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Bad weather couldn't keep fans from lining up for the newest Strat-O-Matic game.

Opening Day Chills

Strat-O-Matic fans vie for newest game

By Jon Pessah

STAFF WRITER

Dwayne Hurt stood shivering, the collar of his gray overcoat pulled up tight, his shoulders hunched to fight off the piercing wind. He was first in a line of about 75 other frigid folks that stretched around Hal Richman's little brick building in Glen Head.

It had been a long day for Hurt. He and a friend had left Indianapolis Monday night, arrived in Newark at 11 p.m., rented a car, broke down at 1 a.m. on the LIE, and pulled into Glen Head at 2 a.m. They slept in the car until 4, and started their vigil at 4:30.

At 1 p.m. yesterday, the door to Richman's Strat-O-Matic baseball headquarters opened and the 30-year-old Hurt's wait was over. Walking inside the cramped entrance way, he handed over \$254 and received eight sets of updated cards for the world's most successful baseball board game.

The attraction of Richman's creation is so strong that each winter, fanatics like Hurt come

from around the country so they can be among the first to purchase what they could get the next day without the chilly wait. Or receive in the mail three days later.

"You wait all year to get these cards," Hurt said. "If you're going to come all this way, you might as well come on the first day. We don't know why. Our wives are continuously asking us that question."

Many who stood in line were asking themselves why.

"There's no sane reason," said Robert Giacobbe, a 29-year-old accountant from Montreal who left Canada at 4 a.m. and arrived on Long Island at 1 p.m. He has played the game for 20 years and has made the trek for the past five. "The driving was pretty horrendous. But as soon as the cards come out, you want to have them."

Richman has been cashing in on this insanity for 33 years. Though he cloaks his share of the base-

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Wait Over for Game Fans

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ball-game market in secrecy, it's estimated that 300,000 sets of cards — at \$31.75 a full set — go out annually.

The game is based on the statistics of major league baseball players from the previous season, which Richman interprets and assigns values on a 3-by-5 inch cards. The ratings cover most of the game's hitting, fielding and pitching aspects for 882 batters and pitchers. Strat-O-Matic players roll three dice to determine what happens on each play.

The beauty from the business point of view is that the cards are updated every year, ensuring market demand. "They begin to call us in December and we start taking orders Dec. 10," said Richman, 57, who began the business in the basement of his parents' Great Neck home. "The phone rings off the hook. We take their order and give them a number. It's like a bakery sale here today."

One by one, the cold customers came to the window of Richman's small office to pick up their prized possession. They are mostly male, in their 20s and 30s. Some pay by check, others count out the cash. It's a slow process, but few are complaining about the day they took off from work.

Said Hurt, who rushed back to Newark for a 3:58 flight, "Everyone who says they're not coming back will be back here again next year."