

Hey, Get Your Dream Team Here!

THE modest, unassuming one-story building sits on the east side of the railroad station in Glen Head. The simple block lettering on the outside—RAT-O-MATIC GAME COMPANY—gives little clue to the activity inside. But to those who have become "Strat-O-Matic Fanatics" (the slogan on the T-shirts the company sells), the building is definitely on the right side of the tracks.

Strat-O-Matic is the embodiment of a dream by its creator and president, Harold Richman of Great Neck. Richman, 43, is justifiably proud of his company. He built it, literally, from the ground up. Like many inventions, it got its humble beginnings in a basement.

But before it ever got off the ground, the idea was germinating in the head of an 11-year-old Yankee fan, devoted to his team that "I couldn't even read the papers if they had lost the day before."

That was in 1947. In 1952, a friend of Richman's introduced him to APBA baseball, which had hit the market in 1950. Richman enjoyed the game and read several others, but always the thought lingered. "I felt I could do better," Richman said.

He clung to that belief even after graduating from Cornell in 1958 with a business degree. Richman's father had an insurance business in New York City and wanted his son to join. "I knew I was guaranteed success, but I just didn't want to sell insurance," Richman said.

He went to work for several toy companies, always being one of the executives would be receptive to his ideas for a tabletop baseball game. But he was young, and his ideas went unheeded. So Richman devised the game anyway, played it constantly during the summer of 1959 to perfect it, and continued to try to market it through an established company. Without success.

Finally, in 1961, with cards of 80 all-stars from the previous season, Richman decided to market the game on his own. "I ran a Dun and Bradstreet report on APBA and it revealed a company making a profit and a market to be tapped. So, with a ping-pong table and a typewriter in my dad's basement, I went to work."

Again, without success. Richman lost nearly all of his \$2,500 initial investment, selling just 350 of the 1000 games he had printed. Reacting to some criticism from those who had purchased his game (derived from a non-existent word, *strategicamatical*), Richman altered his format somewhat and in 1962 came out with a set including the top two teams from each league plus some all-stars. He was still losing money

in 1963 when he made a fateful pact with his father. "I needed more advertising and wanted to print all 16 teams, so I asked my dad for a \$5,000 loan," Richman recalled. "He agreed, with the provision that if I failed, I would join his insurance business."

Facing such an ultimatum, Richman was naturally distraught when sales slipped in April and May and he expected the worse.

"Then, to my surprise and gratification, the orders started pouring in in June," Richman said, smiling at the memory. "For 30 days in June and July I worked from 7 AM to 11 PM. It was an amazing stretch. I did everything—made up orders, packaged, mailed, collated cards—everything. In 1963, I did make some money and I was exhilarated."

By 1965, his father issued another ultimatum, a pleasant one this time. "He told me the operation was getting too big, and I had to leave his house." A three-room setup in a Port Washington office building followed and then, in 1969, the operation moved to Glen Head.

Today, Strat-O-Matic has five products—baseball, pro football, college football, basketball and its newest game, hockey. It is a flourishing enterprise. Richman now has several fulltimers on his staff and the workload is shared. However, he is anything but a complacent company president. "I'm involved primarily in the creating of new products and the updating of baseball, football and basketball cards. Working on new products, for me, is the greatest part of the business. It's my baby, and I like to do the work on new games myself."

"I'm quite proud of our hockey game [now in its second year]. It's done well, especially on Long Island where it sells the most. Philadelphia and New England are next best for hockey. Overall, baseball is far and away our best seller. It is the easiest to adapt, statistically, to a board game. Pro football is second for us."

Where does Strat-O-Matic rank in the industry? That depends on whether you talk to Richman, or APBA president Richard Seitz. Each maintains that his company is No. 1, though neither will release figures pertaining to sales or profit.

Richman bases his claim on the number of sales, pointing out that 15 per cent of his sales are made through the retail market, while APBA does only a small retail business. (Strat-O-Matic is sold locally at several stores, including Herman's, Kay-Bee Toy and Hobby Shops and Brentano's.) Richman allows his customers the choice of buying any number of teams with



Entrepreneur Harold Richman shows

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each game, while Seitz only sells

Seitz acknowledges that Strat-O-Matic sells more games, but it doesn't turn out that I'm positive I make more money. I'm out advertising because of reorder toppers."

Richman admits it's possible that he makes more money. "The question," he says, "is the volume of Strat-O-Matic is enough to make a greater profit per sale of APBA. I don't know, but I am sure we sell more."

This is not a bitter rivalry. In fact, Seitz with opening up the industry's contribution is that his APBA breathed life into the gaming industry. "He won over a segment of the type of activity. It's possible that we have developed if it wasn't for APBA."