

**F**LIP OPEN last week's Forbes, page 145, and you'll find Hal Richman, an unlikely character in this magazine of moguls.

"It's a very nice thing," Richman says simply. "We've got some nice reaction."

This nonchalance will puzzle the entrepreneur who would sell a relative for such exposure, but Richman is not like that. He is quite happy minding his own business in an operation that is as rumpled and easy-going as he is. When publicity comes, it is not because of Richman or public relations, but because his creation has achieved a life of its own.

Richman is the inventor of Strat-O-Matic Baseball, a mythic and addictive board game that has pleased sports nuts for 29 years. He thought of it when he was 11, and his life and the game's have been intertwined in the 42 years since.

**Paul Schreiber**

In doing so, Richman appears to have discovered a near-perfect niche that lets him exist comfortably ahead of small-game makers that don't have cult status and comfortably beneath the sights of gamedom's giants.

Moreover, his game becomes obsolete every year, which makes it like an annuity. Its fans, with a devotion almost religious, fill up the incoming mail flats with orders, usually \$25 or more, to bring it up to date.

The extremes of Strat-O-Matic fervor are demonstrated every January, on opening day for the Strat-O-Matic season. This year, an estimated 300 players lined up outside the two-story, cement-block building in Glen Head where the company is located. The only indication is a hand-lettered card taped to the front door.

Fans began lining up at dawn for their 1989 game cards, which will start reaching mail-order customers about two weeks later. These are hard-core players who turn up at Strat-O-Matic tournaments around the country, but they are just the tip of the Strat-O-Matic iceberg. Richman holds all financial details closely and won't talk about them, but John Kreuz, a Chicago securities broker who organizes 25 tournaments a year, guesses that as many as 100,000 people have played the game nationwide.

There is a basic game, which the average kid can learn, and an advanced version, whose devotees are as staunch as any Trekkies of "Star Trek." Either version is one of probability based on the previous season's statistics for 702 players in the National and American Leagues. Richman has analyzed the numbers for dozens of pitching, hitting, fielding and running factors, and then interpreted intangibles, to come up with a pastime that is as close to real baseball as is possible in a game with dice.

A player who hit .296 in real life should hit about .296 in a Strat season. In the advanced game, Richman's interpretations turn into about 66 variables on the 3-by-5-inch cards that represent each pitcher and slugger. Strat players, overwhelmingly males, roll three dice to determine what happens with each play. An average game takes half an hour.

It is this realism that has kept Strat-O-Matic at the top of its league for three decades. Like the real thing

## Just Don't Tamper With a 29-Year Hit

### Wizard behind Strat-O-Matic remains at the top of the lineup

Strat-O-Matic baseball is complex, strategic and engrossing, but still has enough "play value" to be fun.

"It's not for everybody," says Kreuz, the tournament organizer. "I'm not even sure what makes a Strat bug. But if you like baseball and you like to compete, it's as much fun as you can have with your clothes on."

As a youngster, Richman was a frustrated athlete with a statistical bent. "I was not good enough athletically to satisfy my own thirst for sports," he says. Finding sports games unrealistic, he worked on his own game and brought the first version to summer camp when he was 11.

He refined it over the next decade, during which he earned an accounting degree from Bucknell University. In 1961, he began trying to penetrate the retail market, and failed to the tune of about \$7,000. On \$5,000 borrowed from his father, who wanted him to join his insurance business, Richman tried in 1963 for what he had agreed would be the last time. He made two crucial changes: expanding the game to include all 16 teams and switching from retail to mail order.

"In June, kids got out of school and started to buy the product," he says. "I worked 80 straight days, 7 in the morning to 11 at night. It was a great labor of love because I had turned the corner, and I knew I had something. I paid my father back."

Richman now has seven employees and they do everything but the printing. Strat-O-Matic, advertised in super-fan magazines, is again available in retail stores, at the suggestion of his wife, a former department-store buyer. But 80 percent of his business is through the mail, and much of that is from customers buying the current cards. Strat-O-Matic also has gone back in baseball time, and offers great seasons dating to 1905. As he notes, "It's a beautiful mail-order item."

Big competitors have decided to deploy in his niche, but each has failed. "This company is able to be successful on runs of 5,000 or less of an item. For a large company like Milton-Bradley or Parker Bros., it has to be at least 100,000, maybe much higher," Richman says.

Strat-O-Matic has competition from such small titles as Pursue the

Pennant, APBA Baseball, Avalon Hill and Replay Games, but it dominates the market. Richman won't say how big the market is, although he says Forbes is in the ballpark with its estimate of \$4 million a year. He won't talk about his own company's share.

"Larger companies see the figures created by a smaller company and they say, 'With their limited distribution, we can really do a job with this.' They're always wrong. They always blunder."

Nevertheless, Richman operates in a finite market. "I'm really restricted," he concedes, "but that's my strength. I'm a good example of how a small company can survive in a very big world. They can't come in here and make out, but I can live in this little world and do well."

Richman says he is not foolish enough to challenge the big firms on their turf. A computer version of the Strat-O-Matic game, for example, is not aimed at the mass market, but is a hybrid, with simple graphics and a dependence on the cards.

Strat-O-Matic also has games for fans of pro football, basketball and hockey, each of which are statistics-based and realistic. But none are as popular as baseball.

Richman also has had two duds. He is about to pull the plug on college football, which has less player awareness and competed with the pro version. Richman also was burned when he tried to crash someone else's niche.

That involved a sports-trivia game that he thought would sell well during the madness over Trivial Pursuit. "It totally bombed. There was no demand for it. Trivial Pursuit came out and then it was followed by 50 to 100 other trivia games and we were just one of them. We were just too late."

That failure taught him to stick to his statistics, particularly in this uncertain economic climate. And although he knows the danger of messing with the game, he must do that to stay ahead of advances by the competition. This season's cards come with a slew of new optional rules, each of which makes the game still more realistic, not to mention harder.

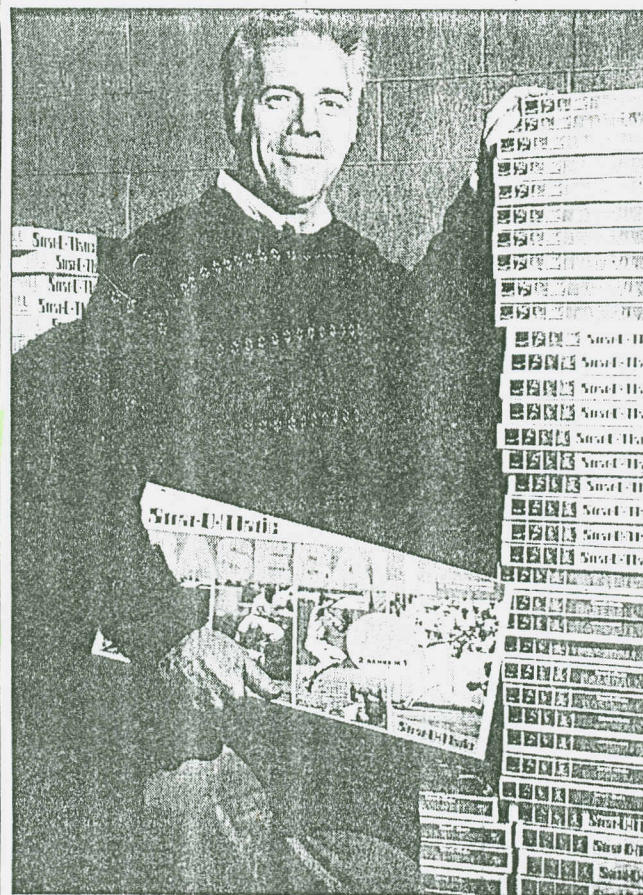
"You don't want to tamper with it," he says. "If you do, you'd better do it in such a way that they can continue to play it the way it always has been. I'll never change the basic side. We've got something that works very well. And people who play this are very conservative people. They don't like change." Nevertheless, he says, "A certain percentage want even more realism. They're willing to sacrifice play value for realism. These are the real nuts, God bless 'em."

It is ironic that the father of the premiere baseball game no longer plays it himself. "I'm with it all the time," he says. "One has to get away from it."

That's OK, for the game seems quite capable of taking care of itself. "It's like a breathing organism," says Richman, who sometimes doesn't identify himself as its creator because he likes people to have their own image of the wizard it came from.

"It's something that's grown much greater than I," he says. "It creates its own publicity. We don't do any PR work. It's done by the game, because people who play it grow up and become important people."

It occasionally cashes in on baseball itself, as it did in 1981, when the season was interrupted by a strike and a substitute All-Star game, using Strat-O-Matic, was played and broadcast on radio. If baseball's millionaire owners and millionaire players shut out the fans again, Strat-O-Matic, and the attendant publicity, will be there. ■



Newsday / Christine M. Barracca

Hal Richman has had grand-slam success with his game.