



When Hal Richman was 11 years old, he invented a game so he and his friends could play major league baseball by rolling dice. Today it's a cult phenomenon.

Still pitching

By Rick Reiff

JUST A WEEK before the Super Bowl, but it's already opening day of the baseball season for 300 men and one woman shivering in a queue outside a Glen Head, N.Y. warehouse. It's the day when Hal Richman's Strat-O-Matic Game Co. releases its annual set of baseball cards, used to play the country's most popular baseball board game.

With dice and these 2¾-by-5-inch cards, tens of thousands of baseball nuts simulate, with surprising accuracy, the performance of more than 700 major league ballplayers and their 26 teams in the American and National leagues. They form Strat-O-Matic leagues, play entire major league seasons, swap players, bet and guzzle

beer, reveling in the imaginary competition as much as any fan at Boston's Fenway Park.

The game is deceptively simple: Each card represents a player, a full roster of 27 cards to a team. A card is divided into three columns, each containing 11 different readings, like single or strikeout, that represent a turn at bat. A roll of three regular dice directs the game players to the appropriate reading. Sometimes a 20-sided die must also be rolled and a chart is consulted to determine such things as whether a fielder has booted a grounder or a runner has stolen a base. Base runners are represented by small plastic pegs that are moved around a cardboard diamond.

The key to Strat-O-Matic is its accuracy and realism. Baseball, reduced

to its essence, is a game of probabilities. Will Clark, the San Francisco slugger, will hit a home run about 7% of the time against left-handed pitching at Candlestick Park, for instance. By meshing hundreds of such statistics on players with the odds of various dice rolls, Strat-O-Matic faithfully duplicates real play. A Babe Ruth card, for instance, contains the potential for more home runs than does a Clark card. Richman's game also takes into account such subtleties as ballpark dimensions, weather conditions, differing levels of fielding skill and a pitcher's endurance.

The crowd lines up in 25-degree weather to pick up their \$25 card sets and to cheer the thin, graying Richman. "The man is a god," gushes Marty Bender, a 41-year-old customs officer from Queens.

Richman, 53, is one of those rare lucky guys who make a living from their childhood fantasies. Strat-O-Matic Baseball has been played by a million armchair managers since it was launched in 1961. When baseball stopped during the 1981 players' strike, several television and radio stations substituted broadcasts of simulated Strat-O-Matic games. Former Mets outfielder Lenny Dykstra compared the thrill of hitting the winning home run in a 1986 play-off game to the excitement of playing Strat-O-Matic as a kid. "The game," claims Richman, "has a life of its own."

About a dozen small companies make board games simulating major league sports. They generate probably no more than \$4 million in retail sales a year. Richman, who also makes football, basketball and hockey games, has close to 40% of this market and nets maybe \$300,000 a year. It's dependable money, too, because Richman's customers usually reorder new cards each year.

Big-league competition? Milton Bradley has failed twice in the past 20 years with baseball games; Parker Brothers' \$90 audio contraption, Talking Baseball, was a colossal flop the past two Christmases.

Richman created his first crude baseball game when he was 11. Unaware of the laws of probability, he rolled two dice 5,000 times to learn the odds of any given number coming up so he could give each player the correct amount of hits and outs. His first edition of Strat-O-Matic, priced at \$4.25, bombed in 1961; a *Sports Illustrated* advertisement drew just 25 responses. Ads the next season in *Sporting News* and *Baseball Digest* did better. Out \$3,500, Richman borrowed another \$5,000 from his fa-

The Strat-O-Matic game board, cards and other paraphernalia
Its secret is surprising accuracy and realism.



ther—with the stipulation he join the family insurance business if the game failed again. It didn't.

Richman's latest competition, no surprise, is computer games, with their arcade action, sound effects and instant results.

Richman plans to issue a computer version of Strat-O-Matic this summer, but packaged with a set of the familiar cards. In an electronic age, he's betting that his board game, like ageless pitcher Nolan Ryan, hasn't lost its stuff. ■



Strat-O-Matic founder Hal Richman and his game
One of those lucky guys who make a living from childhood fantasies.