

FANTASY FOOTBALL NATION

We'll have fun, fun, fun 'til mama takes the TV (and the checkbook) away

This is the time of year boys from teen age to middle age huddle around dining room tables drafting mythical football teams consisting of the best players in the National Football League (NFL). It's become big business, or rather big unbusiness: a 2006 report claims as many as 40 million men—it's mainly a guy thing—spend as much as 10 hours per week grooming and prepping their fantasy football league (FFL) teams.

The same report calculates lost time (~= lost productivity) on the order of \$500 million to \$1 billion per week. Which would seem to be a negative, except the article advises business leaders that modest participation of employees in fantasy football—90% of fantasy sports is NFL football—improves morale and is ultimately positive for the bottom line. I'll buy that... tho some of my business-leader friends might balk.

Anyway, the odds are our business leader friends, especially if they're men, are hooked on FFL themselves. :) And unlike video gaming or cars or the latest technogeek-gizmo banter, fantasy football crosses generations: whether you're 60 or 40 or 20-something, most of the guys you know have a common bond of FF experience.

"Who did you draft at quarterback this year?"

"One of the Archie Manning boys."

"Last year, I took LT (San Diego Chargers' running back Ladaian Tomlinson) in the second round and cleaned up."

"Awesome, you can't lose, LT rocks."

Clearly what the uninitiated observes in such virtual-jock babble is the typical young-male "meaning-challenged obsession syndrome" (MCOS)—e.g. golf, fly-fishing, NASCAR, competitive drinking, [name the mythical sex goddess du jour], etc. Accordingly, the actual result of fantasy-football behavior is not so important as the sociology that accompanies it.

For example, I began to play in my own live head-to-head league[1] back in the early 1990s[2]. My interests were mainly for the camaraderie of the experience and the opportunity to learn more about NFL teams in general... rather than simply living or (mostly) dying from fortunes of the Detroit Lions. We had a small league fee, \$5 per loss, which I felt was well worth the fun factor regardless of outcome.

The last few years we've held the draft at my place. A fantasy draft is really like poker night with your friends, only with a little more preparation and a little less beer. It's basically an all-American annual "guys' night out" where, as vicarious directors of highly talented athletes in brutal contests of skill, we become heroic gladiators protecting hearth and home from the barbarian hordes. Er, something like that. As a woobie writer, I always get a charge out of some of the apocalyptic team names:

Mutant Marauders

Alien Bonecrushers

Death Zombies from Hell

Superwombat Radioactive Thunderpigs

On a more satirical and whimsical note an early incarnation of my own fantasy team was the "Flesheating Pagan Burritos." Which gave me an 'A' for uniqueness, but never struck much fear into the hearts of my fellow competitors. Extremism in team naming has abated lately; indeed, the ultimate defusing of macho tags has come with our newest owner: believe it or not, he calls his team the Raging Fluffy Bunnies!!

Talk about the antifear factor... the weeks you play against John, you have to remember your team-preparation duties while rolling on the floor laughing your ass off (roflyao). Thus, one of the best parts about competing in FFL lies in the entertainment value of the peculiarities of all these weird friends of yours. And it's nice to get together and catch up with a group of guys rowing in the same general direction in life: productive, hard working, honest, caring human beings all. (Damn, I'm getting a tear in my beer just thinking about 'em.)

Not to get sidetracked with politics, but I often get the feeling "fantasy nation" is akin to massive collective fiddling while Rome burns. But then can't one say the same thing about the NFL, sports in general, the fascination with celebrity, movies, what have you? As our species moves toward spiritual enlightenment—I hope with some sense of urgency—my guess is this whole FFL business amounts to one of the *least* tenacious barnacles on the butt of progress.

Another concern is the gaming legality aspect. Frankly, no one even pauses a moment to consider that FFL, like playing poker for quarters once a month, (strangely) may be against the law. Sounds like the Cider House Rules to me.

When you stop and think about it, 99% of the government constitutes a malignant growth of cider house rules (irrelevant, unnatural edicts in areas they don't belong) backed by nuclear weapons. What a comforting thought. I need a drink.

When I told my lady friend I'd be hosting a fantasy draft and probably writing a column on FFLs, she expressed concern on the gambling front. I replied, "Babe, after all the 'state secrets' I've revealed on these pages—the Fed has no real money, 911 was a black op of the Cartel, the war is a fraud as are its instigators, the jury is *not* out on global warming, the Israeli government is the primary aggressor in Palestine, we are all choking on a gluttony of state-dispensed corporate privilege, the blind faith of Abrahamic religions is a wanton killer—I can assure you when they round me up and send me away, it won't be for winning the Toilet Bowl in my fantasy league."

In case anyone is interested, here's a good posting on the legality of fantasy sports, where I also learn that illegal sports betting is a \$380 billion/year industry! Yikes. The federales want to come down on Internet gambling—for the same reason they don't want anyone except the CIA trafficking in drugs: they need their cut—but apparently the law grants an exception to fantasy sports.

So not to worry about a little fantasy fun. Like the Cider House Rules, just don't take it seriously.

[1] There are primarily two types of fantasy competition: head to head, where weekly games are played against one's league opponents (as in the NFL), and total points, in which cumulative points during the season determine winners (or playoff teams). Typically head-to-head leagues, whether on line or live, are gatherings of 8-12 friends each of which has a different roster of players. Also typically, total-points leagues are big-money affairs where the fantasy team owners compete nationally against hundreds or thousands of other individual owners—the players on your roster are shared by many other owners. Wikipedia has a good piece on fantasy football that explains the basics.

[2] Fantasy football began in the early 1960s, but never really got large for another couple of decades until the Baby Boomer geek population reached the threshold of mindless obsession. Some of the guys in my live league go back to the early 1980s when they worked for a large systems company in the Detroit area. Their stories—the substantial fees and payoffs, the intense arguments over manual box scoring, the dog-eat-dog harshness (if you drafted a player who had retired or been killed in a car crash yesterday, nobody would tell you), and so on—are the traditional folklore. Today's FFLs are as user-friendly as opening an email.

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