

Sports Illustrated 1968

Strat-O-Matic makes every player—boy or man—a big-league baseball manager

Sometime next December a computer at the Key Tabulating Service on Sixth Avenue in New York City will start digesting the 1966 batting averages and other records of the 20 major league teams, and by March 1967, or just about the time the players are warming up for a new season, groups of hard-core baseball fanatics all over the country may order their new editions of an indoor baseball game called Strat-O-Matic.

"Your game has all the variety of the real thing," wrote a college professor from upstate New York. From a mother in Canada came a letter filled with baffled wonder: "I have five sons. Each time a new team has been added, the mailman has enjoyed a popularity and concern the likes of which I have never seen." The letters make pleasant reading for Hal Richman, young inventor of Strat-O-Matic. He has been inventing baseball games since the age of 11. He is now 30 and president of his own small business, the Strat-O-Matic Game Co. in Great Neck, N.Y. By next year he hopes to have a football game ready, then basketball—but baseball has been and always will be his first love.

The principle of the game, which can be played alone or with opponents, is simple. The person playing becomes manager of a major league team. Winning or losing is based as much on the player-manager's decisions as it is on the throw of the dice. Should he sacrifice? Put in a pinch hitter? Let his man attempt a steal? "For a game to be successful, it's got to depend on something more than throwing dice," says Richman. "It's got to be complicated enough to be challenging."

Since Strat-O-Matic first became available in 1961, new challenges have been added to test a player's skill. When letters poured in asking Richman to do something with fielding abilities he added that component to the game. He is determined, though, not to over-complicate Strat-O-Matic. He wants to keep it flexible enough so that it will not be too difficult for his younger fans. The boy who wrote wistfully, "Please have a heart and take pity when you make next year's Yankee team, especially take pity on Mickey Mantle!" will be glad to know that Mickey won't have to be benched so often with injuries in next year's games, since he did better in 1966. This will be reflected by the computer at the Key Tabulating Service that guarantees statistical accuracy. "Inventing the game was largely a matter of figuring probabilities," says Richman. "Dice, you know, are a universe, with a predictable number of probabilities. Ballplayers are also a universe, though their predictability is harder

to determine." Pleased by his own understatement, he added, "I have it from a reliable source that some of the Yankees play my game, though they won't admit it, and this year they were unhappy because even playing ball with Strat-O-Matic they had a horrible season."

Richman's most enthusiastic customers are teen-agers. "Adults tend to be secretive about playing—they think they're too old for games, I guess—but kids play openly with great enthusiasm." Enthusiasm reached curious proportions in Valley Stream, N.Y. about three years ago when a 13-year-old boy named Larry King got other boys in the neighborhood so involved in Strat-O-Matic that they ordered their own sets and wound up playing a full schedule of 162 games. "It was quite a summer," says Larry's mother. "The boys were broadcasting their plays to each other by walkie-talkie." One boy in the league, completely carried away, insisted on playing a record of the National Anthem before each day's play began. "He even turned on radio commercials," says Mike Spiselman, a friend of Larry's, "for the sake of realism." Larry and Mike are 16 now and still play frequently, though they are getting interested in things other than baseball. Like girls. Strat-Leagues, or S-O-M Leagues, as they are sometimes called, have also been formed in other communities. There is a league in Elmhurst, Ill. that has young managers ranging in age from 10 to 20. Not long ago Richman received a long-distance call from a father who said since Strat-O-Matic had entered his home there were so many boys "jumping over the fence into his living room" that he was considering sending Richman his food bill (hot dogs are not supplied with the game). Richman enjoys direct contact with Strat players, but he has a little nonplussed recently to meet three 12-year-olds who had pedaled their bicycles 10 miles to buy a deluxe set. "They started to play in the corridor outside my office, then moved their game right out on the sidewalk." Traveling long distances by bicycle isn't necessary, since Strat-O-Matic guarantees 48-hour shipment, a fact no doubt appreciated by the Omaha youngster who wrote quaintly, "Please rush my order as fast as possible, as I am nearing end of another exciting season in my bedroom."

Strat-O-Matic, available by mail only, comes in three different sets: The Deluxe, which includes all 20 major league teams (\$10); the Gift Special, an assortment of the five top teams (\$4.25); and the Selector Set (choose your own five teams for \$4.50, with 50¢ for each additional team selected). Older sets are also available, price depending on quantity. For full brochure and other details write Strat-O-Matic Game Co., Inc., Box 541, Great Neck, N.Y. 11020.