



Baseball Fantasy Game Lives On Statistics-Crazed Fans Play Out Their Sports Dreams. (DAILY BREAK)

The Virginian-Pilot **The Virginian-Pilot (Norfolk, VA)** March 31, 1998 | Hansen, Louis Byline: LOUIS HANSEN, STAFF WRITER

THE ADVERTISEMENT in Street and Smith's Baseball Yearbook during the 1960s called to many: "YOU TOO CAN MANAGE MICKEY MANTLE."

Spread the pages a bit wider, wrinkled brow in adolescent wonder. Cool. Manage the Yankees with APBA baseball. Get all 16 teams, eight play results boards, game dice, realistic stats from 400 palm-size player cards. Really cool.

Mantle, Aaron, Mays - what if they all played on same team, my team? Awesome.

"I had to save up my lunch money," said Morgan Lester, 45, of Chesapeake. He's played APBA (pronounced ap'-buh) since collecting \$8 in nickels and dimes in 1968.

Lester has managed his beloved St. Louis Cardinals to hundreds of victories on both computer and box game versions. "After a while," he said, "it's almost real."

Adds Craig Cope of Suffolk, an APBA player since 1967, "It's realistic. That's the beauty of the game."

APBA players - dozens of men in Hampton Roads - replay seasons, concoct all-star teams, and try to answer those questions as old as sandlots and as fresh as a milk mustache: What if Mantle faced Randy Johnson? Who was better, the 1969 Mets or the 1995 Braves?

For those who think America has lost its love for baseball, consider the efforts of some of these players:

One player has undertaken a "History of Baseball" project, an attempt to replay every major league game ever played since 1900.

Scores of web sites and a monthly journal are dedicated to the game, each filled with results from replayed seasons, all-star leagues and summaries of their greatest games. Like scoring a hole-in-one, it's only cool after you tell you're buddies.

Every January, players make daily calls to APBA headquarters in Millersville, Pa., to ask if the new player cards have been printed. When the cards are ready, dozens of fanatics make a pilgrimage from as far away as Michigan and Canada to pick them up. FedEx isn't fast enough.

APBA director of development Skeet Carr said the basic game, invented in 1951, hasn't changed much since 1959. The appeal, he said, has been its simplicity, realism and ability to reach a core group of fans who are stat-crazed. The small company mails catalogs to about a 125,000 customers.

Craig Cope loves baseball and has always been a numbers guy. A bookshelf in his Suffolk house holds several 3-inch binders, each stuffed with league results, Cope-elected MVPs, Cy Young winners and batting champions.

He runs a 16-team all-star league, playing a 40-game schedule.

Most days, he relaxes with the game of solitaire for an hour or two after work. The computer tallies everything from hits and home runs to on-base-percentage and blown saves.

"The stats are what drive me," said the 47-year-old high school electronics teacher. "The wife can't understand it."

Although obsession might be hard to understand, the board game is pretty simple.

Roll two dice: one red, one white. Read the red number first, the white number second. A red five and a white one equals 51. Check the player card, let's say Barry Bonds. On Bonds' card, next to 51 is a nine.

Check the play boards. Bases empty against erratic Braves reliever Mark Wohlers? Sharp single to left field. Against ace Mike Maddux? Sit down, Barry, and scratch a "K" into that scorecard.

A game can be played in as little as 20 minutes. You pick the lineups. You pick the season. Cope has more than 125 individual teams and 34 seasons of players.

"I can look at Paul Splitterff" - who was, of course, that serviceable, bespectacled southpaw for the Kansas City Royals between 1970 and 1984, "and it brings back memories."

Steve Kanehl, 45, of Newport News collected baseball cards growing up, but, "basically, the cards didn't have enough numbers on them." He started playing APBA baseball in 1972, and he makes a hockey game for the company now.

Not content to be commissioner, owner, general manager and manager of his baseball teams, he has altered the game to suit his tastes.

"I've made some changes," said Kanehl, an accounting supervisor for the Newport News school district. "I've improved them."

Remember George Brett's pine-tar home run off Goose Gossage in Yankee Stadium in 1983? It can happen in Kanehl's game. It's extremely unlikely - it can only happen on a lucky roll with the bases loaded - which "only occurs two percent of the time," Kanehl added, knowingly.

Recent strikes, lock-outs and superstar petulance might have taken some of the shine off the national pastime. "The loyalty's not there," said Cope. But APBA players

Craig Cope of Suffolk, an APBA player since 1967, has a stockpile of game cards containing 125 individual teams and player statistics for 34 seasons.

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never hold out for bigger contracts. APBA general managers never have to worry about no-trade clauses. They can even undo those heartbreaking trades.

Lester goes back into the 1960s to play what he calls "What if?"

He changes history: His Cardinals signed Willie Mays when they had the chance. Throw the Hall of Fame centerfielder into a lineup with Lou Brock, Stan Musial and Roger Maris . . . what a championship childhood Lester might have had!

APBA fans admit that the game may not appeal to kids today. Board games have a tough time breaking the Nintendo-driven market. Basketball has eclipsed baseball as the glamour sport.

"Today, we're competing with video games," said APBA's Carr. "For board games in general, it's tougher."

But a new trend may be emerging among veteran players, according to one web site.

More men are abandoning their computer games to hold their cards in their hand, play the old board game and relive the tactile game from when they were kids.

Simpler times, but wrinkled brows still gaze at baseball cards in frozen adolescent wonder. Roll the dice. Any day can be Opening Day.