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Bringing the Negro Leagues to life

STRAT-O-MATIC | Only the dice aren't black in suburban man's faithful re-creation of games

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BY [DAVE HOEKSTRA](#) dhoekstra@suntimes.com

Baseball historians often read between the lines to grasp the essence of the Negro Leagues. They were formed out of necessity in 1920 in Chicago when black players were excluded from the Major Leagues because of racial discrimination. After Jackie Robinson broke the color line in 1947, the leagues continued until 1955.

The Negro Leagues have been characterized by folklore, mystery and intrigue.

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Scott Simkus is surrounded in his Carol Stream home Monday by materials he used in researching the Strat-O-Matic Negro League All-Stars game.
(Jean Lachat/Sun-Times)

HOW TO GET IT

"Strat-O-Matic Negro League All-Stars" is available by online order only at strat-o-matic.com (\$39.99 player cards only, \$48.95 with the board). The game is also available in computer format (\$27 players only, plus \$52 for the game program).

But the players come to life with uncanny detail in "Strat-O-Matic Negro League All-Stars," which debuts this week through the Strat-O-Matic game company in Glen Head, N.Y. The Strat-O-Matic board game debuted in 1962.

Just like life, inventor Hal Richman based his game on the roll of the dice: 5,000 times in his first effort. Players roll one red die and two white ones. Statistical player cards describe what happens. Charts and advanced rules are available depending on the sophistication of the participants. Baseball fans from 9 to 90 years old have played "Strat-O," as they call it.

A generation of Strat-O players includes comic Drew Carey, musician Geddy Lee of Rush, actor Tim Robbins, sportscaster Bob Costas and filmmaker Spike Lee, who used the game in "Crooklyn."

None is as important as Scott Simkus of Carol Stream. Simkus, 39, has spent the last 10 years of his life reviewing more than 100 baseball books and 3,000 Negro League box scores. Simkus' research informs the 103 players that make up "Strat-O-Matic Negro League All-Stars." The players are all young again.

They have a wink in their eye and swagger in their soul.

I played Simkus in a five-inning affair in the kitchen of the home he shares with his wife, Joyce, a very understanding elementary school art teacher in St. Charles, and their children Joe, 13, and Libby, 11.

Negro League legend Cool Papa Bell was my leadoff hitter, and he went 3-for-3 with a double and a stolen base. Satchel Paige was my starting pitcher, striking out five and giving up just one run in four innings. He was poetry in motion. Chicago great Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe closed the game for me, surrendering one run in one inning.

I learned stuff I never knew: Chicago American Giant Dave "Lefty" Brown was hiding in my bullpen. He played blackball from 1918 to 1925, according to a fascinating 30-page booklet written by Simkus that accompanies the game. Each player has a scouting report. Simkus writes of Brown, "Murdered a guy in NYC, then spent 13 years on the run."

The game incorporates league formats, its schedule lengths (Negro League teams rarely played more than 80 games in a season), its aggressive play and even its funky equipment. In his game notes, Simkus points out most Negro Leaguers bought their products at the neighborhood hardware store. Simkus even took Negro League ballparks into account, calculating home runs by left-handed and right-handed hitters to size up stadium dimensions.

There's a Damon Runyon quality to Simkus' muse. He is a writer and works the night shift as a limousine dispatcher. He gets home about 2 a.m. "During the day I do Strat-O research, and I'm writing a book about outsider baseball pre-1947," he says.

Simkus became interested in the Negro Leagues when he discovered his grandfather played against Cuban stars. Cuban legend Martin Dihigo is included in the set. A member of the Baseball Hall of Fame, Dihigo appeared in two Negro League all-star games.

"The challenge was tracking down box scores for the blackball leagues," Simkus says in a pre-game interview. "I looked at more than 100 newspapers. I started 15 years ago at the Chicago Public Library. I was looking for my grandfather's, who played semipro ball in the 1930s. One was from Pilsen, which was all Czech back then. Lawndale. Then I'd come across the Negro League stuff. The box scores are why Hal at Strat-O-Matic has held off for so long."

Richman had talked with acclaimed Negro League author John Holway. "Scott had more box scores than Holway," says Richman, 73. "More importantly, Scott was willing to extract the information we needed, which is essential for the advanced game. No one wanted to do such a difficult job. This is Scott's passion in life. I've had this idea for many years, but the information was never available."

Richman says Negro League players such as Ernie Banks and Jackie Robinson who succeeded in the Major Leagues are not included because they are in the Strat-O Hall of Fame set.

"Satchel Paige played in the majors at the end of his career," he adds. "We wanted to get the men at their best," during their five to seven prime years in the Negro Leagues.

Simkus will get royalties on game sales, similar to a book deal.

He is a fourth-generation Cubs fan.

"When you're a Cubs fan, all the exciting stuff has happened in the past," he says, glancing at the Strat-O game board with a Wrigley Field backdrop. "I was intrigued and frustrated by the Negro Leagues. You couldn't figure out how good these guys were. It was all sort of myth."

Simkus got his first Strat-O-Matic game in 1981 as a Christmas gift. "So my first season was 1980," he says. "George Brett hitting .390. Mike Schmidt hitting 48 home runs. That stuff is stuck in my brain. I recruited all my buddies. They're going to come over and play this game. We haven't played head to head in a long time."

But why Strat-O? Just in the baseball board-game lexicon, there's also All-Star Baseball and APBA (American Professional Baseball Association), for starters.

"Strat-O will never have as big an audience as video games," Simkus answers. "But video is all about atmosphere. The graphics are fantastic, but the game is about how well you can manipulate your controller. Strat-O has been a breeding ground for baseball executives. In 2002, Alan Schwartz wrote [in his book *The Numbers Game: Baseball's Lifelong Fascination With Statistics*] about a poll of 50 Major League executives that found half of them played Strat-O-Matic growing up. Strat-O-Matic is geared toward intelligent people."

Simkus' parents are retired. His father, Bob, was a system analyst at Western Electric. "It's probably where I get my analytical thing," Simkus says. His mother, Barb, was a business administrator for the same Winfield limousine company where Simkus works.

"There's a lot of Negro League information out there," Simkus says, rolling the dice for his designated hitter Oscar "Heavy" Johnson. "Just reading African-American newspapers, I have a new appreciation for how segregated this country was. In those papers, there were poets, cartoonists, excellent writers and photographers.

"It was an entire different America."

