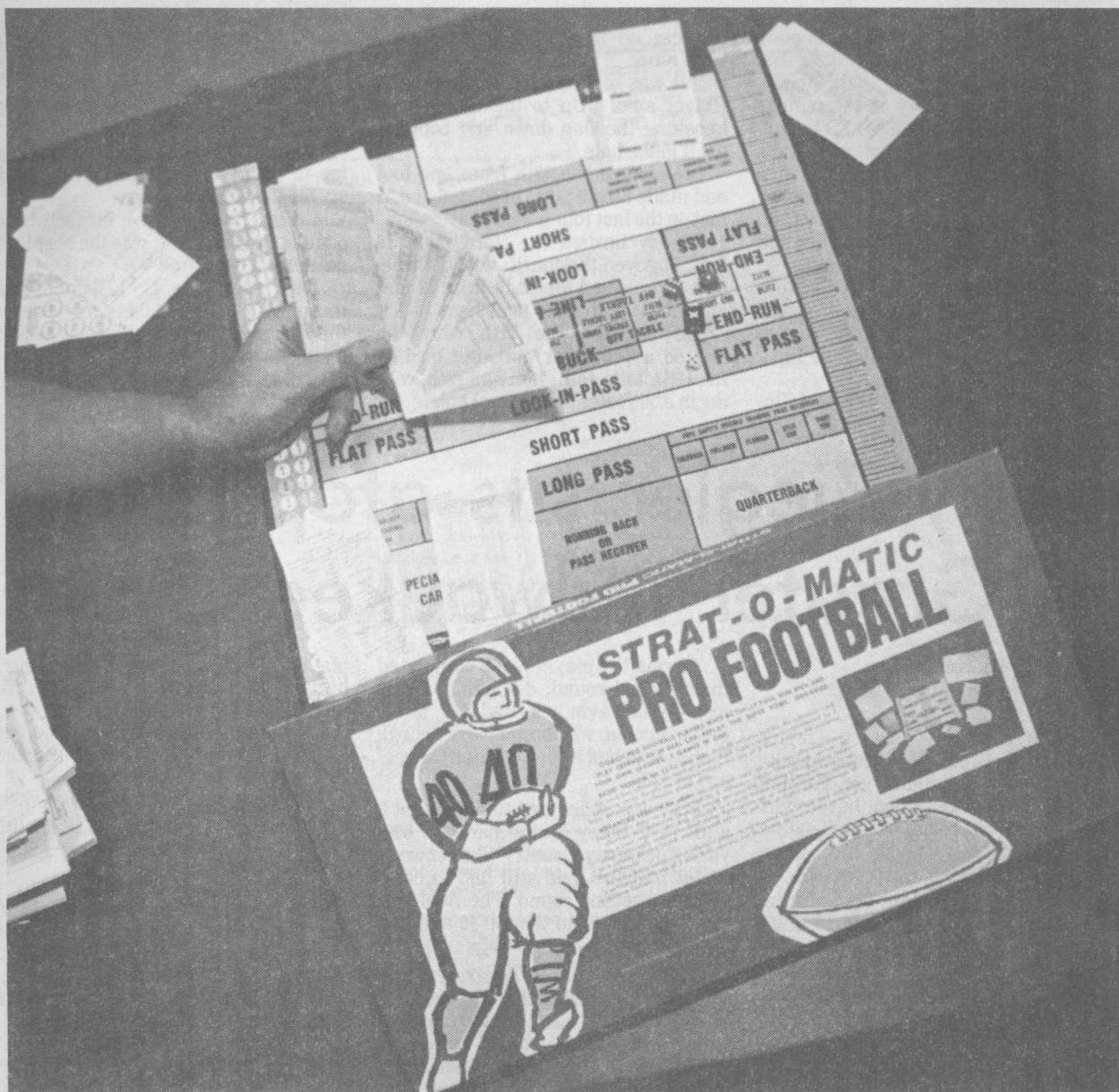
Next, he took a chance on mail order ad in Sports Illustrated. "I didn't do too well with that. Then I ran ads in Baseball Digest and the Sporting News. It was 1961, I could type, and I had a strong back. I worked in my parents' basement, but I still lost my initial \$3,000 investment."

Sales went slowly. He then raised and lost another \$3,000.

Then, in 1962, "I made a deal with the devil. Who was the devil? My father. He had a modest business that put his son through Bucknell. My dad lent me \$3,500, and I agreed that if I did not make it, I had to go into his insurance business."

He continued to work with and refine his games, and turned a profit before the father-set deadline.

"I never thought it would happen," he said of his success with Strat-O-



(Daily Item — Christopher A. Record)

A Bucknellian's invention

Strat-O-Matic pro football, designed by Bucknell University graduate Harold Richman, has been a popular table-top game for many years. Richman used a

matchup of the 1985 Bucknell team against Oklahoma to test his new college football game, which his company began marketing earlier this month.

Matic. "I just wanted to do something that I loved and make a living. Selling insurance was not something I would have enjoyed, God bless my father. I wouldn't have good at it."

He's optimistic the new college game will sell better. Besides using team stat cards, it has additional

cards reflecting individual performances (tailback Earl Beecham was such a player on the 1985 Bucknell team that Richman tested).

So he continues to refine and expand his games. The pro football game, for example, uses results of offensive players from the previous sea-

son. Beyond the elementary version, it has advanced and super-advanced levels that bring more factors, such as penalties, injuries and intricate zone coverage calls on defense, into play.

And he'll probably go right on revising and updating his games, no doubt with his ever-present dice close at hand.