

Inventors and Entrepreneurs

Harold Richman's Strat-O-Matic



Harold Richman with the game he invented in Great Neck at age 11.

Photo by A. Anthony Miller.

By Christina Cronin Southard

When his 11-year-old friends were out playing stick ball and hanging out, Harold Richman was running numbers. Through his head, of course.

Instead of sitting around for hours just talking, about RBIs and ERAs, Harold was up late 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, started to worry. It was Richman's mother, Helen, who made the appointment with a Great Neck toy manufacturer to talk about the feasibility of commercial success of her son's game of statistical strategy.

The manufacturer told the hopeful Harold, "You've got the 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.

Stat-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.

Stat-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 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, Sheila, who believed in him and his game. A buyer for B. Altman's, she suggested, "Why not go retail?" Sheila 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.