

TIMEOUT / Hal Richman ✓

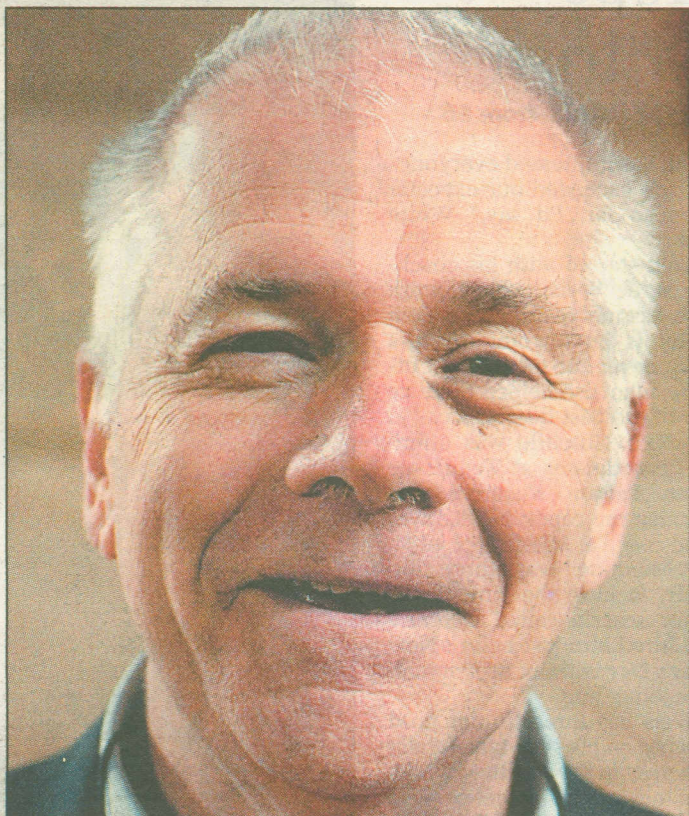


PHOTO BY BRIDGET O'BRIEN

Despite the single-digit wind chills, the line snaked from the locked front door into the parking lot of the nearby Glen Head train station Friday morning. The occasion? Opening Day for Strat-O-Matic



baseball fanatics, the day when the new card set, based on the 2004

season, went on sale. It's become a rite of winter since 1975, with several hundred people traveling every year from several states — some years braving blizzard conditions — to wait in line for hours to purchase their new cards, unwilling to wait for mail delivery.

Such is the passion stirred by the childhood invention of Strat-O-Matic founder/owner Hal Richman, 68. He spoke with staff writer Bob Herzog after serving doughnuts and coffee to his loyal, frigid fans, many of whom later lined up to buy personally autographed copies of a new book about Richman's life, "Strat-O-Matic Fanatics," by Glenn Guzzo.

What has Hal Richman wrought? What do you think of this kind of turnout?

This day is a wonderful day. To me, everything that I've done in my business life is reflected in this day. Many of these people have played the game for more than 30 years. [It first hit the market in 1960.] To be part of their lives, to bring enjoyment to them, gives me a great feeling.

Has the greatest business challenge for you been the advent of computer sports games?

You have to have a very good board game to stand up

to the graphic games [such as the popular John Madden Football and Electronic Arts baseball games]. Of course, we had to develop computer games and not lose our [board game] customer base, which we did. And now, we're even on line . . . It's not quite fantasy and it's not quite a simulation game. We call it Fanta-Sim. This is the only way you can play Fantasy League baseball with guys like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig.

Are you most proud of being No. 1 in this industry or that you've been able to stay in business all your working life against some pretty stiff competition?

There was a strong competition with APBA [beginning in the early 1960s, when APBA, a Lancaster, Pa., company, produced the No. 1 sports game], but we've been No. 1 [in sales] since 1965. Of course, we're not No. 1 anymore because of the graphic games. We have this niche, and in that niche [statistics-based games], we're No. 1. For the fans who want statistical accuracy, who want realism to the nth degree, we're the people for that. If you're into graphics, well, we're not the people for that.

Will there be a spike in sales in New England because of the Red Sox's world championship?

Historically, if a team does well, we do well [in that area]. It's always important for us if the Yankees do well because people like to try to beat them from other parts of the country. We expect to do much better in the New England area this year.