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BASEBALL

Strat-O-Matic Fanatic

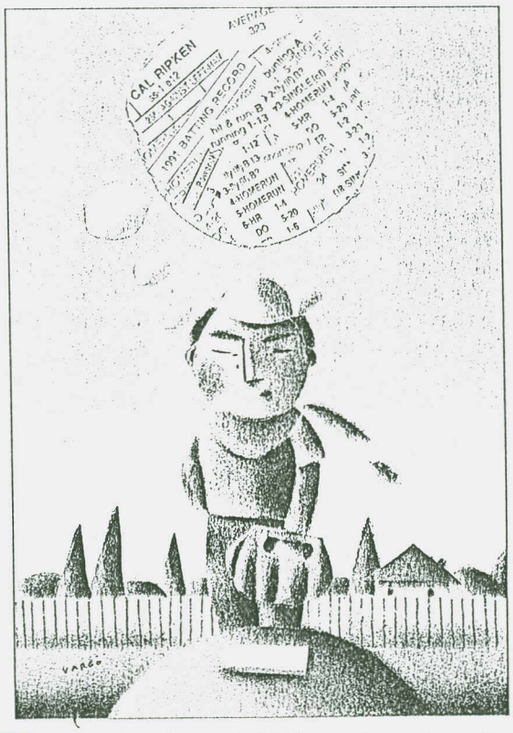
For nearly 30 years the best-known baseball board game has held the author in thrall | by BRUCE HERMAN

EVERYONE HAS A STORY ABOUT WHAT happened to his childhood baseball-card collection. Mine involves several thousand cards from the '60s, five dollars and a yard sale. That's about all you really want to know. But for a long time—at least until the day I realized that had I kept my cards, I could now make a down payment on the purchase of a South Sea island—I didn't miss them. Somewhere along the way I had forgotten the romance of having Clete Boyer fluttering away in the spokes of my Schwinn. Besides, I had found something better.

I remember the ad in the 1964 *Street & Smith's Baseball Annual*. I was only 10, but I wanted to play "thrilling, exciting baseball with Strat-O-Matic," as the ad copy described the board game. I craved players who "perform according to their actual abilities." I hungered to have "real control over all Major League players." You couldn't do these things with baseball cards.

From the day the game arrived at our house in Jim Thorpe, Pa., my life was never the same. I left my room only to eat, go to school and watch *My Mother the Car* on TV. When forced to visit relatives, I packed up Strat-O-Matic and took it with me. When my little cousins came calling, I hid it lest they find and swallow my dice. And sure enough (with the exception of one aberrant no-hitter by a Met pitcher named Buzz Capra), the players performed "according to their actual abilities." I played game after game, season after season, revising statistics on loose-leaf paper until my eraser rubbed through to the other side. And I've never stopped.

Even now, the game is still played on a stiff cardboard field—no electronic gizmos or flashing lights—with three dice and a set of 520 active-player cards that are revised each year by the Strat-O-Matic Game Co., which has made Strat-O-Matic since 1961. The game has become more sophisticated over the years (and a bit more expensive: I paid $10 for my first set; the current version sells for $37), but the basic rules are the same: You roll the dice, then consult the appropriate player's card, which is customized to reflect the player's actual abilities, to determine the result of the play. Additional referrals to charts may be required, but the elegance of Strat-O-Matic has always been in its cards.



Unlike the back of a bubble-gum card, which merely tells you what *has* happened to a player, Strat cards, replete with the possibilities of grand slams and triple plays, tell you what *can* happen.

Strat-O-Matic was a solitary pursuit for me. I couldn't be bothered playing against friends, who rarely understood when to bring the infield in or who didn't grasp the benefit of having a good bunter batting second in the order. But in 1972, when I was 18, I discovered play-by-mail leagues, two of which I participate in to this day. In these leagues geographically dispersed "general managers" draft their teams player by player. The idea then is to simulate general managership and managership of your franchise. You keep the same players from year to year, except for whatever changes your roster may undergo due to player attrition, trades or the drafting of rookies.

Seasons consist of 162 games, in equal numbers home and away. For road games you must put together a complex set of instructions to be used by the home manager in running your team. My instructions, for example, check in at more than 2,000 words; they tell my opponent-host to do such things as "sacrifice with Jody Reed versus lefthanded pitchers if it is the seventh inning or earlier and I am not losing by three or more runs and there is a lone runner on first with less than two outs, or there are runners on first and second only with no outs." Game results are then exchanged and sent to league reporters and statisticians, who put out periodic newsletters. The culmination, after six months, is a league championship series.

One of my teams, the Tampa Beowulfs, opened its title defense in March in a home series against the up-and-coming Olde York Yankees. In a sentimental move I sent Nolan Ryan to the mound on Opening Day. The Wulfs scored some early runs, and Ryan was cruising. By the end of the sixth inning, I realized that all the Yank base runners had gotten aboard

by walks and an error. Ryan had a no-hitter going. Every superstition possible raced through my mind: Should I not touch Ryan's card? Should I uncross my legs? Play faster? Play slower?

Let me point out here that outsiders should never, ever compare us Strat-O-Matic play-by-mailers with fantasy-league drones, the quiche eaters of baseball gaming fans. They read box scores; we manage baseball teams. And I, for one, would rather have Herve Villachaize recite census data into my ear than listen to some lawyer pontificate about why Gary Varsho was a real bargain at $15.

A good Strat mail league is the Mensa of the baseball game world. A league generally includes folks who have little in common save intelligence and a rare affection for and understanding of the game of baseball. The league I run, TRACBAL, includes a nationally known baseball journalist, a professional storyteller, a Canadian social worker and the executive director of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission.

Strat is an undeniable priority in these persons' lives. To play in a single league requires hundreds of hours of work each year. My wife says that I'm missing major segments of humanhood and that my life would be profoundly enriched if I gave up Strat-O-Matic.

Strat players are frequently misunderstood, tossed thoughtlessly into some geeky social scrap heap of computer nerds and Trekkies. Some very respectable people are hooked by Strat-O-Matic, but many are afraid to go public. "I feel like I should have that blue dot that CNN uses for its trials over my face when I talk about Strat," says Dan Patrick, cohost of ESPN's *SportCenter* and a longtime player. As a kid Patrick had to deal with maternal reproach for his endless hours of dice rolling. " 'But Mom, it's only Strat-O,' I'd say. It's not like I'd come home and have Strat-O on my breath," he says.

Patrick, in fact, plays almost daily with *Baseball Tonight* host Gary Miller. Like so many of us, Miller carries dice with him everywhere he goes, as if they were amulets dredged up from the Fountain of Youth. At critical junctures of his games against Patrick, he hands the dice over to a mechanical monkey for rolling. (I understand this, too. Sometimes during team slumps I would resort to storing my dice in the freezer. Eventually I started playing my games on a computer.)

Baseball broadcasters seem to have a particular affinity for the game. NBC's Bob Costas admits that he and an old childhood buddy still spread the cards out on the floor and play when they get together. Jon Miller, ESPN's lead play-by-play man, remembers that he was stretched out playing Strat in front of his TV when he saw Jack Ruby shoot Lee Harvey Oswald.

Even real ballplayers roll the dice. Cleveland Indian pitcher Denis Boucher was so anxious to get his 1992 cards that he drove the nearly 300 miles from Montreal to Strat-O-Matic company headquarters, in Glen Head, N.Y., to buy them. And former Atlanta Brave pitcher Tony Brizzolara was once accused by a member of his Strat league of intentionally serving gopher balls to the Cubs' Ron Cey and the Astros' Jose Cruz because he had them on his team.

Much has been written about how baseball imitates life. Strat-O-Matic has more to do with how one *wishes* life were.

I refer to a certain predictability in the unpredictability of Strat-O-Matic that would be welcomed in the real world. Before every play you have a rough idea of the chances that a given event will occur. Thus I was fully cognizant of the enormous odds against Ryan's completing that Opening Day no-hitter.

Nevertheless, as he set down the side in order in the seventh and eighth, I recalled another particularly harrowing confrontation with probability. In 1979 I had Cesar Geronimo, the outstanding centerfielder of the Cincinnati Reds, on my team. He played the first 114 games of the season for me without a miscue. Then in a single game he made four errors in the space of 12 plays. According to his Strat fielding rating, I calculated that the chances of this transpiring were something like 1 in 21.98 billion.

That's about as likely as my hitting the state lottery every week this month or Hector Villanueva's being chosen the next Supreme Court justice. Of those three events, I would take the lottery to come through. Still, how many people are fortunate enough to have a 1-in-21.98-billion shot of *anything* happening to them?

I knew that despite his spate of gaffes, at the end of the season Geronimo would most likely have handled 99% of his chances flawlessly, according to his actual ability. If only everything in real life were so predictable.

This seductive symmetry is a big part of the reason why I can't give up Strat-O-Matic. I've tried: I quit one league; I relinquished some administrative duties in another; I've explored other hobbies. I even tried baseball cards again for a while.

Ryan, by the way, got that no-hitter. Afterward I held his Strat-O-Matic card in my hand and stared at it as if I had been allowed to touch the Dead Sea Scrolls and, though I couldn't understand them, had sensed their importance.

It occurred to me that someone, somewhere, probably has my old baseball cards. He probably thinks, mistakenly, that he stole my childhood. ■

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