# going for the FENCES

There's a duality at work in baseball that you won't find in any other sport. On one hand, baseball is a sport of cold, hard statistics. Almost every possible action or situation is quantified by someone, somewhere, to the point that you can probably find the stats for a left-handed batter facing a right-handed pitcher in a night game when the humidity is above 60 percent. Rotisserie baseball leagues live and die by stats, hardcore fans can recite them at length, and to a great extent the numbers can be used to predict, fairly accurately, the outcome of situations and games.
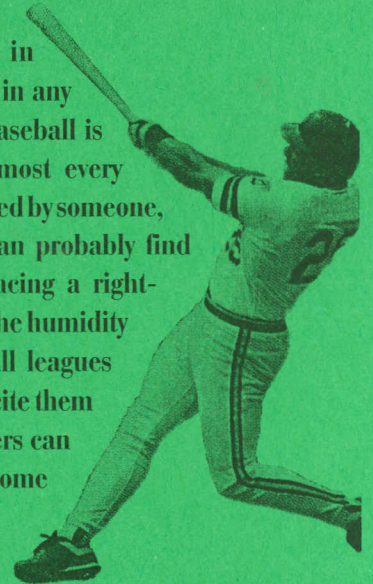
But baseball didn't become America's Favorite Pastime by being a game that only an actuary could love. There's nothing quite like taking off an afternoon from work, heading out to the ballpark, and enjoying a Coney Island and a cold beer as you cheer your team to victory. Keeping up with the latest stats is well and good, but all those numbers don't equal the magic of actually seeing that ninth-inning sacrifice fly, or a spectacular grab at the center-field fence.

Thankfully for PC gamers who love baseball, the current lineup of baseball sims has something to offer everyone. If simulating the outcome of a meeting between two real-life clubs as realistically and as detailed as possible is enough to bring the game to life for you, the new generation of stats-heavy, text-based games will do the trick. But if you're the sort of fan who loves the action rather than poring over the box score, then two league-leaders—*Hardball III* and *Tony LaRussa Ultimate Baseball II*—should be just what you're looking for.

STRAT-O-MATIC COMPUTER BASEBALL

This product caters to one kind of fan: the baseball buff who couldn't care less about state-of-the-art graphics so long as the game provides statistically accurate results. And that's something *Strat-O-Matic Computer Baseball (SOM)*, from **Strat-O-Matic** most certainly does, thanks to its database

built on in-depth analyses of player performance in numerous statistical and subjective categories. The latest version (4.0) is the first to feature graphics, but the on-field action is still handled by text descriptions alone.

The idea of a text-based baseball game may seem as quaint as a monochrome monitor. But for several reasons, *SOM* and other simulations like it stack up surprisingly well against heavy-hitters such as *Hardball III* and *Tony LaRussa Baseball II*. First and foremost, they play *much* faster — a major advantage when you're involved in a 162-game season replay for one or more teams. In *SOM*, for instance, you can rip through a three-game series in under an hour. Secondly, what these games lack in visual spectacle is more than compensated for by the greater degree of de-tail and nuance provided by their play-by-play commentaries. Sometimes that old saw about a picture being worth a thousand words just doesn't hold true.

Gamers who own every edition of *The Baseball Encyclopedia* and can recite Sabermetric formulas by heart will appreciate the precision with which *SOM* attempts to simulate each player's skills. The program takes into account such variables as performance against left- and right-handed batters/pitchers, hitting ability in the clutch, stadium effects, and even the weather (the ball carries farther on hot, humid days). And this new version goes a step further in its quest for realism, adding ground-ball double plays and closer ratings for pitchers.

Besides more stats, the 1993 edition introduces a variety of other enhancements. Most notably, the game now supplements the main text display with background graphics of the stadium where the game is being played. The 16-color palette leaves something to be desired (check out the purple walls at Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium), but the graphics are still an infinite improvement over the alternative, namely a plain black screen with text. There's also an option to add limited animation in the form of digitized images of the pitcher hurling the ball and the hitter swinging the bat.

Another new feature is the Draft-O-Matic utility. This nifty function allows you to draft teams with your friends, with the computer making selections for any club that lacks a human manager. It's perfect for fantasy leagues where you want to maintain a
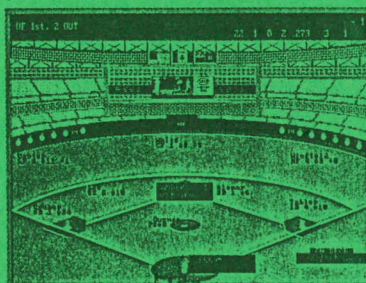
Strat-O-Matic Baseball

full complement of teams but happen to be short a warm body or two. Draft-O-Matic can also be used to test the extent of your baseball knowledge: Simply draft a team, quick-play through an entire season, and see how your hand-picked squad performs against the computer's teams. The possibilities are as intriguing as they are endless.

SOM does have a few quirks, most of them artifacts from the table-top version of the game from which the program is adapted. One of the strangest is that players are susceptible to injuries only when at bat, and then only on line-drive outs. Users also have to contend with the board-game's numerical rating scheme, which doesn't always follow a consistent pattern: lower numbers are better for fielding ability, for example, while the opposite applies for base running. The manual explains the meaning of all the ratings that appear on the screen, but a more common-sense system would have been preferable.

Otherwise, *SOM* offers just about everything that a serious student of the sport could desire: statistical detail, comprehensive stat compiler, programmable computer manager, and built-in scheduler. Above all, it satisfies what might be called the three F's of text-based computer baseball games: it's fast, faithful, and fun.

— *Jeff Seiken*