

# A PASSION TO PLAY ✓

Fans of the baseball board games APBA and Strat-O-Matic will go to great lengths to pursue their hobby

By Bob Herzog

STAFF WRITER

**I**T HAPPENS every winter. Hundreds of baseball board game zealots ignore the weather to congregate at their chosen houses of worship. Strat-O-Matic players line up outside the unassuming brick building by the Long Island Rail Road station in Glen Head. APBA players journey to a larger, gaudier facility in Lancaster, Pa. Their missions: Be the first in their neighborhoods to own the latest player cards depicting the previous season's statistics.

Why such passion? It's only a board game, you say? Oh, ye of little faith in the power of dice and men.

When the winter journeys are over, the fun begins. Even in summer, players hunker down alone or in pairs, over kitchen tables and card tables, in basements and dens, to spend hours playing a version of baseball where the crack of the bat is replaced by the roll of the dice.

Earlier this month, more than 100 people traveled

from as far away as Chicago and Toronto to Lancaster for APBA's 50th anniversary convention and tournament.

"Every year, people plan a trip to what they call 'the Lancaster mecca' to pick up the new baseball cards," said Bill Bordegon, CEO of the older of the two companies, APBA, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this season. "I've never seen such passion and loyalty. It's an unbelievable thing that's been going on for 50 years."

It's been going on nearly that long a couple of hundred miles to the northeast, in Nassau County, where Hal Richman is celebrating his 40th year as president of Strat-O-Matic, the company he founded in 1961.

"Every year in January we have our opening day, and people come from all over the East, some from the Midwest, just to be able to say that they got the cards on the first day. It's amazing," Richman said. "We usually have a two-hour line outside at 1 o'clock, waiting for us to open the doors. One year, we had a blizzard, and we still had a hundred people show up!"

## Batter Up! . . . or, Roll 'em!

**I**T'S ALL in the cards.

Before the dice are rolled (two in APBA, three in Strat-O-Matic), "managers" select their starting lineups and pitchers from among cards that

represent every major-league player. Each card has columns of numbers that correspond to all possible dice rolls and were mathematically computed to produce results similar to those players' actual major-league statistics. Managers can choose from the current players, or match up teams from different eras.

Play is activated in both games by dice. The results of the dice roll are found on the player's card.

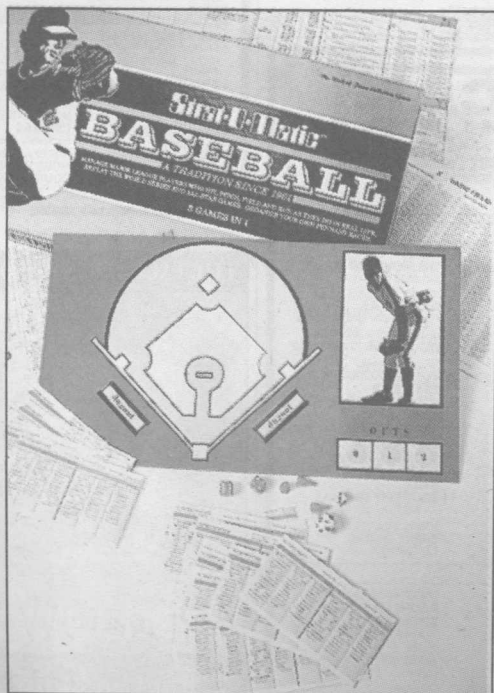
In APBA, pitchers are given letter grades (A through D, with A as the highest) that change certain "hit" numbers into outs.

Strat-O-Matic does not use grades for pitchers, but instead uses a system where dice rolls beginning with 1, 2 or 3 are read off the batter's card, while rolls beginning with 4, 5 or 6 are read off the pitcher's card. For example,

a dice roll of a white one, a red four and a red two is read as "1-6," not "7." In slugger Mike Piazza's case, you look under the "1" column for the number 6 and read the result: home run. A dice roll of a white four, a red three and a red two is read as "4-5." On pitcher Al Leiter's card, that produces a strikeout.

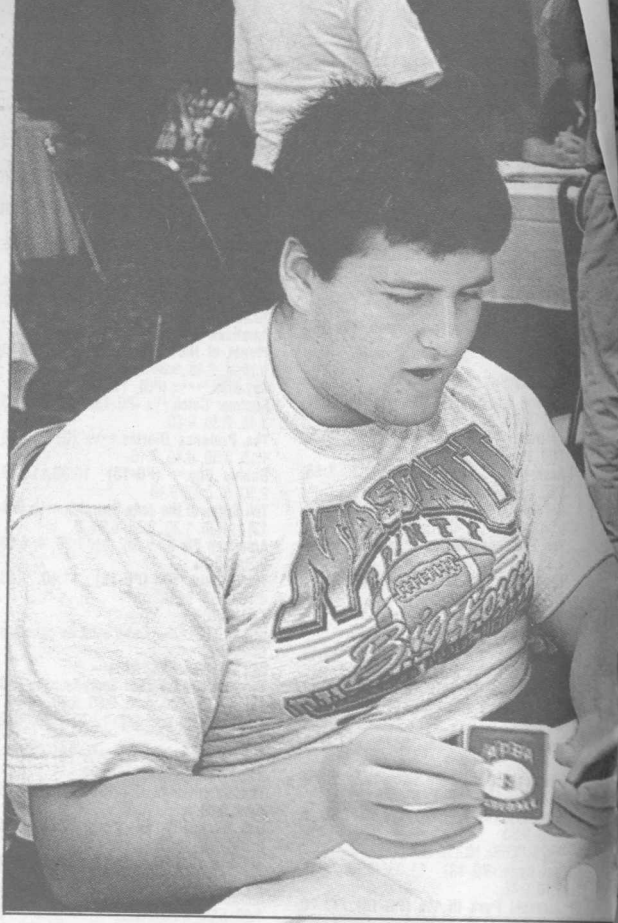
Most of the time, one dice roll produces an instant result in both games. Frequent players can finish a game in less than a half-hour because they are not only familiar with baseball rules and strategy, but also with the APBA and Strat-O-Matic cards and charts.

— Bob Herzog



Newsday Photo / Tony Jerome

Strat-O-Matic uses three dice to determine play.



There were no such lines at first. Both companies had meager beginnings, advertising in baseball publications and selling their games through the mail. Word-of-mouth was the preferred sales strategy. Their fans were loyal to their brand but limited in number. There was no secret handshake, but if you happened to meet another APBA or Strat-O-Matic player, conversation turned quickly to numbers and ratings that, to outsiders, sounded like a code.

Today, both companies still do a brisk mail-order business but have expanded to popular Web sites and select retail chains (such as Wizards of the Coast and BC Sports Collectibles). There are thousands of organized leagues around the country, regular independent publications (APBA Journal and Strat Fan) that feature articles about the games and their players and annual conventions and tournaments.

Strat-O-Matic has a low-key advertising approach, while Bordegon has linked up APBA with the corporate world and is planning a big-money advertising campaign. Both companies commemorated their anniversary seasons in 2001 with colorful special-edition sets; Strat-O-Matic offered an old-timers card collection, while APBA redesigned its current cards and charts.

Both companies produce popular computer versions of their baseball games and also offer basketball, hockey and football games. Both company presidents say their future successes are tied to computer and Internet play, but acknowledge their No. 1 product remains the statistically accurate, easy-to-play dice-and-cards baseball game.

"We dominated in the early years. Others came and went, and we dominate now," Richman said. "In terms of sports games, we are 'the classics' — like Monopoly, Scrabble and Clue."

Gaming industry experts estimate that more than a million games have been sold between the two companies over the past half-century, with Strat-O-Matic passing APBA in sales in the early 1980s. Demographically, both companies say it's a male-dominated hobby; only about 5 percent of their players are female. They are trying to attract younger players, but the median age for gamers is 35 to 45.

While APBA (pronounced app-bah) and Strat-O-Matic are the Ford and General Motors of the sports board game industry, their rivalry is friendly. Each praises and respects the other's products. Richman credits APBA founder and inventor Richard Seitz, who died in 1992, with "giving rise to this industry." It is an industry that flourishes for three main reasons:

- **Fantasy.** The games tap into a sports fan's desire to own and manage a team and try to do a better job than the teams they root for.



AP Photos for Newsday

**Platon Elias, right, got his 17-year-old son, Bobby, hooked on APBA baseball. Platon plays the 1957 Brooklyn Dodgers; Bobby prefers the 1997 Dodgers from L.A.**

- **Realism.** Both games are built around cleverly conceived cards representing each big-league player that, combined with a dice roll and game charts, produce results statistically similar to their actual performances.

- **Ease of play.** If you are a knowledgeable baseball fan, you can complete a game in less than a half-hour. APBA-philes and Strat-o-maniacs often memorize the cards and charts and can play games in 10 to 15 minutes.

"The thing about cards is that you can hold them, draft them or trade them," Richman said. "Then there is the excitement and spontaneity of getting the result of a play off a dice roll. No computer game can give you that."

APBA and Strat-O-Matic players also are fanatics when it comes to record-keeping. "You've got to have a love for baseball and a love for statistics," Richman said.

There is no better example of that marriage than Bob Rosen. He has been an APBA player since 1955 and is a veteran staff member of the Elias Sports Bureau, the company that provides the official statistics for Major League Baseball. "Keeping stats is a big part of the enjoyment of playing APBA," Rosen said in the press box of Yankee Stadium before a recent game. "Never mind which team wins or loses, just give me those good statistics."

His APBA partner for more than 40 years was Rocky Avakian, a friend since elementary school. They played regularly until Avakian died four years ago. They were co-workers at Elias, and in their spare time, they used the APBA game to replay entire seasons from 1955 through 1966. Rosen would play the National League teams, solitaire style, while Avakian played the American League. They would meet at least once a week at each other's homes to play head to head. "We'd play 12 games a night, six for each league. It would take about four to five hours," Rosen said.

When Avakian died, Rosen kept all of his friend's APBA cards and records. They kept meticulous statistics, as befit their profession. "We compiled statis-

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# Nearly Four Decades Later, It's Still a Thrill

By Bob Herzog

STAFF WRITER

**I** WAS 12 YEARS OLD when I first saw an advertisement for the APBA baseball game in a magazine. "You Are the Manager" blared the headline. For a serious Yankees fan who had outgrown most kids' games by then, the thought of being able to manage Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Yogi Berra and Whitey Ford was intoxicating.

I asked my father, the most generous man I know, if he would buy me the game, which sold for \$10.75 in 1962; Monopoly cost around \$3 back then. "It's awfully expensive, Bobby," my dad said. "Can we go to the store and look at it first?"

When I explained that it was strictly a mail-order game, my father, the most practical man I know, said, "I don't think it's worth that kind of money, especially when we can't even try it out." Reluctantly, I gave up any thoughts of managing the Yankees.

A year later, I had my first job, delivering Newsday. I made roughly \$7 a week. About a month into the job, my dad came home from work one day and said, "Hey Bobby, remember that baseball game you wanted to buy last year? Well, if you want to spend your *own* money on it, you have my permission." Thanks, Dad!

I ordered the game, waited impatiently for 10 days for the brown UPS truck to show up, then came home from

school one day and saw that the box had finally arrived.

I was the fastest paper boy in Dix Hills that day. After completing my route, I immediately played a solitaire series between the 1962 World Series opponents, the Yankees and the Giants. The Yankees won, just as they had in real life.

Nearly 40 years later, I experienced similar emotions when I purchased (this time for \$50), the APBA 2001 baseball game from a retail store, featuring cards based on the 2000 season. This time I didn't have to wait 10 days. I struggled to observe the speed limit while driving home from the mall. Then, naturally, I

played my own Subway Series.

I selected the batting order and starting pitchers and rolled the dice for each team. Despite my Yankees allegiance, I managed both teams honestly and made the strategic moves I thought managers Joe Torre and Bobby Valentine would make.

But unlike my 1962 experience, this time art did not imitate life. Stunningly, the Mets swept the Yankees in four games. All were close and well-pitched, as was the case in the real Subway Series, which the Yankees won in five games. But in my series, as I watched with amazement (and, admittedly, a touch of horror), it was the Mets who delivered the big hits.

One measly Yankees victory would've been nice, but rolling the dice, keeping a scorecard and actually managing "my Yankees" was great fun, just as it was when I was 13. As for the outcome, all I can say is "Wait 'til next week!" ■



Newsday Photo / Tony Jerome

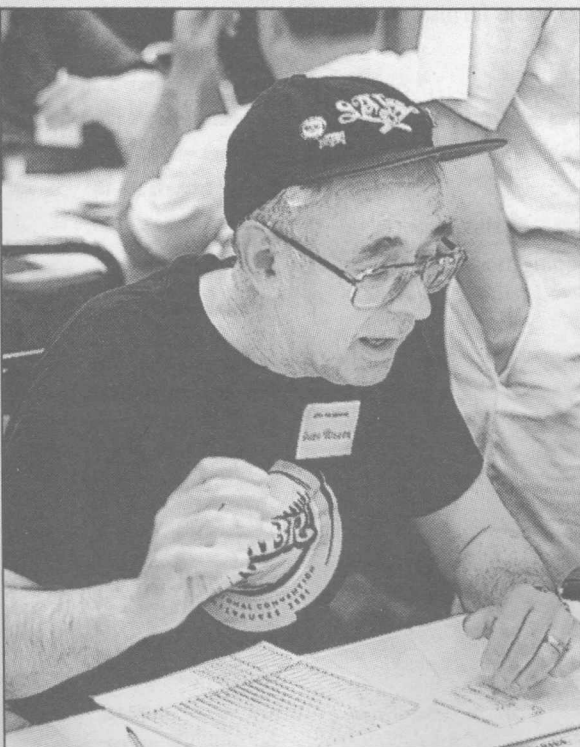
**APBA's board game remains a favorite pastime among baseball buffs.**

tics and league leaders. I wrote press releases every Sunday," Rosen said. "The realism and statistical accuracy of the players' cards is a big part of its appeal."

Rosen admits he misses his old friend terribly. "I think about him a lot when I'm playing APBA. I'll roll the dice, someone gets a big hit, and I'll want to call him, just like in the old days, and say, 'Guess what just happened, Rock?'"

Wherever you turn in the sports world, someone is eager to share an APBA or Strat-O-Matic anecdote. "You know you've really made it as a ballplayer when you see a Strat-O-Matic card of yourself!" laughed Yankees broadcaster Ken Singleton, a 15-year major-league veteran. "It's definitely a kick to see yourself on a card, especially when you played the game as a kid."

Singleton played a memorable game of Strat-O-Matic as an adult two years ago during a two-hour rain delay of a Yankees game in Cleveland. Madison Square Garden Network's Bill Daughtry, a serious Strat-O-Matic player whose photo hangs in the company's headquarters, had brought along the computer version and suggested that Jim Kaat, a former APBA player, manage his 1965 Twins against Singleton's 1979 Orioles in a game played on Daughtry's laptop. "I hit a home run off Kitty," Singleton said of Kaat, "but his team won. It was a lot of fun. We an-



**APBA-phile Owen Ricker reacts to a roll in a quarterfinal game at a recent convention in Lancaster, Pa.**

nounced the results on the air after the rain delay."

Mets broadcaster Howie Rose, of Fox Sports New York, volunteered this example of Strat-o-mania. "One of my best friends, Robert Joseph, introduced me to Strat-O-Matic in the summer of 1966. I was infatuated by the game," Rose recalled before a recent game at Shea Stadium. "I must've played it 24 hours a day that summer. I kept every statistic conceivable. But my friend took his passion for the game to an extreme."

It seems Joseph liked to designate different areas of his family's two-bedroom apartment in Bayside, Queens, as "home fields" while he played Strat-O-Matic solitaire. "This was a tiny apartment. He drove his family nuts," Rose said. "When he was playing a game involving the Yankees, he used the living room because that was the biggest room in the apartment and symbolized Yankee Stadium. When he was playing with the Houston Astros, he played *under* the kitchen table. Why? Because it was like playing under a roof!" In 1966, Houston played in baseball's only enclosed stadium, the Astrodome.

Rose suggested his friend's odd actions provided a bit of foreshadowing. "He's Dr. Robert Joseph today, a Manhattan clinical psychologist."

Joseph would have a field day compiling psychological profiles of Strat-O-Matic and APBA enthusiasts. Richman related this favorite:

A dapper gentleman with a Canadian accent showed up at the Strat-O-Matic building in a cab. Richman asked, "What are you doing here? Are you visiting New York?"

The man replied, "No, I'm not. I'm here to buy a set of cards for my grandson."

"Really, you flew in from Montreal and you took a cab from LaGuardia just to pick up a set of \$9 cards?" an incredulous Richman asked. "Why didn't you just have us mail them to you?"

"It takes too long between the U.S. mail and the Canadian mail systems," the gentleman said.

Such dedication and passion has reached into all walks of life. Bordegon has instituted a popular program of APBA "coaches" — professionals in a variety of occupations plus retirees who volunteer to demonstrate the game at stores, such as Wizards of the Coast, and teach it to customers. He also is working on incorporating APBA into schools as an educational tool for math.

One lawyer from Manhasset incorporated APBA into the college search for his son. Platon Elias and his 17-year-old son, Bobby, visited nine colleges in early August sandwiched around their participation in APBA's 50th anniversary tournament and convention in Lancaster.

In the tournament, the father played the 1957 Brooklyn Dodgers and made it into the second round; the son used the 1997 Dodgers and was eliminated in the first round. "My son got into APBA through me. I taught him the game and we still play against each other," Elias said.

A teacher from Ohio used Strat-O-Matic to explain probability to his 11-year-olds in an after-school program that involved more than 100 kids in playing the game, including many girls. "The girls did very well, and the boys were aggravated by that," Richman said.

Strat-O-Matic has even reached into popular culture. Spike Lee was a passionate player, and his movie "Crooklyn" opens with a scene of kids playing Strat-O-Matic on the stoop. "They showed the game about six or seven times in the movie," Richman said.

From the silver screen to the White House, there is no former APBA player with a higher profile than President George W. Bush. At a private party for family members before his inauguration in January, Bush was presented with a special-edition APBA set by his cousin, Hap Ellis, who contacted Bordegon before the party and told him that Bush, his brothers and cousins "played the game endlessly as kids."

A unique feature of the commemorative set given to Bush was his own APBA card, based on statistics from his freshman year as a pitcher at Yale. APBA uses a grading system for its pitchers, and Bush was given a "D" — the lowest grade possible.

He is said to have enjoyed the joke. ■