

For gamers, baseball's 'Opening Day' comes in January

By MIKE HUDAK

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Football fans are in ecstasy over the prospects of a Super Bowl where the two head coaches hate each other. Ohio college basketball fans are in peak form, with Cincinnati a national power and Ohio State coming out of nowhere to emerge as a force. Even Cavs fans are beginning to get "the feel" as they see if Shawn Kemp can drop below 300 pounds before opening night.

But if you're looking for pure adrenalin in a sports fan, it would be hard to top the baseball aficionados who gathered at The Game Trader in Cuyahoga Falls on Jan. 24. The occasion was "Opening Day West" for the new set of Strat-O-Matic baseball cards, and the first look at each card's special properties and nuances leads to hours of comment, debate and, in general, Nirvana-like bliss.

Strat-O-Matic baseball, invented by Harold Richman in the early 1960s, is a dice and/or computer game where major-league baseball players almost exactly recreate their real-life abilities from a particular season. There are many levels of the game ranging from elementary to a super-advanced computer version

where you purchase like 50,000 personalized lines of play-by-play for enhanced enjoyment. For gamers, it's the closest thing to reality on the market — with a bonus that a game takes only about 30 minutes to play.

"It took us 13 hours to drive here," said 25-year-old Chad Cropp. "Actually, I thought it was going to take longer. The time went by so fast that I plan on making the trip every year from now on."

Cropp and his buddy, Jason Crider, had made the drive from Topeka, Kan., no small feat. But in the past, they would have had to have driven all the way to Long Island on the East Coast for their cards. "Opening Day East" occurred on Jan. 22, with nearly 150 people showing up at Strat-O-Matic headquarters in Glen Head for a first glimpse at the treasured cards.

Among them was Akron Beacon Journal Managing Editor Glenn Guzzo, better known to gamers as publisher of StratFan Magazine. Guzzo and his buddy, fellow newspaperman Dave Scott, drove out to Long Island in a van and picked up cards to distribute in Cuyahoga Falls on Sunday.

"We had great weather and made the trip in about eight hours each way, which was a record time," said Guzzo. "The key was timing the trip to miss the New

York rush hours both in the morning and afternoon. That can slow you down."

Guzzo also spent a few extra hours at Strat-O-Matic headquar-

ters talking to fellow travelers for an article for StratFan.

"Opening Day at Strat-O-Matic headquarters is perhaps the single most unique event in the gaming

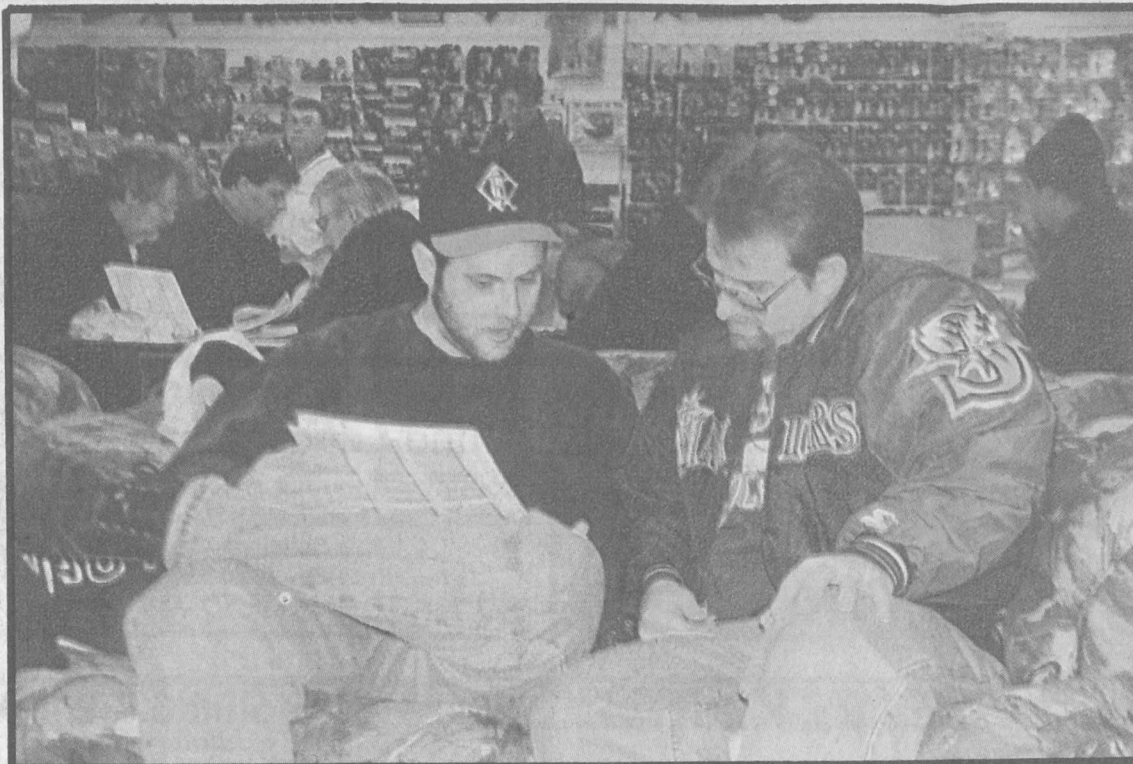
world," he said. "It's also great to see Hal (Richman). This year he was especially excited — he's trying to wrap up a deal where Strat-O-Matic will be able to be played face-to-face over the Internet, and that's going to be a major breakthrough for the game."

Richman should be happy for another reason, too. According to warehouse manager Rita Laranaites, the home-run setting exploits of Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa has led to what should be a record-setting year of game orders.

The amazing thing is, McGwire doesn't even have the best home run card on the Cardinals! Wait until you see J.D. Drew, who hit over .400 with four home runs in about 32 at bats!

Longtime gamer Jim Hoy of Canton had one word when he saw Drew's card.

"Wow."



CHAD CROPP, left, and Jason Crider made a 13-hour trip from Topeka, Kan., to Cuyahoga Falls to pick up this year's new Strat-O-Matic baseball card set. (This is about three days quicker than if they had waited for it to be mailed.) Cropp seemed particularly concerned about Manny Ramirez's defensive rating — a "3," which equates to "average." (Free Press photo by Mike Hudak)

More information?

Strat-O-Matic Games
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And while baseball is a business, it's also a game. And come late January, it means I was either driving to New York City to pick up the new Strat-O-Matic baseball game cards, or waiting anxiously for the UPS truck to arrive with the new batch.

This year I didn't have to do either. Strat-O-Matic (a dice game where players match their actual statistical capabilities) actually has a fan magazine published by Akron Beacon Journal executive

Glenn Guzzo, and this year he drove to New York City himself and loaded up a truckload of card sets to bring back to Akron for distribution at a card shop on Super Bowl Sunday in Cuyahoga Falls. Around 50 people, mostly from Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan, showed up.

Akron will continue to be a hotbed of Strato activity. This summer a national Strat-O-Matic tournament will take place in Akron and will feature a visit from Strat-O-Matic inventor Hal Richman. The bad news? It takes place Hall of Fame Weekend, where I'm already overwhelmed by journalistic commitments! We'll work something out