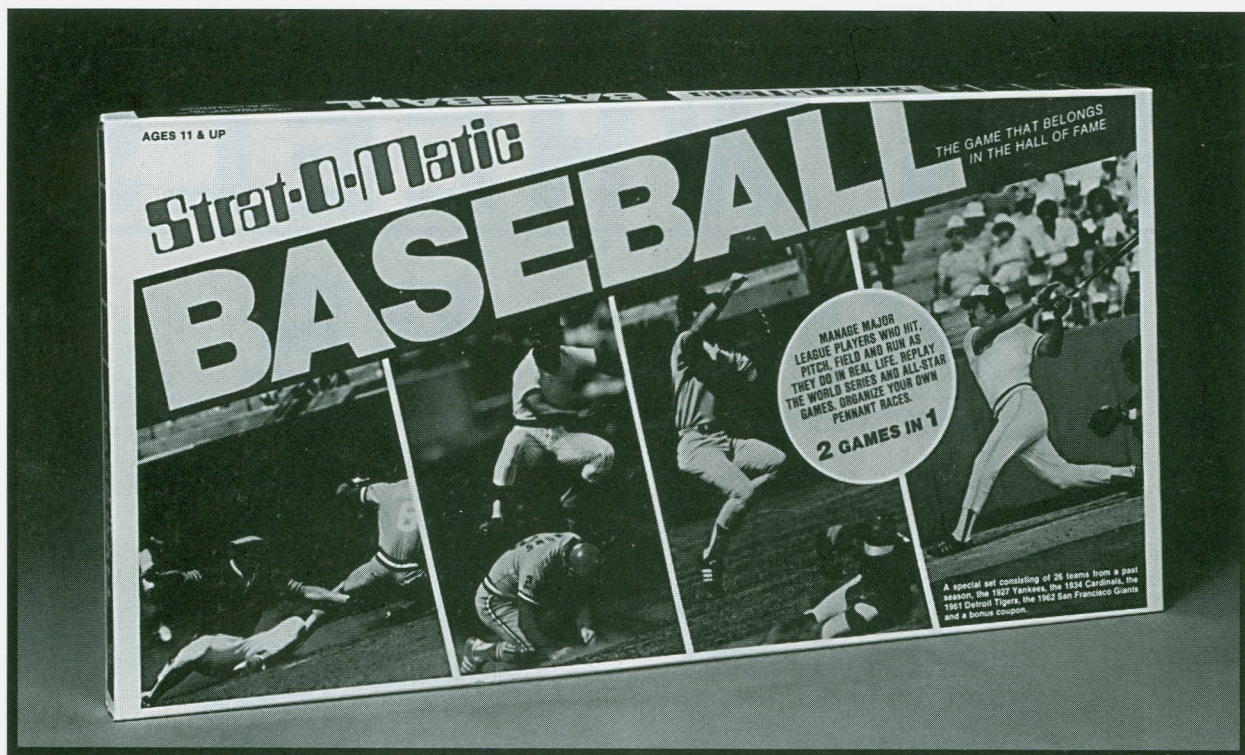


BUSINESS

By Daniel Bastone



If You Build It, They Will Play

**Hal Richman
developed Strat-O-
Matic baseball
when he was 11.**

The History of Strat-O-Matic

It was April 7, 1995, and Frank Thomas came to bat against Dennis Eckersley with runners on first and third, two outs, and his team, the Chicago White Sox, trailing the Oakland A's by one run. Thomas sent a ground ball to first baseman Mark McGwire, who booted it, but recovered to record the final out of the game. Wait a second—April 7. Wasn't there a strike going on then? How could this be?

It could be, thanks to a baseball fan's greatest friend during a labor dispute—the Strat-O-Matic baseball game.

Strat-O-Matic, a board game that is played by over one million people around the world, was the idea of Hal Richman, who developed the game when he was only 11 years old. Richman, who said his athletic prowess didn't allow him to shine in sports, created a statistical game that could allow him to make his own

sports memories.

"I was a frustrated athlete," Richman said. "I was never good enough to be the hero, so by creating the games, I could create my own heroics."

The early game consisted of some charts and dice, but as Richman became older, the game became more sophisticated. He designed a statistical formula that would accurately portray how players did during the season. If Ted Williams hit .401 in the season and you

played him the same amount of games against the same pitchers and teams, he would probably hit very close to that number. That's how exact his formulas are.

Each season offers unique individual cards for every Major League player who played. Card individuality is based on how each player hit and pitched against lefties, righties, in clutch situations, at different ballparks and in special weather conditions. Always on their toes, the folks at Strat-O-Matic continue to update their game with new and exciting rule changes.

So how did this simple idea go from the imagination of an 11-year-old Long Islander to the full-throttle business it has become?

In 1961, Richman had \$400 to market his new game. He used the money to place an ad in *Sports Illustrated* to advertise the game for the first time. The response was remarkable and his mail-order business, which he operated out of his parent's basement in Great Neck, soon expanded. He moved to a Port Washington office.

In 1975, the office moved again, this time to Glen Head. Richman has operated his multi-million dollar business—he won't give exact figures for competitive reasons—from that location for 20 years. From the outside, you would never guess that such a large business could be run from such a small building. But players from around the country always seem to be stopping by to pick up something for their game.

Not just this country, either. Every January, hundreds of fans line up in front of the Glen Head building for what many consider to be a bigger sporting event than the World Series or the Super Bowl—the day the new season of cards is released.

"I've been here since six this morning," said Gary Martingue, who drove for two days from Canada to be one of the first to get the new set. It's a ritual he repeats every year.

Putting a new set together is not as easy as it may sound. As soon as the baseball season ends, Richman and his staff of seven full-time employees spend almost 40 hours a week for six weeks preparing the formulas for each player that had played the previous season. The result is the most accurate statistical game that money can buy.

"Our reputation is much greater than the size of our seven people," Richman said.

Baseball isn't the only sport for which Strat-O-Matic manufactures games. Football, hockey and basketball are also available. There used to be a college football game, but it didn't catch on and was one of the few disappointments for the company, according to Richman. Baseball still makes up 75 percent of the business, 90 percent of which is still done through the mail.

"There are many reasons why baseball does so well, and it's not just because it was the first," Richman said. "Baseball is a game of history. We attract a statistical audience."

In baseball, the nature of the game is more conducive to a statistical breakdown. In football or basketball, the stats are dependent more on the environment.

"If a running back is on a team with a poor offensive line," Richman said, "he's not going to rack up the numbers, regardless of who he is."

The name "Strat-O-Matic" has an interesting derivation. Richman was perusing through the dictionary one day when he came across the word "strategicalmatical". He went out to shovel snow and the name "Strat-O-Matic" just came to him. The strange part is that Richman has never been able to find that word in any dictionary again.

The game received a huge helping of notoriety in 1981 when, during the strike season, radio and television stations were playing simulated games using Strat-O-Matic. Sales increased tremendously as the season lived through the cards.

This year, however, the strike has hurt the business and sales were off nearly 15 percent. Richman blames people's anger and resentment towards baseball as the underlying reason. "We anticipate a return to normalcy next season," he said.

One of the things the company is doing to bring back some customers is offering two old-timer sets this year. Usually, the company releases one past-season per year, as more than 1,500 hours of research go in to designing one set. The reason is that no one kept accurate righty/lefty statistics back then, so one man is responsible for going through the boxscore of every game played for that particular season. This year, the 1934 and 1964 sets will be completed. Past-season sets have included 1927, 1959, 1967 and 1975.

Staying with the times, Strat-O-Matic was also a leader in the computer-generated statistical game, delving into the market in the mid 1980s. The game has graphically advanced since the first attempts, and now, 10 percent of strat players use a computer game or a hybrid of the board game and computer game.

Strat-O-Matic has seen its share of competitors come and go since the first game was released in 1961. Some may have had flashier pieces, some have had photos of the players, some have tried to offer a more realistic game, but learned they couldn't. Through it all, Strat-O-Matic has remained the top statistical board game to fans.

Evidence of its popularity can be seen in all aspects of the multi-media market. "Strat Fan" is a magazine devoted strictly to strat players. Spike Lee grew up playing the game and used it in his movie "Crooklyn". There was even an off-Broadway play about a reunion of a group of former strat players. Now, how many games can make that claim?

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