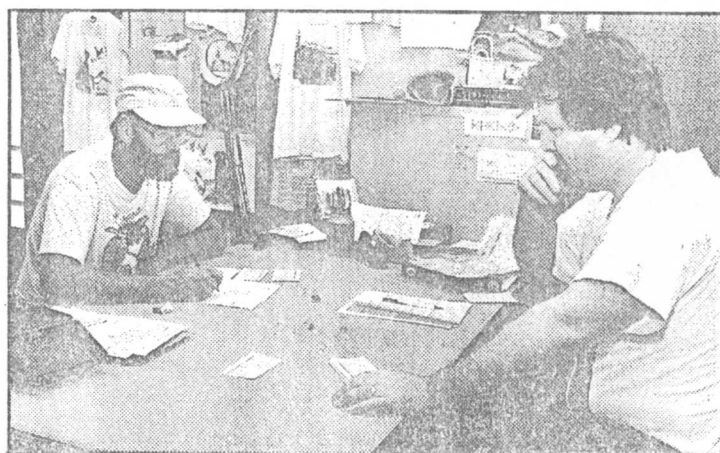


THE BOARD GAME

"When we come down here, it doesn't matter what bills you've got to pay, or what the world's problems are."

Ken Vander Slik



PRESS PHOTO/MICHAEL STASSUS

Dave Stoutjesdyk, left, and Todd Dalsen manage the Snakes and Spartans, respectively, in a game of board baseball.

By Charles Honey
The Grand Rapids Press

The place looks like a poker den: four guys hunched over card tables, posters of Marilyn Monroe on the walls, the air stale with cigar smoke.

But those four guys are holding baseball players in their hands, not jacks and queens. And in their minds they aren't in a little storefront off East Fulton Street, but sprinting across the hallowed green diamonds of Wrigley Field and Fenway Park.

This is the world of board-game baseball, a small but fanatical subculture where accountants and other grown men bring their boyhood big-league fantasies to life with a roll of the dice.

"When we come down here, it doesn't matter what bills you've got to pay, or what the world's problems are," says Ken Vander Slik, an easy smile spreading beneath his relief pitcher's mustache. "We couldn't care what's going on the world when we're in this room."

In a shadowy alcove behind a beaded curtain, Ken's brother Dale is negotiating a trade with Ted Krueger, a longtime rival in Strat-O-Matic League Baseball.

They're loaded up with statistical charts detailing their players' real-life performances,

which are replicated with amazing accuracy in their board-game counterparts.

"You go through all the emotions of a win, a tough loss, a miracle ending," says Dale Vander Slik, a 38-year-old mental health worker, explaining his passion for board baseball. "You get to be the manager, the player and the fan."

Dale, Ted and Ken are part of a league of 12 men who get together every Monday night in Ed Carlson's commercial art shop on Holland Avenue NE, and play their teams in a 162-game schedule that culminates in a card-board championship series.

They keep this up for nine months out of the year, and this is the ninth year many of them have been playing. One night each year they draft new players in their quest for the ultimate all-star team.

If you can't fathom that kind of all-consuming dedication, then you were not a boy who went to sleep with a transistor radio in his ear, listening to Ernie Harwell broadcast Tiger games and dreaming of one day stepping onto the pitcher's mound.

"If I could do any one thing with my life in the world, it would be to play major-league baseball," says John Kreuz, a securities exec-

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utive from Chicago who organizes board-baseball tournaments throughout the country. "This is our way of vicariously living out that dream that we weren't physically able to do."

The game that brings that dream to life for Kreuz and the Holland Avenue league is called Strat-O-Matic, one of the top-selling baseball board games on the market. Other popular games include APBA, Pursue the Pennant, Replay and Statis Pro.

Strat-O-Matic provides individual cards for each major-league baseball player from the previous year's season.

Just like real life

Statistical probabilities make these player cards perform very close to the way they did in real life. If you played a complete season using the current cards, chances are good Tony Gwynn and Kirby Puckett would repeat their 1989 league batting championships.

To play Strat-O-Matic, you manage your team just like Sparky Anderson does, except the players are stacked in a pile, not sitting in the dugout.

You select your starting lineup and set your batting order. Then you roll the dice and match the result with numbers on the cards. Those numbers in turn determine hits, walks, strike outs or fielding plays in proportion to that ballplayer's real-life performance.

In some cases, the player must also consult a fielding chart to determine if the opponent turned a tough chance into an out or booted the ball.

It sounds complex, but most games only take half an hour to 45 minutes to play. A person can play a game by himself, managing two teams, or against another player.

Game creator and president Hal

Richman says he began making up the game when he was 11, because he was fed up with the statistical inaccuracy of the spinner-activated game he was playing.

"Basically I was a frustrated sports nut who was unable to perform on the diamond to satisfy his needs," says Richman, speaking from his company's office in Glen Head, N.Y. "So he had to go to board games to satisfy them."

Richman rolled the dice 5,000 times to figure out which combinations turned up most often, and started creating player cards. He marketed the game in 1961.

The game he came up with is so compulsively accurate it even reflects such factors as the ballparks where games are played, how well batters hit against left- and right-handed pitchers, and whether the games are played at night or in the day.

A player can get as serious about the game as he chooses. A basic version is aimed at 11- to 15-year-olds, but there are advanced and super-advanced versions for adult players who eat up statistics as if they were roasted peanuts.

These are guys who know how well their next batter hits with men in scoring position against right-handed knuckleballers on artificial turf under the lights.

"Left-handed batters hit .138 against (relief pitcher) Gregg Olson last year," says Mark Farmer of Wyoming, a self-described "stats freak." He pulls out the 1990 Elias Baseball Analyst to check his claim. "Oh, it was .135," he corrects himself. "I'm sorry."

Farmer plays a computer version of Strat-O-Matic, and now is playing a 162-game season with Dr. Jim VanRhee, a doctor at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Each of them plays games by himself and shares the results by mail. At season's end they'll get together and play a World Series of the top two teams.

Farmer plays two or three games each morning, after his wife goes to

work. For him, the chance to manage the likes of Will Clark, Wade Boggs and Kevin Mitchell — well, it's an addiction.

"I cannot not play," says Farmer, 36, who also collects baseball cards, books and records. "You go into withdrawal if you don't... All I can say is it's a good thing my wife tolerates me."

Farmer sells baseball cards at Sportscard Stadium, 925 28th St. SW, but Strat-O-Matic players come from all walks of life.

Kreuz says the more than 2,000 people who have played in his tournaments over the past four years include attorneys, legislative aides, cab drivers, students and a member of the U.S. Army Band.

About 25 times a year they pile into hotels in Baltimore, Sacramento and other cities for a weekend of nothing but Strat-O-Matic. The best players gather in Chicago at year's end for a World Series.

What about, ahem, females?

"We have had some women play in the past," says Kreuz, but adds, "These baseball board games are pretty much a male bastion so far."

That certainly describes the ambience of the SOM League, where teams have names such as "Coyotes," "Snakes" and "Spiders."

Ranging in age from 28 to 62, the players include a teacher, a garbage truck driver, a compact-disc store owner and an electrician. Most are from metro Grand Rapids, but Dave Stoutjesdyk drives about 30 miles from Clarksville in Ionia County.

There are no hard and fast rules of decorum except to show up and be a good sport. Throwing your dice down Fulton Street, as a fellow once did, is frowned upon.

The guys are as superstitious as big leaguers, changing the color of their dice if they're on a losing streak. Though much of the game rides on managerial decisions and selecting the best lineup, the roll of the dice can foil the most astute skipper.