



Local Game Maker Can't Say 'Play Ball!' -- Yet



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The 2002 season of Major League Baseball opened on schedule this week with the Phillies, Orioles, Pirates and 27 other teams taking the field.

The start of the American Professional Baseball Association season, however, remains a question mark.

The new edition of the cards needed to play the popular board game made by APBA International Inc. has yet to be released due to the Lancaster Township firm's ongoing financial woes. The cards, which list individual player statistics, were supposed to be available last December.

"We're still attempting to raise additional funding (by selling controlling interest in the company) that will enable it to happen," said Marc Rinaldi, vice president of business development.

"We're confident we'll be able to do that. We anticipate, once we get the necessary funding, it will take six to eight weeks to get the product printed and out the door," he said.

By selling a controlling interest in the four-employee company, which posted revenues last year of about \$1 million, APBA hopes to raise \$1.2 million to \$2 million, said Rinaldi.

That would be enough to not only produce the new edition of cards for the baseball board game, but to reposition the entire company by launching new games and revamping existing ones, he said.

APBA, a 51-year-old company based at 1001 Millersville Road, creates games that simulate professional sports. Over the years, games of basketball, golf, boxing, bowling and horse racing have come and gone.

Currently, besides the baseball board game, there's a computerized baseball game and a football board game, though much more is in the works, awaiting that cash infusion.

The baseball board game is APBA's original and biggest product. It uses dice and cards containing real players' actual full-season statistics. Enthusiasts laud it for its realism and strategy.

New cards, containing players' statistics from the latest season, are sold annually for \$39.95. The entire game, baseball-diamond board and all, costs \$49.95.

"We have a very loyal customer base that comes back every year. When the new cards are released, we have a line that reaches the whole way outside, around the corner of our building," said Rinaldi.

Those loyal customers haven't had a chance to line up this year to buy cards with the 2001 season's stats, though, forcing them to either make their own or use cards from earlier seasons.

APBA was founded here by the late J. Richard Seitz. In 1992, it was acquired by Frederick H. "Fritz" Light. Light sold the company, then with eight employees, to Sports Associates Inc. in 1995.

It was the start of a takeover binge by SAI, which soon renamed itself Microleague Multimedia Inc., that helped swell the local work force to about 24. But not all the additions proved profitable.

Microleague filed for bankruptcy reorganization in 1997. It since has emerged from bankruptcy and renamed itself AbleSoft Holdings, based in Pensauken, N.J.

AbleSoft spun off APBA as an independent company in 2000, although AbleSoft and a venture capital firm own a controlling interest in APBA. APBA has other outside investors, as well.

With its independence, APBA plotted a new direction, spending more than \$1 million to market the APBA games, previously sold only via direct mail, to hobby, collectible and trading-card stores.

"That didn't do well," said Rinaldi. The move consumed APBA's cash, leaving the company so strapped that it's been unable to produce the 2001 baseball game cards.

When the hobby-store strategy flopped, APBA instead began pursuing toy and game stores, as well as mass-market retailers. That reception has been much warmer, he said.

APBA products now are carried in more than 150 independent toy stores nationwide, as well as the national chains Zany Brainy and Wizard of the Coast, and available online through Toysrus.com (part of Amazon.com).

Retailers also have expressed support for APBA's plans to overhaul and expand its product line, once funding is obtained, according to Rinaldi.

Besides issuing the 2001 cards for its baseball board game, APBA wants to launch a smaller, cheaper version with cards for just the eight 2001 playoff teams' players.

It's tentatively priced at \$25 to \$30, or about half the price of the regular game. The lower price should make customers who are unfamiliar with APBA more willing to try it.

"We have a loyal customer base. Once they start playing, they never stop. They're a passionate group. I think we can breed a new generation of passionate fans, if we can get the game in their hands.

Tim Mekeel

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"...The real key is getting it in their hands. Once that happens, we believe the game will sell itself. It's done that for more than 50 years," said Rinaldi.

That's just the start of what Rinaldi has in mind for the firm's product line.

APBA also intends to update the master-level baseball board game and master-level football board game, plus give facelifts to the children's versions of its baseball board game and football board game.

In addition, APBA intends to bring back its ice hockey board game and introduce three new children's board games: auto racing, ice hockey game and soccer, said Rinaldi.

While the company's top priority is to serve its "core market" of baseball board-game fans, Rinaldi said he was "extremely optimistic" about the prospects for the other games.

These new and revamped APBA products would be entering the board-game industry at a good time, he said.

"The board-game industry has had a resurgence in the past few years. Some of the others (game makers) have done very well. There's plenty of room for us and them," Rinaldi said.

"This is a very exciting time. Once we get our funding, I really believe we can take APBA to a whole new level. I think we can do lot more, without alienating our traditional customer base," he said.