

Fantasy Sports: Winning by Losing or Vice Versa

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It seems that coming up with a topic to relate to this society gets more and more difficult with each paper; difficult in the sense that you would prefer to discuss a subject that might actually be of interest to the group, although admittedly, this apparently is not always of highest priority. It is likewise difficult to adequately present your information in the time provided, which thankfully has expanded from twenty minutes to an hour recently.

Tonight, my subject is one that hopefully will be of interest to some of you and enlightening to others. Since our teen years, we have all had certain fantasies. As we have aged, most have remained just that, unrealistic activities or ideas that are just impractical. Making fantasies happen is a goal that is usually unfulfilled. As a urologist, I am often privy to many different types of fantasy, and have often been requested to pharmaceutically enhance the chances of success. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this is not the direction I want to take you tonight. Sorry!

I have always been a sports fan, both as a poor player in my younger

years, and as an observer to this day. My definition of fantasy sports would be best characterized by Duncan Cavanah's steadfast belief every September that the Kentucky Football Wildcats would definitely win the SEC championship. Despite his perennial disappointment, Duncan still has that fantasy, but that is not the type of fantasy football I want to discuss tonight.

My son, Ethan, has been a fantasy sports fanatic for years and what really prompted me to write this paper was sitting with Ethan last fall and watching a NFL game. We all have our favorite teams, or used to. Remember the day when you watched your team play and, if they lost, that alone put you in a sour mood for the rest of the day?

Well, those days are over. If you have suffered your whole life being a Detroit Lions or a Chicago Cubs fan, things can get better quickly, unless of course you draft Mark Pryor, but I digress. In the fantasy world, you have your team that you want to win, too, but it's different.

Ethan and I were watching the Colts play the Giants. Eli had the Giants in the red zone. He threw a pass to Plaxico Burress, which was almost intercepted, and Ethan erupted shouting expletives about the Colt cornerback who dropped an easy pick which he could have returned 100 years for a touchdown. On the very

next play, Eli hands the ball off to Tiki Barber who breaks two tackles and scores. Ethan erupts again, "Yes, yes, that's my boy, Tiki."

Confused? Well, I was too. How can you on one play be unhappy that the Giants were not intercepted for a touchdown and then on the next play be ecstatic that they scored. I asked Ethan just who he wanted to win the game, the Giants or the Colts? His reply was that he didn't really care who won the actual game, but it was extremely important the Plaxico Burress didn't catch many passes or score and that Tiki Barber have a great day running the football.

More than 30 million people play fantasy sports. It's a no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners, every-man-(or woman)-for-themselves activity. When you come out of a draft with a key player tucked under your arm, then it was all worth it. A fantasy sports player is a man or woman who owns a team, each year drafts a pool of players for a specific league and then manages his/her team like a bonafide team owner.

Being a fantasy sports team manager is an empowering and exhilarating experience requiring little investment. It brings all the pleasures of being George Steinbrenner with none of the headaches, risks, or financial investments. With the advent of the internet, it became much easier to be involved in fantasy sports.

And it's not just your major sports. The most played fantasy game is pro football. Major league baseball is next, then the NBA, NASCAR, the NHL, golf, and college sports. But this is certainly not all, as the scope is constantly expanding to meet everyone's fantasy, including cricket, dog racing, gymnastics, figure skating, volleyball, softball, horse racing, lacrosse, rugby, skiing, tennis, and yes, even tug of war and bass fishing.

The roots of modern internet-oriented fantasy sports can be dated back 26 years to Rotisserie League Baseball. Daniel Okrent, former editor with both Time, Inc. and Sports Illustrated "invented" the rules to Rotisserie baseball on the back of a cocktail napkin during a long cross-country flight.

The inaugural season of Rotisserie baseball began on the first Sunday after the opening day of the 1980 National League Baseball season. The game's namesake was La Rotisserie Francaise, a locals' hangout in New York frequented by Okrent. Many American fantasy baseball leagues today are still called Rotisserie Leagues.

The first group of team owners was entirely composed of writers and publishers, thereby word of the leagues spread quickly via the literary pulpit. One of the original members, in a 1980's article written for Sports Illustrated

wrote: " The Rotisserie League is silly and we know that. We also know that it has caused great changes in the lives of each and every one of us, mostly for the better. We play for money, of course, but we also play for friendship, competition, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Rotisserie baseball was low on the public radar until the mid 1990's when leagues began to breakout into football, basketball, and other sports. The process of manually calculating stats is what kept the sport from initially flourishing. It took a true baseball aficionado to painstakingly maneuver through all the statistics. The internet boom of the 1990's created a revolution of the game. Enabling gamers to easily compute stats and maintain their teams brought Rotisserie baseball into the fantasy sports industry that we know today.

Fantasy sports have not only become an integral part of everyday lives, but in many cases a necessity. Greg Ambrosius, President of the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA), said "It used to be thought of as just something for geeks and hardcore fans. But this isn't a small closet hobby anymore. This son of a bitch is a big, big industry and it's all due to the internet."

Research reveals fantasy players spend more time watching the NFL on television (2-3 hours more each Sunday), are regular visitors to the websites that

host their leagues, and tend to stay on site longer than an average visitor. Figures from Nielson/Net Ratings show the average fantasy players visit to CBSsportsline.com is 2 hours, 8 minutes. That sort of usage catches the attention of advertisers and makes both the league's TV rights and those network's affiliated websites more valuable.

Sportsline.com is considered to be one of the top games on the market. Charges of about \$130 to manage up to a 12-player league comes out to about \$10-12 per league member. This is nothing compared to what is exchanged under the table. The average player participates in more than two leagues and spends about \$154 per season in what is now a greater than a \$ billion per year industry. Okrent, the founding father, was recently quoted, "I feel the way J. Robert Oppenheimer felt after he invented the atomic bomb. If I'd only known the plague that I've visited upon the world."

So, how do you play, how do you get a team, how do you win? Fantasy sports is a game where fantasy owners build a team that competes against other fantasy owners based on the statistics generated by individuals players or teams. The most common variant converts statistical performances into points that are compiled and totaled according to a roster selected by a manager that makes up a fantasy team. These point systems are simple enough to be calculated by a

"league commissioner." In fantasy sports, there is the ability to trade, cut and resign players, like a real sports owner.

To discuss the intricacies of all the fantasy sports would require more time than would be needed to discuss the history of salt. So with that in mind, I would like to concentrate purely this evening on the king of all sports - both fantasy and real - Football.

Actually, the roots of fantasy football predate those of Rotisserie baseball. Any history of the game has to answer one question first and foremost. Who was the individual most responsible for Fantasy Football as we know it today? There is no controversy or mystery surrounding this one. The gentleman in question was the late Wilford "Bill" Winkenbach, an Oakland-area businessman and limited partner of the Oakland Raiders.

As legend has it, Winkenbach came up with similar games involving other sports in the late 1950's. The initial groundwork was laid on a rainy October night in 1962 in a New York hotel room during an Oakland road trip. Bill Tunnell, the Raider P.R. man and Scotty Stirling, a reporter covering the Raiders for the Tribune, helped him set it up. The three men hammered out a basic blueprint as the night progressed (and the cocktails flowed), specifying league organization

and a set of rules calling for the selection of offensive skill players from pro football teams who would make up your team.

The original league was dubbed the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League or GOPPPL as those who played referred to it. Winkenbach was named the first League Commissioner of the league composed of eight members. It officially made its debut in 1963, its purpose being, as published in the original GOPPPL rules "To bring together some of Oakland's finest Saturday morning gridiron forecasters to pit their respective brains (and cash) against each other. In as much as this league is formed only with owners having a deep interest and affection for the Oakland Raiders Professional Football Team, it is felt that this tournament will automatically increase closer coverage of daily happenings in professional football."

The original 8 team owners described the original draft, held in Winkenbach's basement on a beautiful night in August of 1963 as "euphoric." The original "Rules of Drafting" were outlined thusly : "Prior to the opening of the professional football season at the evening dinner meeting, club owners will draft 20 players from either league. However, no more than 8 imports can be drafted from the NFL. (Remember this was pre-merger and Oakland was in the AFL). In the event of injury, which depletes a position, an owner shall apply to the

Commissioner for approval to activate a temporary replacement from undrafted players."

The order of the draft was very carefully laid out so that it would be fair. Each owner selected a roster composed of four offensive ends, four halfbacks, two fullbacks, two quarterbacks, two kickoff/ punt return men, two field-goal kickers, two defensive backs or linebackers, and two defensive linemen. Owners submitted a weekly starting lineup featuring a quarterback, two offensive ends, two halfbacks, and a full back. Despite being relegated to the use of what, even the most minimalist modern day participant would consider antiquated gear, Winkenbach prepared and published weekly reports that were delivered to GOPPPL owners without fail on Tuesday mornings throughout the regular season.

It was stated in the original 1963 GOPPPL rules "Lack of skill or study will also afford the heaviest loser the yearly trophy, symbolic of the loser's ineptness in this grueling contest. This award will be presented by the League Commissioner at the annual GOPPPL banquet, held in late January for club owners, coaches, and wives." Stirling recalled: "Winkenbach had this trophy made with a wooden football face and dunce cap on top for the guy who came in last each year. The last place guy had to keep it on his mantle till the next season

and when you visited his house, he damn well better have that trophy up on the mantle or there was trouble."

Now, more than 40 years later, of the greater than 30 million fantasy sports participants, more than 15 million play fantasy football. Modern leagues usually start seven key players every week. The accumulative points of one team's starters are matched up against the points of another team and the end result is either a victory or a loss.

Simple, right?

Currently, the standard scoring system used in most fantasy football leagues is fairly simple. For running backs, the studs of any team, every ten rushing yards earns a point, as do every ten receiving yards. Each touchdown (either rushing or receiving) is worth six points, and every two-point conversion is worth two. Wide receivers and tight ends follow the same system, and all players lose two points for each fumble they lose. Quarterbacks follow a similar system: a point for every twenty-five passing yards, and four points for every touchdown thrown. Each interception earns a two-point penalty (sorry, Brett Favre), and any rushes or receptions are awarded the same points as a running back would earn, which is a nice bonus for running QBs like Michael Vick, Vince Young, and

to a much lesser extent, Drew Bledsoe.

The scoring rules for defenses and special teams are a bit more convoluted. Since most leagues have managers take an entire team's defense rather than individual players, points can be awarded on any defensive stand. A sack or blocked kick is worth one point, and a takeaway by fumble or pick or safety is worth two. Any touchdown scored on defense or special teams is worth six. Points are then awarded for limiting the points scored by the opposition, but if a defense gives up more than thirty points, it gets penalized.

Kickers receive little respect in real life, and despite their personal fantasies to the contrary, their fantasy football counterparts aren't much more handsomely rewarded. Any good point-after kick is worth one point; any miss is a one-point penalty. Field-goal attempts under forty yards are worth three points if good or a three-point dock if missed, and progressively longer kicks get bigger scores if hit and smaller penalties if missed.

Well, that was difficult to follow. To make it more concrete, let's take a local example. When Vikings running back Chester Taylor was nursing an injury against the Lions in Week 14, former Hoptown High and Kentucky star Artose Pinner rode in to Minnesota's rescue. In what was surely the most unexpected

fantasy explosion of the 2006 season, "Tose" racked up 125 rushing yards, three rushing touchdowns, and fifteen yards receiving. Anyone who happened to randomly be starting Pinner in that game on the strength of his forty or so yards rushing up to that point was handsomely rewarded. He earned twelve points for his yardage, eighteen points for the three scores and a point for his receptions for a total of thirty-one points. Unfortunately, he also lost a fumble, which brought his grand total down to 29 points on the day. For perspective, any game where a running back scores 14 or more points is considered very good, and anything greater than twenty points is fantastic. For a least one day, "Tose" was in Tomlinson territory.

With this system in mind, managers draft their teams each August. The average league has ten to twelve teams, and each squad has around fifteen players. Each week, managers will start one quarterback, two running backs, two or three receivers, a tight end, a defensive/special teams unit, a kicker, and a "flex" offensive player who can be either a running back or a wide out. Strategies on using this flex position vary, although most owners tend to use running backs, as they are assured of getting the ball in their hands more often. The rest of the draft is devoted to picking up bench players who can fill in gaps when starters are injured or on bye weeks. For this reason, it's of the utmost importance to pick backups who have a different bye week than one's starters,

which often leads to strategic decision making on draft day.

In their quest to assemble their unstoppable fantasy juggernauts, managers take part in one of two types of drafts. In the less common "salary cap" leagues, managers are given a fictitious budget of \$200, and players are auctioned off. It is not uncommon for top talents like Larry Johnson or LaDainian Tomlinson to fetch more than \$75 in these auctions, which leaves their managers with shoestring budgets with which to assemble the rest of their team. The more common method of putting together a team is to carry out an online draft just like NFL teams do with college players. Draft order is randomly decided or, in leagues that have been together for many years, determined by the inverse order of the previous year's standings. To be fair, the last player to draft in any given round gets the first pick in the next round. Drafts are the social high point of the fantasy season and are often the only time that all managers are together in the same room during the year. Some leagues even devote entire weekends of travel to make the draft big events. Atlantic City casinos are popular draft destinations for New York City and Philadelphia fantasy leagues. By the end of these drafts, everyone's had a few too many beers, and someone usually tries to draft Tim Couch in the last round just to make everyone laugh.

Draft strategies are fairly diverse, although almost everyone agrees that

since the scoring anchors of teams are running backs and there are few quality backs in the league, the best idea is to stockpile running back talent in the first two rounds and then fill out with receivers and quarterbacks. Every year, some foolish Tennessee fan will settle into his ugly orange sweatshirt and take Peyton Manning in the first round "because he's the best QB," only to end up losing the league because they have no good running backs. Managers usually start looking for a defense in the eighth or ninth round or later, and kickers usually go in the last round or two.

The average fantasy player spends hours each week, managing his team, agonizing over whom to start that week, watching Sunday's games with a laptop in his lap so he can continuously check the box scores in all the games that are being played, and analyzing potential waiver and free agent pickups. At the end of the year, the winner gets more than just pride and honor for all of these efforts. Most leagues play for some kind of large cash pool. League buy-ins vary greatly, from around \$20-\$50 for most small leagues to up to thousands of dollars for some larger leagues. After everyone puts in his or her money, the second-place team usually gets his buy-in back at the end of the season, and the winner gets the rest of the loot. In leagues with huge stakes, winning can be a significant under-the-table cash windfall. It's worth noting, though, that if you spend 300 hours researching players to win a few hundred dollars, your hourly wage isn't

much to flaunt.

Probably not your best-spent time, but that partly depends on who is paying for it. Whether casual participants or compulsive players, the time that workers invest may have significant financial consequences for corporations. An executive search firm, Challenger, Gray, and Christmas, estimated that, nationwide, fantasy football consumption cost \$37 million in lost productivity for every ten minutes of work time spent on fantasy football activities. This is assuming that each fantasy football player spends only ten minutes a day on sports sites. On my initial Google search on fantasy sports, I was impressed by the fact that there were over 66,600,000 sites available.

While ten minutes is a drop in the bucket in a typical workday, it certainly adds up in non-productive work time for large companies. In fact, it has been enough of a problem that some software companies are developing software that allows its managers to filter or block certain sites based on keywords or addresses.

The Super Bowl is Sunday and it is arguably the biggest day in sports, culminating a hard-fought season by crowning a world champion. You know who is playing and you've made your picks. But who turned out to be the fantasy elite

this year? If you were smart enough and lucky enough to have drafted the top players and played them against the right team, who would have made you unbeatable?

During the 2006 fantasy season, the "perfect" team would have consisted of LaDainian Tomlinson and Larry Johnson as running backs with Steven Jackson as the "flex" player and Peyton Manning at quarterback. Tomlinson actually broke the all-time record for fantasy points in a season as well, which had previously been held by Duante Culpepper's 2004 season. The top three receivers were Marvin Harrison, Terrell Owens, and Reggie Wayne, although in leagues where points are awarded for drug overdoses, Owens was a runaway top scorer. The top tight end was Antonio Gates, and the Bears defense and special teams unit netted the most points, thanks in large part to Devin Hester's penchant for breaking kick returns into touchdowns. The top kicker was the Bear's Robbie Gould.

Would a team that had somehow amassed all of these players have won its league following an undefeated season? Probably. However, since most fantasy football leagues play in a "head-to-head" format, having the best players for the year is no guarantee of success. In this setup, each team plays one other team each week in a match up, just like in the real NFL. The top four or six

teams in terms of won-loss record from these head-to-head matchups make the playoffs in most leagues. Therefore, if you had this "perfect" team assembled, but somehow ran into a buzz saw each week, like Colts RB Joseph Addai's 40-point Sunday night game against the Eagles, you could conceivably go winless for the entire season. Therefore, fantasy owners value not just season stats, but consistency. If you drafted Reggie Bush in the second round and got very little return from him all year, his four-TD outburst game at the end of the season wouldn't really help you if your team had already been eliminated from playoff contention. When drafting and making trades, managers tend to look not just at a player's stats, but how they piled them up.

If you are, know, or live with a sports nut, chances are you will be subjected to the trials and tribulations of fantasy sports. Being a fantasy sports player gives you a unique bond with the athletes on your teams. Not only does it give you a renewed interest in your sport, but an exaggerated sense of accomplishment when Phil Mickelson chokes on the 18th hole or Vince Young scrambles for a touchdown in overtime. Chad Johnson's ridiculous touchdown antics may have always annoyed you to no end, but if he's your first round pick, you're counting on him, and you may find yourself doing your own version of an end-zone celebration.

The scope of fantasy sports is constantly expanding. As I get older and the knees refuse to cooperate, I must admit that the concept of fantasy turkey hunting has some appeal to me. So, if you decide to take the leap, remember, you're playing a game with the word fantasy in the title, a word previously reserved for the Cubs winning a World Series, the Detroit Lions winning a Super Bowl, the Wildcats going to a BCS Bowl or unicorns. One can certainly see the attraction. There are clinics for alcohol, drug, and gambling addictions. There is little doubt in my mind that the next anonymous will be dedicated to the fantasy sports fanatic.

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