

Oh, the Stories They'll Tell about the 2013 Opening Day

(All photos – except the last one – by Adam Rosen)

By Glenn Guzzo and Adam Rosen

Given the well-documented passion of Strat-O-Matic baseball fans and the magnetizing influence of the company's annual Opening Day, it won't amaze those in the gaming community that about 100 die-hards defied blizzard conditions and stay-home warnings to show up in person at company offices in Glen Head, NY, on Friday, Feb. 8.

The shocker may be that some did *not* make it through to collect their pre-ordered treasures – cards of Triple Crown winner Miguel Cabrera, rookie extraordinaire Mike Trout, revolutionary knuckleballer R.A. Dickey and nearly 2,000 other Major Leaguers who performed in the better weather months of 2012, 1961 and 1938.

After all, resourceful Strat-O-Matic fanatics were not to be denied their adventures from Canada, New England, the Midwest and the mid-Atlantic despite forecasts of several feet of snow, both on Long Island and in their return paths home.

John Hughes and John Kostyo, best friends for more than 35 years, made the eight-hour drive from Cleveland on Thursday rather than Friday in order to make it to their third straight Opening Day. They had company: **Kostyo's son Jeremy**, one of those Trout fishers who just had to reel in the rookie card as soon as possible.



JOHN HUGHES, JEREMY KOSTYO, JOHN KOSTYO

Peter Iezzi and Steve Dufresne made their seven-hour drive from Montreal on Thursday. They avoided the danger on the way out, too, by spending the weekend in Manhattan. Both are charter members of a 23-year draft league, but while this was Dufresne's 25th Opening Day, it was Iezzi's first. Like so many SOM-fueled friendships, this pair met through their league. Perhaps Iezzi made the trip to pick up some tips from the master – Dufresne has won 13 of the 23 championships. This time he will try to do it with Trout. It seems that Dufresne grabs for the ring without fear; to get Trout from Peter, Steve traded Matt Cain, David Ortiz, David Wright and Shin-Soo Choo.

Such success suggests Dufresne has experience staying hot, Strat-O-Matically. Proof: One year he placed his entire struggling team in the microwave “to heat them up.” After that, they were *en fuego* – especially the one card that literally went up in flames.



PETER IEZZI, STEVE DUFRESNE

Perhaps this year's adventurers were undeterred because, as **John Bark** posted online at the Strat Fan Forum, they saw opportunity, not adversity. “Blizzards were made for Strat-O-Matic ... keeps you inside all day to roll game after game!”

Most of the gamers in a line that began before 6 a.m. – hearty souls prepared to wait up to seven hours in blustery, biting cold – were embolden by their solemn responsibilities to the Strat-

O-Matic world. Many were retrieving cards for league members who used their jobs and families as excuses not to attend Opening Day. Other early responders had been designated by online acquaintances to report from the scene. Pictures, weather reports, Richman sightings, play-by-play descriptions of the activity, even the brownie-battered donuts and coffee served by appreciative and sympathetic SOM staff – no details were too small for those in the far-flung regions of Strat-O-Matic’s virtual world.

Strat-O-Matic Marketing Director **Adam Rosen** fed the frenzy with a tantalizing photo posted on SOM’s Facebook page the afternoon before Opening Day. It showed pre-packaged pickup orders, with clearly visible gamers’ names on them, sitting on an office floor, with the tease, “Recognize your Opening Day pickup number?” Based on the online response, the golden-yellow packages might have been the stacks of gold in King Midas’ fortress.

There is no other day of the year when anyone beats SOM’s **Steve Barkan** to the office. But on this Opening Day, **Marty Bender** was first, at 5:45 a.m. A 25-year veteran of Opening Days, Bender lives only 30 minutes from this gaming Mecca, but for the honor of being No. 1, he was willing to wait longer than anyone in freezing weather (the town’s high was 34 degrees at 8:25 a.m. – it was all downhill after that).



MARTY BENDER

Larry LaRochelle and Todd Underwood were earlier birds, too, completing their six-hour, 375-mile trek from Bath, Maine, by 6 a.m. The pair, who share two online leagues (and play in others separately), achieved their fifth straight Opening Day. This one had a new twist for LaRochelle.

LaRochelle used to umpire many of current Milwaukee pitcher Mark Rogers' high-school games, including his last, just prior to being the fifth overall pick of the 2004 draft. So LaRochelle had unusual interest in the card of a seven-start right-hander with a 3.92 ERA. (Spoiler for other Rogers fans: He's strong vs. righties, but wild and gopher-ball prone vs. lefties).



LARRY LAROCHELLE, TODD UNDERWOOD

During the wait, SOM staff made repeated coffee runs to the frigid fanatics. Boxes of donuts were devoured at intervals. SOM's display window showcased the previously unseen 2013 T-Shirt – a blue, ringer tee that displays the right-handed overhand pitcher who appeared in SOM's early print ads. All the SOM staff wore them as the Opening Day uniform. That power pitcher is also the star of a new 6-foot-by-6-foot banner that will remain outside the Strat-O-Matic building all year after its unveiling on Opening Day.

The determined fans' tactics paid off big time when Strat-O-Matic President **Hal Richman** decided to unlock SOM's doors at 10 a.m., two hours before the sky began dropping 10 inches of snow in Glen Head and more than 30 inches elsewhere in the region. That shortened the line's wait by three hours before the traditional 1 p.m. pitching hour.

"Thank you for opening up early," **Jim Labruno** posted on the Strat Fan Forum. "Made the trip with my buddy Eddie from the Jersey Shore. Got there at 10:15 they were already giving out cards. Was back in the car by 10:25 and after a stop for food back home at 1:45. Great job letting everyone in and out to avoid the incoming monster storm!"

The early opening meant a shorter line at 10 a.m. than SOM usually has by 1 p.m. Therefore, Richman, Rosen and others at SOM could enjoy a more relaxed conversation with customers.

Rich Weinberg of Nazareth, PA, arrived solo for his 12th Opening Day. He confided that when he plays in his two online leagues he has to "lock the kids out of the room."



RICH WEINBERG

The day's odd couple, in Strat-O-Matic context, might have been **J.C. Plante**, making his 13th Opening Day, and friend **Aaron Leeke**, who also traveled from Toronto even though he has never played the game. Sometimes Strat-O-Matic baseball is described as an addiction. Perhaps Leeke is Plante's sober companion.



AARON LEEKE, J.C. PLANTE

A trio from Ashburnham, MA could tell Leeke it's never too late to pick up the habit. **Tyler Noseworthy**, 22, **Dan Boucha**, 23 and **Cody Brown**, 23, have been close friends since preschool but didn't start playing Strat-O-Matic until they saw it mentioned on ESPN Fantasy boards last year. Their 75 games with last year's cards continued to the night before SOM's Opening Day, when Josh Reddick hit a walk-off home run for Oakland to beat Seattle and closer Tom Wilhelmsen.



TYLER NOSEWORTHY, DAN BOUCHA, CODY BROWN

Devoted Strat head **Larry Fryer** and league-mate **Mark Gratkowski** began their trip in Baltimore, collected league members **Jim and Tom Beltz** in Hamburg, PA and the foursome arrived bearing a gift – the amazingly detailed ECBA League Yearbook. Fryer spent more than 40 hours compiling the stats, game summaries, analyses, photos and more for the 12-team, nationwide play-by-mail league that will be celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.



LARRY FRYER, TOM BELTZ, JIM BELTZ, MARK GRATKOWSKI

Some gamers had close calls.

Ben Leong, a successful manager in STAR Tournaments, arrived from Maryland at 1:42 p.m. – 10 minutes before his return train was due to arrive at the station across the street from SOM. SOM's early opening meant there was no line when Leong showed up. He escaped just in time.

Kevin Thomas had an excused absence for missing his first Opening Day since 2005. His Friday flight from Chicago was canceled. But the man entrusted to transport the cards for the league that includes Baseball Info Solutions CEO John Dewan threw a change-up. He flew in Monday with an empty suitcase and returned the same day with a jam-packed bag carrying seven overstuffed gold-yellow packages.



KEVIN THOMAS

About the only Opening Day glitch in Glen Head was when the Dunkin' Donuts delivery of seven dozen donuts had the unexcused absence of the brownie-battered variety. **Richman's son Adam**, would not stand for it. But at that hour, SOM had to rely on gamers **Bill Daughtry** (the emcee at SOM's 50th anniversary convention) and **Steve Napoli** to record the season's first save with an unscheduled stop at the store. Adam Richman's instincts were unerring. The specialty cakes hit a home run with the crowd.



STEVE NAPOLI, HAL RICHMAN, BILL DAUGHTRY, STEVE BARKAN

The last in-person customer showed up at about 4 p.m., but the SOM phones rang off the hook till closing time.

Shortly thereafter, the worldwide Strat-O-Matic community sighed in relief, and then enjoyed a collective chuckle over weather disasters imagined and averted, captured cleverly by this photo illustration posted on the Strat Fan Forum by **Smokey Joe**:



The last word, for the moment, belonged to Rosen, who posted: “It is loyal customers like you that have allowed Strat to thrive for so many years. Have a great weekend and enjoy the new cards!”



Strat-O-Matic's HAL RICHMAN, LEN SCHWARTZ, ADAM RICHMAN



Strat-O-Matic's HAL RICHMAN, ADAM ROSEN, ADAM RICHMAN



Strat-O-Matic Founder HAL RICHMAN at the end of Opening Day 2013.