

*A family that plays together, the Richmans of Port Washington (Hal, Sheila and their children, Adam and Ann), are all involved in Strat-O-Matic Baseball, a game created by Hal Richman 20 years ago which has since grown to become an international phenomenon. They're in the production room of the company's Glen Head facility where the game pieces are coordinated and prepared for mailing.*

*(Susan Francy-Jenkins photo)*





# The name of the game is Strat-O-Matic

By Mike Reiner

A place on his high school sports teams eluded Hal Richman back in the 1950s, for although he played many, many hours of baseball, basketball and football, he was, in his own words, "an average athlete." In order to quench an unsatiated thirst for sports achievement, the teenaged Richman invented a baseball board game.

Eventually, he called it Strat-O-Matic.

Twenty years later, a cult-like attraction to the game has developed internationally — to the extent that Strat-O-Matic was the only salvation this year for many strike-hungry baseball fans, and the game has been nominated for inclusion in the Cooperstown Hall of fame.

Inventor Richman, now 45 and a resident of Port Washington, started the whole thing off when he was 11 years old.

"At age 11 I developed my first baseball game — a very rudimentary game — because there was nothing on the market at the time that I found realistic," said Richman. "I started playing around with dice — I had no idea what the probabilities were, I used to roll the dice hundreds of thousands of times to get a representative sample — and from there I created a very rudimentary product which became Strat-O-Matic Baseball in 1961."

The premise of Richman's game — and its siblings, Strat-

O-Matic Football (1968), Basketball (1973), College Football (1976) and Hockey (1978) — is to offer realistic play of the sport at home on a board.

"It's not as if we have to create a completely new idea; we try to simulate a sport," Richman said. "The problem is that there is a reality already created in a sport. You have to stay within that reality."

"At the same time," he added, "you have to have something playable. The right degree of play-value and realism in a product is what makes it successful."

Richman's combination of these two things is manifested in a set of statistic cards which represent the players of a major-league team. A player's record in a given year is computer-analyzed and the result is a card with various plays and a number next to each. By rolling a pair of dice and matching the numbers against opposing player cards, the game transpires.

"All our games are based on the actual player's abilities to perform in real life," Richman said. "For instance, you have a Reggie Jackson. We'll measure his ability to hit home runs, his ability to field, even his ability to get injured or to hit left- or right-handed pitchers. We do quite a bit."

Similar formats are used in Richman's other sport games. Each one features an advanced game for experts and a basic one for beginners, the duality attained by printing on both sides of

the game card. The baseball version, however, is the oldest and most popular.

Strat-O-Matic Baseball was introduced to Sports Illustrated readers April 10, 1961, in that magazine's preview issue of the baseball season. "Be a Big League Manager," proclaimed the ad, "you pick the lineups, direct the actual play of big-league games... All-Stars such as Mays, Mantle and Law perform according to their current records."

Despite the sales pitch, Strat-O-Matic didn't catch on at first. "It was very difficult the first few years," Richman said. "In 1961 I invested \$3,500. I lost all my money." The young gamemaker worked out of his father's basement in Great Neck.

Strat-O-Matic fared no better in 1962. The next year, however, "I made some money," Richman said. The game gained momentum, and within two more years he had to move from the basement to a Port Washington office to accommodate the growing company. In 1969, the operation moved again, this time to Railroad Ave. in Glen Head opposite the train station, where it remains today.

The Strat-O-Matic sets are assembled in Glen Head; the pieces — board and box, dice, playing pieces, cards and charts — are made by subcontractors and shipped to the company. Conception of the game itself, however, is a little more complicated.

"The actual creation of all our products has taken much time," Richman said. "The game we're working on now" — a revised version of the basketball game — "has been done over a three-year period. Basically you play and play the product, for play-value and for statistical realism."

"The game changes many times in form over the period of time," he noted. Richman himself

changes the game, and, of necessity, he is totally involved in playing it. "Our hockey game changed in form over a two-year period at least a dozen times, maybe two dozen. With the basketball game, with six months to go, I was very unhappy with it. Then in two months, some great changes — small changes with great impact — occurred."

Sheila Richman, who heads the retail division of her husband's company (actually she and an assistant are the retail division), asserted that "all the games — baseball, football, college football and hockey — are the best on the market. But Hal really felt his basketball game was not number one, and he takes such pride in his work that he decided that he had to revise it."

Richman's games used to be available only by mail order. In the last few years, however, retail sales have grown under Sheila Richman's direction.

A few letters that Sheila found in her husband's files — letters from several large companies who wished to acquire the product Richman wanted to sell only on his own — prompted her to set up a retail division with the telephone. Aided by her previous experience as a department store buyer, she sold to many stores across the country. Some of the company's clients include A&S, Marshall Field in Chicago, Herman's and FAO Schwarz.

In selling A&S on the product, Sheila Richman said she tried to

extol its merits to a merchandising manager who had never heard of the game. Before she could finish, the store's buyer walked in and recognized Strat-O-Matic from his childhood — and the manager decided immediately to host a Strat-O-Matic convention at A&S, which was a sell-out, even when extended to two days.

The entire Richman family has gotten involved in Strat-O-Matic, including Adam David, 11, and Ann Dara, 13, who help demonstrate the game at trade shows.

"One of the nicest things of this business is that, even though it was Hal's creativity that brought the product to fruition, now our whole family is involved," Sheila said. "The children are always willing to help test, and they're very enthusiastic about all the publicity we've gotten over the years."

Not surprisingly, young Adam has a "keen sense for game creativity," according to his father, and Ann once finished third in a countywide game-creation contest ("I didn't help," Hal said).

"The children's evaluations really help," reported Sheila. "If in a layout they see something missing or something they don't like, they're very honest and helpful... a child's eye is a very important eye in the production," she said.

The game, in the business world, is a success. According to Richman, Strat-O-Matic, of all the

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*'For instance, you have a Reggie Jackson. We'll measure his ability to hit home runs, his ability to field, even his ability to get injured...'*

*'We had a grandfather fly in from Canada, had a chauffeur drive him out here to pick up \$9 worth of cards and just went right back...'*