



HAROLD RICHMAN WITH the game he invented in Great Neck when he was 11 years old.

Home Run Dream Began in Great Neck

Strat-O-Matic Inventor Celebrates 35th Year Of Success

By Christina Cronin Southard

When his 11-year-old friends were out playing stick ball and hanging out at Frederick's, Great Neck's ancient newsstand and coffee shop, Harold Richman was running numbers. Through his head, of course.

Instead of sitting around for hours just talking, about RBIs and ERAs, little Harold Richman was staying up past his bedtime creating cardboard cards for each player on every team in baseball and playing games with his statistics-obsessed friends. Richman kept at it, trying to come up with strategies to make his card game more interesting.

The years flew by and when Richman's peers were pursuing more "adult" matters, his father, Irving, was starting to worry. When Harold Richman got his accounting degree from Bucknell, Irving wanted his son to work in his insurance business.

But Richman's mother, Helen, could read her son pretty well and wisely assessed that he was a dreamer not an actuary. She even made an appointment with a Great Neck toy manufacturer to talk to her son about the feasibility of commercial success with his game of statistical strategy.

The manufacturer told the hopeful Harold, "You've got talent, kid, but it's not commercial." The 21-year-old Richman went home that night and instead of getting discouraged, came up with the key element to his future success—the third die.

The 10 years Richman spent perfecting the game of strategy had uncovered an obvious weakness. With two dice, the game could only be played offensively, with players scoring runs. The third die allowed for teams to play defense, as the third die had corresponding defensive actions on the card.

"Quite simply, it made the game commercial," Richman said.

In 1961, the first Strat-O-Matic was offered strictly through mail-order in the back of comic books. It started selling using All-Stars as players. Two years later a full set of all 20 teams was unveiled.

Because of the statistical nature of the game, its players are almost cultish about the authenticity.

"It creates an instant bond," Richman

said. "It takes the place of poker. Many of our players have had a standing game for 30 years."

Strat-O-Matic's appeal goes beyond the living room with some of the rich, famous and the truly talented picking up the game.

Len Dykstra proclaimed on a radio show, "The last time I hit me three home runs was when when I played Strat-O-Matic."

Director Spike Lee, another major player, has the game featured prominently in his next movie, *Crooklyn*.

Richman struck gold again when he found a life partner, Shiela, who believed in him and his game. A buyer for B. Altman's, she suggested, "Why not go retail?" Shiela marketed it herself and soon they expanded into football, hockey, and basketball. Now, 25 percent of their business is from retail sales.

In 1981, during the baseball strike, in a humorous mode, a group from the Players Association played Strat-O-Matic in center field at the Cleveland Municipal Stadium. The players picked an All-Star team based on the previous year's stats and came up with a team that might not fill a ball park but it definitely filled a void for the disappointed fan. From there, the game went directly into the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown for the role it played in Cleveland.

Several copycat versions have come out since Richman's original version but none with equal or continued success.

In keeping with the times, Strat-O-Matic is now available for computer fanatics as well. When their new cards are issued just after the New Year, a line forms outside their headquarters on Railroad Avenue in Glen Head. People fly in from all over the country and the first one on line has usually spent a long night camped out in the car.

Although Richman will not divulge the company's sales figures because of the competitive nature of his business, he said, "It is the number one in royalties to the Players Association."

Richman's son, Adam, 23, is working in the family business for the summer. Like his father, he, too, has his own dream. A drama major in college, he is attending business school in the fall to learn the number-crunching aspects of the business. He wants to be a producer.

Richman encourages him. After all, he would be the last person to stomp on someone's dream.