Strat-O-Matic started in a slump

From Herald Wire Services

GLEN HEAD, N.Y. — The year was 1958. Warren Spahn was mowing 'em down in County Stadium. Mickey Mantle was knocking 'em out at Yankee Stadium. And Harold Richman was blowing 'em away in his Long Island neighborhood.

Richman couldn't throw a fastball, couldn't hit a curve. His baseball prowess came with three dice and a handful of cards, a game he'd invented that recreated major-league games with almost eerie precision.

Thirty-five years later, the game has long since evolved from obsession to profession. Richman's game — Strat-O-Matic Baseball — has become an international pastime to hundreds of thousands of fanatics.

Count NBC announcer Bob Costas among them. Ditto moviemaker Spike Lee. And Philadelphia Phillies outfielder Lenny Dykstra. There's 2,000 subscribers to "Strat Fan," a monthly publication. Scores of leagues are played in person and through the mail, all over North America. There's a heavily attended world championship, which was held last year in New Orleans.

"I played constantly when I was a kid. I played with my cousin, and we were both nearly addicted," Costas confessed. "We still recall — he's 43 and I'm 41 — and compare notes on games played 20 years ago and more."

Costas remains a fan. When his cousin had a baby boy this year, he immediately shipped the infant a new version of the game. Lee has a soft spot for the game, too: His next movie, *Crooklyn*, will feature its characters tossing the Strat-O dice.

"The enthusiasm, the loyalty — it's a cult," said Richman, amazed by what he's wrought.

All this for a game first marketed from his parents' house and sold via mail order only, with a 25-year-old Richman operating as a one-man band — part president, part go-fer.

His company nearly failed before it got off the ground. In 1961, he borrowed $3,500 from friends to launch his new game, but lost it all. A year later, the Bucknell University graduate paid them back and was broke.

In 1963, he approached his father with a proposition: "Lend me $5,000, and if I cannot pay you back by September of this year, I'll go to work for you."

This was not an appealing option: his father and uncle were insurance men known as "The Battling Brothers of John Street."

Thus motivated, Richman paid the money back. Business picked up. By 1965, the game was a modest success. Richman moved out of the house and into his own office in Port Washington.

"I was just hopeful that I could put my kids through college and buy a home," Richman said recently. "That's all I wanted to do."

He's done much, much more. When a player's strike wiped out the 1981 All-Star Game, the canceled game was played on Strat-O-Matic in Cleveland's Municipal Stadium. The game set used later was enshrined in baseball's Hall of Fame.

The original card sets from 1962 are now collectibles that sell for $500. The new sets inspire similar frenzy: Each year, hundreds of people nationwide travel to tiny Glen Head to pick up sets the day of their release.

"The line forms outside the building five hours in advance," said Glenn Guzzo, a 30-year Strat-O-Matic fan who's hit a half-dozen of these opening days. "The first arrivals get there at 6:30 in the morning. It's quite an experience."

There's also a demand for the old-timers sets. You want Babe Ruth and the Murderers' Row of the 1927 Yankees? You got 'em — along with the 1934 St. Louis Cardinals' Gashouse Gang, the 1950 Philadelphia Phillies' Whiz Kids, the 1919 Chicago Black Sox, and just about any other prominent team of the 20th century.

An estimated 300,000 sets of cards go out annually. Strat-O-Matic has become big business: A full set, with the game, runs $47. When he started, Richman recalled, the price was $10.

Other things remain the same: Richman, 57, still wears most of the hats. Only eight employees work at the corporate headquarters, a nondescript white building

Cult-like following includes Bob Costas, Spike Lee, Lenny Dykstra

hard by the railroad tracks. Eighty percent of sales are still by mail.

Baseball card games have proliferated and perished over the years, but none has the cachet of Strat-O-Matic. Guzzo, a student of baseball board games and the publisher of "Strat Fan," explains why baseball junkies come back for Richman's brainchild.

"It's fun, it's fantasy, it's relaxation. That is probably the magic of it," said Guzzo. And there's always the fan's belief that he can do it better than the real manager: "That's something every Strat player does: 'This guy should bat second, not sixth.'"

No matter where a player bats, his numbers will be deadly accurate; Richman's unique game ensures it.

Each pitcher and hitter has a card reflecting their abilities. There are fielding ratings, throwing ratings, range ratings. There are ratings for bunting, stealing, baserunning, hit-and-runs. Clutch hitting and ballpark factors were just introduced; pitchers wear down.

Yet — and this is Richman's biggest advantage — a game can be played, start to finish, in under 30 minutes.

Three dice — a white one and two red ones — are thrown to determine what happens in an at-bat. Each player has three columns on his card with various possibilities. An at-bat literally takes seconds.

Richman, who still assigns most of the player ratings himself, is a stickler for accuracy. Take George Case, a wartime outfielder for the Washington Senators. In 1941, as a left fielder, he notched 21 assists.

Good arm, right? Wrong. The assists came when runners challenged him again, and again, and again.

"All the other game companies had him with a great arm," said Richman. "We knew, from reading, he did not have a good arm. He had a very weak arm, and that's why they moved him to left field."

Just to make sure, Richman had a friend check with a ballplayer from the same era. His verdict: "Weak arm, very fast."

"That's what we do," Richmond said, smiling in his cramped office off the Strat-O-Matic warehouse. "We're more than just a game company. We do research, too. In the 1927 season, we discovered an error — 100 missing at bats."

As Richman has his George Case, Costas has his Gary Geiger, a journeyman player of the 1960s with a lifetime .246 average. He was the last man left on Costas' bench during a 1966 Strat-O-Matic showdown with his cousin; Costas was forced to call on Geiger as a pinch-hitter.

Twenty-seven years later, in a voice that has called the World Series, Costas can give a play-by-play of Geiger's stunning, bottom of the 14th, two-out, game-winning home run.

"He jerks it out of there. It's gone!" Costas intoned. "A grand slam! A 7-6 win!"

Costas chortled. "The mere mention of that to this day makes my cousin apoplectic," he said.