



**HAROLD RICHMAN**, surrounded by dozens of read-for-shipment versions of the game he invented when he was 11 years old. His company is based in Glen Head.

Photo by A. Anthony Miller

## Hitting "Out Of Park" Home Runs

By Christina Cronin Southard

While his 11-year-old friends were out playing stick ball and hanging out at an ancient candy store in Great Neck, Harold Richman, now a successful Glen Head businessman, was running numbers. Through his head, of course.

Instead of sitting around for hours talking about baseball statistics, Richman was up past his bedtime creating cardboard for each player in every team in baseball and playing games with his statistically-obsessed friends. Richman kept at it, trying to devise strategies to make his card game more interesting.

The years flew by, and when Richman's peers were pursuing more adult matters, Richman's father, Irving, was starting to worry. When Richman got his accounting degree from Bucknell, Irving wanted Richman to join his insurance business.

Richman's mother, Helen, could read her son pretty well and wisely assessed that he was a dreamer, not an actuary. Helen made an appointment with a Great Neck toy manufacturer to talk to her son about the feasibility of a commercial success with his game of statistical strategy. The hopeful Richman was told, "You've got talent, kid, but it's not commercial." The 21-year old Richman went home that night and instead of getting discouraged, came up with the key element to his future success—a third die.

The 10 years Richman spent perfecting the game of strategy had uncovered an obvious weakness. With two dice, the game could only be played offensively, with players scoring runs. The third die allowed for a defensive game as the die had a corresponding action on the card. "Quite simply, it made the game commercial," said Richman.

The company's name may have evolved through a mis-reading, Richman concedes. He searched through a dictionary for a catchy title, and recalls he saw the word "strategimatical." He abbreviated that to the current title, but later when he went to check the spelling, said he could never find the original word again.

In 1961, the first Strat-O-Matic was offered, available strictly through mail-order in the back of comic books. It started selling using only All-Stars as players, and two years later a full set of all 20 teams was unveiled. Due to the statistical nature of the game, players are almost cultish about the authenticity. "It creates an instant bond," said Richman. It takes the place of poker. Many of our players have had a standing game for 30 years.

The game's appeal goes beyond the living room, with some of the rich, famous and the truly talented picking up the game. Len Dykstra proclaimed on a radio show, "The last time I hit three home runs

Director Spike Lee, another major player, has the game featured prominently in his next movie, "Crooklyn."

Richman struck gold again when he found a life partner, Sheila, who believed in him and his game. A buyer for B. Altman's, she suggested, "Why not go retail?" Sheila marketed it herself and soon they expanded into football, hockey, and basketball. Now, 25 percent of their business is from retail sales.

During a 1981 baseball strike, a group from the Players Association in a humorous mode played Strat-O-Matic in center field at the Cleveland Municipal Stadium. The players picked an All-Star team based on the previous year's stats and came up with a team that might not fill a ball park, but definitely filled a void for the disappointed fan. From there, the game went directly into the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown for the role it played in Cleveland.

Several copycat versions have come out since Richman's original version, but none with equal or continued success. In keeping with the times, Strat-O-Matic is now available for computer fanatics as well. At the moment, available are IBM, Apple IIE and IIC and Commodore versions of baseball, and discs have made to date for 32 seasons: 1927, 1930, 1941, 1956, 1959, 1961, 1962, and 1968 to 1992. The graphics are top-level, complete with stadium, field, players, fans and all the motions and plays of the game.

More are being created, and by the Christmas season of 1994, Strat-O-Matic expects to have basketball and ice hockey versions on computer as well. To play the game on computer requires one master disc, plus a separate game disc for each season. Check with the company for complete details and an order form.

So popular are the games that when new cards are issued—just after the New Year—a line forms outside the company's headquarters at Glen Head's Railroad Plaza, with people flying from all over the continental United States. The first one on line has usually spent a long night camped out in a car.

Although Richman will not divulge sales figures due to the competitive nature of his business, he said, "It is the number one in royalties to the Players Association."

Richman's son, Adam, 23, is working in the family business for the summer. Like his father, he has his own dream. A drama major in college, he is attending business school in the fall to learn the number-crunching aspects of the business. He wants to be a producer.

Richman encourages him. After all, he would be the last person to stomp on someone's dream.

A. Anthony Miller contributed to this