

SHOWCASE

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HERE'S A GAME A BASEBALL FAN CAN APPRECIATE

By John Kovalic

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The baseball players are striking.

Football's still in its pre-season.

For goodness sakes, even the Goodwill Games are over.

If the dearth of major league action is making your couch potatoes curl, don't worry, sports fans. You can just play a game instead.

Not an actual baseball game; a game about baseball.

Recently released, Dynasty League Baseball (Design Depot, \$44.50) may be the best hardball board game ever produced.

Easy enough for beginners to play, it contains an elegance and level of detail that will satisfy even the most stringent followers of, say, "The Bill James Baseball Abstract."

And best of all, its creator is from Wisconsin . . . so it's like rooting for the home team.

"Although, when I first started getting interested in baseball, there were no teams in Milwaukee," said game designer Michael Cieslinski, of Boca Raton, Fla., "although the White Sox would play some games in County Stadium. The first game I ever saw was the Sox against the Yankees."

Born in Milwaukee, Cieslinski studied marketing at Carroll College in Waukesha and then at the University of Florida-Miami. Now 35, he admits his degree helped him form Design Depot, the small Florida company that now manufactures Dynasty League.

But it's Cieslinski's love of baseball that was important in producing the game.

"I've always followed baseball closely," he said. "If you're going to do a game like this, you'd better enjoy baseball."

"There's no doubt that I'm an avid baseball fan," he said.

In fact, Cieslinski still does some work for Stats Inc., the company launched by statistics guru Bill James.

"Bill revolutionized fandom," Cieslinski said. "He was probably the first person to, for example, point out stadium effects. He brought about a whole new era of statistics. I'm just a student of the game."



Dynasty League is certainly stuffed with stats. So much so that it's not only perfect for the baseball board gamer, but also for anyone who plays in a rotisserie league - the popular office game where participants "draft" real-life ballplayers and use their actual statistics to determine the winner.

"Most of those rules are actually devoted to forming your own leagues," said Cieslinski. "I wanted to make Dynasty League the most realistic game on the market, but also the most playable game."

And it just may be: You can easily play it in 30 or 40 minutes. There are no arcane symbols to memorize. Everything is written out on hundreds of individual, color-coded player cards, from Rick Sutcliffe's batting potential against lefties to John Jaha's "durability." Even weather charts are included for the major league stadiums.

The core rules, however, are less than a half-dozen pages long. Even easier, a computer version (expected to cost \$69.95) is due out in August.

"If you have a game that's incredibly realistic but is hard to play, you're gonna have problems," said Cieslinski.

And, let's face it: Rotisserie league baseball (which also uses statistics from real games) can be detailed and easy but lacks the head-to-head battles you get at the ballpark.

"Instead of accumulating points, you actually put your players on the field," said Cieslinski, who was about to fly off to play a game of Dynasty League with - yes - a striking ballplayer, Paul Molitor.

"There's nothing like playing someone face-to-face," he said. "It's a lot more challenging. It's a lot more exciting. This just goes to a whole new level."