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APBA Lets Stat Lovers Be Managers

By CHRIS HINE

LANCASTER, Pa. — Amid the rolling hills of Amish country sits a small brick building obscured by shrubbery. It is the headquarters of APBA, a company founded in 1951 and known most for making a dice baseball game that has nurtured a persistent following through the years.

Not far from this building, 76 people recently converged on a hotel ballroom for [the annual APBA tournament](#). Many of the players were middle-age men hoping to apply their math and managerial skills to something other than work. One player was 7, and perhaps the most feared competitor was a teenager with spiky hair.

Video games have become increasingly sophisticated, and fantasy sports leagues have surged in popularity, but APBA, like its rival [Strat-O-Matic](#), has stuck to the basic format that made it successful. Players compete using a system built on the actual performance of professional players and teams from baseball's distant or not-so-distant past.

“Baseball has always been a game for statistics freaks,” said John Cochrane, a veteran APBA player from Virginia. “And this was the ultimate game for statistic freaks.”

Each player chooses a team, which comes with a set of cards for the entire roster. Ratings and numbers have been assigned based on how pitchers and batters performed that season. Winning or losing is mostly determined by rolls of the dice — one red, one white. The numbers of dots on the dice — first red, then white — correspond to numbers on the cards. Those numbers, in turn, match up with a situation booklet that determines walks, hits and outs.

Along the way, the human players act like managers, deciding when to hit-and-run, when to pull the infield in, when to pinch-hit and when to bunt. Those decisions are announced before a play, and the outcomes are found in the booklet. Nine-inning games last about 20 minutes.

The annual tournament takes place in Lancaster or in Las Vegas, and it has garnered a devoted following. At this year's version, in late July, some players wore T-shirts bearing their own personalized APBA cards. Others brought custom dice shakers. Many have memorized the results book, which contains hundreds of possible outcomes for each dice roll.

APBA (pronounced APP-bah) even has a Hall of Fame (which Cochrane joined this year). Several participants are in statistics-related careers like accounting, teaching math, tax law and financial advising.

“This is a really nerdy place,” said Brian Wells, the spiky-haired teenager whom nobody in the tournament

wants to face. "It's fun, but it's nerdy."

The 16-year-old Wells, a fast-talking native of Wyomissing, Pa., who has a summer job as a busboy, became the first person to win the tournament twice. His first title came in 2002, when he was 9, his second in 2008. The older players have accepted him, some begrudgingly, as a member of their fraternity.

"It used to be when I was 9, when I was younger, they didn't seem like they wanted me there, you know, little kids," Wells said. "And then, like winning, they didn't really like that at all."

Wells has a knack for rolling doubles, which are the best for a hitter. Combinations like 66, 11 and 33 usually result in extra-base hits or home runs.

Wells has made the playoffs in six of his seven trips to these tournaments. He uses the same dice shaker that helped him win his first tournament, and in this year's playoffs, he wore the same shirt that brought him luck in 2008. APBA also helps him stay motivated in school; his parents made him skip the tournament one year because his grades were not to their liking.

"I also play the baseball video games, but after a while, that just gets boring," he said. "And APBA, it will get dull after a while. Like, honestly, if you're my age, you can't play it every day."

Lancaster has been APBA's home base since 1951, when Richard Seitz established the company. Seitz and his friends called their group the American Professional Baseball Association and later shortened the name.

The peak years were the 1970s and early 1980s, according to Marc Rinaldi, the company's president. Today, APBA has four employees, and it creates card sets after every major league season. The company has developed football and hockey games and has plans to release a golf game.

"We're a niche market for people who prefer a more cerebral approach to playing and want to control the action through being a coach or manager," he said.

To sell itself to a younger generation, APBA is developing an interactive version of its electronic game. Company officials had hoped to have it on the market already, but development complications have delayed the release. At the same time, Rinaldi said, there is not much APBA can do to restructure its basic game, which he said had sold more than 600,000 units.

"As long as there's fans, there's always going to be the guy that likes to track stuff, the guy that likes to do replays, the guy that wants to be able to say, 'How would this guy perform against this guy?'" Rinaldi said. "I want those guys to come to us."

Wells cruised into this year's semifinals by playing with the 2004 [St. Louis Cardinals](#). With two outs in the ninth inning of the deciding semifinal game, he needed a home run to tie the game with Jim Edmonds at the plate. For some batters, like Edmonds, a 66 means a home run.

Wells stood up to roll and shook the dice. The other players gathered around, anticipating that 66. Everyone watched and listened intently to that familiar rattle. Then it stopped.

Out came the red die — a six.

Then the white one — a five.

A third title was not to be for Wells. The game ended with a pop-up to the catcher.

Wells lost to John Duke, a 62-year-old retired computer systems analyst who went on to capture the tournament title with the 1909 [Pirates](#). It was his second championship in three years. Duke also defeated Wells in 2007 on his way to winning it all with the 1927 [Yankees](#).

In previous tournaments, Wells won with the 2001 [Seattle Mariners](#) and the 2000 [Arizona Diamondbacks](#). He left this year's event vowing to end the "curse of John Duke."

He has tried, with little success, to recruit friends to APBA. Next year, he said, he expects to attend the tournament with his father, Greg, while his friends stay home with video games.

"They don't make fun of me," Wells said. "But they don't want to get into it. Because some of my friends just don't have the attention span for all of this."

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