



PLAY the Demo
on the disc

Dugout Gems

By Peter Olafson



Baseball Pro vs. Strat-O-Matic vs. Triple Play vs. Big Hurt

Here are the diamonds that really sparkle. We've called up the four freshest faces from this summer's computer-baseball bench and assessed their respective shots at the big time. With the National and American Leagues' best meeting in the World Series, we've ranked them in the same competitive spirit. As in the autumn classic, the level of play is smart and snappy. Everywhere you look, you'll find a star.

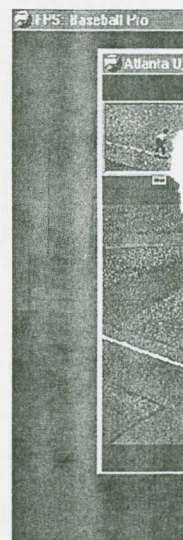
Hoist the Flag

The brightest among them—and our World Series champion—is Front Page Sports: Baseball Pro '96.

You may well be thinking, "Yeah, right," and I can't blame you. I expressed some disappointment with this Sierra release in a review in October: Windows 95 groan, groan, groan. Cluttered screen gripe, gripe, gripe.

But that's in part a measure of my own high expectations, born of long experience with this most ambitious of baseball games. In context with other hardball games, I'm a Baseball Pro lover, not a fighter. Never has one so sought to be all things to all people and succeeded in so many areas.

The most striking quality for me is still the simplest: At the plate and on the mound, this feels like baseball—not a simulation of baseball, not an action game with baseball as its theme, but just baseball. I can't quantify it more neatly than that, except to say that the undocumented organ under the sternum, which rises into my throat and drops into my stomach in moments of crisis, is always active when Baseball Pro is in play.

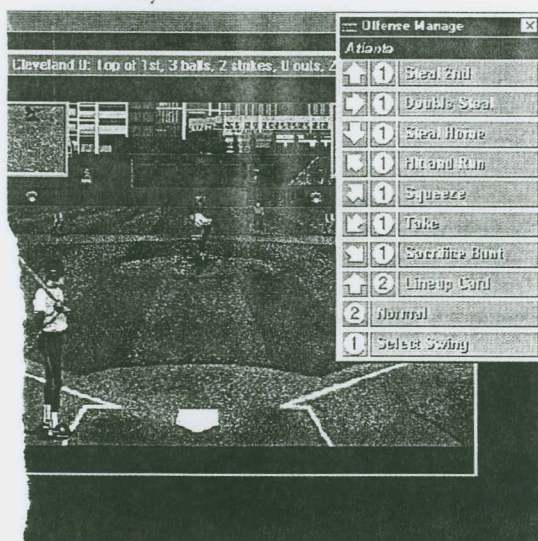




Fred McGriff heads home after socking a huge home run.

As far as I can tell, the key to this distinction lies in Baseball Pro's approach to the game. Most baseball games use predetermined results: As soon as the ball leaves the bat, it's destined to be a 417-foot home run, or a liner to third, or a bloop single that falls between two outfielders. In Baseball Pro, the ball—thrown or hit—is a blue bolt of potential that's vulnerable to circumstance and environment.

Bottom line: Nothing happens the same way twice.



Jack McDowell prepares to deliver one up to an Atlanta batter in Front Page Sports: Baseball Pro. (Last time we saw Jack he was looking for a shower cap.)

Naturally, there's more to it than game physics. I could speak to the game's graphical beauties, its engaging sound, its huge statistical capacities, the rigors of its artificial intelligence (active computer managers), its broad scope (players who age and retire). But without that essential underpinning of variability—what baseball is all about, really—these things wouldn't mean as much.

This isn't to say that Baseball Pro doesn't have some bad habits. When the batter connects and the game twitches from the 2D pitcher-batter mode to full-screen 3D, the window leaves the impression of jerking up and to the left, and that's where my head



Cleveland's second baseman leaps in an attempt to grab a liner. (He missed.)

kept turning—regardless of where the ball was bound. I want a proper manual: I hate Sierra's new manuals-on-CD policy. And I still wish they'd dispensed with all the messy little windows.

Yet, I've learned to live with those fea-

tures. Baseball Pro is worth it. Out of the current crop, the game is unsurpassed.

But how does it fare against the king of spring, Tony LaRussa Baseball 3?

Actually, head to head, it's a very close race—just as it has been since 1994. Stormfront has tweaked TL3 with a range of minor features, and third-party developer Nick Keren's Ultimate Utilities fills in a lot of holes. TL3 has a great, crisp look, and I enjoy the GM Challenge (playing the game from a front-office point of view).

Still, Tony 3's "feel" is robotic compared to Baseball Pro, and, in sum, I'd give the Sierra game a slight edge. (Sierra On-Line; 800-757-7707; www.sierra.com; Win CD; \$54.95)

Better Luck Next Year

Baseball Pro does have a rival at the stats end: Strat-O-Matic Baseball 6.2 and the recent Strat-O-Matic CD-ROM Baseball 1.0, the pennant winner in our lineup.

Your response this time may well be "Huh?" You won't see this one on store shelves. Strat-O-Matic, a software version of the venerable cards-and-dice game, is sold only through the mail.

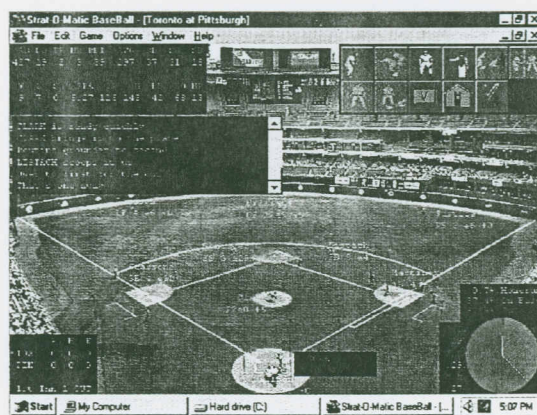
But you'd do well to track it down. I've used Strat to run a league for about four seasons running and have consistently found its combination of ease of use, reliability, and statistical realism virtually unmatched. (It's also the only one of the bunch that's been brought to the Macintosh, which has a meager supply of baseball games.)

It's the detail with which you can run a team that makes Strat something out of the ordinary. Naturally, you can set up multiple lineups and a starting rotation, but you can also designate preferred substitutes and relievers and fine-tune the way the computer manager runs things—even how individual players are used. (For instance, if you have a fast squad, you'll probably want the team to be "aggressive" on the bases. Then again, if you have a couple "pudges" on the team, version 6.2 and the CD-ROM edition allow you to set them to steal less often.) Reports of all sorts are at your fingertips—among them, delight-

fully newspaper-like reports that display the day's games, the probable pitchers (with their current records), and running tallies for MVP and Cy Young awards.

The CD-ROM version for

Windows and Mac adds the pleasures of dragging and dropping (earlier takes were a bit more mechanical), lovingly detailed play-by-play description (text only), and, most particularly, a feature called the Regulator. This takes your hitters toe-to-toe with the pitcher in a graphical, full-screen matchup



Otis Nixon grounds out to open a game of Strat-O-Matic CD-ROM Baseball.

Report	Team Stats	Team	Targets	Stats	Total Stats
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<div> <div> OVERALL RECORD WON: 32 LOST: 9 WON PERCENT 77.8% ROAD RECORD 12-14 VS. LEFTY STARTERS 24-1 VS. RIGHTY STARTERS 32-27 BATTAL BATTING AVERAGE .275 OPS LOW CARDS 17 EAST 10 GAMES 4-4 </div> <div> LEFTY RECORD 48-32 WON PERCENT 60.0% ROAD RECORD 21-14 VS. LEFTY STARTERS 24-1 VS. RIGHTY STARTERS 32-27 BATTAL BATTING AVERAGE .275 OPS LOW CARDS 17 EAST 10 GAMES 4-4 </div> <div> RIGHTY RECORD 12-14 WON PERCENT 46.2% ROAD RECORD 12-14 VS. LEFTY STARTERS 24-1 VS. RIGHTY STARTERS 32-27 BATTAL BATTING AVERAGE .275 OPS LOW CARDS 17 EAST 10 GAMES 4-4 </div> </div>					
STATS TEAM TOTALS OPS LOW CARDS 17 EAST 10 GAMES 4-4					

Stat's stats will tell you everything you want to know about your team. Here's a breakdown of one squad's performance.

that allows you to influence the play through more detailed player control without upsetting the game's precious statistical balance.

Strat-O-Matic 1.0 does have a few rough edges. FPS's treatment of injuries is far more realistic. (In Strat, no player can be injured for more than 15 games.)

And the computer general managers don't do much with their teams. While they can respond to human managers' trade offers via the Swap-O-Matic—sometimes with a broad sense of humor—they can't make offers themselves (as Baseball Pro's managers do). That makes for a sense of no one at the wheel. Also, the graphics are sort of like Microleague's baseball games of a couple of years back and aren't up to the competition. (The CD-ROM edition comes with black-and-white stadiums; an add-on disk allows you to see them in color.) And the copy protection remains a sore point.

But this is a small outfit, without the vast resources of a Sierra, and it's not quite fair to judge its games by the same standard. Even so, they've improved steadily with every update. If you're serious about your computer baseball, Strat-O-Matic will reward your diligence every step of the way. (Strat-O-Matic; 800-645-3455; www.enter.net/~adamw/strat.html; Win/Mac CD; \$66)

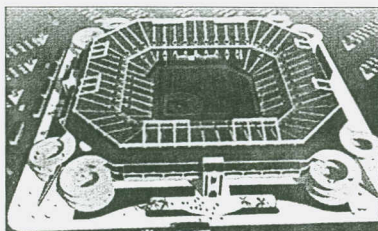
One or Two Players Away

Our division champ is Electronic Arts' Triple Play '97: Virtual Stadium Baseball. The whys and wherefores take a little explaining.

In *Bull Durham*, Kevin Costner's Crash Davis told his teammates that major-league ballparks are like cathedrals. He was right on the mark. Baseball stadiums have their own heightened reality. The grass is never greener than when arrayed in the three-quarter circle of an outfield, earth never earthier than when it has a white line running through it, players never more like their baseball-card selves than when basking in the reflected glory of artificial light.

Admittedly, this is an impressionistic view of the Great American Pastime—"Oh, Crash, you do make speeches"—but it's one that I've never seen translated into a computer baseball game until now.

Triple Play is a conversion of the console game and has the bright, hard



PRO PLAYER PARK

Triple Play '97 brings you the majesty of America's ballparks.



THREE RIVERS STADIUM



WRIGLEY FIELD

hyper-reality of baseball down to a science. It took me out to the ballpark, parked me in the choicest of seats, and provided a vivid experience that, while slightly less than full-fledged, was also slightly more than real. For that alone, it deserves special recognition.

There's an almost physical dimension to Triple Play. It doesn't so much run as sprint. It doesn't play music; the music bursts out. It doesn't display pictures; it pictures the on-field display. It grabs you and it holds you, and you stay.

Of course, there's more to it. You've got

all the major-league teams and stadiums, and they look great. You can play by modem. (Baseball's wait states are the perfect answer to latency.) You can have multiplayer games on a single machine.

It's not quite a full-featured baseball game—console games tend naturally toward action—but it's still more of a stat hound than some.

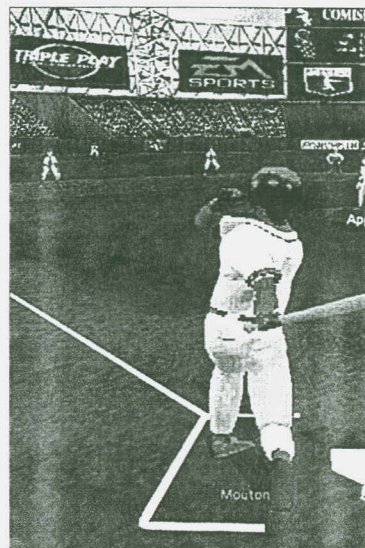
Among other things, it allows you to trade players and track top stats. You can even build a player. (It's funny—all of mine are 6' 4" and weigh 290.)

My complaints are of the gum-under-the-seat variety. I never quite took to the batters' appearance; I was left with an impression of underlying polygons jutting out here and there. I didn't like the fireworks overlay that accompanies a home run. And I found it difficult to hit for power, even in the home-run derby (a thrilling long-ball competition that challenges you to smack the horsehide as hard and far as possible).

But my biggest problem was installation. Under Windows 95, it took three installs of DirectX 2 and the game itself before one finally took and returned to a non-corrupted desktop screen and an acknowledgment that the game was in its proper place.

Once it did take, the problem was solved. Triple Play is still on my hard drive, and booting it is still surprisingly like walking into a ballpark.

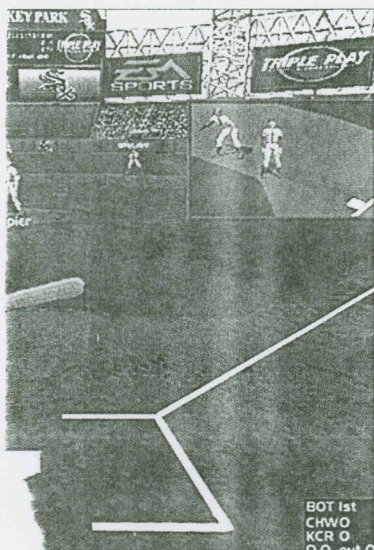
As good as this game may be, it's not quite up to Accolade's *Hardball 5*, released earlier in the year. No action-oriented slugger so perfectly nailed the pitcher-batter confrontation, and this incarnation wraps it in a luxurious blanket of stats, sumptuous graphics (love the insets of runners on base!), and features (a great replay/highlight mode) while sacrificing nothing of the action. On deck: *Hardball 6*, due next year. (Electronic Arts; 800-245-4525; www.easports.com; Win 95 CD/DOS CD; \$59.95)



The baserunner inlays are a nice touch.

A Little Short in the Bullpen

Finally, the wildcard slot goes to Acclaim's Frank Thomas Big Hurt Baseball. This action-based game wouldn't be among the very best unless we made room



to accommodate it. That said, it isn't bad. In fact, it's one of the best things Acclaim has released since it started publishing computer games.

Like Triple Play, Big Hurt appeared first on the consoles, and it has the brusque, in-your-face presentational

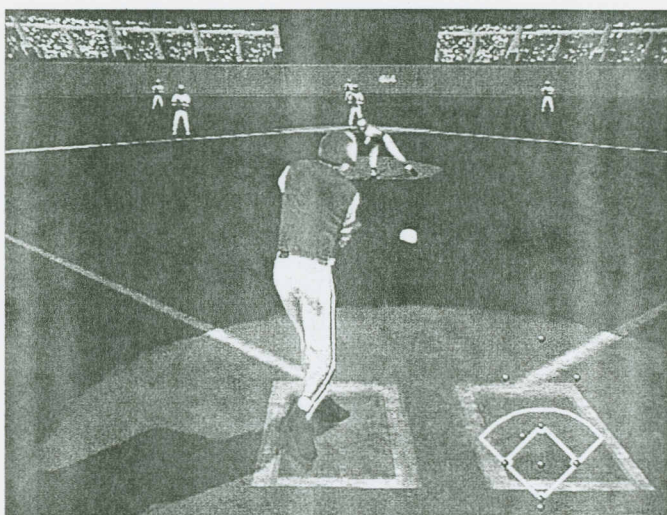
style of a console baseball game: big music, big graphics, big animation. It doesn't eat stats for breakfast. It doesn't have Triple Play's bright edge. In fact, the in-game graphics are slightly dull.

But Big Hurt is just full of surprises. I was initially uncomfortable with the keyboard controls, but once you pick up the system, you'll wonder how you managed it any other way. Batter outlines display the jagged "step" effect even in high res, but the

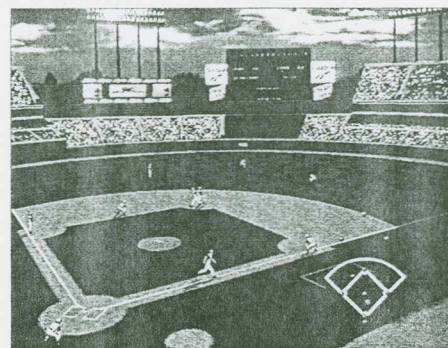
animation is fluid and realistic, and the TV-like front end is gorgeous.

The announcer's patter, while repetitive—how many times do you need to hear about the new zip code the home-run ball is going to need?—does manage to keep pace with the game's action and is generally on-target in its descriptions.

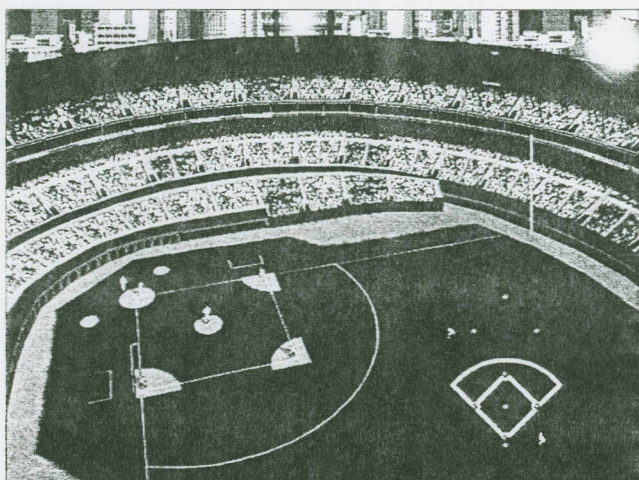
But what appealed to me most and what I still remember is a range of endearing details. I like that the umpires don't stand there with mud on their faces as play unfolds, but signal that, for instance, a ball has gone foul. I like the way the pitcher slaps the ball into his glove, mops his brow and checks each of the base runners. I like that the way fielders pick up, throw, and catch the ball hasn't been standardized (they can jump and dive for the ball). And if you can spot the distant in-game scoreboard during the game—the camera zooms in on it at the end of each half-inning—you'll see that it's keeping meticulous track of the action. It's details like this that finally bring a baseball game all the way home.



Batter animations are smooth and realistic.



Big Hurt is big on detail.



Big Hurt Baseball has beautiful stadiums but is lacking in the stats department.

Unfortunately, Big Hurt gets trapped in a rundown between second and third. Again and again, I watched hit balls roll past outfielders, only to miraculously reappear in their throwing hands. The game is prone to the classic console-game oddity of having an outfielder throw the ball to first (rather than second) on a bases-empty single to right field, center, and even left.

Opposing batters sometimes seem to

swing when the ball's barely halfway to the plate. The curveball swoops in on an absurd trajectory, to the accompaniment of a jet-engine sound. While the background sounds are generally well done, some (like fans whistling) are played at a relatively high volume, which gives them a disembodied quality, and the peanut vendor sounds as though he's talking through the PA system.

Finally, the stats element is wanting. To be fair, the one it has is nice: In its season mode, Big Hurt tracks standings but handles accumulated season stats only for the team you're running. It doesn't even display league leaders, so you don't have any sense of context for your performance.

So this time, Frank doesn't quite make it around to score. But what it does, it does well enough to be entertaining. It's a rough diamond, but it sparkles still. (Acclaim Entertainment; 516-759-7800; www.acclaimnation.com; DOS CD; \$49.99)