



TABLETOP GAMES

BY GLENN GUZZO



Where once there were 25-30 basketball and hockey board games roaming the earth, most are now extinct — too dumb or too slow to adapt to the changing

world around them. Most of these dinosaurs — especially the hockey games, which were more like shooting galleries than hockey — are best forgotten. But the basketball victims included some real gems — *Fastbreak* and *PTG* — plus almost all of the college games (*PTG*, *Negamco*, *BLM*, *Ultimate College Basketball* and others).

Today, there are only seven known survivors, but also one hopeful newcomer. For the most part, they succeed where the dinosaurs failed — they capture the flow and “feel” of pro hockey and basketball. Statistical accuracy is still a precious commodity, however.

BASKETBALL

REAL LIFE BASKETBALL
Valgames
(301) 627-2856

Perhaps the best of the Valgames line. This is the last board game to offer

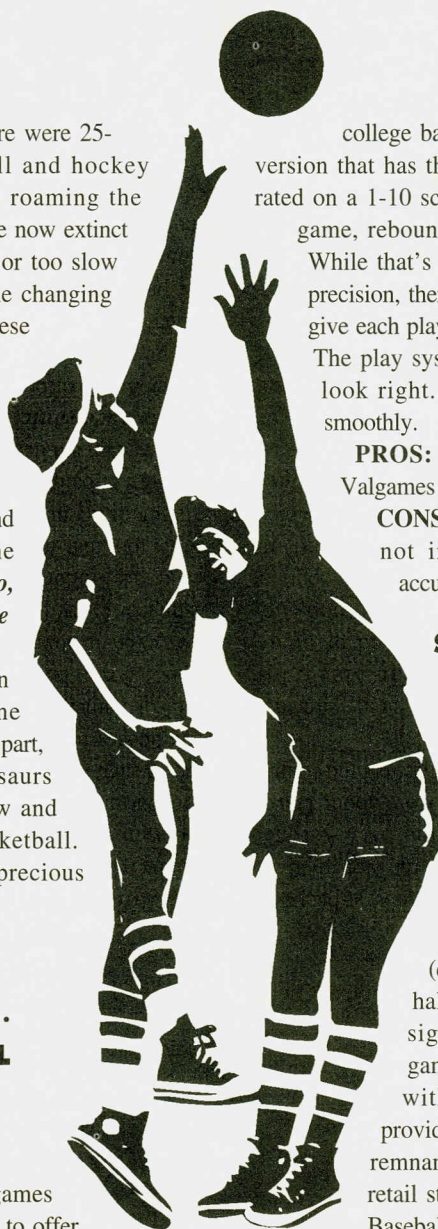
college basketball ratings, but it's the pro version that has the most credibility. Players are rated on a 1-10 scale for shooting, passing, floor game, rebounding, defense and other skills. While that's not going to produce statistical precision, there are enough of these ratings to give each player his own on-court personality. The play system makes the results feel and look right. The game plays quickly and smoothly.

PROS: The simple-fast-inexpensive Valgames formula.

CONS: Players are on paper rosters, not individual cards. Statistical-accuracy limitations.

STATIS-PRO
Avalon-Hill
(800) 999-3222

Avalon-Hill took over the extensive *Statis-Pro* line of games many years ago and gradually abandoned them. After giving them the visibility (marketing) and credibility (quality game parts) that are A-H hallmarks, the company made no significant improvements to the games and eventually parted ways with *Statis-Pro*'s inventor, who provided all the creativity. Except for remnant games that show up in some retail stores, *Statis-Pro Basketball* and *Baseball* are all that remain of this line.



PROS: Perhaps the first game to use fast-action cards, *Stat-Pro* discovered before anyone else how to make a basketball game flow like basketball. Detailed player ratings make for a very believable, playable game.

CONS: With the *Stat-Pro* creator long gone, the credibility of the more subjective ratings (like defense) has declined. And the game has not had the refinements that all top-flight games need to keep up with changes in the pros. For the same reason, certain statistical flaws (e.g. in assists) remain uncorrected.

STRAT-O-MATIC **Strat-O-Matic Game Company** **(800) 645-3455**

When this game debuted in the 1970s, it was a plodding half-court game that was more like chess than basketball, and it was virtually impossible to play solitaire. But with a total revamp in 1981, and the demise of the obscure but excellent Fastbreak basketball game, *Strat-O-Matic* has been the best game on the market by far. Its fast-action cards, passing game ("dazzlers" are automatic baskets) and fastbreak mode capture the breakneck pace of the NBA. Players are expertly rated for shooting tendencies (3-pointers, outside 2-pointers, penetration and inside shots) and their individual defense against each of those shots, as well as for all statistical categories.

PROS: Flow, statistical accuracy and realism.

CONS: Heavy reliance on actual team defense, twice as often as individual defense, means that scores go too high if you play this game for draft-leagues. Also, while rebound ratings are excellent in some ways (separate offensive/defensive ratings), the game does not adequately reward dominant rebounders.

HOCKEY

APBA **APBA Game Company** **(800) 334-2722**

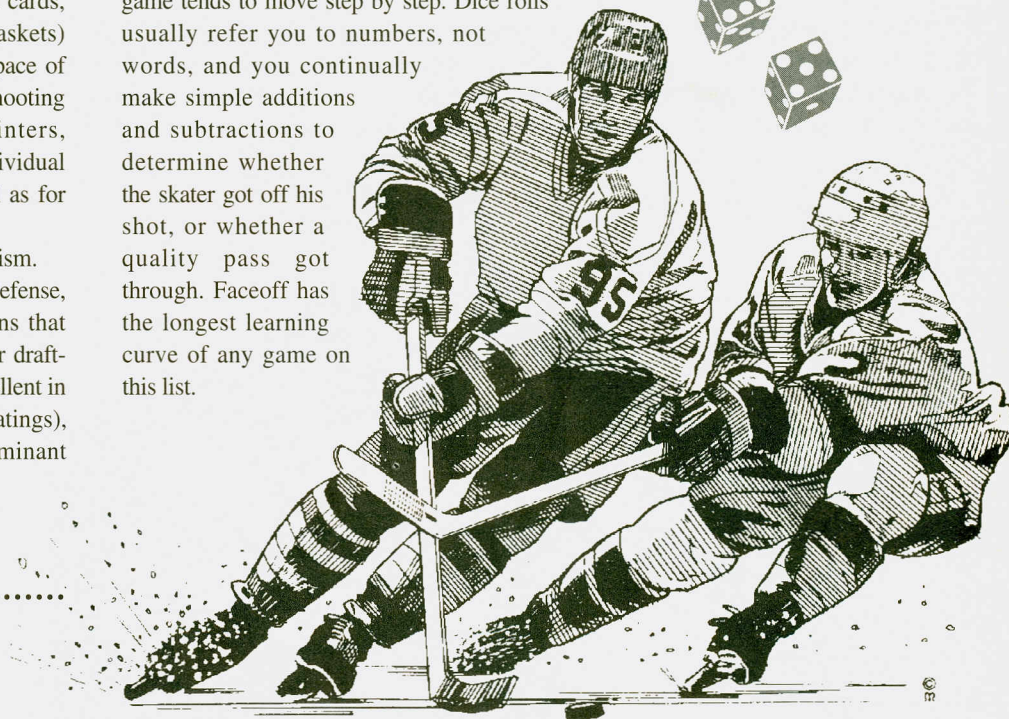
APBA's first venture into hockey was due this fall, but not in time for review here. However, we know that it is to be based on the unpublished board game predecessor to True Hockey, a computer game. The computer game has its strengths, chief among them its inventor's devotion to hockey. Still, we are told this will look and feel like an APBA game, with single-column ratings in familiar 11-66 dice range. This is a significant new product worth a close look, because it is the first new board game (among those that rate real players) by a major manufacturer in several years.

FACE-OFF **Land-Sports, Inc.** **(215) 354-9596**

An obscure, but quality, game that has endured because of the loyalty of its small, cult like following, some of whom play by mail across the Atlantic Ocean in well-organized leagues. The player ratings are unmatched — not only are the star scorers and playmakers rated for those skills, but so are the top forecheckers, backcheckers, penalty-killers, shot-blockers, faceoff men and goal-mouth pests. A new edition of *Face-Off* is due October 1.

PROS: The ratings. For instance, each man's penalty ratings are divided into frequency of minors, majors and misconducts — that should be standard in hockey games; only Faceoff provides it. Faceoff also is the only game to chart actual playing time for each player — crucial to putting stats into proper perspective.

CONS: The devotion to the proper math has its drawbacks in playability. Rather than flow, this game tends to move step by step. Dice rolls usually refer you to numbers, not words, and you continually make simple additions and subtractions to determine whether the skater got off his shot, or whether a quality pass got through. Faceoff has the longest learning curve of any game on this list.



HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES! **Valgames (301) 627-2856**

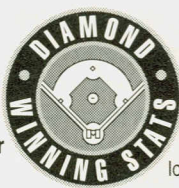
A typical Valgame product — simple, fast and inexpensive. Players are on paper rosters, not cards. A few essential skills (goals, assists, penalties, etc.) are rated in numbers that are more like rankings than statistically accurate ratings. A small number of charts help define the action, and away you go.

PROS: This is a game for quick-play, not realism. Most of the games on this list will take you an hour or more to play. This one will take 20-25

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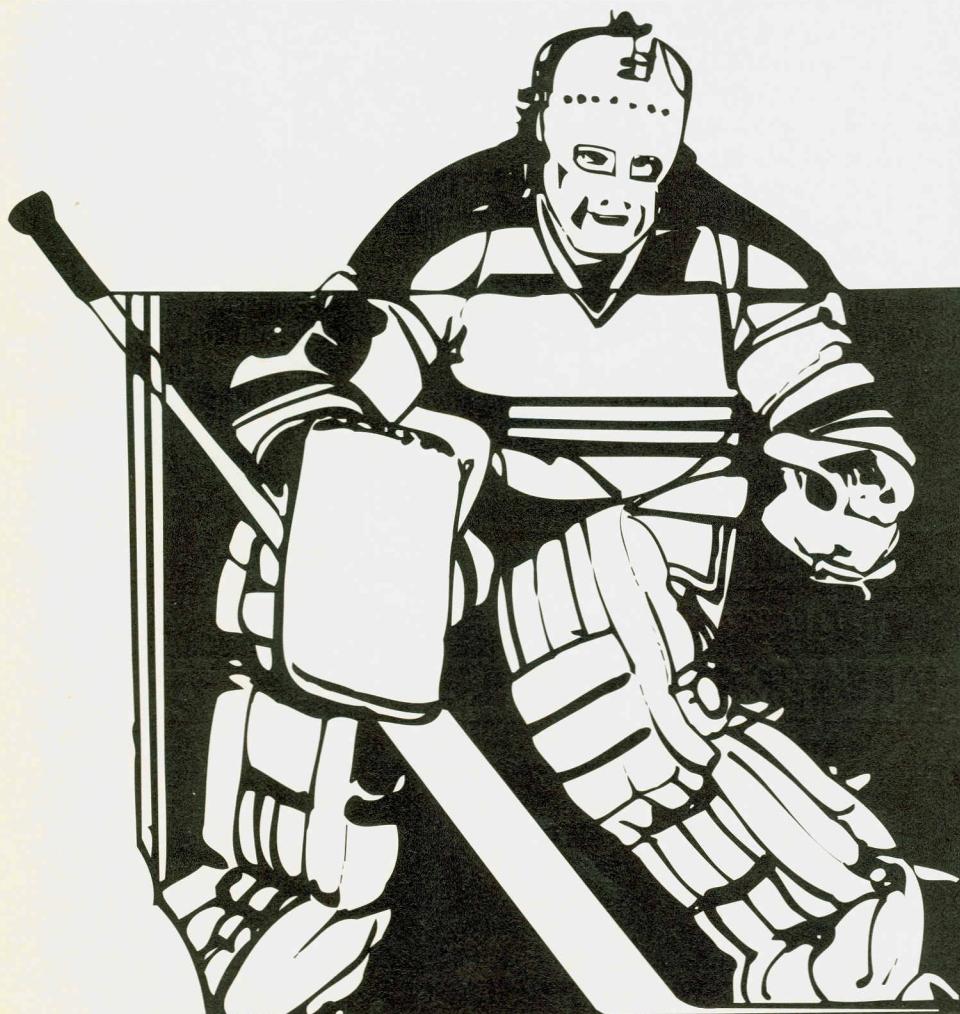
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CONS: You get what you pay for: Simple fun, not quality materials, detailed ratings or statistical accuracy.

STRAT-O-MATIC Strat-O-Matic Game Company (800) 645-3455

With excellent playability and detailed player ratings, this was for years the best hockey game on the market — by default. For all of its strengths, *Strat-O-Matic's* realism suffered in statistical accuracy and in several key areas (especially passing, penalties). But the only game that did a better job at ratings — *Face-Off* — was unplayable for many who found it too lethargic. Other games' player ratings couldn't be taken seriously. Now, Strat has revamped its goalie cards and penalty system and has fine-tuned its passing game and shooting columns with an array of highly promising optional rules that debut this year. Unless the new APBA game is very strong, *Strat-O-Matic* could have the field to itself, on merit this time.

PROS: Playability. New goalie cards should reproduce goalie penalties and assists as well as save percentage. More careful ratings for shooting tendencies should increase realism tremendously.

CONS: Previously, the game could be manipulated too easily to inflate scoring for the top gunners, and the penalty system had no chance to reproduce accurate power plays or penalty stats. New rules will help a lot, but statistical accuracy must be proven.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST HOCKEY GAME VOHL, Inc. Rt. 1, Box 174 1/2 Ogdensburg, NY 13669

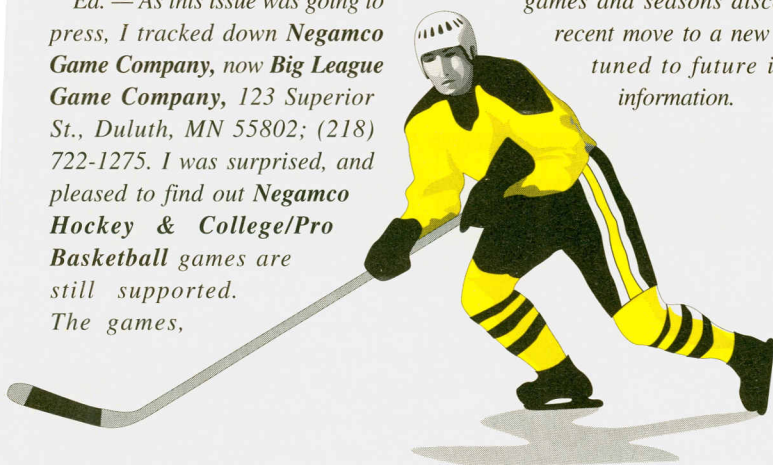
After years in oblivion, this game resurfaced last year with its new publisher. The game is essentially the same as the 1970s model — a simple, fun, fast-moving game that gives you the feel of hockey, but not the realistic player ratings or statistical accuracy to justify its name. All player results — pass, shoot, skate, etc. — are divided among a 1-100 range. The scorers have more chances in 100 to shoot, and therefore score.

PROS: The flow of the game. You get the feel of the puck rapidly changing direction and possession. A large array of players, including some prospects.

CONS: Statistical limits and one very annoying fact that wasn't present in the original model of this game: Player cards are not precut or perforated. Worse, the players were not identified by team, or grouped by team. Rather, they seemed to be grouped according to some draft league's rosters. So, after spending hours trying to cut all of these cards evenly, you then face the ultimate memory test: Who did this guy play for last year? That's easy for Gretzky and Lemieux, not so easy for Crossman, May and other traded role players.

*Ed. — As this issue was going to press, I tracked down **Negamco Game Company**, now **Big League Game Company**, 123 Superior St., Duluth, MN 55802; (218) 722-1275. I was surprised, and pleased to find out **Negamco Hockey & College/Pro Basketball** games are still supported. The games,*

*amazingly enough, sell for \$4.50 each, the same price I paid for the hockey game some thirty years ago! Player ratings for the '92-93 season for all games are available at \$9.95 each. Although by today's standards, the hockey game is less sophisticated in its approach to the game, **Negamco Hockey** is an exciting, fast moving simulation that emphasizes shooting and passing. **BLM Basketball** is still around, although player cards have not been updated since the '83-84 season. Also of interest is an upcoming catalogue from **BLGC**, containing dozens of old games and seasons discovered during a recent move to a new warehouse. Stay tuned to future issues for more information.*



OLD-TIME BALLPARKS

Strat-O-Matic Game Company
46 Railroad Plaza
Glen Head, NY 11545

If you long for the wide open spaces of the Los Angeles Coliseum, or the cozy, confines of Ebbets Field, the Old-Time Ballpark disk from Strat-O-Matic will put you in the mood for a past season replay. Designer Jack Wood has produced an amazing level of reality in 16 colors, including scoreboards, fence signs, light towers, bleachers and other landmarks that will take you back in time when ballparks had personality. The disk sells for \$19.95 and includes 24 stadiums such as Shibe Park, Crosley Field, Forbes Field, Old Yankee Stadium, Griffith Stadium, and the Polo Grounds. The old parks can be activated from within the Strat-O-Matic Baseball utility program by changing the ballpark identification numbers. 🏆