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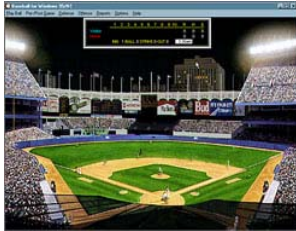
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APBA, Strat-O-Matic endure in era of high-tech games

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Enlarge Image of APBA game

APBA debuted as a board game in 1951, but like Strat-O-Matic, now offers a computerized version, seen above.

By Mike James, USA TODAY

It's a beautiful day for a baseball game: 70 degrees, not a cloud in the sky, and the beer is cold. Ted McDonald and Tim Haller are intensely watching as Ryan Dempster takes on Ervin Santana in a possible pitcher's duel.

But they're not at the ballpark. For that matter, they're not watching on TV, either. It's 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning and they are huddled around McDonald's tiny kitchen table in College Park, Md., focused on dice, charts and "players" depicted on tiny white cards with red numbers.

"Another strikeout. Are you kidding me?" McDonald exclaims as he hurls a yellow dice shaker across the room, causing it to slam into a wall 15 feet away and land behind his refrigerator. He turns to Haller, who is surprisingly nonchalant, and tells him, "I swear, I am going to call the cops and have them tow your car away."

VOTE FOR YOUR FAVORITE: APBA or Strat? Board or computer?

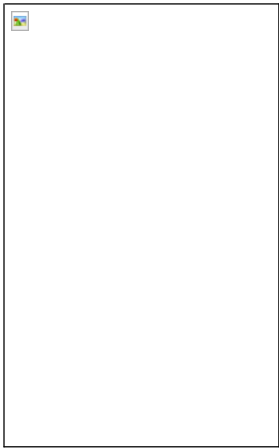
McDonald, a 58-year-old retiree, and Haller, a 40-year-old accounts receivable specialist, play in the Baltimore-Washington APBA Baseball League, made up of 12 managers who each play 82 games a year by dice and paper. Much like any fantasy baseball league, they draft their players and follow their statistics — but with one key difference. The league is decided not by actual stats, but by head-to-head game competition with other managers.

The Baltimore-Washington league, one of hundreds around North America in which fanatics play tabletop or computer baseball simulation games, is in its 35th year. "I can't tell you how many dice shakers I've flung," McDonald says, noting that he once smashed one with a hammer.

Haller, an avid APBA player since he was 8 years old, carries six dice shakers and 20 extra sets of dice to every match. He doesn't smash his, but he likes to have extra ones in case some of his dice "aren't giving me the rolls I need." Some years ago, he recalls, an opponent used to put dice in the microwave. "It was his way of heating them up when they went cold," Haller says.

APBA, formed in 1951, stands for the American Professional Baseball Association. It's commonly called "app-bah" by its loyal followers. Along with its main rival Strat-O-Matic (circa 1961), the games still endure in the Xbox era of high-end graphics and

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traditional rotisserie leagues. Both APBA and Strat-O-Matic also offer computer versions of their games, but they are tame by today's standards, with rolling text announcing the outcomes of plays. Joysticks aren't used; all the excitement happens with just a keyboard tap or two.

There are a few bells and whistles — APBA's computer game features the voice of legendary broadcaster Ernie Harwell calling every pitch and every play, for instance, and Strat has an animated ball-flight simulator. But the driving force behind both the board and computer games are sabermetrics, the term Bill James coined for the study of baseball through statistics.

Each player in Major League Baseball has a card with ratings and other numbers that, based on the player's statistics from the previous season, aim to realistically recreate his performance. In its simplest form, the dice are rolled, either by a person or the computer, and the resulting roll is cross-referenced to a player's card.

Baseball simulation players often hunger for more strategy and complexity, though, and there are charts and numbers for seemingly every scenario. There are balks, triple plays, rainouts, injuries, ejections, appeal plays, baserunners passing each other in the baseline, pitcher fatigue and ballpark ratings that can turn a routine fly to left into a homer over Fenway Park's Green Monster on a windy day.

"Our players have a real passion for this," says APBA president Marc Rinaldi from the company's Lancaster, Pa., headquarters. "There's no need for us to aspire to be a Hasbro."

While there are numerous other statistics-based games (such as Diamond Mind, whose creator now works for the Boston Red Sox.) APBA and Strat-O-Matic are by far the oldest and most recognized. And there is something amazing about how these two games have survived for so long. APBA estimates it has sold over 600,000 units of its board game; Strat-O-Matic, over 1 million.

Both companies describe their customers as getting older — age 35 and up, a sign of how the electronic era is pushing kids away from board games. In the 1960s and 70s, teenagers were a big part of the customer base.

"We have a niche group," says Hal Richman, the 72-year-old founder of Strat-O-Matic, based in Glen Head, N.Y. "We cannot compete with the Xboxes and the John Maddens and EA Sports and all their graphics. We do it another way. We want the ballplayer to be realistic."

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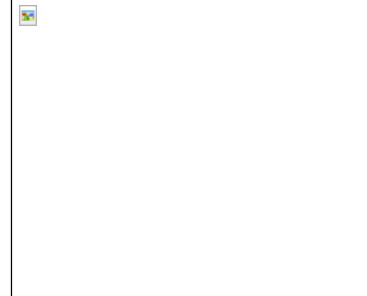


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Strat-O-Matic entrusts its hardcore research to Steve Barkan. Back in July 1968, Barkan, then a Long Island teenager who liked to play the board game, walked into Strat company headquarters looking for a summer job. Now 59, Barkan says it feels like he never walked out.

"That's when my eyesight went," says Barkan, who has spent thousands of hours combing through newspaper stories, box scores from the Baseball Hall of Fame, and the *Sporting News* in an attempt to make Strat-O-Matic card sets as realistic as possible.

One of Barkan's biggest challenges is lefty-righty percentages. Official baseball statistics didn't track how batters fared against left-handed or right-handed pitchers until the early 1970s. For Barkan, that meant that for every Strat-O-Matic season before 1970, he had to pore over box scores and newspaper stories to figure the information out — game by game, inning by inning, out by out.

"The patterns start to emerge," Barkan says. "We just finished making the 1924 season. Rogers Hornsby absolutely crucified right-handed pitching that year. . . it's fascinating to see it. In 1911, Detroit and Philadelphia played a big six-game series. It was obvious Ty Cobb was trying to win that series all by himself. You can actually envision Ty Cobb running, hitting, stealing bases."

It's that level of detail that appeals to fans of baseball simulations. Many leagues keep meticulous stats of the outcomes of the simulated games, even declaring an MVP.

Los Angeles Dodgers skipper Joe Torre recalls playing APBA growing up in Brooklyn and says the seeds of his present-day managerial skill started with the game. He recounted in his autobiography *Chasing the Dream* that he used to keep a cool head in between dice rolls while a buddy, Johnny Parascandola, would become furious when his starting pitcher floundered.

"Once Johnny became so enraged at his starting pitcher that he took the player's card and stuck it under a faucet of running water," Torre wrote. "I'm sending you to the showers!" he yelled."

And of course, the question will always be asked: Which game is better? Strat or APBA?

Both Strat and APBA fans love the game they play. In some ways, declaring one game better than the other is kind of like trying to argue over whether vanilla ice cream is better than chocolate. Each game has its own appeal to its fans, with many players sticking by the game they tried first. If you played APBA as a kid, chances are you'll stick with it, and vice-versa.

"Generally, you don't switch parties," says Richman. "Once a Democrat, always a Democrat. Once a Republican, always a Republican. It's your choice."

Got a favorite story about playing a memorable APBA or Strat-O-Matic game? Share it below.



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