Fantasy Football America:
An Analysis of America’s [New] Favorite Game

by

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Abstract

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Fantasy sports – in which fans ‘draft’ players and follow their progress through compiled statistical measures – is a major new development in American fan culture over the last generation. While fantasy sports are garnering success across many different sports, this thesis focuses on football since it has become the most lucrative and visible form of fantasy sports in both the sport and popular culture. The popularity of the game continues to rise exponentially, which, ironically, is borne out by recent decisions from state governments to regulate the fantasy sports industry (that is, to gain a piece of the financial pie for the state). This thesis will explore the way American’s consume and critique the fantasy game. To achieve this goal, this paper first explores the transferable skills gained from playing fantasy football as they are compared to the New York Stock Exchange; looking at auction and snake drafts, the fantasy team is equated to building a stock portfolio. Following the individual skills linked to playing fantasy, this thesis then examines the ways fantasy football has infiltrated popular culture. This section looks in particular at Matthew Berry’s New York Times best-selling novel *Fantasy Life*, FX Network’s television series *The League*, and various fantasy-related news articles surrounding issues in popular culture. Last, my research turns toward a specific case by taking an ethnographical approach to fantasy football by interviewing people in my own fantasy football leagues. Interviews are used to evaluate how fantasy football impacts and shapes the basis and context for which Americans view the NFL.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface. SAME PIGSKIN, DIFFERENT GAME ................................................................. 1

Chapter .5. OFFICIAL REVIEW .............................................................................. 4
  Roster Construction ......................................................................................... 4
  Two Types of Drafts ....................................................................................... 5

Chapter 1. THE FANTASY DRAFT EXCHANGE .................................................... 6
  The Draft: Intro to the New York Stock Exchange ........................................ 6
  Knowing Who to Draft: The “Sure Thing” .................................................. 7
  Navigating Narratives ..................................................................................... 11
  A Game of Numbers ....................................................................................... 14
  A Different Approach ...................................................................................... 21
  Sleepers: The Ultimate Risk/Reward ............................................................ 23
  Hybrids: Worth the Investment? .................................................................... 25
  Two Minute Warning ....................................................................................... 27

Chapter 2. INTRIGATING AMERICAN CULTURE .............................................. 28
  Accidental Advancements ............................................................................ 28
  A League of Not-So Extraordinary Gentlemen ........................................... 30
  A Tie is like Kissing Your Sister .................................................................. 32
  Love It or Hate It ........................................................................................... 38
  Bullying: A Lifetime of Bad Memories ....................................................... 41

Chapter 3. FANTASY MEETS REALITY ............................................................... 47
  Ratings, Revenue, and Personal Allegiance ................................................. 52
  Telly ............................................................................................................... 53
  Hank ............................................................................................................. 54
  Ho ............................................................................................................... 64
  Brock and Derek ........................................................................................... 71

Works Cited ....................................................................................................... 79
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Additionally, I would like to thank my wife and daughter for their patience and support as I spent hours away from the house to complete this program and this paper.
Preface: Same Pigskin, Different Game

In 2013, Lincoln Financial Field, home to the Philadelphia Eagles, underwent a two-year stadium revitalization project. In an attempt to “dramatically enhance the game day experience for [the] fans,” Club President Don Smolenski decided to ask the fans donning Midnight green jerseys each week if they had ideas for change. ¹ After interviewing and questioning stadium visitors, the club narrowed the suggestions to a list of plausible renovations. Some changes were more drastic and would accommodate the way fans would view the game, such as the addition of 1,600 new seats and bridges that connect the upper concourse of the stadium. Others, however, were less noticeable and catered more to the changing interests of the fans entering the stadium for each home game. The most significant of these less-visible changes, one that might even confuse the most traditional football fan, was the addition of free, high-speed Internet for all fans.

As it turns out, the lack of accessible, high-speed Internet was not just a problem for the Philadelphia Eagles. In an article published by CNN in 2013, the request for high-speed Internet is reported as a top request by fans for all NFL stadiums. Their rationale? Fans could not access fantasy Football stats, scores and updates while watching the games because of the large amount of people trying to utilize data from the same place at the same time. In short, so many people were trying to access fantasy football scores, the networks (AT&T, Verizon, etc.) could not keep up. As CNN reporter Matthew Casey writes, the “game-day ritual of the digital age -- tracking scores, highlights and social-media chatter on a mobile device -- isn't possible inside many NFL venues because the crush of fans with smartphones can overload

¹ Lincoln Financial Field – Stadium Renovations 2014
cellular networks.”

To some, this may seem ridiculous: fans pay money to go to a Football game to see live entertainment, yet now demand technology that allows them to simultaneously stay up to date with the other games happening across the nation. Ludicrous or not, the need was a reality, leading owners to make the necessary changes. Stadium owners know, as others too are beginning to realize, that the popularity arrow for fantasy Football is currently pointing up. This means not only immediate changes to NFL stadiums, but also to the way we watch and enjoy the game.

In the year 2014, it is estimated that nearly 41.5 million people play fantasy football in the United States and Canada. The number of participants has doubled since 2008 and continues to grow each year. With this type of popularity, it is important to not only understand what the game is about, but also to analyze how such a rapidly growing enterprise impacts the American people. To some, fantasy is the worst thing that has ever happened to the NFL. In an article published back in 2008, LA Times writer Dave Zirin claimed that fantasy is “irrevocably distort[ing] the essence of the game.” Zirin notes that Football was created to be, and should remain, a team sport. In his view, fantasy focuses that attention on individual player performances, which leaches the integrity from the game.

Those in support of fantasy football, on the other hand, propose that playing the game puts fans in a position where they become more involved: by owning players on multiple teams, viewers are more inclined to watch or follow multiple games per week rather than the one team they typically support. While the debate between misguided focus and hyper-

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2 Casey 2013
3 Industry Demographics 2014
4 Ibid.
5 2007
6 Ibid.
involvement ping-pongs back and forth, there are many beneficial facets of the game many overlook. Whether it is played for fun or money, fantasy football is a highly complex game that requires a multitude of skills (so much so that playing in a fantasy league for money is legal under federal law because of the skill involved while the playing the game).\(^7\) One develops these multi-faceted skills by playing the game, which can then later be applied to real-world scenarios to make people more successful.

In his book *Everything Bad is Good for You*, Steven Johnson highlights the positive qualities our modern entertainment sources - namely television and video games - offer the children and adults who embrace them. While researchers, parents and the general public blast these contemporary entertainment forms (labeling them too violent, sexual and inappropriate), Johnson jukes the other way by analyzing the beneficial qualities these mediums offer. In that same vein, there is a need to also approach fantasy football with an eye toward the tangible, constructive qualities one can attain through playing in a fantasy football league. To be a successful participant in the game requires the ability to manage, invest, speculate data, trade, and be decisive while adhering to a code of ethics. With participants utilizing these skills on a weekly basis, it is possible that fantasy serves as one of the most accessible, hands-on business and investing instructors available today. Where some spend thousands of dollars on intro-level business courses at universities and colleges, fantasy offers an education at a price determined by a one-time entry fee determined by the league.

It is furthermore essential, due to the exponential growth of the game, to carefully evaluate the effects fantasy football has on American culture and society. Whereas other authors - namely Armington, Barmack and Handleman, Becker and Esser – focus on

\(^7\) “Is Gambling on Fantasy Sports Legal?” 2014
mathematical formulas and theories surrounding fantasy football drafts, this paper will unearth the social impacts fantasy has on America. By looking at the way society is influenced by and interacts with football in respect to fantasy sports, the beneficial qualities fantasy football offers will be highlighted and explained. By the end, it will be argued that fantasy football, though highly criticized by certain fans, commentators and football players, offers numerous benefits to the people who play it, the society that embraces, and the NFL that depends on it.

Chapter .5: Official Review

Roster Construction

Each fantasy football season begins with a draft. On draft-day, league-members assemble either in person or online to compile a team of players. All players from the 32 teams in the NFL are eligible to be drafted by a team. Each roster includes two sections: starters and a bench. On a standard roster, the starters include one Quarterback, two Wide Receivers, two Running Backs, one Tight End, one “flex” position (choice of an additional Wide Receiver, Running Back, or Tight End), one Kicker and one Defense/Special Teams unit.\(^8\) In addition to these nine positions, an owner’s bench houses five extra players of any position. At the end of the draft, each owner in the league will fill 14 spots, which serve as his or her team going into the start of the fantasy season.

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\(^8\) To be succinct throughout the essay, the following abbreviations will be used: Quarterback: QB, Running Back: RB, Wide Receiver: WR, Tight End: TE, Kicker: K and Defense/Special Teams: D/ST
Teams compete head-to-head on a weekly basis, the winner being the team who accumulates the most points. During any given week, an owner can move players from his bench into his starting lineup an NFL game begins; at kickoff, the players on that team becomes locked into the slot (bench or starter) and can no longer be moved until the following Tuesday. All NFL games are used, including Thursday and Monday Night Football; a typical season runs from week one through week thirteen and finishes with a playoff system that mirrors that of the NFL (including first-round byes and a championship game). In the end, the victorious owner reaps the reward of bragging rights, a trophy, a bag of “gummy bears,” or whatever the league determines.

*Two Types of Drafts*

To pick players, leagues can choose to draft under one of two models: a “snake” draft or an “auction” draft. A snake draft contains fourteen rounds. Owners are assigned a draft pick number, which is typically determined by the results of the previous year’s standings (similar to the way the NFL runs, the last place team gets the first pick in the upcoming draft) or randomly (deal ten playing cards with the Ace representing the first pick and the 10 representing the last pick). This style of selection is deemed a “snake” draft because of the order of selections: after player 1 select his player, the draft moves up the ladder until it concludes the last person, number 10 (or 12, or 14, or however many people are playing in the league). Round 2 then starts at player number 10 and works back down to number 1. This method is used to promote fairness; since player 1 gets the first pick in the draft, he must then
wait until the 20th pick to select his second player. This succession continues until for fourteen rounds until all rosters are filled.

An auction draft works much differently. As the name implies, players are not selected in any order, but are instead “purchased” using fake money. It is here that the fantasy draft most closely resembles that of the stock market (though correlations will later be made to show how the snake draft also compares). At the start of the draft, each owner receives a budget (in a standard league, $200). When the draft begins, NFL players are “nominated” one at a time, or placed on the bidding block. From here, league members can offer any amount of money to obtain that player. The only rule is that each owner must roster a full team. This means the maximum bid for the first player is $187, which would leave $1 per player to fill the remaining 13 spots on a roster (this type of wagering is not recommended). An owner does not need to spend all of his money as long as he rosters a full team by the end of the draft. In most leagues, however, there is no reward for saving money.

Chapter 1: The Fantasy Draft Exchange

The Draft: Intro to the New York Stock Exchange

While its roots date back to the late 18th century, the New York Stock Exchange truly became significant in the mid-to-late 19th century. Today, the NYSE runs Monday through Friday, providing investors with the ability to buy, sell, or trade stocks in major and minor corporations. These investments are then taken and used in a multitude of ways: some use the market to enhance retirement accounts while others use returns for supplemental (or total) income purposes. Regardless of one’s intentions, the Big Board provides investors with an opportunity to make legitimate amounts of money over the span of days, months, or years.
Because of this potential, when the opening bell rings at 9:30 am, thousands flood the market in person, online, or through phone and brokers to capitalize on return investments. While the NYSE offers great opportunity to make money, looming in the shadows of each investment lives the risk of losing money (or, if investments falter, owing money). For this reason, it becomes important for investors to learn the basic skills associated with navigating the stock market before transferring abundant amounts of money into investments. This involves researching and understanding the different types of stock and what they offer; building a solid portfolio geared toward profitable returns; learning when to buy, sell, or stay with a company; and understanding when to take risks. These skills are not impossible to learn from textbooks and online articles, but are often best learned though experience. For this reason, many turn to professional advisors and investment classes that offer knowledge and advice for investors. In the end, however, one must put money on the table to begin playing the game; no class or simulation can mimic the positive and negative feelings associated with the game. It is here that fantasy football offers some of its greatest learning attributes. By playing in a fantasy league, players become investors participating in a stock-simulation experience where skills are learned at a much lower risk. Despite this abated risk, however, investments in fantasy carry a weight of emotional involvement that makes the wins truly euphoric, and the losses heartbreaking.

Knowing Who to Draft – The “Sure Thing”

Regardless of the type of draft a fantasy league uses, each owner is faced with the problem of deciding whom to draft first. The first few rounds of a snake draft are akin to the largest purchases in an auction draft: they are the biggest investment and thus have the expectation of
providing the most return throughout the season. The worst mistake a fantasy owner can make early in the draft is “reaching” for a player, or spending too much on a player who is not considered to be an elite talent. Instead, in the first few rounds, owners seek what may be referred to as a “sure thing:” a player who will perform consistently at a high level each week and carries lower risk in under-achieving. In football, however, just like in the stock market, there is no such thing as a sure thing. Players get old, suffer injuries, or find themselves locked into a non-efficient offense that can no longer move the football past the pylons. These situations are speculated by analysts and commentators, but are ultimately unpredictable. Despite these unknown factors, though, wise fantasy owners still manage to attain these desired “sure thing” players each season. The main way they accomplish this is by tracking previous results, consulting the advice of analysts, and making the best-informed decisions with the data they procure.

A smart investor in the NYSE will not try to invest alone; Wall Street analysts work to understand the market much better than the average investor. With this knowledge, analysts “compute earnings-per-share estimates for the current fiscal year and the next fiscal year.”\textsuperscript{10} From there, they make projections as to which stocks will produce the best price-per-earnings ratio. These stocks set up investors with the most opportunity, those with a high floor and a high ceiling, to make a profit – a “sure thing.” Despite this advice, investors still need the necessary knowledge and experience when consulting analysts and investing real money. If playing the stock market were as simple as following the advice of a group of analysts, everyone in America would be rich. By the same design, the world of fantasy football has its own group of analysts who utilize data from previous years, factor in changes from the

\textsuperscript{10} “How Much to Pay for Stocks” 2014
offseason, and establish rankings of players they predict will have the most success in the upcoming season. Like the stock exchange, these rankings are not a prophecy; they serve as a guide owners must know when to use, and when to ignore. By looking at a handful of first-round draft choices from previous seasons, the difficulties investors face becomes more prevalent. Choosing the right investment goes well beyond selecting the market-option at the top of a list.

Thanks to the continuously increasing popularity of fantasy sports, the game can now be played via multiple Internet outlets. Of these venues, ESPN and Yahoo Sports are the top organizations offering the game.\textsuperscript{11} Entering the 2014 NFL season, both organizations projected a consensus of four players to draft as “sure things:” Adrian Peterson, Jamaal Charles, LeSean McCoy, and Matt Forte. Right away, two things from this list become obvious: all four players are big names in the NFL (easy to spot on the back of a jersey at a home game), and all four are RBs. What this says to fantasy owners is that these athletes are worth top-dollar in an auction league or a first-round selection in a snake draft because they tend to be the safest play week to week. RBs touch the ball consistently and often, especially when compared to a WR who must “share the wealth” on each passing play with other WRs, TEs, and, further proving the aforementioned point, the RB (who often receive anywhere from 6-10 targets a game). This offers a high basement for points each week and creates a better chance of scoring touchdowns.

A top pick in a fantasy draft best equates to a top-dollar stock option in the NYSE. These companies include, but are not limited to, Apple (AAPL), Google (GOOG), and Berkshire Hathaway-A (BRK.A). A stock in each of these companies is worth over $100 per

\textsuperscript{11} Price, 2014
share.\textsuperscript{12} While these stocks are expensive and require a larger down payment, they also tend to be more stable and offer a steady, gradual increase in profit. They are, in turn, the RBs of the stock market. The overall risk of these stocks plummeting in the near future is low, which makes them a good staple for stock portfolios. AAPL, for example, has risen from $71 to $120 per stock over the past 52 weeks. In that same time period, the stock for GOOG went from $502 to $604; BRK.A rose from $163,039 to $229,374.\textsuperscript{13} While the numbers look convincing, at the end of the day, investing still brings considerable risk. Furthermore, to invest in one of these companies, one must be able to match the asking price. Like high-caliber RBs, these stock prices make it difficult to own multiple shares, creating an elite scarcity investors relish.

In addition to a steep price, as stated before, investing in a “sure thing” is never guaranteed. While an investment may look good on paper because the chance for risk is greatly reduced, situations beyond the investor’s control can prove to be inevitable. Of the four aforementioned top-stock RB options, Forte, Charles and McCoy all finished in the top-ten for points for the 2014 season. Those who paid top dollar or used a first-round pick on these players received high value from the investment, as analysts speculated before the season began. The name missing from the list? Adrian Peterson, who finished near the bottom of the list of all RBs. Note, this is not just the bottom of the four elite RBs mentioned, but at the bottom of the list for ALL RBs in the league. What makes matters worse is that these results are not linked to a major injury or an overall decline in talent, but rather a child-abuse scandal that earned Peterson a multiple-game suspension from the NFL. Those who spent a first-round pick or paid an egregious amount of money in an auction draft received the

\textsuperscript{12} “Seven Stocks With Above $500 Per Share in Prices” 2014
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
same results from Peterson than backup RBs who went undrafted in most leagues. It seems unfair, but risk like this is permeates investments, even in the real stock market.

In the summer of 2000, the general public could purchase stock in the Enron Corporation (ENE) at a price of $97 per share.\textsuperscript{14} At the time, ENE stock seemed like a sure thing (similar to the way investors currently view AAPL and GOOG). Unknown at the time, however, was the companies' billions of dollars of debt an ENE staff of executives facetiously hid from the general public and other executives.\textsuperscript{15} When the scandal finally became public, ENE stock plunged to less than a dollar a share in less than a week. In the same way Adrian Peterson owners found out almost overnight their star RB would no longer play, ENE investors watched a top-dollar investment dissolve in a matter of days. At the end of the day, fantasy owners lost a player in a made-up competition. It may have ruined their season, but at the end of that season, all investments become irrelevant; the next season starts over, bringing new life to failed investments. Owners of ENE stock, on the other hand, learned a difficult lesson with real money. For them, there was no "re-do" button, just the harsh reality of a failed investment.

\textit{Navigating Narratives}

To be fair, the Peterson ordeal, much like the Enron scandal, is a bit of an anomaly in the both fantasy and the stock market. These things can happen, but most likely will not. Flashing-forward to the 2015 fantasy season, however, shows that even without a major scandal, first-round picks are no lock. Entering this fantasy season, the landscape of the speculated top-ten changed ever so slightly from the year before. Some of the usual names still showed up on

\textsuperscript{14} "Enron Shareholders Look to SEC for Support in Court" 2007
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

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the list: Adrian Peterson (#2 overall), Jamaal Charles (#4 overall), and Matt Forte (#8 overall). New to list, though, were players like Le’Veon Bell (#1 overall), Eddie Lacy (#3 overall), C.J. Anderson (#7 overall), DeMarco Murray (#9 overall) and Steelers’ WR Antonio Brown (#6 overall). With each new addition to the 2015 fantasy draft came a brand new set of deliberations as owners prepared for the first round.

Oddly enough, in 2015 many of the decisions fantasy owners had to make revolved less around physical talent and more on off-field issues and unsupportable injury predictions. Many saw Adrian Peterson as one of the clear-cut top selections in the draft, yet remnants of the child-abuse scandal that sunk his 2014 season remained fresh in the minds of many owners. Combine this with the fact that he was now thirty years old (an age where RBs tend to decline in physical ability) and had just missed an entire season of football. Many were unsure how a year-off would affect his performance in the upcoming year. ESPN Analysts Matthew Berry and Field Yates, for instance, boasted Peterson as their number one draft pick fueled by the narrative that he “had something to prove” and “had fresh legs” entering the season. Analysts Erick Karabel and Tristen Cockroft, however, ranked Peterson number five. Still a top-ten pick, these guys, as well as many others, feared that Peterson’s unique situation might lead to a down-season (though a down-season for Peterson is still above-average, which is why he stayed at number 5).

A second favorite for the number one pick in 2015 was Steelers’ RB Le’Veon Bell. Coming off a monstrous year (1300 rushing yards, 8 rushing TDs; 850 receiving yards, 3 receiving TDs) and participating in a high-octane offense in Pittsburg, the argument in support of Bell was easy to make. Factoring against Bell was a 2-game suspension from a substance-abuse violation during the 2014 season issued for the first two games of the regular
season. With a regular fantasy season running from Week 1 to 13 of the NFL season, players would knowingly select a player who would be benched for two weeks.

A name not mentioned for first-selection was DeMarco Murray, which might seem strange to many considering Murray was the top-rusher during the 2014 NFL season. In 2015, Murray was now a part of the Philadelphia Eagles, who were known for running a fast-paced, “fantasy-friendly” offense. One would think that the reigning league-leader in rushing moving to a more productive offense would create a fantasy juggernaut, yet the analysts entering 2015 listed Murray as consensus pick number eight. The rationale here, again, stemmed from narratives. Because Murray rushed for 1,800-plus yards in 2014, many were worried he would break down mid-season and succumb to injury. Despite entering the season at full health, fantasy owners were advised to look past Murray with the top picks in the draft because of the potential risk surrounding his upcoming season.

As DeMarco Murray’s Average Draft Position (ADP) in 2015 proved, narratives have the ability to outweigh numbers and statistics. In the NYSE, narratives have the ability to drive stocks more than any other factor. In 2015, for instance, the Stock Market saw more company mergers of major businesses. Driven by low interest rates, this “merger mania” mirrored a pattern investors recognized from the 1960s, giving hope for profitable returns.\(^\text{16}\) Narrative one seems simple enough: seek out merging companies, invest money there and reap the rewards.

Countering that narrative, however, is the fear that mergers can become too big, or grow for misleading reasons, which can lead to de-mergers and a drop in stock value.\(^\text{17}\) Valeant Pharmaceutical International (VRX), for example, serves as a company that fits the

\(^{16}\) Lopez 2015
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
latter of these two choices. Boasting consistent growth in the summer of 2015, reports surfaced that VRX garnered success through accounting roll-up, which is when a company “does not grow organically but relies on serial acquisitions and aggressive accounting to show growth.”18 Here, merging companies led to VRX’s ultimate downfall by November the same year. Those who believed that mergers lead to unsustainable growth avoided disaster while those chasing the numbers only landed on the wrong side of a poor investment.

So what about those RBs from the 2015 season? DeMarco Murray did not sustain an injury, yet still finished as only RB18 due to a treacherous, inept offensive in Philadelphia. Le’Veon Bell, after his two-game suspension, came out and rewarded fantasy owners with five solid games as a top-five RB. In week 8, though, he sustained an MCL injury and missed the rest of the season (RB43). While this misfortunate, it had nothing to do with his suspension. Finally, Adrian Peterson, despite missing a season and becoming “too old,” finished behind only DeVonta Freeman as the season’s RB2. The narrative supporting Peterson was the only one to culminate; those who bought into the other storylines and avoided Bell and Murray looked smart by the end of the season, but for reasons unrelated to the initial predictions. With reporters and analysts pitching new narratives each season, fantasy owners need to learn how to weed out certain narratives to become successful. It is for this reason that many choose numbers over stories when preparing for a draft.

*A Game of Numbers*

To spot a fantasy football player in a room full of people, look for the person with eyes glued to the game’s box score. Because fantasy owners attain points through total yards for

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18 Lopez 2015
individual players, every catch and run by an NFL athlete becomes scrutinized by the question “how many yards?” At the end of the day, fantasy football essentially boils down to two things: yards and touchdowns. For this reason, fantasy owners begin to view Football through a different lens.

During the 2015 NFL season, the Kansas City Chiefs finished with a record of 11-5. After a close loss to the Minnesota Vikings in week 6, the Chiefs went on to win ten games straight, sealing a trip to playoffs. Down near the Atlantic, the Jacksonville Jaguars conversely finished with a record of 5-11. Weeks ten and eleven contributed to the only time all season the Jaguars won back-to-back games. With these glaringly opposite seasons, a normal NFL viewer might assume that fantasy owners should select Chiefs players over Jaguars players because of KC’s success. Using numbers as a guide, however, the successful fantasy owners in 2015 did the exact opposite.

By the end of 2015, KC QB Alex Smith threw for 3,486 yards and 20 touchdowns.\textsuperscript{19} These numbers are not bad, but lead to a finish of QB15 for Smith. The main beneficiary of those yards and touchdowns, Chiefs’ WR Jeremy Maclin, finished the year as WR17. A top-twenty finish for both players is a great accomplishment, but were not the driving force behind any fantasy championships for the year. Back down in Florida, the Jaguars, despite a maladroit season, offered much different results. JAC QB Blake Bortles finished his season with 4,428 yards and 35 TDs, which was good enough for QB4 on the year. His recipients, Allen Robinson and Allen Hurns, finished the year as WR4 and WR 14 respectively. In a game driven by numbers, team wins and losses become moot so long as the players succeed in yards and touchdowns.

\textsuperscript{19} Statistics 2016
The problem with numbers, however, is that they can be incredibly misleading. An article published by Kiplinger magazine highlights the top eight mistakes inexperienced stock-investors make; it is not surprise that many of these mistakes revolve around emotional decisions fueled by soaring or plummeting numbers. The first mistake mentioned is “pulling out at the worst possible time – the bottom.”\footnote{Kiplinger 2016} Using the 2008-09 DOW plummet as a prime example, Kiplinger highlights how many investors sold stocks when value was at an all-time low. Five years later, the DOW resurged, rewarding the patient investors who held on to investments.\footnote{Ibid.} This advice is widely known amongst investors, and yet when the stocks hit bottom in 2008, many still followed the lemmings off the cliff and sold. When real money is invested and real money is lost, listening to what investors “should do” rather than following one’s instinct becomes incredibly difficult, a lesson fantasy owners learn again (and again) each season.

The worst mistake a fantasy owner can make is over-reacting to a poor box-score performance from a player. In his first game back from suspension, Vikings RB Adrian Peterson had the spotlight on him in a prime time Monday Night Football game in San Francisco. With the eyes of the nation on him, Peterson finished the night with 31 yards rushing, 21 yards receiving, and no touchdowns (good for 5 fantasy points). As if the aforementioned narratives surrounding Peterson were not enough, this performance sent fantasy owners into panic mode. The numbers were horrific and the investment looked bad, creating a desire to trade Peterson before his value sank any further. As previously mentioned, Peterson finished the season as RB2 in the 2015 season. Those who held on and
weathered the early storm reaped (or bought low from an alarmed owner) reaped the benefits for the rest of the season.

While a drop in numbers can cause panic, a sudden upwelling in numbers may be even more devastating for investors and fantasy owners alike. As Kiplinger goes on to write, the second biggest mistake investors make is “getting swept up in market euphoria.”22 When stocks begin to surge, the common desire for investors is to “pump money into the ‘hot stocks,’ fantasizing about future treasure.”23 Problematic to this euphoria is the reality that stocks fluctuate on a daily basis. Investors know that stocks are like the ocean: every high tide came from a low tide, where it will eventually return. Even with this knowledge, though, a stock on the rise sings to investors like the Sirens. The experienced investors learn to temper emotions and stick to more realistic investing strategies.

Playing in the same national spotlight as Adrian Peterson during the first Monday Night Football game of 2015, SF RB Carlos Hyde entered the season as an intriguing player to watch. Coming off a great tenure at Ohio State, Hyde spent his 2014 season running behind seasoned-veteran Frank Gore. In 2015, however, Gore was traded to the Colts, opening up the lead spot for Hyde. Where Peterson failed in the first game of the season, Hyde elusively torched the Vikings defense. He finished the night with 168 yards and 2 touchdowns (29 fantasy points). Those who drafted Hyde were exuberant while those who avoided him now attempted to sell arms, legs and firstborn children to acquire him. Following his Monday Night magnum opus, however, Hyde went on to score double digit fantasy points only one more time that season. In week 7, he suffered a stress fracture in his foot, sending him to the Injured Reserve list for the remainder of the season. Even Matthew

22 Kiplinger 2016
23 Ibid.
Arnold’s “Dover Beach” fails to encapsulate the loss and despair Hyde owners felt follow his tragic 2015 season.

A final suggestion Kipling makes to new investors is to avoid the desire to “put all your eggs in one basket.”\textsuperscript{24} Successful investors find ways to minimize risk in an unpredictable market. One of the best ways to reduce said risk is to keep a balanced portfolio with diverse assets. As Kipling’s senior editor, Anne Smith, states, “Over time a diversified portfolio provides the best combination of reasonable returns with bearable volatility.”\textsuperscript{25} While it seems logical to invest all of one’s money into a vibrant, successful company, this tactic proves to be sophistry. There are no guarantees with investments, a notion fantasy players are all too familiar with.

Coming out of the 2014 season, the Denver Broncos and the Green Bay Packers owned arguably the best two offenses in the NFL. Led by all-star QBs Peyton Manning and Aaron Rodgers, these teams ran surgical offenses that excelled against even the most prolific defenses in the league. As one can imagine, this type of real football success translated into much fantasy success. Those who owned players from either team reaped top-ten seasons from the QBs, WRs, and RBs. The following chart concentrates these accomplishments to show the success of both organizations.

\textsuperscript{24} Kiplinger 2016
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
2014 NFL Season Final Rankings and Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>End of Season Rank</th>
<th>Yards/ TDs</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>Player</th>
<th>End of Season Rank</th>
<th>Yards/ TDs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Green Bay</td>
<td>Aaron Rodgers</td>
<td>QB1</td>
<td>4381/38</td>
<td>Denver</td>
<td>Peyton Manning</td>
<td>QB4</td>
<td>4727/39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eddie Lacy</td>
<td>RB6</td>
<td>1139/9</td>
<td></td>
<td>C.J. Anderson</td>
<td>RB11</td>
<td>849/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jordy Nelson</td>
<td>WR3</td>
<td>1519/13</td>
<td></td>
<td>Demaryius Thomas</td>
<td>WR2</td>
<td>1619/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Randall Cobb</td>
<td>WR7</td>
<td>1287/12</td>
<td></td>
<td>Emmanuel Sanders</td>
<td>WR6</td>
<td>1404/9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at this chart, a logical choice for a fantasy player would be to heavily invest in players from both teams. Even C.J. Anderson, a slight anomaly since he finished outside the top-ten, ended his season as the top running back in the league over the final eight weeks of the season. Though his data suggests he was less elite, the way he finished suggested more talent and promise going forward. Entering 2015, these players were coveted first and second round selections that would serve as the backbone to a winning fantasy season.

For fantasy owners entering 2015, it was nearly impossible to own more than two of these players listed above: the prices in an auction draft were too high and the ADP of each player in a snake draft had all of them as first and second round selections. The idea of “putting all of your eggs in one basket” here would have been sought after, if possible. The 2015 end of season results, however, show that owners were fortunate to avoid his strategy.
Midway through the 2015 NFL season, one thing became painfully obvious to fantasy owners: neither of these teams resembled the prolific juggernauts they were in 2014. Multiple factors contributed to this lack of success: Jordy Nelson tore his ACL in training camp, taking away the Packers’ fastest player and “deep threat” down the field; Eddie Lacy gained weight and looked less spry when carrying the ball; Peyton Manning (now playing at age 39) suffered nagging injuries throughout the season and lost some of his arm strength throwing the ball; the Broncos’ offensive line began rebuilding with new players, which took a while to really get started. Analysts and commentators predicted some of the influences (especially Denver’s offensive line and Manning’s health) while others were random and unfortunate (Jordy Nelson’s injury); regardless, in one season they taught owners a key lesson all investors can benefit from: spread the wealth of investments, or be prepared to sink with the ship when it inevitable begins to sink.
A Different Approach

Between top players suffering injuries (or getting suspended) and top offenses deteriorating over the course of a year, some savvy fantasy players will choose to utilize other options during the draft rather than investing in one of the top options.26 In addition to “spreading the wealth” amongst multiple NFL teams, these owners extend the funds available to them during a draft and invest in the players just outside the “elite status” range. Though the top players provide consistent rewards, some see one investment as too risky. As the following numbers show, this method can work well or fail miserably.

Entering the 2014 fantasy draft, the previously mentioned top four RBs had a suggested auction value of $59 (Peterson), $58 (McCoy), $57 (Charles), and $54 (Forte).27 With the standard auction budget set at $200 per owner, this meant one of these elite RBs would cost over one-quarter of an owner’s total budget. For this argument, we will say an owner chose Charles as his top RB option. To keep a more balanced budget, this owner would then need to look at a single-digit priced RB as his second option, such as Steven Jackson ($7).28 Jackson is slightly older in the league and is starting to be phased out by younger competition, but still offers owners a consistent, yet significantly lower, basement for points on a weekly basis. This owner has now spent $64 on a RB duo and managed to attain a top talent. Because of the aforementioned risk that comes with spending big on an elite players, though, a second owner can approach the draft differently by drafting two mediocre, yet serviceable, RBs who will cost the same amount. These RBs are in no way a “sure thing”

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26 As a strategy, this is seen more often in auction drafts. In a snake draft, those with a later pick are forced to utilize this option since the elite players are typically drafted early.
27 ESPN fantasy Football 2014
28 Ibid.
to produce consistent points, but give an owner a second legitimate player and help him save money.

Since the prices of the top four RBs nearly topped $60, a fantasy owner in 2014 could have considered a combination of DeMarco Murray ($42) and Frank Gore ($20) instead. Both of these players were clear-cut starters for his team and were predicted to handle a decent workload on a weekly basis. Neither player was considered elite, but were still respectable players whom many projected to achieve worthwhile weekly point averages (at a combined price of $62). As the 2014 fantasy season concludes, Murray and Gore currently combine for 325 points with two weeks left in the season. The tandem of Charles and Jackson, on the other hand, combines for 288 points. Owner number two, who decided to forgo one of the top talents, not only saved money in this situation, but also outscored the first owner.

Of course, using these hypothetical situations to prove a point is unfair at the end of the season; it is easy to pick two random mediocre players who did well that year to prove a point. After all, DeMarco Murray had the best season of his career and was not expected to finish as the top point-scorer for all fantasy RBs in 2014. Furthermore, had owner number two decided to select the next two players in respective price-based order, he would have taken Doug Martin ($45) and Toby Gerhart ($16). These two players combined for 70 points that season (due to the fact that neither ran very efficiently that season and were both replaced by a better player halfway through the season). While the second owner’s method of drafting gave him two mid-level RBs, these players are in no way “sure things” and carry the

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29 ESPN Fantasy Football 2014
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 2014 Standard League Auction Draft Cheat Sheet 2014
risk of not producing at all. Additionally, these players are susceptible to injuries and fluke-suspensions like the elite players, making this choice equally risky.

Sleepers: The Ultimate Risk/Reward:

While top to mid-level players increase the chances of a successful return in fantasy, they also come at a price that limits the number of these players an owner can select (whether as a draft pick or in actual auction money). The same is true for the bigger stocks in the NYSE. Not everyone can afford to buy multiple shares of General Electric or Netflix; the presumed safety associated with these investments make them more popular, adding competition, increasing scarcity and therefore purchasing price. In fantasy, since only one person can own a player, this same system creates more difficulty owning the top ranked guys. Generally, this leads to one of two things: over-paying (in an auction league) or “reaching” (in a snake draft) by selecting them a round or two earlier than the player’s ADP.

To avoid these scenarios, a third option exists, which leads owners in the complete opposite direction. Here, in the dregs of the selection pool, we find the “boom-or-bust” players and the breakout candidates. This includes, but is not limited to, rookies, guys on new teams, guys with a new supporting cast, and players with new coaches. These players offer the most risk, but also the greatest potential yield if they pan out as the “home-run” owners hope they can be. In fantasy, these players are known as “sleepers.”

Americans love a “get rich quick” scheme. They are the reason we play the lottery, fall victim to Ponzi schemes and gamble at casinos. In fantasy football, sleepers are the equivalent of a lottery ticket: the cost is low, but the potential return is extremely high. In an auction draft, sleepers tend to be purchased around $1 to $3; in a snake draft, they are selected
in the 10th, 11th, or 12th round. These players enter the NFL season with no history of performing well in the NFL; statistically speaking, they are irrelevant. What drives their value, though, is the speculation and hype from professional analysts. Regardless of the players’ situation, the potential is there for this player to be great. More often than not, however, these players end up being a bust at the expense of auction money or a draft.

Some of the most hyped sleepers entering the 2014 fantasy draft were QB Johnny Manziel ("Johnny Football"), RB Bishop Sankey, and WRs Justin Hunter and Odell Beckham Junior.33 Of these players, three were rookies (Manziel, Beckham and Sankey), while Hunter, entering his sophomore campaign in the NFL, moved into a more significant role in his team’s offense. With promises of explosive playmaking ability and future dynasty potential, fantasy owners entered the 2014 draft eager to grab one of these future stars. As the 2014 season concludes, the accumulated point totals for these sleepers are as followed: Manziel: 9 points; Sankey: 60 points; Hunter: 61 points; and Beckham: 117 points.34 Those looking for a fortune from these players struck out, with Beckham being the sole player to live up to his hype as a fantasy relevant player (18th most in points out of eligible WRs).35 By the end of the season, unrealistic expectations became bitter realities as most of these players failed to live up to the hype. Fortunately, these realizations came at little to no expense.

In stocks, a simple Google search finds multitudes of websites offering the “best” companies investors “must” buy now while prices are at a premium. Much like the sleepers in fantasy, these stocks live on the hype and speculation of the companies promoting them. Some of these investments may thrive like investors believe, rewarding those willing to take

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33 2014 Sleepers, Busts and Breakouts 2014
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
the risk. At one point, advisors speculated that a new computing system called “Microsoft” or “Yahoo” would become majorly successful. These situations happen. The majority, however, are more likely to do nothing. This is not to say one should avoid these stocks, just like a fantasy owner should not completely ignore the sleepers. Instead, one needs to learn how to balance the sleepers with the “sure things” in a way to set up the most successful fantasy team or real-life stock portfolio. Once again, this is a skill best learned through trial and error, something fantasy offers at a much cheaper price.

Hybridx: Worth the Investment?

When it comes to owning a business, the ultimate goal becomes capital gain. To capitalize on net gains, business owners must always look at the newest trends in the market to see what product will bring the greatest reward. In the 21st century, these trends are starting to include the idea of hybrid products, or a combination of two products synergized to offer more results than the products could individually. On paper, these products present themselves as sure-fire ways to produce more business at a cheaper cost. In reality, however, not all consumers are buying; some even avoid at all costs.

In the first chapter of his book The Omnivore’s Dilemma, Michael Pollan spends a day working with a corn farmer, George Naylor, in Iowa. While the two set out to plant endless rows of corn, the two begin to discuss the multiple variations of corn seed available to farmers today (since there is little else to talk about while planting acres of corn). Looking through a catalogue of corn seed for purchase, Pollan questions why Naylor neglects to spend extra money to purchase a more advanced hybrid corn seed that promises better results. Naylor’s response underscores one of the main problems some investors have when it comes to new
age, hybrid products: one, he does not trust the technology, and two, he feels the immediate
gain in crop production is immediately spent to cover the cost of more advanced seeds.\textsuperscript{36}

Technology is great, but to create a successful product, the consumer has to trust in the
system. For Pollan, like many fantasy owners, these types of lucrative decisions are ones that
require thought, as well as a gut feeling for what fits the system best.

A decade ago, the majority of players trying out for offensive positions on a football team
were as cut and dry as they come: QBs were expected to throw, RBs ran through holes created
by the offensive line, TEs blocked and caught the occasional pass, and WRs ran various
routes to beat the Corner and get open. In 2014, however, coaches are starting to invest in
hybrid players. If a QB can throw the ball \textit{and} run for 50 yards in a game, the offense
becomes more elusive; a RB who can run up the middle and catch a screen pass opens up the
playbook; and a TE who can shift off the line and play WR adds an extra weapon for the
offensive coordinator. As more NFL coaches turn to these hybrid pawns, fantasy owners are
faced with the same decision as Pollan: do we trust what we know has worked for years, or
should we try a new investment for a potentially greater gain? And, what risk does this
prospective player bring to the game?

At the QB position, the idea of a scrambling passer (one who uses the read option to either
throw the ball quickly or run for yards) is a fairly new concept. In the past, pocket passers led
the NFL in stats through the names of Kurt Warner, Steve Young, Joe Montana, and Jeff
Garcia. These players rarely left the pocket, yet produced some of the best QB ratings in the
history of the game. These types of QB can still be found in the NFL today – Peyton
Manning, Tom Brady, Phillip Rivers – but younger, more agile QBs are prone to use their

\textsuperscript{36} Pollan 36
legs when given the opportunity. The question fantasy owners must answer is which type of QB generates the greater results in points? Unfortunately, the numbers provide little clarity in making the decision.

In 2013, the top five scoring fantasy QBs were, in order, Peyton Manning, Drew Brees, Cam Newton, Andrew Luck, and Andy Dalton. Of these QBs, two were predominantly pocket-passers (Manning and Brees) while the other three fit the hybrid mold. From a total-points standpoint, the stats do not support one side or the other; on a points-per-game basis, however, the statistics change the perception more drastically. Through the 2013 season, Manning acquired double-digit fantasy points every week and Brees dipped into single-digit points only once (on the road against the League’s most dominant defense, the Seattle Seahawks) (“ESPN” 2014). Combined, these two QBs achieved double-digit points in 31 out of 32 weeks. Alternatively, the other three QBs combined for eight single-digit fantasy productions. While these three QBs’ total points led the league at the end of the year, they showed inconsistencies on a week-to-week basis, an element that can beak a fantasy season in a head-to-head matchup. Ultimately, fantasy owners are forced to decide whether these week-to-week inconsistencies are worth the gamble, or if the more traditional and reliable QBs present a better option.

Two Minute Warning

Through all of these scenarios, two things become clear: projections are not always accurate and investments always carry potential risk. The same is true for the NYSE, which is why both entities (both fantasy and stocks) require the right skill, intuition, and some luck. The whole game is not a godsend, though; those who know the fantasy well and have experience
tend to finish near the top of their league year after year. Similarly, certain investors continue to find successful stocks annually in the NYSE. Some investors will have off years, but ultimately, those who can display the right amount of confidence, knowledge and discernment end up on top. This takes experience, something not everyone can afford using real money in the NYSE. It is here where fantasy football becomes one of America’s greatest teachers. When playing the game, the investments, the risk, the rewards, and the failure are real, but cost little to nothing at all. The lessons become hands-on and teach owners the very skills one can use in a global market. It is for this reason the game must no longer be approached as “just a game,” but perhaps one of the greater activities one can enjoy on a yearly basis.

Chapter 2: Infiltrating American Culture

Accidental Advancements

Sometimes, good things come out of unexpected situations. What starts as an idea geared toward a specific goal can turn into a situation that unexpectedly benefits other people or situations. Take, for instance, the earliest developments of Viagra. Famous for its ability to increase the blood flow of those suffering from erectile dysfunction, the “little blue pill” led to unexpected discoveries separate from the original study. First, in 1989, “British scientists tested sildenafil citrate as a medication to treat high blood pressure and angina.”37 The results of these tests, while hoping to benefit the human heart, led to an increase in male erections. As a result of these findings, by the late 1990s, the pharmaceutical group Pfizer created and released Viagra as a drug that could combat erectile dysfunction. Though this discovery

37 James 2014
would go on to help thousands of patients, the path of secondary discoveries surrounding this creation did not stop there.

Once Viagra became a viable male enhancement drug, new studies began to show that Viagra was also enhancing the hearts of the clientele taking it. Because Viagra contains the active ingredient sildenafil citrate, taking Viagra over a prolonged period of time “prevent[ed] heart muscle thickening and early stage heart failure.” As it turned out, the amount of sildenafil citrate used in Viagra was more than average heart medicines were using at the time. Additionally, the side effects from this higher dose were minimal to nonexistent. The results, though unintentional, allowed doctors to further their research on heart medicine and create more effective, lifesaving doses.

The results of these discoveries help bridge the gap between the two seemingly unrelated phenomena through the roundabout way benefits arise out of random situations – a trait that holds true for the current game of fantasy as well. Much like Viagra inadvertently led to developments in heart research, the creation and popularity of fantasy football has created vehicles for positive social and cultural criticism through the byproducts associated with the game. As shown in the introduction to this paper, what started as an activity played by small groups of friends slowly turned into a hobby for many. From there, the hobby became increasingly popular each year until it eventually caught fire in public perception.

From this popularity came derivatives like TV shows, *New York Times* bestselling novels, and weekly columns all dedicated to that juggernaut enterprise, fantasy football. More importantly, each of these mediums contains embedded didacticism concerning pertinent cultural and societal issues. Though not its original objective, fantasy football is making

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38 James 2014
American culture smarter due to the byproducts orbiting the game. As the game continues to grow in popularity, the beneficial qualities it offers continue to advance as well.

*A League of Not-So-Extraordinary Gentlemen*

As one of the first companies to embrace (and cash in on) the rapid growth of fantasy football, *FX Network* piloted the show *The League* in 2009. Set in Chicago, Illinois, *The League* follows four main characters who play in a fantasy football league: Kevin, the commissioner of the league, who is often ridiculed because his wife knows more about fantasy football than he does and therefore manages his team for him; Ruxin, a conspiratorial, somewhat heartless character who boasts an attractive, supermodel wife (but also gets harassed because she controls every facet of his life); Pete, a recently divorced businessman who repeatedly fails at finding a replacement love-interest; and Andre, the plastic-surgeon, most-successful-yet-also-most-criticized member of the league who seems to be terrible at everything he does.

It is important to know that these four members are middle-aged males who work, have families, and love football; the potential lessons we can learn from *The League* stem from the fact that its characters embody these characteristics, or those of a “typical football fan.” It is also worth considering that they embody a desirable demographic for television networks: youngish males with disposable income. As IMDB describes it, the show is “an ensemble comedy that follows a group of old friends in a fantasy football league who care deeply about one another -- so deeply that they use every opportunity to make each other's lives miserable.”\(^{39}\) Though the nucleus of the show is fantasy football – each season starts at the league’s draft and ends at the championship game – the show is more about the lives and

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\(^{39}\) IMDB 2016
interactions of the people in the fantasy league than fantasy football itself. This formula allows the show to be more than just a “guy show” about football and girls, creating an avenue for multiple audiences. More importantly, this approach allows the show to take on bigger issues than the minor squabbles a typical fantasy football team endures and pushes it into territories for social critique.

For the typical fantasy football player, *The League* lends itself well to highlighting and ridiculing the stereotypical behaviors and activities of people who play in a fantasy league. The show’s greater success, however, derives from its relevancy regarding important societal issues that surround both the NFL and our 21st century American society. Accomplishing this in regards to football, for example, is the 2016 series premier of *The League*, which bitingly attacked the Seattle Seahawks’ devastating loss in the 2015 Super Bowl. Those who remember this game will recall the controversial decision Seahawks’ head coach Pete Carroll made on a potential game-winning drive in the fourth quarter. Inside the Patriot’s five-yard line with only minutes left in the game, Seattle decided to throw the ball, a pass that was intercepted and ultimately lost them the game. Many criticized this play call because the Seahawks’ RB, Marshawn Lynch, is a powerful runner who statistically secures the ball well (elements a coach might consider when trying to score a three-yard touchdown).

Following this loss, *The League* premiered its next season with one of its secondary characters, Taco, meeting with Marshawn Lynch on a beach in Mexico. When Kevin, standing about ten yards away, asks for a beer from the cooler sitting next to Taco and Lynch, the two debate whether Taco should throw the beer to Kevin or run it over. Marshawn Lynch claims he could “sleepwalk the beer over to him” because it is such a close distance.40 Taco,

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40 Schaffer 2015
instead, decides to throw the beer; Kevin misses it, hits a charcoal grill and catches on fire (an obvious, yet comical, simulation of the failed decision from the Super Bowl). Adding a football-centric scene like this addressed an issue that was debated by coaches, players, fans and commentators for weeks following the Super Bowl. Fans of football could easily see the parody the show created while reliving an important football moment.

For the less football-savvy viewer, however, the show also excels at tackling some pressing, non-football issues our current society faces. Using this same type of humor – brash satire, exaggerations, reversals, and irony – *The League* educates viewers on more culturally relevant issues, such as homosexuality, racism, and persons with handicaps. As a result, the show – a direct byproduct of fantasy football – offers its viewers opportunities to learn and become more culturally aware of the tenacious issues in America today. By looking in detail at the plot of one show, we can see how *The League* accomplishes this feat for its viewers.

*A Tie is like Kissing Your Sister*"  

One of the more controversial, societal issues in the NFL (and sports in general) over the past decade stemmed from openly gay players making their sexuality public. Entering the 2014 NFL draft, no other headline sold more papers than the one broadcasting Michael Sam’s decision to “open up” about his sexuality prior to the NFL draft. Some celebrated Sam’s boldness in the decision while others criticized the non-football attention this announcement brought (as well as the possible detriments it could have had on his NFL draft stock). Regardless, Sam’s announcement brought to the forefront a long-established question regarding the NFL: was football ready to tolerate and cope with an openly gay player?
In 2014, Chris Korman covered the Sam story while writing for *USA Today* by critically evaluating how coaches and General Managers would handle the issue.\(^41\) In another *USA Today* article, Jarret Bell focused on the way the media would handle the issue and whether it would cause public relations issues for the team that would draft Sam.\(^42\) At the time, these were the questions people seemed to be most interested in: how would the coaches, the GMs and the players handle an openly gay player in the NFL? One of the subjects reporters chose to ignore, however, was the American people. It is here that popular culture was able to step in for the much needed commentary that reporters and columnists missed. Perhaps most impressive, though, is that *The League* covered this topic in 2010, four years before Michael Sam was ever showcased atop the Sports page of every media outlet in America.

Airing in November of 2010, *The League*’s episode “The Tie” focuses primarily on society’s (in this case, namely men’s) ignorance and stereotypes regarding homosexuality. Following the normal trajectory of the show, “The Tie” bounces back and forth between multiple sub-plots involving individual characters that accumulate to make the full episode. The marquee event of the show revolves around Ruxin and Andre tying in their weekly fantasy matchup, an outcome they bemoan to the league commissioner, Kevin. Elsewhere in the episode, Pete, while jogging in the park, meets a random stranger (Ed), who offers him free tickets to the upcoming Chicago Bears game for a “small favor in return” in the future. While these two sub-plots serve as the show’s main entertainment points, they also employ the satirical technique of reversal to make a cultural criticism on the main characters (a group whose stereotypical views on homosexuality will be exploited and ridiculed).

\(^{41}\) Korman 2015  
\(^{42}\) Bell 2015
The worldviews of the main characters on the show are best represented through their interactions with Pete as he tells the story of the free Bears tickets. As Pete meets up with the rest of the league to tell his story of getting free Bears’ tickets, Andre immediately asks him “is he going to put the tickets through the little hole in the bathroom stall?” Catching the joke, Kevin proceeds with “Did he tap your foot underneath the bathroom stall?” Both of these comments inadvertently (and condescendingly) show that the guys believe Pete’s new friend is homosexual and further insinuate that he will have to repay him through sexual favors. To drive this point home, Ruxin (always the voice of clarity) goes on a diatribe proclaiming, “favors are gay, and parks are super gay. Parks are like the Club Med for homosexuals.” From these early interactions, it becomes clear that “gay” things are not permissible within this group and such issues will fall into the group’s normal realm of humor. Furthermore, the lack of hesitancy or awkwardness surrounding these comments makes it seem all too natural for the group. Since the show is set up to mirror a real fantasy football league (albeit one that is over-the-top for the sake of comedy), the show depicts these interactions as nothing out of the normal for a group of guys in a league to joke about.

Moving to the second sub-plot in the episode, Ruxin and Andre decide to settle their fantasy tie by holding a footrace in the local park (the very one Ruxin previously called “super gay”). After a disputing over who won the race, the guys notice a wedding ceremony between two men being held right up the hill from the finish line. A vīce camera recording the ceremony also overlooks the finish line of the race, so the guys decide to steal the tape and check the “instant replay” in order to determine who truly won the race. Pete again sees Ed,

43 Schaffer 2010
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
who is both attending the gay wedding and also invites him over to his house later that night
to pick them up. This, of course, incites further ridicule from the other guys. As they get
back to Kevin’s house, Kevin warns Pete to be on the lookout for “gay” things at Ed’s house:
“look for some telltale signs: if there’s Jazz music on, if there’s a fire going on in the
fireplace, if he’s wearing a silk robe.” They further joke with Pete about what sexual favors
he would be comfortable performing for the tickets, to which he concludes he might be ok
giving “just a hand job.”

Using the commentary of the main characters, The League makes clear that, among a
typical machismo-influenced group of football guys, homosexual behavior is not accepted.
Homosexual terms and phrases are used in a pejorative way and homosexual action (such as
giving another guy a hand job) is seen as a taboo action that would have a league member
ostracized. The episode, though, does not end by simply blasting homosexuality and
ridiculing the fact that gay people exist. In fact, the denouement of the “The Tie” brings to
light a subtly laced theme that opposes the very views of the members in the league.

Entering Ed’s apartment, Pete is confronted with everything Kevin predicted: a fire in
the fireplace, Jazz music, freshly poured wine, and Ed wearing a silk robe. At this point, Pete
breaks down and tells Ed he will not be able to perform any sexual favors for the tickets,
stating “I thought maybe it could just be a hand job... and then I was like, I don’t think it
could be a hand job, even with a glove.” Seconds later, Ed’s wife and son walk into the
room as things quickly begin to unfold for both the characters on the show and the audience
viewing the show. Ed was never gay, even though he fit the specific “gay” parameters set by

\[46\] Schaffer and Schaffer 2010
\[47\] Ibid.
\[48\] Ibid.
Kevin and the other guys. As the clarity sets in on this scene, the rest of the show unfolds to reveal the opposite of what was anticipated.

Using a technique of parody known as reversal, where the stereotypical, expected outcome of something is flipped upside down, “The Tie” is able to make a social critique regarding homosexuality. By the end of the episode, the line between “what gay looks like” becomes more and more blurry. In fact, a closer look at the actions of the guys in the league leads to an indecipherable level of how a gay person looks and acts. Mid-episode, while receiving criticism for his interactions with Ed, Pete makes a crucial comment that almost gets lost in the banter of the episode. He states, “I don’t think you guys are in any position to decide who’s gay and who’s not.”49 He immediately references the fact that Ruxin, at the beginning of the episode, recorded a message on the league’s message board with his naked butt (using his butthole as a mouth and using a high-pitched voice, presumably his “butthole voice”). Though this is the only scene Pete mentions, throughout the episode, many of the members of the show perform actions that would be deemed “homosexual” by the “gay parameters” they themselves set for others. As mentioned earlier, Ruxin, after classifying parks as “super gay,” participates in a footrace in the park to settle a fantasy discrepancy. This is immediately juxtaposed with two actual homosexuals, who are getting married in a park (much like any normal couple, heterosexual or homosexual, would choose to do). Furthermore, Andre is ridiculed for crying during the movie Jumanji, Ruxin exposes his naked butt to the whole league on the public message board, and Kevin and Ruxin engage in a cyber-battle that involves changing their team names to insult the length of the other

49 Schaffer and Schaffer 2010
member’s penis (“The Kevin’s Micro Dongs;” “The MacArthur’s Crotch Knobs”). By the end of the episode, we begin to see that the straight guys in the episode align more closely with the league’s negative standards for homosexuals, creating irony via satire where roles are reversed.

Though this method of criticism is indirect, an episode like “The Tie” forces its audience to self-evaluate the stereotypes we hold over certain groups. Though not all of its viewers are homophobes like the main characters in the show, the fact remains that, in both sports and American culture, these viewpoints exist. If they were non-existent, Michael Sam’s announcement would have carried less weight and failed to make headlines. Though the show hinges on fantasy football as its main focal point, these side critiques work to educate an audience on issues Americans need to engage and embrace.

Social critiques in The League do not stop with homosexuality, either. In fact, looking across the full spectrum of its successful six-season run, The League continually embraces the cultural issues our society faces (often ones that are more pertinent in Football culture, as well). In “Ramona Napolitano,” for example, the show focuses on feminism and misogyny: as Kevin’s wife, Jenny, takes control of the league while each of the guys in the league simultaneously experience a loss of masculine pride (Andre takes soy medication, which causes him to grow breasts and cry at everything; Kevin owns up to being incapable of making any decision in life, claiming “I haven’t made a decision for myself since the day I got married”). Elsewhere, in “The Vapora Sport,” the show places attention on pejorative societal views regarding the handicapped (Pete battles a man in a wheelchair for a pair of athletic running shoes who turns out to be more athletic than both himself and Kevin; Ruxin

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50 Schaffer and Schaffer 2010
51 Ibid.
represents a blind man who, near the end of the show, wrestles him to the ground and pins him).\textsuperscript{52} Finally, in “The Freeze Out,” the show presents discourse on racism, questioning what counts as discrimination in our society (Ruxin and Kevin refuse to eat from a sushi chef because he is Caucasian instead of Japanese).\textsuperscript{53}

Similar to “The Tie,” each episode puts the main characters in a less-than glorying light, which allows The League to quickly become a didactic sitcom for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century viewer. Laced with misogyny, prejudiced and misanthropic behavior, each episode champions a beneficial worldview that cuts through the fantasy plotlines the show is formed upon. These newly defined worldviews, however, come at the expense and failures of the main characters. While some episodes accomplish this much more successfully (and tactfully) than others, the show presents educational values for its viewers on culturally relevant issues. Through posing as a show about fantasy football, The League offers much more.

\textit{Love it or Hate it}

Because fantasy football is a weekly game, players must research and tweak lineups on a weekly basis to account for the ever-changing factors that are the NFL schedule. Each week, an individual player faces a different defense in a different stadium with (due to injuries and other unforeseeable factors) different players surrounding him. As these factors change, a fantasy owner must change his lineup accordingly to maximize the winning potential for his team. Some weeks, these decisions are easy to make because of the factors surrounding each player on a team. For instance, a team carrying three RBs might lose a RB to an injury for a

\textsuperscript{52} Schaffer and Schaffer 2012
\textsuperscript{53} Schaffer and Schaffer 2012, “Freeze Out”
few weeks, ultimately forcing the owner to play the other two RBs in the available slots. Here, there lack of options makes the decision easy. Other weeks, however, owners can have more difficult decisions to make due to optimal matchups or an aggregation of seemingly impossible matchups. It is these weeks that make fantasy football a game players hate as much as they love.

In response to the all-too-often fantasy dilemmas players face week-to-week, fantasy columnists and analysts everywhere attempt to provide respite via recommendations of which players owners should start and sit. Using a combination of statistical data, football knowledge, and overall “gut feelings,” these articles essentially become a list of two types of players: those with favorable matchups and those with more challenging matchups. Because fantasy is such a tumultuous game, these articles are extremely popular amongst the fantasy community. After all, the last thing a fantasy player wants to do is lose a matchup because he started player A instead of player B (better to lose at the hands of failed potential than failed managing). Using these lists as a guide, fantasy players can gain confidence in difficult decisions before the lineups become locked on Sunday morning.

Most “Start ‘Em or Sit ‘Em” columns jump right into the advice of the columnist. Venturing to Yahoo!’s Sports page, for example, a column by analyst Nick Mensio begins with about 20 words explaining the reason for the column before offering his first favorite player. Similarly, switching over to CBSSports fantasy page, columnist Jamey Eisenberg pens close to 150 words summarizing the week’s biggest player decisions before the article enters into a basic structure of “here are the guys I like and here are the ones I would bench.” This standard set-up for weekly advice caters to the frenetic fantasy owner scouring the Internet for every fantasy tip available. Amongst the myriad of advice columns that follow
this basic format, one weekly column breaks this trend. Ironically, this article is also
sponsored by the “Worldwide Leader in Sports,” ESPN. Here, senior fantasy Analyst
Matthew Berry offers a much different weekly column in which he titles “Love/Hate.”

Clicking on Berry’s weekly “Love/Hate” column, one immediately notices a stark
difference from the multitude of other weekly advice columns: to find the players Berry
recommends sitting and starting each week, a reader must first scroll through (or actually
read) anywhere from 500 to 1500 words of content. Each week, Berry begins his column by
addressing... well, whatever he feels is relevant, pressing, or necessary to discuss. Some
columns are light-hearted experiences he had that week, such as “Love/Hate for Week 16:
Wasting Away in Fantasyville,” where he writes about meeting his musical idol, Jimmy
Buffet. Other weeks, he may write about terrible experiences he has had, like “Love/Hate for
Week 4: A Giant Letdown,” where he discusses getting harassed by drunk fantasy football
players for giving “bad advice” while attending an NFL game with his three kids. Most of the
time, however, Berry covers the NFL and, most of the time, he uses his column to do more
than talk about famous singers or bad experiences. In fact, most weeks, his column covers
real issues – some football related, some not – that are prevalent in American society. It is
here that fantasy football offers yet another beneficial, supplementary contribution to our
society. Using fantasy football as its subject, Matthew Berry’s “Love/Hate,” published by
one of the biggest sports companies in the world, educates his readers while addressing
important cultural issues and topics.
Bullying: A Lifetime of Bad Memories

Similar to The League, Matthew Berry often writes reactionary articles to events taking place in the NFL. When the Richie Incognito/Jonathan Martin story broke in the fall of 2013, however, Berry did more than just cover it; he wrote one of his longest “Love/Hate” columns (close to 1500 words) about being bullied as a child and the way it has affected him ever since. For those unfamiliar with the story, Jonathan Martin joined the Miami Dolphins as a rookie in 2012. Soon after signing, Martin fell subject to ridicule and bullying from fellow teammates, the majority at the hands of guard Richie Incognito. According to a report on the issue by Ted Wells, the bullying began with Incognito and a few other players harassing Martin, calling him a “bitch,” “cunt,” and a “pussy” during team practices. From there, the bullying became directed at Martin’s sister. Here, Incognito and other teammates sent grotesque text messages to Martin describing the sexually assaultive things they were going to do to his sister. As a result of this bullying and harassment, Martin decided to quit the team, a move that instantly garnered national headlines.

Following Martin’s departure, the reactions of fans and NFL players instantly became mixed. Many agreed that the harassment went too far and warranted him leaving the team. Others, however, claimed that this type of behavior was common in NFL locker rooms and that Martin should not have made it public by bringing the national media into the situation. As CBSSports’ Ryan Wilson documented, some players even criticized Martin for being too soft. Covering the story, Wilson interviewed Giants’ Safety Antrel Rolle, who called Martin a “Grown-ass man” who should “stand up for himself.”\textsuperscript{54} With these mixed reactions stemming from both NFL players and NFL fans alike, Matthew Berry used his weekly column – geared
toward fantasy advice for fantasy players – to address the issue and bring understanding to a situation many fail to truly understand.

While most commentators offered criticism on the Martin/Incognito situation – defending one or attacking the other – Matthew Berry’s week 13 edition of “Love/Hate” in November of 2013 did something different: he provided understanding. Using a fantasy football platform that reaches thousands of readers each week, Berry’s column revealed his own personal experiences of growing up as a child who was bullied multiple times. Addressing one of the biggest questions asked during the whole event – why did Martin wait so long to speak up about the harassment and bullying – Berry wrote: “I don’t know the answer because I’m not him, but I can guess. Because I’ve been there. My whole life I’ve been there. I’m still there.”

From there, the article launches into the childhood of Matthew Berry, a young, Jewish boy growing up in a Texas town full of judgmental teenagers. Highlighting instances like having his car vandalized, being forced to give up items of his lunch in order to sit down in the cafeteria, and purposefully being left at convenient stores while his friends drove off laughing, Berry recounts his childhood as “soul-crushing,” “humiliating,” and “heartbreaking.”

Due to the nature of the article, it would be easy to downplay the heroics of an article like Matthew Berry’s “Love/Hate” by suggesting he is a columnist using a current event to pull on the heartstrings of his reader in search of sympathy and pity. The more the column continues, however, the easier it is to discover that such a sentiment could not be further from the truth. As Berry writes about his childhood, what his column does best is force his reader to consider the life of a person being bullied by inserting himself into the situation. His real-

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55 2013
56 Berry 2013
life examples, as vulnerable as they may be, give his reader something concrete to connect with, something that exceeds any blanket-criticism a typical sports writer could quip regarding the situation. Continuing his article, Berry writes that, as a victim of bullying, “you feel helpless. It’s a group against one. Tell an authority figure and you’re a tattletale. They’ll just come at you harder and more cleverly disguised. You feel embarrassed. You get jumpy, looking and assuming things are there when they aren’t.”

By understanding his personal experience, we as readers slowly gain a deeper understanding of the situation Jonathan Martin experienced, one that makes the aforementioned comments from Antrel Rolle (and the surface-level criticism from other commentators and sports fans alike) seem both ignorant and misguided.

Adding to his effective personal writing style is the fact that, by the end of the article, Berry never tells his reader to react a certain way toward the situation. In fact, toward the end, he even justifies the actions of Incognito by claiming “people are often blissfully unaware that something that seems so small to you can in fact be very large to someone else, which is why I also understand why Richie Incognito doesn’t understand what the fuss is about.”

Clearly, his article reads with a bias against bullying (as it should), yet by offering rationalization for Incognito, it becomes clear that Berry’s ultimate goal is not to criticize one side or defend the other; he simply wishes to provide context for the event so his reader can make an informed decision about a ubiquitous situation. Ending his column with proverbial advice, Berry writes, “I hope everyone reading this fights his or her demons. And is careful not to create any for someone else.” From there, he jumps into the player he favors and

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57 Berry 2013
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
dislikes for that particular week of fantasy football, offering up his best advice to help players win their weekly matchups.

Nowhere in Matthew Berry’s job description at ESPN does it mention “social critic” or “life coach,” yet from just one article it becomes clear that he has more of an agenda in writing than just providing advice for a made up game people play behind a multitude of screens each week. Instead, using a column that is marketed on the main page of the biggest sports network in America, Berry’s “Love/Hate” columns offer educational value in regards to fantasy, morality and life. While it would be impossible to truly measure the effectiveness of an article such as this, the opportunity for his readers exists (something that would not be true if he chose to write about a funny football story or, like other columnists, abstain from writing any sort of introduction at all). Furthermore, because the article’s weekly core is about the players Berry “loves” and “hates,” so long as he includes a list of said players at the bottom of his column, he essentially receives a free pass each week to write about any topic that could be of interest to his reader (such as the one about the Jimmy Buffet concert). Beyond bullying and Buffet, Berry’s fantasy football column receives an unrestricted freedom to shape our society through didactic commentary and critique toward endless topics of his choice.

Counteracting the Richie Incognito type of headlines in the NFL are the more motivational and uplifting stories that also surround the game. One such story was that of Devon Still, a defensive end for the Cincinnati Bengals. To put it politely, in comparison to other DEs in the NFL, Devon Still is not that good at football. In fact, the Cincinnati Bengals were intent on cutting Still in 2014 because other players outperformed him in the pre-season. This all changed, however, when Still’s four-year old daughter, Leah, was diagnosed with
Stage-4 neuroblastoma, a cancer found in her adrenal glands that gave her a 50/50 chance to live. After hearing about his daughter’s illness, the Bengal's retracted their decision to cut Still from the team and, instead, signed him to the practice squad – a move that guaranteed him no playing time, but ensured he would remain on the team’s health-insurance policy. While it was never formally documented, the understanding was that Still would remain on the team’s practice squad until his daughter’s cancer went away or became too severe for medical help.

Obviously, an empathetic decision like this from an NFL organization garnered immediate praise from the media. Many columns were written in admiration of the Bengals and in support of the Still family. By November of 2015, reports indicated that Leah’s cancer had all but dissipated – a victory for the Still family and everyone following the story for the year and half since the original diagnosis. Going in a different direction on the topic of cancer, however, was Matthew Berry’s “Love/Hate” that came out one week after Leah’s remarkable biopsy. Issued on December 3, 2015, Berry went a less jubilant route as he covered the topic of cancer as told through the eyes of a fantasy league that had just lost a league member because of cancer. Abstaining from the celebratory influx surrounding Leah Still’s recovery, Berry’s fantasy column continued to educate and provide understanding about a topic nearly every reader can relate to in some way.

Reporting on the Ashe Fantasy Football League, a “12-team PPR keeper league” out of North Carolina, the column covers the insane antics the league experienced together over the years (something most leagues can relate to). From there, though, the article loses its cheer as Berry unveils that the league lost one of its members, Mark, to cancer earlier that

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60 Serico 2015
year. The next page and a half of the column are spent recapping the inspirational, heartwarming (while also devastating) experience the league had in the year leading up to Mark’s death. The reader quickly realizes that the article is as much about Ashe league as it is Mark. By taking the reader inside the league and everything they went through while supporting their beloved friend, Berry takes his reader through a scenario any member of a fantasy league can understand and sympathize with. Once involved in the story, the reader becomes more receptive to the overarching theme of the column: “a cancer diagnosis may not be life-ending, but it is life-changing. For the patient and his/her family, for the rest of their lives. Even if someone is declared cancer-free, there will always be worry.”\footnote{Berry 2015} With a new understanding of how cancer can affect a fantasy league, any fantasy player can now use the context of his own league to better visualize how true this quote is on a personal level.

A cancer diagnosis is tragic; few would argue that the Cincinnati Bengals’ treatment of the Still family was anything less than elevating and admirable. Our failings as a society, however, come through our understanding of what a cancer recovery (or failed recovery) looks and feels like. Unless we experience it first-hand, it becomes difficult to fully grasp the complex elements surrounding a life-altering event. It is here that Berry’s column superbly succeeds. Using fantasy football as his context point, his column takes his reader beyond the black-and-white view that “cancer is bad” and “survival from cancer is good.” Instead, by reading about a league and connecting with the members involved, we gain a better understanding of the fear, uncertainty, humor, anguish, and every other emotion that is coupled with a cancer diagnosis. Ultimately, this column educates society in ways that other mediums fail to connect.
With sixteen weeks in an NFL season plus the playoffs, the number of “Love/Hate” columns increase every year. As mentioned before, not every article covers a crucial contemporary issue in society. Some are more personal, such as the aforementioned Week 4 of 2015 where Berry discusses the difficulty of being a fantasy analyst in public. Other times, like Week 12 of 2014, Berry discusses general life advice as he outlines the steps he took to become the Senior Fantasy Analysts at ESPN. Other articles are just interesting and fun reads (see again, Jimmy Buffet from before). When the articles are serious, however, and provide meaningful lessons, the true impact can be made on fantasy fans and society.

Clicking on a Fantasy advice URL like Matthew Berry’s “Love/Hate” takes the reader to a piece of edifying literature on events that requires more understanding from society. These articles, much like FX’s The League, use fantasy football to sell product; at the end of the day, the goal for both is to acquire more viewers and readers, most of whom have a common interest in the game. Ancillary to this goal, however, is the reality that both mediums contain the ability to make society a better place. Through the morals and teachings coupled to their fantasy core, both The League and “Love/Hate” provide the opportunity to make readers and viewers more informed and in-tune with relevant issues surrounding American culture, turning a game most consider a hobby into a valuable asset for the American people.

Chapter 3: Fantasy Meets Reality

Some NFL players love fantasy football. Others downright hate it. Surrounding the commencement of fantasy’s surge in popularity, most NFL players remained emotionally indifferent to the game. The reactions of fans, whether exuberant over a win or disgruntled
over a loss, seldom surpassed the threshold of NFL locker rooms. Twitter and the rest of today’s social-media networks, however, have changed all of that. In 2016, fans can follow, tweet at, and direct message the very NFL superstars they watch on the screen every week, encapsulating every spontaneous emotion felt in 150 characters or less. In addition to expanding our accessibility to NFL players, these social networks have also grown the divide between NFL player’s endorsements of fantasy football. Now, more than ever, pro-footballers are beginning to respond back.

Maurice Jones-Drew (MJD), best known for his years spent as RB for the Jacksonville Jaguars, may be one of the biggest proponents for fantasy football who also plays in the NFL. Not only does MJD play fantasy football on a yearly basis, he has also been known to offer fans drafting advice during the weeks leading up to the NFL season. Entering the 2013 season, MJD told fans to draft him “number one, every year.”\textsuperscript{62} He went on to say that “people were saying Adrian [Peterson] was washed up last year. Now they’re questioning Arian [Foster]. That's what people have to do to justify not drafting you. That's them. I'm very confident in my abilities and my team.”\textsuperscript{63} Though much of this was said with tongue in cheek, MJD’s overall attitude toward the sport cuts through his own joviality; only a player who enjoys the game and supports those who play it would take the time to talk about it in an interview and furthermore give draft advice (however self-aggrandizing it may be).

The NFL players in support of fantasy do not stop at MJD, either. While not all players give fantasy advice like MJD, numerous NFL players have confirmed that they play fantasy football themselves and are hooked on the game. These include some big names, too, such as Bears’ RB Matt Forte, former Falcons’ TE Tony Gonzalez, and former QB turned

\textsuperscript{62} Adelson 2013
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
current fantasy analyst, Matthew Hasselbeck. Some play for fun; some play in multiple leagues; some draft themselves; some draft their entire NFL team—while their involvement varies, consistency is found through players who love both the NFL game, as well as the internet version we call fantasy football.

While these players are pro-fantasy, some NFL players avoid fantasy football at all costs. In fact, they vehemently despise it, especially when angry fans complain about losing a fantasy matchup as a result of a player’s poor performance. We know this because, when situations like this occur, some players respond back to the fan who vented behind the presumed safety of his Twitter account. Such was the case for Cardinals’ WR John Brown during week eight of the 2015 NFL season. Despite being listed as “healthy” for the Cardinals’ matchup against the Cleveland Browns, Brown sat on the sidelines the entire game resting an injured hamstring. Following the game, after receiving numerous angry tweets from fans that scored zero points as a result of Brown’s inactivity, Brown took to Twitter and began responding to his transgressors. To one fan who claimed Brown would be on his fantasy bench the next week, Brown responded with “I’m a be at your girl [sic] house it’s our bye week” (sealed with an emoji smiley face). To his other disgruntled fans, he responded by simply saying “you’re welcome.” Though not entirely enraged, it becomes clear through Brown’s responses that his views toward fantasy are less than favorable.

Whereas John Brown’s views regarding fantasy football could be described as mild aversion, Chris Johnson has documented his disdain as clearly as possible. In 2013, while playing as the RB for the Tennessee Titans, Johnson managed only 21 yards on 15 carries in a tilt against the New York fightin’ Jets. The Titans ended up beating the Jets 38-13, but Johnson had little to show for a game that was won through the air. As a result, Johnson’s
fans erupted on Twitter over the meager two points his performance earned them. Johnson responded, via the use of two Tweets, saying “Public service announcement: I can care less about fantasy football. Key word fantasy. As long as we win I’m happy. I rush for 200 n lose y’all happy. U r the head coach n the owner of ur fantasy team so u should be mad at urself I didn’t ask any of u to draft me so if I’m so sorry y start me.” Putting the onus on his fans to manage their teams better, Johnson easily fits in the category of NFL players who dislike fantasy football.

Most of the time, NFL players and fans vent on Twitter and move on from the incident without revisiting the issue. NFL players have actual games to worry about and fans have jobs, families, or both to tend to that force these issues to be dropped after they happen. In 2015, however, an anti-fantasy football rant by Chiefs’ WR Jeremy Maclin managed to tread water longer than usual thanks to the counter-response by ESPN’s Senior fantasy Analyst, Matthew Berry. Following a down game (statistically), Maclin responded to angry fans similarly to Chris Johnson by Tweeting:

M: It amazes me how 'Fantasy Football' is the only football that some of you know. It's sad. News flash for yall (sic): I don't give a damn about ur (sic) "Fantasy" football team #ChiefsKingdom.

Reading these Tweets, Matthew Berry quickly responded by saying:

B: Nor should you care @ anyone’s fantasy team, Jeremy. But you don’t need to insult fans who drive ratings & revenue” (Ibid). Berry went on to say “I remain a fan of @Jmac__19 but I’m disappointed by his tweet. Fantasy players drive huge ratings,

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64 Dixon 2015
65 Ibid.
Maclin would go on to clarify the root of his anger by saying:

M: How can one possibly be a diehard fan of a team but want a player on that team to do bad because he plays them in fantasy…I’m frown (sic) upon those who will sacrifice a team victory for a fantasy victory.67

At that last tweet, the discussion ended and all was forgotten between the two public figures.

While the Twitter-debate between Berry and Maclin ended the same night it began, the points both parties bring up regarding fantasy football and the NFL are worth revisiting. Both men make strong claims about fantasy football, the people who play it, and the way it impacts the NFL. Berry, on one hand, attributes much of the NFL’s success (ratings and revenue) and player’s contracts to the game of fantasy football. Maclin, on the other hand, claims that fantasy players care more about fantasy football than real football (favoring a fantasy team victory over a win by one’s NFL team). Clearly, the two are at odds over a game that impacts both of their careers on a personal level.

Since many of these claims are difficult to prove using data due to a lack of substantial evidence, this section of the paper will seek to explore the ways fantasy football impacts the NFL through the means of ethnography. Through interviewing people who play the game, the views of these fans will be used to determine if Matthew Berry’s claims are valid and whether Jeremy Maclin’s concerns hold any truth. In the end, it will be determined if either argument, or both, actually match up with the typical beliefs of fantasy football players.

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66 Dixon 2015
67 Ibid.
Ratings, Revenue and Personal Allegiance

Using Matthew Berry’s arguments as a catalyst for discussion, the questions for this ethnography first find links between one’s fantasy football playing and the way it affects NFL viewership. Determining the amount of football a player watches because of his fantasy football team creates an identifiable link to increased ratings. With increased ratings, we can also hypothesize that this directly leads to increased revenue. After all, as CNBC’s Ike Ejiochi writes, “another major moneymaker for the NFL is its four-year $4 billion partnership ($1 billion per season) with DirecTV…it attracts roughly 10 percent of DirecTV’s 20 million subscribers to the satellite TV service.”

In addition to seeing if people simply watch more football because of fantasy, this section also searches to see if fantasy football changes the way (TV service, location, etc.) people watch football. Beyond that, this section will also determine whether fantasy football breaks down barriers a typical NFL fan might have; does fantasy help curb the biases fans have toward opposing teams players? While the NFL certainly benefits from big rivalries between teams, if a player can throw his support behind any team in the NFL because of a made-up game, it should only help ratings, which would align with Berry’s aforementioned argument. If a Steelers fan will watch his arch-nemesis Baltimore Ravens play, for instance, because he has Joe Flacco as his fantasy QB, the ratings might see an altered influx as a direct result of fantasy sports.

The interviews also set out to address Jeremy Maclin’s claims that fantasy football is ruining the allegiance viewers have to the NFL and the personal teams we root for. To evaluate these claims a hypothetical situation is used in the interview that puts one’s fantasy

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68 Ejiochi 2014
team against one’s real NFL team. This, in addition to other pointed questions, evaluates the allegiance fans\(^6^9\) show the made up game of fantasy sports when stacked against the real thing.

_Telly_

Telly’s real name is Ryan, but only people who do not know him (and his parents) call him that. There is a story as to why people call him Telly, but it got lost somewhere in the late 1990s. Currently 34 years old, Telly is a letter carrier for the city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Of his many passions in life, Pittsburgh sports, Craft beers and photography rank amongst the top five. He has additionally played fantasy football for the past decade of his life, which hovers near the top of the list as well. Though he never actually played football growing up (aside from the typical backyard football game with friends), Telly is an avid viewer of NFL games. This, however, is something he picked up in the latter portion of his life. When asked about his views on the NFL, he told me “growing up, it was something I did, you know, because it was like something my Dad did and we could watch together. Once I got out of high school and into college, though, is when it really picked up.” Today, he balances two fantasy leagues while dabbling in daily fantasy tournaments from time to time as well.

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\(^6^9\) To garner a larger range of response, the interviews for this ethnography attempted to reach people in various working communities with different experiences relating to football. This helps ensure that some of the responses would be a direct result of fantasy football and not just football fandom. A former football player or a current football coach, for instance, may enjoy football so much that he watches every game due to his fascination with the sport. These types of questions have also been included in the interview to give a better overview of the interviewee. While these interviews attempted to include more women who play fantasy sports, none were able to be contacted for interviews. It is worth mentioning, however, that fantasy sports are catering to females as much as males, which in turn is helping break down the generalization that football is a “guy’s sport.”
My first question for Telly asks him to go back ten years (to when he first started
playing) and to determine if playing fantasy changed the way he currently watches or views
the NFL. Even a decade removed from his time starting fantasy, his answer comes
immediately.70

E: When you first started playing fantasy football, did it change the way you watched or
viewed the NFL?

T: The clear number one thing is, I noticed this right away, when I first started playing is
I immediately got interested in other teams, other players… it’s such a great
familiarize yourself and get invested with more than just may your local team you root
for. You really get a sense for the whole league because all of sudden you’re
interested in all these other teams and players and how they’re doing and how their
team works. So yeah, that has to be the biggest impact. Right away, I became more
interested in the league as a whole instead of just the Steelers, who is the team I root
for.”

This idea that fantasy expands a players’ overall interest in the NFL is one that will transcend
all of the interviews conducted for this paper. Supporting Matthew Berry’s claim, this initial
change a player notices beginning to play fantasy football leads to a desire to become more
educated on every team in the NFL. This includes, but is not limited to, the way individual
players, the type of offense, the coaching staff, etc.

70 All questions coming from myself will be labeled as “E” for “Ethnographer”
E: Has your newfound love for the game changed the way you specifically view the games, such as TV provider or how the stations you watch?

T: We use Comcast, but no it didn’t influence my cable subscription, but I do watch more games than I would have, so maybe I patronize more channels than I normally would have?

Telly’s household does not subscribe to DirecTV or get any extra football packages, but he admits to being a football junkie because of fantasy and watches more games because of it.

E: Does playing fantasy football make you more objective toward players where you might actually draft and root for guys in a fantasy realm that you despise under normal football circumstance?

T: (Chuckling) You know, there is a certain point where I would not pick a Ravens player… ok, there are two sides to this. I would not pick anyone from the Ravens, unless, maybe, it was kind of a good pick? I could maybe stomach it, but there is definitely some influence to that homer mentality for sure. It’s not like a deal breaker, but there is some bias for sure – it exists.

The idea that fantasy football can make fans more objective toward football can directly influence the ratings and revenue. A typical NFL viewer dislikes his team’s rival and hopes they lose as many games as possible (especially when playing one’s own NFL team).

Because of fantasy football, however, it becomes possible for a player to root for a team he despises because of the investment he has for a specific player on that team. This could lead
to situations where, even though a fan dislikes a specific team, he will still watch said team play on a Sunday afternoon. Trying to make the situation more realistic, I gave him a scenario to latch onto:

E: If Pittsburg’s prized WR Antonio Brown was suddenly traded to the Ravens and he fell to you at the eight spot in the first round, would you pick him or avoid him out of spite?

T: (After some hesitation) It would depend on who the quarterback is, for one, but I would consider it. It would have to be the right situation, but I would definitely consider it. I wouldn’t avoid him solely because he was on the Ravens, but I would definitely look at the other options available as well. I just don’t wanna root for the Ravens, though. I don’t want that team to have success. It’s a weird situation where there is that duality between your fantasy team and your reality team. You want to keep your own team pure and root for that team, but then there’s a thin line between that and, really, meaningless fantasy games. It’s in the name of it, it’s “fantasy.” At the same time, though, even the real stuff is just a stupid football game when you look at it.

Addressing the duality more, I asked Telly which team took precedent if he could have only one. I gave him the following scenario to help latch onto the concept a little better
E: Let’s pretend, at the end of the season, you have to choose between the Pittsburg Steelers winning the AFC Championship game or you winning your fantasy football championship, which would you pick? Only one can happen.”

T: (No hesitation) You gotta go for the Steelers. You have to root for your team. Team takes precedence. There’s more of a benefit when it comes to rooting for your own team because, most likely, when your actual team wins, you have friends and family to celebrate with you. With your fantasy team, though, that’s just a selfish endeavor where I can win some money that lacks the community that comes along with your actual team winning. So, that has to take precedence over winning a silly game, even if money is involved. It speaks to why you watch sports, which should be for the community that comes along with it.

This last response addresses Jeremy Maclin’s claim that fans care more about a specific player than one’s actual team. Others interviewed in this paper support Telly’s views on fantasy football. Most tend to see fantasy as an individualistic game. While people are competitive and play to win, supporting a real NFL team posits a different type of community and environment. Despite a long-standing love for fantasy football, the allegiance remains with the actual NFL team.

_Hank_

Like Telly, Hank’s name is not actually “Hank.” It’s Henry. Also like Telly, one would show his unfamiliarity to Hank by calling him Henry in public. Unless, of course, you were a member of his congregation. In this case, you might call him Pastor Henry. Though he
graduated with a marketing degree in the early 2000’s, Hank now pastors a small church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Born in Africa, Hank came to America as a child where he found friends, family, and football. Today, those remain some of the biggest proponents of his life. For these interviews, Hank fulfills the role of a person who knows football well from both playing and coaching it throughout his life.

H: I grew up playing football, I played football all the way up through high school, actually. I was always a huge football fan, one of the interesting things is that I came over from Africa so I didn’t know football, I had no framework so I kinda just jumped right in and started playing. I became a huge NY Giants fan and then I moved to Philadelphia in the 7th grade. This meant I went from having all my home games on TV to only seeing them when they would play the Eagles or if they happened to be on MNF. So that’s where I came from with football, having to check the evening news or Sports center or even the newspaper the next day to find out which team won.

E: Very cool, what positions did you play?

H: I actually played QB my first year and then my second year – I was always younger for my grade so I actually got to play in the pee-wees during 5th and 6th grade when I was living in northern Jersey – that was funny because once I hit 7th grade, I was finally playing with people my own age. So by my third year in pee-wees I played MLB, which seems kinda crazy, and then RB.

E: Ha, that’s awesome. I actually never knew that. Since you come from a background of knowing football, having played it, once you started playing fantasy, did that
change the way you started watching football? Did you pick up any new information or understand the game differently?

H: I think, to be honest, the whole part of it is not just playing fantasy but also getting older. When you’re 7 and 8, there’s only so much you can pick up in nuances vs what you pick up when you’re 17, 18. So this was the time I started playing fantasy, right around the same time I started watching and understand the game differently. Where it did change, though, is through the appreciation for the game. For example, I can still remember when they were picking pro-bowl teams and you would just assume there would be at least 10 cowboys because the Cowboys were just really good that year. But I think now, because of fantasy, I’m more… I would even say passionate about arguing pro-bowlers because I’m like “well this guy has more touchdowns and that guy has more interceptions” or, “is that guy really good, or did he just play for the Cowboys? Why are we putting their fullback on the team.”

Whereas Telly’s interview showcased the way fantasy spreads out one’s interest in the NFL, Hank’s response shows how fantasy also put a person in tune with the smaller intricacies of the game. This level of interest and “appreciation” for the game creates a more involved fan, one who drives the ratings and revenue of the NFL through the multiple outlets they use to seek information. A player with the level of involvement watches more games, listens to more NFL based radio shows or podcasts, and carries the discussions into his normal daily activity.
E: I’m the same way, so many small aspects have changed like that since I started playing. During the season and offseason, how much time would you say you dedicate to fantasy? Whether that’s checking player statuses or reading articles?

H: Obviously, during the offseason I don’t check this stuff as often, however because of the online thing it makes it so much easier to follow your team so I would guess I check at least one Giants’ blog a day. But the one greatest thing about the NFL expanding their calendar, which is kinda genius, is that now, even if my team doesn’t make the playoffs, because of fantasy I’m still interested and watching. Then, by backing up and having the draft later, I’ll even follow that through the spring.

Hank addresses in both of his previous responses the fact that fantasy football’s popularity is almost perfectly synchronized with technological advancements being used by the NFL. It would be difficult to delineate whether fantasy or technology is actually driving people’s yearlong fascination with the NFL. Fortunately, isolating one over the other is not necessary. Because the companies the offer fantasy football (as well as the analysts and commentators who report on it) use the immediacy fans have to the sport to keep people connected, the two can be analyzed together. Hank mentions checking a Giants’ blogs daily in the same thought sequence as watching his fantasy players in the playoffs. This shows that some fantasy players equate the importance of keeping tabs on real NFL teams and potential fantasy players. This type of attention given to fantasy football during every month of the year only helps the argument set forth by Matthew Berry.
E: Ok great – my next question is going to call into question your allegiance to Fantasy football. If you had to choose between your fantasy team winning the championship game or your Giants making the Super Bowl with a chance to win, which would it be?

H: Well that’s the nice thing about being a Giant’s fan because I never have to worry about that [laughs] but there’s a couple reasons – one way my allegiance does show up is that I try not to draft anyone in our division. Right, so that’s like a rule I have. Now, since I’m also trying to win and I’m pretty cynical, If I’m in a league say with lots of Eagles’ fans, right, and there’s an equal value and I know everyone wants to draft this guy and there’s no equal value later, then I might take him. But that’s a pretty unique scenario. Usually, there’s a guy who is comparable, for example let’s say I want a WR and Dez Bryant is up there, there’s a good chance that there’s someone up there who’s equal in value in a different division. But, if it came down to one game and my team winning… to be honest I would actually pick my team over my fantasy team. I mean, I love fantasy but I feel like I would get more joy out of my actual team winning. With fantasy, I have like ten guys I can brag to about being a champion. But, if the Giants win, that’s a year’s worth of bragging with family, friends and social media – I feel like I win when the Giants win a title whereas when I win a fantasy title, it’s really just me and my 10-12 friends. Now I will say, the only caveat is if I played in a league where guys are putting down like $1,000. That might change things a little bit.
While Hank’s response was less immediate as Telly’s, his answer paralleled the same elements set forth in the previous interview. Hank seconds the idea that a victory for a real NFL team fits in a communal category that fantasy football fails to offer.

J: I agree – there’s a tipping point for everyone and it tends to be the right amount of money. Alright, here’s another question about the way you watch football. Would you say Fantasy has changed your direct medium for watching football? Whether it be a cable package, going to the bar to watch a game, etc.?

H: Oh I definitely think so. It’s hard to quantify whether fantasy has a direct impact on the actual NFL but one thing that definitely exists is the creation of the NFL Direct Ticket package. It’s interesting because the initial marketing for this was ‘Hey, you can get out of market teams and view your favorite team’ (if they’re out of market). I think it’s getting to the point where you don’t even have to say that anymore – now, you can just say ‘Hey, you can watch out of market teams that have your favorite fantasy players’ and that will probably actually sell more. And, I mean, that’s just me putting on my marketing major hat for the first time in like ten years. And I think it’s even more important now because with internet access, most people can view any game by just illegally streaming it online. So the plus of getting the package is that I don’t need 12 different feeds up, I can just switch the channel. But even the way the players play today is being marketed toward fantasy. There’s a reason they’re putting the super stars in commercials, and there’s a reason the NFL Network has Red Zone. Red Zone is made for fantasy football, it’s for people who care even that their team is playing but just want to watch the game within 20 yards because that’s where the guys
score the most points. Personally, it changes, but that could also be because of the because of the way media options have changed. It might be a convergence of fantasy and social media and everything else coming together. So, 20 years ago, I would have gone to the bar with my friends to watch a game, but it would have only been to see the Eagles play the Giants. Now, I’m like “well what else is happening?” because it might have a direct impact on my through my fantasy team. Ten years ago, when I’m sitting on my couch and the Giants aren’t playing, I might have got up and gone outside to do something. But now I’m like, well I’m pretty tired, so I’ll just watch Red Zone. So I’d say I’m more invested in the league as a whole. You know, now when they talk about the NFL draft, in the past I would just pay attention to who the Giants’ drafted. But now, I need to keep an eye out because there’s these entirely different fantasy related ramification – who’s gonna start, how will it change the dynamic of the team, etc. So I really think this is from the way the media has changed with social media and better access, but I would say fantasy is the glue that holds it all together. If there wasn’t fantasy, I don’t think there’d be this much interest in the NFL in general.

I also wonder if non-traditional fans are getting pulled because of fantasy. I mean, I know women now who play in “women’s only” fantasy leagues and I wonder if they would be invested in the NFL without Fantasy.

Hank’s final answer brings to light the fact that NFL, as well as cable companies, are using fantasy football to garner interest from fans. Immediate access to any NFL game through programs like “Direct Ticket” are now marketing toward the viewer who wants to watch his
fantasy players play rather than the fan who simply wants watch every NFL game every weekend. This may be the place that Jeremy Maclin’s argument holds the most water. If the marketing strategies direct attention to the individual players fans “own” on fantasy teams, it would suggest that fans care more about a player’s success over the team’s success. The opposition to this, of course, is that a random fan is not expected to care about every team, only the team he supports. There may be fans out there that value Jeremy Maclin’s individual performance over the Chiefs’ success, however if those fans do not support the Chiefs, should that matter?

One additional point Hanks mentions is the appeal fantasy football offers to women. Though it is still presented as a male-dominant hobby (as seen on the FanDuel and DraftKings commercials that show only middle aged men playing fantasy sports), women are beginning to embrace fantasy football. The fact that “women’s only” leagues exist shows that enough women are beginning to play the game, creating interest in the NFL that now transcends gender. If women begin to watch football at a level of involvement that typically is attributed to men, the ratings and revenue of the sport can only increase over the upcoming years.

Ho

Yes, Brandon’s nickname is really “Ho.” And yes, it’s mainly because of the pejorative connotations associated with the word (in addition to being the first two letter of his last name). Ho is what you might call a sports junkie. He loves sports, almost all of them. As a Physical Education and Health teacher in Adams County, his job revolves around sports. He coaches baseball and football. He loves basketball, baseball, hockey, golf, and every other
sport that involves any level of competition. More importantly (for this essay, at least), he loves fantasy sports. From daily basketball games to his rotisserie baseball league, his year consists around sports played on TV and the fantasy sports he plays online. Furthermore, he has been playing fantasy football since the stats were only available in the newspaper the day after a game. With these years of experience in both real football and fantasy football, his responses offer a slightly different perspective than those interviewed before him.

E: Ho, thanks again for agreeing to do this. My first question for you is how long have you been playing fantasy football?

H: I've been playing since 1997

E: Wow. That's impressive. How many different leagues are you in? Can you describe the guys you play with?

B: I am in three different leagues. Most of these leagues, the ages vary from 24-55. Everybody is employed... one guy is retired, a teacher.

E: What kind of experiences have you had with football outside of fantasy?

B: Yup, I played in high school and then I coached a little while here at the high school.

E: Would you say your knowledge of football in general is greater than that of the average person, given that you've invested a lot of time into it?

B: Yeah, I would say so. As a kid, I grew up watching a loving football.

E: What first drew you to fantasy football? Was it your love for football in general or something else?

B: I first started playing because there was a baseball team in a league that I was playing with, the team had a fantasy football team. So when you joined the team, you joined
the fantasy league as well. And with that, you had all the rituals that went along with it, like the draft was always a big time, a big social gathering and building chemistry amongst each other.

E: Nice, almost like an induction ceremony. Would you say fantasy has changed the way you watch or view football?

B: It has, and I think it has in a positive way. Instead of just worrying about one team, you know, now, any game could have value. So you’re sort of getting the grand scheme of things rather than just focusing in on just your team.

Though easy to overlook, the attention Ho puts on the camaraderie in a fantasy football League supports the idea that fantasy can increase the ratings and revenue of the NFL. The community fantasy football leagues create give people a reason to watch more football as they now have a group to discuss the games with. If a random person watches two teams play on a Monday night, he must then seek out others who happened to watch the same game the next day if he wished to engage in any meaningful conversation. As Ho mentions, when playing fantasy, any game can have value, which means the majority of the league is now watching a majority of the games and then conversing about them later in the week.

E: Yeah, definitely. And who is your favorite team?

B: The Denver Broncos

E: That’s right. Congratulations. Would you say fantasy has changed your overall knowledge of the game? Are you more in-tune with certain things as a result of the game?
B: Yeah, without a doubt. I think technology has also increased that because, when we first started out, you didn’t have the updates coming in on your phone to know who was playing and who wasn’t playing. You sat or you played guys who you didn’t know if they were healthy or not because you didn’t have that access. The computers, even, you didn’t really have.

E: It’s hard to imagine the game at a time like that with the way it has changed. Before you started playing fantasy, would you watch any game of football on TV? Or was it mainly just if the Broncos were on?

Like Hank, Ho combines the progress of technology with the intrigue of fantasy football. Discussing player injuries, he shows another level of awareness fantasy players must pay attention to. In the beginning stages of fantasy sports, the injury news came out through the newspaper if a reporter happened to write about that specific player. Now, thanks to Twitter and apps like Rotoworld, fantasy players receive injury updates multiple times a day. They monitor practices, evaluate phrases such as “questionable” vs. “probable” and study the specific injuries and the potential impact it might have the upcoming matchup.

B: Yeah, I mean I always watched football, period. But, I also made sure to watch the Broncos if they were on national television.

E: That makes sense. Talk to me for a minute about your draft strategy. How do you decide which players you’re going to draft? Do you gravitate toward Broncos’ players? Do you avoid rivals of them?
B: See I have a major issue when it comes to draft time because a couple of buddies of mine do a Madden draft. And when you do a Madden draft, we do it franchise mode so you end up taking a lot of young guys. So that always kind of ruins me early on in that first draft because I end up taking a bunch of young guys instead of guys I should be taking. Uh, but do I take a lot of Broncos? I definitely try to get a Bronco or two. I try to draft them probably a little earlier than I should just to make sure I have a guy I can root for on my team. But I also don’t try to have too many. I don’t think too many is the way to go.

Discussing the Madden league, Ho points out that fantasy players become very aware of younger players with potential. Even those not participating in Madden leagues spend time obsessing over the crop of rookies entering the NFL each year. Typically, NFL fans follow the stars. Ask any person on the street to name an NFL player, and they tend to know the Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers of the world. But do they know Montee Ball? Because thousands of fantasy players do. Fantasy players spent the entire 2014 preseason gushing over the potential Ball had entering the season as the lead RB for the Peyton Manning lead Denver Broncos. Selected in the top three rounds of most drafts that year, Ball never panned out as expected and was soon relegated to the bench. Regardless of his failures, the fact remains that fantasy players obsess over players a normal American is not even cognizant of.

E: Is that just because you don’t want all your eggs in one basket?
B: Well there’s that, but also I try not to match up certain players, like a QB and a RB. A QB and a WR, however, or a QB and TE I might try and match up but I don’t like the QB and the RB on the same team.

E: Are there any teams you avoid?

B: Oh yeah, there’s teams I’ll avoid. I mean I’ll avoid the Browns and those types of teams that don’t score. And then you also go toward certain teams that score a lot of points, kind of like Peyton Manning with the Colts or Drew Brees with the Saints. Those guys would just score a lot.

E: Got it. So you don’t avoid teams at all because of a general dislike for the team? Like, as an Eagles fans, we hate the Cowboys. Anything like that?

B: No, nothing like that. It’s all about production. But I’ll definitely draft guys I like because I have to root for them.

E: Would you say fantasy has changed your IQ level of the game? Maybe how some of the rules work or some of the meticulous inner working of things?

B: Yeah I think it’s definitely changed some aspects, especially with the advancement of certain leagues. I mean, some leagues are PPR leagues where you get a point for every reception during the game. So now you gotta know who’s getting receptions, who’s getting Touchdowns, who’s getting yards and know that kind of stuff. You have to know Running Backs because, in a PPR, you can’t take a guy like Alfred Morris who doesn’t get any catches out of the backfield or a guy like Jonathan Stewart. They are both basically just Touchdown and yardage guys whereas some of these other guys catch the ball, which adds value to their possessions. So that kind of stuff definitely adds to your overall knowledge. Then, in another league, it’s a
defensive league, so you’re adding defensive guys into the equation with tackles, sacks, pass deflections and interceptions. So when you add that side into it, you get to know defensive players better and you know more of their talents because of that.

More than knowing potential future NFL standouts, fantasy players must also be aware of the multi-faceted skill sets a player offers. It is at this level that fantasy players hone in on the numerous statistics players accumulate during the game. After all, fantasy football points are based on yards, completions, and touchdowns. As Ho mentions, in different styles of leagues, players must even become aware of the defensive stats for each team.

E: Why should more people play fantasy football?

B: I’m not sure it’s a game for everyone. I mean, if you don’t like football at all, you’re probably wasting your time. If you do like it, though, it adds to the overall excitement of watching. I mean, now that football is Thursday, Sunday and Monday, it gives you an incentive to watch the game on those nights and it adds to your overall appreciation for the game because you are more in tune with what’s going on.

Even for the biggest fans of football, those who watch every game available to them, fantasy football increases the overall interest a person invests in the NFL. Through checking statistics, player injuries, and rookies entering the league, fantasy football players involve themselves in football almost every day of the week. Whether checking the reports of an individual team or a specific player, this level of interest helps the ratings of football, which in turn increases the overall revenue. Though fantasy puts the focus on individual players, most
players continue to support their actual NFL team over the success of their fantasy league
success.

_Brock and Derek_

Brock and Derek are friends who enjoy the simple things in life: wings on Wednesday nights,
golf (when their wives let them), and sports. In the winter, they follow the NBA and the
NHL. In the spring, it’s the Masters with some light dabbing in baseball. In the summer and
fall, it’s all football. Couple with their love for football is their fascination with fantasy
football. Members of the same fantasy league – the “Tru Playaz” league (in operation since
the year 2010) both guys were more than willing to sit down and talk about football and
fantasy sports for this interview.

E: Good evening, guys. Thanks again for agreeing to do this. Can you start off by
stating your name and current occupation?

B: My name is Brock, I am a 30 year old Prosthetist Orthotist

D: My name is Derek, I am a 25 year old Financial Planner

E: Nice, how long have you guys been playing fantasy football and how many leagues
are you in?

B: I have been playing since, hm, I think 2008 was the first year. So I guess that would
be 8 year, wow. And I play in 2 leagues.

D: I’ve been playing for five and I only play in one league.

E: What kind of experiences do you guys have with football outside of fantasy? Have
you ever played or coached?
B: The only experience I have is watching it on TV and the occasional pick-up game. I’ve never played or anything like that.

D: I played in 8th grade. I was the QB.

Differing from Hank and Ho, Derek and Brock align more closely with Telly in terms of football fandom. Though Derek has some experience playing, it was only for one year. Both of these guys will join in serving as the “average” NFL fan for these interviews.

E: What first drew you to the game of fantasy? Do you remember why you started playing?

B: For me I was in college and some of us guys thought it would be fun and wanted to start a league and I’ve been in that league ever since. I picked up a second league this past year.

D: I think the draw is that it’s a little bit shorter of a season than normal sports so it’s easier to keep your focus and attention. It’s just different, you know. You can go out and shoot a basketball by yourself at any time but with fantasy you’re connected to your friends and the league you watch.

Adding to the previous comments of Hank and Ho, both Brock and Derek continue the idea that fantasy is a game played amongst friends. Though a fantasy team is often managed by one player, many view it as a group activity.
Great – let’s talk about the draft for a second and your approach to waiver. Feel free to conceal your answers if needed, I’m not trying to steal your strategies here or anything like that (laughs).

(Laughs) I don’t have any strategies, I just try and outbid for Julio.

Um, when you’re picking players, do you tend to pick certain players? Do you avoid certain teams? Do you ever pick players from the teams you like?

I don’t mind picking players from teams I like but I try to draw away from that a little bit, cause sometimes it’ll make me just root for that player instead of the team.

So you don’t like being too focused on one guy… you wanna be able to root for your team?

Right, but if they have a good player, I’ll select him.

Gotcha – so you like the Steelers, clearly you’d draft Antonio Brown if he was available. However, are you saying you’d take Julio Jones if he was available so you could root for the Steelers instead of just their WR?

Yeah, that’s it.
E: Do you ever avoid certain guys? Or because they are Pittsburg’s nemesis like the Ravens?

B: I’ll avoid the guys who are on a bad team, like the Cleveland Browns, but I don’t avoid guys from any particular team just because I don’t like them.

D: Well I don’t pick any Titans (laughs). The Titans don’t really have a rival, so there’s no team I have to avoid there. I typically try not to draft any Eagles players because I don’t like the Eagles. And I try not to pick players I’m predicting to be on bad teams… I also try to stay away from guys who have been injured in the past couple of years, such as Adrian Peterson.

E: How do you guys decide which teams are the “bad teams” for the upcoming season?

B: I might avoid a player who is on a team with a difficult schedule or maybe I know the offense isn’t going to score many points, so I’ll shy away from that particular play because I don’t think they’ll provide as much opportunity to get me points.

E: So is that stuff you’ll look at before the season starts? Strength of schedule, the offense of the team?

B: Yup.

D: Even knowing the offense coordinator can help. If it’s an offensive coordinator that likes to run a lot as opposed to pass/run offense like a Peyton Manning offense or a West Coast style offense, for instance – just kinda slingin’ it around – I focus on: do they have a good QB, someone who is solid and has had good success in the past; does the offense have more than just one offensive guy. With that, the defense can just hone in on that one guy and shut him down so it’s harder for him to excel.
Looking at how they pick certain players, both Brock and Derek address facets of the game
even the “football guys” failed from the earlier interviews failed to mention. Knowing things
like a team’s offensive and defensive coordinator and strength of schedule definitely play into
the selections made during a fantasy draft. For instance, knowing that Carolina Panther’s
coach Ron Rivera likes to run the ball a lot each game might lead someone to draft Carolina
RB Jonathan Stewart earlier than a more talented back on a different team. More touches
leads to more opportunities, which ultimately gives the player a higher percentage to score
points.

B: I agree with that, I definitely look at offensive coordinators and whether they run the
ball more or pass the ball more.

E: Since you guys don’t have an elaborate football background, would you say your
football IQ has gone up at all from playing fantasy football?

B: I would say I have definitely learned a lot more about football from fantasy because it
makes me want to watch every single game. So, I’m learning players from every
team, what their defense does and what their offense does.

D: Yeah, I would say I focus more on the overall league instead of just my team as a
result of fantasy.

E: Is there anything else you’ve learned from playing fantasy about the way the game
runs?

B: I think one thing I’ve learned is that, just because a player gets me lots of points or
puts up big stats in a game, he can still lose his game in real life. Even though he
plays well, it doesn’t mean his team is going to win.
E: Yeah, so you can have good players on bad teams

B: For sure, some will say that having players on bad teams even helps you in fantasy because they are usually playing from behind so they have more opportunities to score “junk time” touchdowns and points.

Learning to objectively evaluate a team is another excellent byproduct of fantasy football that directly benefits the NFL. For a few years now, the Jacksonville Jaguars have been a below-average NFL team. To the average fan, they are simply a bad team that loses games.

To a fantasy player, however, they are seen as a team with a terrible defense that also offers two promising young wide receivers, Allen Robinson and Allen Hurns. The more Jacksonville’s defense struggles, the more opportunities these guys get to make big catches and score longer touchdowns. For this reason, fantasy players will watch Jacksonville play even if they are losing by multiple touchdowns, whereas a normal fan might switch to a different program.

E: How do you guys stay up to date with the NFL? How do you stay engaged? Do you follow it year round or do you only pay attention during the regular season?

B: (Laughs) I am reading stuff right now. I never take time off. I’m reading articles, I’m seeing what the Steelers are doing, you know, who they’re maybe looking at for the draft and what impact they might have. That kind of stuff. See who they pick up in free agency, see who other teams are picking up in free agency.

E: Would you say your focus there is fantasy related or just general interest in the NFL?

B: Just general interest. I’m not really thinking about the fantasy stuff as much.
D: I don’t read as many articles as much as I just follow Twitter and get alerts from ESPN. But I don’t pay a ton of attention to it from the Super Bowl until a few weeks before the fantasy draft. I read some of the stuff surrounding the trade deadline, but not too much extra.

These answers move in a different direction than those previously interviewed. Realistically, fantasy football does not turn everyone into an obsessed NFL fan. Many fantasy football players mirror Derek’s mentality and check NFL updates every once in a while during the offseason. Even Brock, who admits a need to stay up to date, states that his desire hinges more on his love for the NFL than fantasy. This does not negate the fact that both guys became more interested in the NFL because of fantasy. For this reason, it could be argued that their year-round attention paid to the NFL owes some thanks to fantasy football.

E: Do you feel like you root for your NFL team or your fantasy team more? If you could pick between your fantasy team winning the fantasy season or your actual team winning the Super Bowl, which would you prefer?

D: (Immediately) Actual team.

E: Titans?

D: Yeah.

B: Yeah, I would definitely root for my team before my fantasy team. But, it’s probably not that far off because of my competitive nature.
Once again, we see a love for team taking precedence over love for individual players. Brock admits the line between his fantasy loyalty and NFL loyalty is close, yet he also previously admitted that he prefers rooting for the Steelers rather than individual players. Jeremy Maclin’s angry Tweets stem from the reality that, as Brock claimed, people are competitive by nature. Because people dedicate so much time, knowledge, effort (and often money) to fantasy football, it is easy for this passion to boil over into anger toward a particular player. Outside of those moments, however, most fantasy players show a clear preference to an NFL team winning instead of one’s fantasy team. Furthermore, it is the very time, knowledge and effort (and money, when given to cable subscriptions and TV packages) that increases the ratings and revenue of the NFL. This passion (though sometimes misguided) is birthed from fans wholly invested in the NFL, which can in large be attributed to fantasy football.
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