

The Bonds of history

by **Steve Wulf**

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There are gods who walk among us. **Barry Bonds. Adam Vinatieri. Michael Jordan. Harold Richman.**

You don't know who Harold Richman is? Well, the 75 people lined up outside the cinderblock building across from the Glen Head, Long Island train station last Friday do.

While the rest of the world looked toward Salt Lake City on February 8, 2002, the few, the proud, the Strat-O-Maniacs gathered for a different Opening Ceremonies. Many of them show up same time, every year for the first distribution of the annual Strat-O-Matic baseball cards, all 999 of them, that will take them into the heart of enlightenment.

But this year was special for two reasons: It was the 40th anniversary of the baseball dice game that has wrecked marriages and repaired father-and-son relationships, lowered grade-point averages and raised two generations of **John Foster Nash**-in-al geniuses; and it was the unveiling of the 2001 **Barry Bonds**.

Strat-O-Matic XL didn't have quite the pageantry of Salt Lake City XIX, but when, shortly before official distribution began at 1 p.m., Hal Richman pulled the curtain aside on a gigantic version of the Bonds card, well ... I swear I saw tears rolling down many of the cheeks. "This is the greatest slugging card in history," said Richman. "One home run for every 6.5 at bats."

BARRY BONDS		
		
SAN FRANCISCO		
1	2	3
2-WALK 3-WALK 4-HOMERUN 5-HOMERUN 6-HOMERUN 7-HOMERUN 8-HOMERUN 1-16 DOUBLE 17-20 9-strikeout 10-TRIPLE	leftfield-2 2-flyball (cf)A plus injury 3-groundball (2b)A 4-groundball (2b)A 5-strikeout 6-WALK 7-groundball (2b)B++ 8-flyball (rf)B 9-strikeout	stealing-B running 1-14 2-WALK 3-WALK 4-WALK 5-groundball (1b)B 6-WALK 7-WALK 8-WALK 9-WALK 10-WALK 11-WALK 12-WALK

and a date.

Some people drove in from Louisville for this. Hal's very first customer back in 1962, **Bill Sindelar** -- a gentleman who looked like **Drew Carey's** grandfather -- came all the way from Cleveland for the event. And these opening ceremonies were not without poignancy. **Kenneth J. Marino**, one of the firefighters lost in the World Trade Center attacks, always made the pilgrimage to Glen Head, so his wife, **Katrina**, set up a little shrine to her husband's love of the game, and brought their two adorable toddlers along.

1 DOUBLE 2-20 11-DOUBLE 1-18 flyball (rf)B 19-20 12-lineout (1b) into as many outs as possible	10-flyball (cf)B 11-flyball (rf)B 12-WALK				
2001 BATTING RECORD					
AVG	AB	2B	3B	HR	RBI
.328	476	32	2	73	137
BB	SO	SB	CS	SLG%	ONBASE%
177	93	13	3	.663	.515

It's quite possible you think of these people as geeks. But they don't look like them, and neither does Hal. Dressed in a tweed sports jacket and a Strat-O-Maniac T-shirt, the man who invented the game when he was 11 years old, then sold it out of his parents' basement 10 years later, passed out donuts and regaled us with Strat-O-Tales. One of his favorites was the time some Phillie fans razzed their leftfielder, **Gregg Jefferies**, with his fielding rating: "You're a 5, Jefferies, you're a 5."

"Jefferies was totally confused," said Richman, "The best part was that **Doug Glanville**, the centerfielder and an avid Strat-O-Matic player, couldn't stop laughing. Glanville, by the way, complained to us when we made him a 3 in center. This year, he's a 2."

To this day, I still think of double play balls as Groundball A's and great glove men as 1's. I occasionally time-travel to the late nights in college playing the entire 1970 season with **Soule** and **Brace**, trying to muffle the sound of the dice -- and our shouts -- so as not to wake up the fraternity house. There was the time my girlfriend's cat peed in the box containing my 1974 set. We -- and they -- were never the same. I recall the long train rides to Glen Head in the middle of February to pick up the cards, and the much shorter train rides back.

I haven't made the trip in years, sidetracked by, well, life. When I mentioned this to a woman who was hawking her husband's rating sheet the other day, she asked me why, and I said, "Kids, I guess." And she said, "There are lots of people here with children. The game will help you keep in touch with them."

Hal's own grown son and daughter were there. **Adam**, a filmmaker in Los Angeles, recalled his awakening to the Strat-O sphere. "I had always known it put a roof over our head," he said, "but when I was 10, there was a convention at an Abraham & Straus department store, and when I saw the devotion these people had to my father, my sweet, soft-spoken father, I realized the power of the game." **Sheila Richman**, Harold's wife, remembered the time she got pulled over for speeding, but was let off

when the policeman noticed her Strat-O-Matic address and asked if he could possibly meet Mr. Richman.

Among the Strat-O-Matic faithful have been the aforementioned Drew Carey, **Spike Lee** (the game figures in *Crooklyn*), **Tim Robbins**, **John Denver**, a host of sportscasters and one current President of the United States. There is Strat-O-Matic hockey, pro basketball, pro football and college football, available in game or computer formats, by phone or mail or website.

But it is baseball which got Harold started -- his first set was an All-Star contingent -- and baseball which makes up the bulk of his business and remains his first love. For baseball, there are basic, advanced and super advanced (or **Bobby Valentine**) versions. There is now a card set for every great team in history, every significant season, most Hall of Famers. Want to know how **Walter Johnson** -- Hal's favorite pitcher -- would do against Bonds? Just roll the dice.

You know how it is when you meet an idol and invariably come away disappointed? Well, upon meeting Hal Richman for the first time after all these years, my opinion of him grew. He is warm and funny and still a little amazed at what he created: "A mother once wrote me to tell me Start-O-Matic helped her son regain his memory."

I know the feeling.

One of the prizes the other day was the chance to actually go an inning with Richman. **Mark Bender** of Flushing, N.Y., a 27-year veteran, got to play the '01 Yankees against Hal and the '01 Diamondbacks. After taking a 2-0 lead off Curt Schilling in the first, Bender got up to leave. But not before telling Richman, "Hal, you've brought a lot of joy to a lot of people. Thank you."

"No," said Hal. "Thank you."

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