



02/12/11 4:58 PM EST

Fans celebrate 50th anniversary of Strat-O-Matic

By Spencer Fordin / MLB.com

NEW YORK -- Hal Richman received an honor five decades in the making on Saturday, when his labor of love reached an impressive milestone of longevity. Richman, the creator of Strat-O-Matic Baseball, saw legions of fans descend upon the Community Church of New York to jointly celebrate the game's 50th anniversary and its annual Opening Day party.

Richman said that fans generally come to his Long Island office to pick up the newest season's cards, but the milestone nature of the 50th season enabled him to wrap it into a day-long celebration of the game. Richman saw more than 600 devotees file into the church on Saturday, which more than tripled his estimate for a normal Strat-O-Matic Opening Day.

Strat-O-Matic has already been featured in a book, and organizers planned to make a documentary out of Saturday's event. And as Richman tried to put his lifelong project into perspective, one theme came rushing to the forefront.

"It really says that you've done something in life that was really worthwhile. You've brought a lot of happiness to a lot of people," he said. "To have some of these people come from all over the country is just a wonderful thing. I feel very honored. I'm humbled by it. It's just something I never even thought would happen.

"Who would think -- when you begin something -- that you'd be at it 50 years? The success is because of their loyalty and their interest in the product as much as myself creating it."

That loyalty took center stage on Saturday, and it felt somewhat appropriate that the event took place in a house of worship. Hundreds of fans lined the pews and listened to several guest panels that featured former players and statistical gurus, all of whom held one thing in common: A love of Strat-O-Matic and an appreciation of the simple joys of the game.

Former big league outfielder Doug Glanville -- who began playing Strat-O-Matic at age 6 -- said that he considered showing up on one of the game's cards as a huge rite of passage. Glanville said that he's played Strat-O-Matic for more than three decades, and he can still remember what it was like to treasure the cards as if they were something valuable.

"People borrowed our cards, and I wanted people to take care of them," said Glanville, recalling a simpler time. "I remember being very offended because someone spilled grape juice on somebody. ... Another guy came in and there were teeth marks on it and he said the dog got to it. I said, 'That's Ron Guidry, man. Your dog cannot eat Ron Guidry.'"

Glanville, an analyst for ESPN and the author of "The Game From Where I Stand: A Ballplayer's Inside View," said that he can also remember specific instances of Strat-O-Matic fans getting his attention during a game. One time, he said, a fan incorrectly cited that he had a +3 throwing arm, and Glanville made sure to tell him to check the game's particulars again.

The former center fielder also told another story about ex-teammate Gregg Jefferies that drew a rousing reaction.

"When I was playing in Philadelphia, Gregg Jefferies was our left fielder, and let's just say he wasn't the best left fielder," said Glanville. "He was a converted infielder, and plus he had a bad ankle that he was playing on the second half of the season. A gentleman came to the Phillies/Toronto series, and I heard [him screaming], 'You're a five, Jefferies! You're a five!'"

"I was laughing in center field, and they were like, 'What's going on?' I knew that [Lenny Dykstra] had heard of the game, so I had to break it down a little deeper and explain something: 'Basically think about it this way: They invented the rating five just for [him].'"

The game, of course, appeals to wide segments of the baseball-loving audience, and you hardly need to know what it's like to step in against Curt Schilling to play the game. Vinnie Mancini, a New Jersey resident who came in for Saturday's event, said that he's been playing the game for nearly four decades -- since his eighth birthday -- thanks to his older brother.

"There was only a basic version then, so it was pretty easy. Now, I play in too many leagues, if you ask my wife," he said of his Strat-O-Matic fixation, which bleeds into other sports.

"I run an all National League league, and I also run a retro league that will play the 1952 Finals tonight with two guys that are here. I also run a retro hockey league and play in two hockey leagues. We play the exact amount of games; 154 in the retro leagues and 162 in the NL-only league. The computer game goes so quick. In the old days -- with cards and dice and stats by hand -- was not really for me. The computer is my saving grace."

Richman said that many of the game's next-generation developments are tied to the computer game, but he's also planning a streamlined version of the table-top game that targets a younger demographic. Richman also said that the company has found a new printing process that will allow it to manufacture old seasons that had fallen out of stock.

That's pretty much it for near-term expansion, though. Strat-O-Matic has already moved into basketball, hockey and football -- both college and professional -- but Richman isn't sure that there are any other sports ripe for the tabling.

"I've looked at tennis. That's a tough game," said Richman of another popular sport. "Basketball is the most difficult game we would do. We already do football, basketball, hockey and college football. With hockey, we have a fanatical group that plays it. We do the major sports, and if soccer were to become a passion in this country, we would do a soccer game.

"With tennis, it doesn't really have a passive following. Tennis is an active game, and that's important. You have to have a television following. The big tournaments have a decent audience in tennis, but it's mostly an active game. And golf's the same thing. If soccer becomes big enough in this country, then we would do it. It's not gonna help that it's No. 1 in Europe."

That focus may explain why Strat-O-Matic's games have resonated so well on the domestic front. One gamer remarked openly that getting the cards was the biggest day of his year, and the second-biggest day would come when he drafted his team. That's the kind of devotion and passion that has helped this game -- and its players -- persist for five decades.

"The best part about the game is the guys I've met," said Mancini. "It's been incredible, and they're real-life friendships. I had a daughter who was hit by a car five years ago, and she was in the hospital. Three days later, I saw one of the guys from my Strat league -- and he was a Baptist minister from Spring, Texas -- so I asked him, 'What are you doing here?' He said, 'Where else am I supposed to be?'

"Another guy that's in my retro league is an older fellow, and has been playing longer than me. He showed up at my daughter's rehab, and I heard a booming voice asking for his niece. Those are the type of guys I've met."

Spencer Fordin is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.

MLB.com