

Answers to Frequent Questions

By Glenn Guzzo

Strat-O-Matic has dropped college basketball after just one year. Hopes that the computer game's ability to handle many teams without huge printing costs would lead to expansion beyond last season's 64-team tournament model, are lost, perhaps forever.

What happened?

Simply, the college teams did not bring enough new sales to the computer basketball game. And the most popular scapegoat is the lack of names to accompany the player ratings on disk (STRAT FAN's utility disk, which added all 640 player names within seconds, also had nominal sales).

The NCAA would not grant permission for SOM to use the names. Without them, SOM abandoned its intention to market a separate computer college game, which would have created a separate revenue stream for the company.

Still, SOM hoped that gamers attracted to the NCAA tournament disk, priced at just \$20 for 64 teams, would be enough to encourage adding more teams this year.

Just the opposite happened.

College sports fans undoubtedly are discouraged, since Strat-O-Matic now is 0-for-3 in attempts to market college games. Two board-game attempts at college football flopped. The first, in the 1970s, did not contain names, and lasted about two years. The second, with some names but not individual player cards for the 1986, 1987 and 1988 seasons, disappeared almost as quickly.

Then, SOM creator Harold Richman lamented that gamers wanted names *and* many more teams to replay full schedules and full conferences. The cost of doing so on cards was prohibitive, but he held out hope for the computer.

Now this.

It doesn't mean SOM will never try again, but the odds are not good. The best hope will be for computer college football teams, which presumably would be more popular than college basketball (since SOM sells many more football games than basketball games now). But even then SOM probably would have to be assured of permission to use the names before investing the significant time in tracking down each college team's stats and calculating the ratings.

WHY ISN'T THE SOM NBA GAME MORE POPULAR?

This is a mystery. Obviously, there are more baseball and football fans than basketball fans. This is true in the real world and the SOM world, too. But SOM basketball, a terrific simulation of a dynamic sport, appears to be no more popular than SOM hockey.

Here at STRAT FAN, we receive the least mail — by far — from basketball fans. Fewer replays. Fewer playing innovations. Fewer everything.

Isn't the NBA's popularity great enough to support an SOM game better than it does? Maybe not. No SOM competitor has produced a wildly popular basketball game, either. Could it be that NBA fans are far more likely than other fans to see their sport as pure entertainment rather than a strategy/stats game?

WHERE ARE THE HISTORIC NBA (and ABA) SEASONS?

We hear this question persistently, albeit from relatively few folks. Strat-O-Matic has dabbled with past seasons for the computer game, mostly adapting card sets from the 1980s, but also re-creating 1970-71 and 1976-77. But the SOM time machine gets cranked up for pre-1970s seasons only for baseball. Why?

Richman believes there is little demand for NFL, NBA and NHL seasons of the '50s and '60s, despite the legendary players who were

in their prime then. And he thinks there is even less interest in such alternative leagues as the AFL, WFL, USFL, ABA and WHL.

The other sports lack baseball's sense of history and its pride of stat-keeping that drives memories of the past, Richman has said.

He has a point: Many baseball fans know who were the stars of each decade and the statistical milestones achieved generations ago that today's players must eclipse to attain immortality. Gamers want to re-create those great seasons: The twin tight pennant races in 1908, the Black Sox Scandal of 1919, the great Hornsby years of 1922-25, the Murderers Row Yankees of 1927, the DiMaggio-Williams hitting fest in 1941, Jackie Robinson breaking the color line in 1947, the Maris/Mantle Yankees of 1961, the Phillies Phlop of 1964 and more.

In baseball, single numbers are instantly associated with great players: 61, .424, 56, .367, 755, 1.12 and on and on. Not so in football, basketball and hockey. What is the record for most touchdowns scored in a career? A season? What goalie had the most wins in a season? The most shutouts? What year was Oscar Robertson's best? Jerry West's? Bob Cousy's? Bill Russell's? Bob Pettit's? Elgin Baylor's? Dolph Schayes'?

All of these things can be learned. Some are remembered by the most ardent fans. But few milestones are common knowledge among football, basketball and hockey followers.

The leagues have had something to do with that. And their indifferent stat-keeping until the 1970s (or later) inhibit Strat-O-Matic's ability to create historic seasons in modern card format.

It restricts STRAT FAN, too. Proud of our ability to update great SOM football teams into modern card format, and to create from scratch old AFL and NHL teams, we have been unable to do the same for basketball. We'd love to do a 9-team NBA season from the '60s, when Hall-of-Famers like Robertson, West, Russell, Chamberlain, Pettit, Frazier and others were on every team.

But the NBA didn't keep contemporary stats then for offensive rebounds, steals, blocked shots and more — things essential for proper SOM card-creation. And SOM's sophisticated card-making has defied inventive gamers.

That's another way the SOM basketball audience has proven less involved. We know talented card creators in each of the other SOM sports, but none in basketball.

SHOULD LEAGUES BAN COMPUTER OR CARD GAMERS?

The differences in the two SOM basketball games are so significant that any league permitting both types of gamers needs to disclose which gamers are playing the board game and which the computer game.

The strategy options are different, the ratings are different and even the rules are different. If you are knowledgeable about both, there is no reason why you can't play both, although assembling a team that will be equally strong in both versions may be a bit trickier in a league that disperses talent well.

But such a league almost certainly will favor the computer gamers. While computer gamers can have the cards at hand and learn the differences quite easily, a board gamer may not have a computer at all. Therefore, it may be best to keep board gamers and computer gamers in separate leagues. Since it's tough enough to find league members, this further restriction likely means fewer leagues and perhaps fewer people will be encouraged to play the game regularly. That, of course, means fewer people who study the game closely, developing playing innovations and card-creation techniques.

And that brings us back full circle — another reason why basketball's popularity doesn't translate as well to Strat-O-Matic and to STRAT FAN content.