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**OUR TOWNS**/Evelyn Nieves

# Baseball Game for Those Who Love Player Stats

GLEN HEAD, L.I.

**B**ASEBALL season began again last week for Hal Richman and his legions of fans. On Opening Day, the faithful cut work, sat on planes, fought the ice (a slugfest) and waited in line for hours outside a cinderblock building to meet the season head-on. It was madness. It always is.

Strat-O-Matic turns hundreds of baseball fans into cultists and even Hal Richman can't fully explain it, 33 years after his board game took off. He simply accepts that every January, they will come. ("It's part of the happening.") "Fans" (never customers) trek to Strat-O-Matic's headquarters, just across the road from the Glen Head train station, happy to take a number. They leave clutching the latest pack of player statistics cards, ready to indulge their obsession.

It's baseball for those who never made the team, those too scared to try and those never given the chance. It's for baseball poet-nerds, baseball stats junkies and even baseball players. (Bobby Bonilla, for one; his order went out the other day.)

In part, the game is a nostalgia trip. Trend watchers say aging boomers (usually males) are snapping up the toys of their youth: Matchbox cars, Lionel trains. Strat-O-Matic fits right in. Even its name is square, a throwback to the days of this-o-matic and that-o-matic kitchen gadgets that could slice and dice and yes, Norton, core an apple.

There is more to it, though. The game renews itself each year, much like the real thing. Mr. Richman's gift is analyzing the statistics of every major league ballplayer for the previous season, rating them, and recording them on 3-inch-by-5-inch cards. Strat-O-Matic players roll three dice, which direct them to a hitter or pitcher and to a particular performance variable on the card. The game comes so close to the way actual players play that it has become the stuff of dreams and Strat-O-Matic tournaments around the country.

The clamor for the current cards, at \$31.75 a set, is such that Strat-O-Matic has unhooked its 800-number for the rest of the month. Half the calls, Mr. Richman said, are from fans asking when they can expect their orders. By Friday, with the phones still ringing off the hook, the message on the company answering machine pleaded for patience:

"As of Friday, Jan. 21, all orders received as of Jan. 11 have been shipped out. We anticipate shipping the balance of the orders that were made by phone by Monday. Please allow one to four weeks for delivery if you did not specify U.P.S. or priority mail."

The world's most successful baseball board game is made by a very small company, Mr. Richman said. Just seven employees, including a full-time programmer for the computer game. "The first two weeks of the season, we're all in the warehouse filling orders," he said. "Fans do save themselves time on the mail when they come here because we ship on a first-come, first-serve basis."

By now, fans know his legend: how he thought up the game when he was 11, refined it a decade later and began pitching it with a \$400 advertisement in Sports Illustrated, taking mail orders from the basement of his parents' house in Great Neck.

Profiles of the man, now 57, and his game always marvel at his market share, his niche, the built-in demand the annual card sets create. But no one knows his own stats. He keeps the figures, from how many games are sold to how much the company makes, a closely guarded secret "for competitive reasons."

And fulfilling his childhood dream is hard work: three months of 80-hour weeks spent poring over stats and interpreting them for two versions of the game — one with more variables than the other.

He is an unlikely hero, soft-spoken, shy. "The most modest man in the world," his wife, Sheila, says.

After 26 years of marriage (and two children), Mrs. Richman still gushes over the attention her husband's game receives.

"The fan mail," Mrs. Richman said, from their home in Port Washington. "Oh, it's unbelievable. Stacks and stacks." She remembers turning sales clerks into star-struck, stuttering autograph seekers just by using a credit card issued to Strat-O-Matic. "The few times I've used it, it's been fun," she said.

Other Strat-O-Matics draw other fans: basketball, football, hockey. But the purists, with diamonds in their eyes, see only one game.

"I've said time and again the game has a living, breathing life of its own," Mr. Richman said.

It's true. He has nothing to do with the Strat-O-Matic tournaments organized each year, or an Off-Broadway play, "All for One," that centered around a male-bonding reunion of Strat-O-Matic players. It wasn't his idea to run a Strat-O-Matic All-Star game during the 1981 strike. ("We appreciated it," he said.)

Then, of course, there is Opening Day. He still seems surprised at the phenomenon. Fans come from up and down the East Coast, as far away as Canada, as well as parts west. "There is nothing like it in gamedom," he said, with the awe of a man whose greatness was thrust upon him.