

Guest columnist

S-O-M Basketball critiqued

BY DICK HUNT, Ovid, MI

Since Strat-O-Matic made the major overhaul in its basketball game back in 1981 (first affecting the '80-'81 cards), I have been a basketball junkie. Although S-O-M Baseball is probably still tops on my list, the basketball game is moving up quickly.

I have noticed a definite lack of coverage of the hardwood sport in the Review. From this I make two assumptions: one, that you folks at the Review are not great basketball fans; two, that the fans of the game who do exist in Strato-land do not write to you very often.

I think it's about time someone did. There seem to be several play-by-mail basketball leagues flourishing out there, judging from the ads I see every month. I'm surprised none of them have written about their accomplishments.

I suppose you could call the following a critique of Strat-O-Matic Pro Basketball.

PLENTY OF POSITIVE POINTS

Before I start pointing out the game's faults, let's take a quick run through its good points:

* The rebounding system is excellent. The old game just featured "key" rebounds (although many weren't "key" at all) and you were required to double or triple a guy's actual rebounds to get a realistic total. Now the rebounding takes care of itself in a quick, realistic way.

* The shooting frequency system (with replays, etc.) is a great improvement over the former version of the game. Formerly, coaches picked the shooter too often; let's face it, in real life a basketball coach does not stand on the sidelines calling every shot. He mostly watches and suffers, like the rest of the fans.

* The passing system has been greatly improved by the "position-shot-with-a-dot" play. It keeps the bum passers from throwing dazzlers every which way while at the same time letting the John Longs and T.R. Dunks of the world keep their turnovers down.

* Individual defense is great. Between the defense column on each player's card and the X-column, I feel individual defense is well taken care of.

* The block man setup is a great idea. Where would guys with Mark Eaton and Tree Rollins be without it?

* The Open versus position shot is an excellent renovation. The difference between an X and an O can be crucial. As evidence, look at the outside shooting ability of any big guy like Sampson, Laimbeer, Dawkins, etc.

* The foul system is so much better since the game's overhaul that there is almost no comparison. Prior to 1981, every player's card drew fouls on the same numbers. Now a World Free or a George Gervin can really put your guards to work.

Okay, enough of patting Strat-O-Matic on the back. The new basketball game beats the older version(s) hands down. I don't think anyone would argue that point. But if a few suggestions could make it even better...

A LOOK AT THE DEFENSE

First, let's look at something that affects all teams - the defense cards. I would like to know why they are all patterned the same? Why
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does every team foul on D-4 rolls; why does every team draw the charging fouls on D-9 and D-11 rolls? If Strato can give baseball pitchers 12 or 13 different card patterns, why not make up four or five for basketball team defense cards?

One idea might be to give a foul happy team - New Jersey, for instance - the foul(2) reading on a D-5 or D-6 roll. Of course, I suppose that would mean reducing the individual players' foul numbers in their individual defense columns.

Another point about defense cards that I feel needs changing: should not a team using a close defense commit more fouls (conversely drawing fewer charges)? And shouldn't a team which is sagging commit fewer? Sometimes teams will sag to avoid foul trouble.

One last thing about the defense cards. Why doesn't S-D-M put any "0" results in the penetration or outside shot columns?

A LOOK AT THE X-COLUMN DEFENSE

Now for X-column defense. If guys who swing between LF and C can have split X-column results (on their inside shots), why don't guys who play RF and G have that problem?

Wouldn't Larry Bird defend against a driving Clark Kellogg a little better than he might against a smaller, faster Gus Williams.

One more defensive note: the BL reading on everyone's inside and penetration 9 roll. What's the point? It seems like a lot of hassle for a block stat that means nothing. Whether blocked or not, the shot is missed. Better to make it so that if the shot isn't blocked, it is good. This would make the great shot-blocker a little more important.

NOW FOR THE OFFENSE...

Now let's look at the "Denver Doug (Moe) Defense" - mainly the offense.

The passing aspect of S-D-M Basketball raises a few questions. Even so, I must repeat my belief that the present system beats the jelly beans out of the previous system.

My biggest complaint is about the "point," or right guard passing. In the fastbreak offense, the RG does his job just fine. The difference between Brad Davis and Walter Davis is very apparent, as it should be.

But in the normal offense these two guys are interchangeable. Each position (C, LF, RF, LG, RG) in the normal offense gets four passing readings - one to each of the other four guys on the floor. The readings are the ones on the action cards. In the fastbreak offense, the RG gets 20 readings for a FB pass. That's one third of the deck. But in the normal offense, Strato says Moses Malone dishes the ball off as much as Mo Cheeks, albeit with fewer assists.

I say this is terribly unrealistic when S-D-M gives each guy's passing ability equal importance in the normal offense. One, because the RG won't control the offense enough to get his assists, especially guys that run a patterned offense.

The second problem with the normal offense is that too many of a RG's assists are going to have to come from his assist rating (RG-1, RG-2, etc.), assuming he even gets one. But with or without a big assist rating, someone like Ennis Whatley will never get his 662 assists. First off, those assists are garbage assists - they're never credited until after the basket is scored. They are therefore worthless, since they don't reflect a guy's passing ability at all. They just hand out freebie assists.

The assist rating doesn't come up often enough to even help a Whatley get his assists. In the normal offense, the RG's assist rating

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only comes up on a successful switch.

One more small passing note: why don't centers and left forwards ever get to throw a FB pass? Do they pass that seldom in the FB in real-life? I notice that they do shoot a fastbreak shot now and then. If they manage to get downcourt for the occasional fastbreak slam, it seems like they'd be in on pass now and then. As it is, all those poor devils can do is turn the ball over.

ADJUSTING 'REST IN MINUTES'

An easily corrected problem presents itself in S-O-M's "rest in minutes" situation. Presently, a guy is one of four things: an 18-minute rester, 12-minute rester, 6-minute rester or an ultra rare (usually one guy per card set) 2-minute rester.

The problem comes up with the borderline cases. A guy who averages zero to 27 minutes per game in real-life is an 18-minute rester in S-O-M. But a guy who averages 28 minutes per real contest is a 12-minute rest player. This means that Eddie Johnson and Johnny Davis of the Hawks can conceivably play 36 minutes per game, a full eight minutes above their real-life averages of 28.

The difference between how much S-O-M lets you play a 27-minute man and how much you play a 28-minute man is way too large. Also the difference between a 33-minute player (12-minute rest) and a 34-minute (6-minute), is way too large.

The answer to the whole problem of minutes of rest is to make the rest increments smaller. Instead of jumping from 6 to 12 to 18, go from 3 to 6 to 9 to 12 to 15 to 18, etc. All this would call for is a little more action card counting on the coach's part.

An even easier method would be for S-O-M to recommend playing no player more than 6 minutes over his real-life average minutes per game. The following chart is the schedule I'd like to see. It gives you more latitude for the in-betweeners and lets no one play more than six minutes over his average:

<u>REAL LIFE MINUTES</u> <u>PER GAME</u>		<u>MUST REST</u>		<u>COULD PLAY</u>
0-12	-	30 minutes	-	18 minutes
13-15	-	27 "	-	21 "
16-18	-	24 "	-	24 "
19-21	-	21 "	-	27 "
22-24	-	18 "	-	30 "
25-27	-	15 "	-	33 "
28-30	-	12 "	-	36 "
31-33	-	9 "	-	39 "
34-36	-	6 "	-	42 "
37-39	-	3 "	-	45 "
40	-	2 "	-	46 "
41	-	1 "	-	47 "
42+	-	0 "	-	48 "

Another quick problem: it would be nice to see the following statistics on the players' cards (although I don't see where S-O-M would put 'em): turnovers, fouls committed, foul disqualifications, offensive and defensive rebounds and three-point shot statistics.

Editor's note: Dick Hunt is 24 years old, married and the father of one. He's employed at Oldsmobile in the Lansing area. He's also a frequent contributor to the Review, with his critiques of S-O-M products being especially insightful. As far as S-O-M Basketball, the Review only wishes more gamers (or leagues) would write with their exploits.