

# Strat-O-Matic started the computer age

Fantasy baseball isn't really the new craze a lot of rotisserie players think it is. Seems like my brother and I used to do our own version of fantasy ball using stuffed animals for players. Brown Bear, I believe, was Juan Gonzalez 15 years before Gonzalez was born.

There also were board games of fantasy sports in my youth, games in which you spun the dial or flipped over cards or guessed where a magnetic "ball" on a metal screen was and tried to plunk the right part of the screen with a plastic "bat."



## Fantasy Leagues

Ed Spaulding

And there's Strat-O-Matic. This probably is the game that took fantasy baseball into the computer age. In the early 1960s, when Strat was born, the idea of home computers and baseball boxscores with instant ERAs was pure

fiction.

Strat-O-Matic, for those who haven't been introduced to it, is a board game. The fuel that makes it run is a set of game cards that contain last year's player statistics. The cards come out each January (cost is about \$32) and are as hot as a winning lottery ticket.

Just as in rotisserie, Strat owners draft teams. They play league games all season within a league, make trades and try to outthink last year's

winner or this year's new owner — the one who has bragged for years about what he would do once he got a team.

Hal Richman created the game 30-some years ago. Estimates place his yearly sales of player cards at 200,000 or 300,000.

"They begin to call us in December and we start taking orders Dec. 10," Richman says of the new sets of cards. "The phone rings off the hook. We take their order and give them a number."

The beauty of Strat-O-Matic is that it provides the head-to-head play missing from rotisserie-style games. It's the perfect rainy day game, best played during the winter or spring training seasons. Once the real season is under way, Strat becomes semi-obsolete. This year's hotshot rookie is not in this year's Strat game because he has no statistical line from 1993. The farther the real season progresses, the farther from reality this year's Strat-O-Matic game becomes.

Not that that takes much away from the excitement, or the strategy, or the bragging.

**It keeps growing and growing** — How far has rotisserie baseball come? Consider this: In the early years of the game, most leagues did statistics from The Sporting News (which meant statistics were a week to 10 days late getting out) or from USA Today.

Now, few leagues do the long-hand figuring of a decade past. Statistics services have taken over that end of the game, giving fantasy players more time to devise strategy and analyze statistics.

Less than 15 years after its creation, fantasy baseball has an estimated 4 million player/own-

ers and has become a \$500 million industry.

Over the years, fantasy players constantly have tried to stay a jump ahead of their competitors. First there was USA Today, then ESPN, then home computers and newsletter hotlines.

The latest step may be "Fantasy Baseball Scoutline," a 900 telephone number that permits fans to access scouting reports from any major-league city. The Scoutline (FBS) says it will update information daily from a nationwide network of more than 100 fantasy baseball scouts.

For details on the Scoutline, call 1-800-730-9480. First, though, you might want to take the wife to her favorite garment outlet and extend her line of credit.

**Early trade tip** — Two weeks of 9-8 and 22-11 scores scream loudly that this will be another hitters year. It will take more hitting than you think to compete for your league title, but the winners will be those who can best spot pitchers who avoid the whiplash of watching their fastballs disappearing over outfield fences.

To get a jump: Spot a quality pitcher who has had a lousy start and offer up one of the early hotshots — Javier Lopez, Ray Lankford, Carlos Delgado, Jeff Conine — for him. But strike quickly: Delgado becomes just another rookie if he goes 5-for-30 without a homer over his next 10 games.

*Information obtained from Newsday is included in this report. Ed Spaulding is a Chronicle copy editor and fantasy league player. His notebook appears on Sundays.*