

Fantasy Football FOR **DUMMIES®**

by Martin “Cyber Tuna” Signore

Fantasy football expert, screenwriter, and game designer



Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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About the Author

Martin Signore relishes turning his hobbies into paying gigs. He began shooting home videos with a 50-pound VHS camera in high school, which led him to NYU film school. After college, Martin went west and has been working in film and television ever since. Having worked in almost every crew position, Martin is now a freelance writer/producer and has sold a feature pitch to 20th Century Fox and a feature-length screenplay to Eden Rock Media and Film Office. He'll still work "below the line" when duty (and friendship) calls.

Raised as a first-generation gamer, Martin's love of Atari also somehow leads to paychecks. Martin is now a writer/designer of video games, having worked on story-driven titles such as *Fantastic Four*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Legend of Jack Sparrow*, and *The Sopranos: Road to Respect*.

An avid computer hobbyist, Martin's infatuation with Windows and PC gaming led him to start his own consulting firm, All Things Digital. Luckily for his business, Windows crashes all the time, which results in hourly billing that supports his screenwriting career.

And last, but certainly not least, Martin is an avid fantasy football coach. Over the years, he has won several public, private, and expert leagues and, some might say, found his true calling. A fellow member of his favorite fantasy league, *The Hollywood Football League*, works for Wiley Publishing. The rest is fantasy.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my mother, Norma Feuer, my stepfather, Steve Feuer, and my father, Don Signore. Mom, thanks for all of your support of my creative endeavors over the years and for your unconditional love through it all. Steve, thanks for helping me put this book deal together (your check is in the mail) and for being there for Mom while I am off chasing rainbows in Hollywood. Don't worry, Dad. Fantasy football fame and fortune won't stop me from wearing other hats in the film industry. It's always sunny in L.A., wish you were here.

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Speaking of the HFL, thanks to all my fellow coaches (past and present) for their cooperation on the project. Shout outs go to: David, Libby, Charlie, Joe, Todd, Noah, Josh, Tony, Ed P., Ed K., Josh, Justin, Neil, Mike B., Mike C., Mike D., Deirdre, Alan, Derek, and, of course, Mango. No mention of my league would be complete without the name Lance Khazei. Lance's advice and support over the years have made me a better fantasy coach and a better writer, and I thank him for that.

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Finally, much thanks to my old friend and fellow fantasy football fanatic, David Perrin. Dave's help was indispensable when I was putting together Part IV of this book. Dave, you have our gratitude.

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Introduction

In 1999, I was exactly where you may be right now. I decided to give the whole “fantasy football” thing a try, even though I had no idea how to play. Back then, the online version of the game was just starting to take off, and Yahoo! just began offering its free league services. I did a bit of research and talked to a few buddies about strategy, but I mainly learned the game through trial and error(s). I had no definitive resource guide to help me get off to a good start in my fantasy football career.

Things have changed today. With *Fantasy Football For Dummies*, you have helpful guidance and friendly advice right at your fingertips — the keys to a successful fantasy season, which I didn’t have when I began to play the game. This resource can make your fantasy football season less frustrating. You can avoid many mistakes and start racking up victories by knowing the basics of the game, the popular strategies for winning, and the etiquette of league play. Also, when I began playing, I knew very little about the available online resources. I just bought the first fantasy magazine I saw and went from there. This book also includes an overview of major fantasy football providers and expert Web sites that offer tools and advice you can turn to when looking to improve your team.

This game was built to mirror pro football and it does just that. Fantasy football is as exciting and as fun as it is frustrating and unpredictable. Hope for the best and expect the worst!

About This Book

Fantasy Football For Dummies gives you the foundational information you need to play fantasy football. This book is a unique guide because it offers in-depth lessons on how to play the game and serves as a reference on where to play and where to get great expert advice. Unlike most fantasy Web sites and magazines, which offer advice with the assumption that you’re already a fantasy addict, this book serves the beginning fantasy player and has plenty of advice sprinkled throughout for more advanced players. You can open this book, scan the table of contents or index to find a subject that interests you, and flip to those pages to improve certain parts of your fantasy game or to read up on a fantasy league provider.

Conventions Used in This Book

I provide the following basic conventions to help you navigate your way through the concepts and discussions in this book:

- ✓ I *italicize* all new terms and follow them with easy-to-understand definitions.
- ✓ I **boldface** all keywords in bulleted lists and all steps in numbered lists.
- ✓ I use `monofont` to highlight all Web sites and e-mail addresses to set them apart from the normal text.

Most of the companies that provide fantasy football games and content have Web sites of the same name. For example, you can find Rotowire at `www.rotowire.com`. If some Web addresses break across two lines of text, rest assured that I didn't put in any extra characters (such as hyphens) to indicate the breaks. So, when using a Web address that spans two lines of text, type in exactly what you see, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. For the fantasy Web sites, I also capitalize all the links to help you easily identify them.

- ✓ Although you can choose to play fantasy football on a wide array of Web providers, to simplify matters throughout this book I use the default settings for Yahoo!. No matter what provider you choose, make sure you double-check the league settings before you start to play.

Furthermore, because fantasy football is a game based on the National Football League (NFL), it can feature some confusing terminology. For example, each person who plays fantasy football is a player in the fantasy game, and he or she depends on the players in the NFL game. See what I mean? Therefore, when I refer to *coaches*, I mean you, the fantasy participant — unless I specifically say “NFL coach.” (I also may refer to you as the *owner* or *GM* [general manager] — not to be confused with NFL owners or GMs.) Whenever I say *player*, I'm referring to the NFL players who make up your fantasy league.

Finally, fantasy sites and experts use a lot of positional shorthand based on NFL depth charts, and this book is no different. I call the starting running back the RB1, and his backups are called RB2 and RB3. You can apply the same shorthand when you're the king of your own team's depth chart. Here are the positional abbreviations to look for:

QB = Quarterback

RB = Running back

WR = Wide receiver

TE = Tight end

K = Kicker

DEF = Team defense

D/ST = Defense/Special teams

What You're Not to Read

Throughout the book, I refer to some of my fondest and funniest memories of playing in the Hollywood Football League — my fantasy league — with my buddies. These anecdotes, which I often place in sidebars, are meant to entertain and inform because they're examples of the rules and strategies I lay out in the chapters. However, the info in these anecdotes isn't essential reading in order to grasp fantasy football. Feel free to read them if you want to read about my personal experiences.

Foolish Assumptions

When writing this book, I made a couple assumptions about you, my dear reader. Here are my two main assumptions:

- ✔ **You're a football fan.** I don't explain how offenses can get a first down or when the forward pass was invented. You know the pro league, and you know many of the NFL studs by name. Understanding the game helps you evaluate talent and choose quality players during the fantasy draft process and during the season. It's possible to stick only to expert advice and cheat sheets and play fantasy football, but I don't advise it. For a more in-depth look at the game of football, check out *Football For Dummies*, 3rd Edition, by Howie Long and John Czarnecki (Wiley).
- ✔ **You own (or have regular access to) a computer and you're not afraid to use it.** Almost all fantasy leagues are run exclusively online, from the drafting process to weekly team management. I assume that you can surf the Web, use search engines, and point and click on links. Being able to navigate the Internet quickly and effectively is part of the game.

How This Book Is Organized

Fantasy Football For Dummies explains the game to you from start (the draft) to finish (the championship). However, like the NFL, the fantasy season is never truly over. You can use the research information to scout players and potential sleepers year-round. This book is organized so that you can jump in anywhere, depending on your experience level and the status of your season and league.

Part I: The Xs and Os of Fantasy Football: Just the Basics, Please

Part I provides readers with an overview of the game. You find out how it works, how different fantasy leagues are set up and run, why scoring is so important in fantasy football, and how you can join or create a league that's right for you. I also explain how you can prepare for the most fun day on the fantasy calendar: the all-important fantasy league draft.

Part II: Advanced Scouting and Drafting Secrets

Researching the NFL players and picking the best possible talent for your fantasy team is a very important part of fantasy football. This part provides guidelines for you to use when you try to separate the wheat from the chaff at the different roster positions. Then when you're ready for draft day, this part explains important draft strategies to help you assemble your team.

Part III: Let the Games Begin: In-Season Strategy Guide

After you assemble your dream team in the draft (or endure a nightmare brought on by another coach always selecting your coveted players), you need to know how to guide your team to glory during the fantasy season. This part walks you through your many in-season management duties and breaks down the most common issues you'll face and decisions you'll have to make. If you draft well and you make some shrewd moves during the season, your team may qualify for your league's playoffs, and you may even win

your league championship! The fantasy postseason is its own beast, so I end this part by explaining the rules and strategies for enjoying postseason success.

Part IV: The Research Guide to Online Play

The online business of fantasy sports has spawned a slew of major fantasy league providers and expert news Web sites. The provider sites are massive fantasy playlands bombarded by endless links and stats, which may be overwhelming to a first timer. The fantasy-specific news and advice sites offer in-depth coverage of the NFL from a fantasy perspective. These chapters help you understand the services offered by each site and how you can use them to build a winning fantasy team.

Part V: The Part of Tens

Part V is the classic *For Dummies* feature, the Part of Tens. The chapters here are filled with quick reminders that you can refer to before your draft and well into the fantasy season. Specifically, I present ten quick fixes you can make after your draft concludes and you determine that your team is less than perfect, and I cover ten common rookie mistakes you should avoid at any time during your fantasy season.

Icons Used in This Book

To help you navigate your way through this book, I provide the following friendly and useful icons in the left margin. These little pictures enhance your reading pleasure and point out specific types of information.



This icon provides some fantasy football advice in a nutshell. I give you specific actions or strategies you can implement to improve your team or your fantasy football gaming experience.



Here you find important advice worth repeating and remembering. If you have time to only skim the chapters I provide here, these are the bits of information you should keep with you.



Most fantasy advice follows the “rule,” but there are always “exceptions,” right? When I see a possible contradiction or a path that could lead you to fantasy failure or exile from the rest of your league-mates, I warn you about it. Consider this icon a yellow flag.



This icon highlights personal stories recounting my most memorable fantasy football moments in the Hollywood Football League. The stories are meant to be examples of the rules and strategies I present in the text.

Where to Go from Here

Like all *For Dummies* titles, this is a reference book, and each chapter is a modular piece about a specific area of fantasy football. You can skip around and not get lost! Flip to the table of contents or the index, find the location of what you want to know, read what you want to read, and feel free to skip the rest of the info.

If you're totally new to the game, you can start your reading with Part I. If you know the game but want to improve your skills as a fantasy coach, you may want to focus on Parts II and III. If you already had your league's draft, you may want to skip to Part III, which discusses in-season game management. The research guide and the Part of Tens (Parts IV and V) are filled with helpful information and expert advice that can benefit players of all experience levels. For example, if you want to read about playing in an ESPN.com league, you don't need to worry about the chapter on Yahoo! leagues.

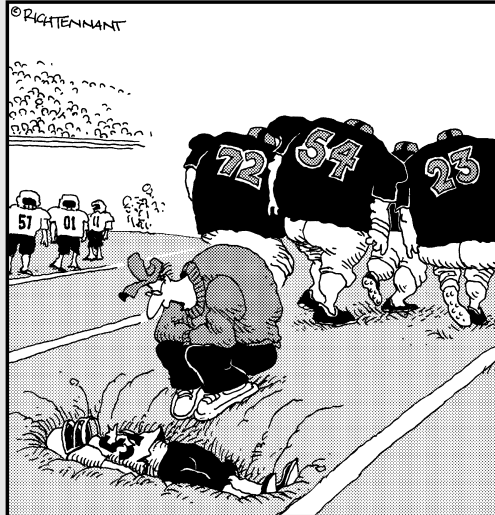
From the day you first sign up for a fantasy league to the day you hoist your league's championship trophy over your head to the day you sign up for another season, this book will be your guide through the world of fantasy football. No matter what you read, I wish you luck in your future fantasy adventures.

Part I

The Xs and Os of Fantasy Football: Just the Basics, Please

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Just so you know if it were up to me, I'd take you out of the game, but the owner said it would screw up his fantasy football team if I did."

In this part . . .

If you're new to the game of fantasy football, Part I has you covered. Chapter 1 gives you the quick lowdown on fantasy football. In Chapter 2, I explain how fantasy points are scored and why scoring is so important to the game. Chapter 3 covers the types of leagues available to fantasy players and helps you determine which one to join, if you aren't already in one. Finally, Chapter 4 helps prepare you for your fantasy draft so you can create a fantasy team that would make NFL general managers green with envy.

Chapter 1

The Reality of Fantasy Football: What's It All About?

In This Chapter

- ▶ Focusing on fantasy football's big picture
 - ▶ Getting up to speed on the draft process
 - ▶ Filling your roster with the right players
 - ▶ Reviewing the responsibilities of team management
 - ▶ Starting your fantasy journey
-

Sports fans usually root only for their favorite local teams, but fantasy sports allow the diehard sports fan to root for every team. In fact, playing fantasy makes watching every real game more fun and exciting. Millions of online fantasy sports enthusiasts can't be wrong. The biggest of all the fantasy sports is fantasy football, and after you start playing, you'll quickly know why. But before you start playing fantasy football, you need to know the basics.

This chapter gives you a quick overview of fantasy football. Consider this chapter your jumping board into fantasy football. If you already know how to play but want to improve your game, feel free to skip to Chapter 4. However, if you keep reading, you may discover something about fantasy football that you didn't know!

Understanding Fantasy Football: A Quick Overview

What is fantasy football all about? Instead of just watching the NFL game, fantasy football allows you to feel like you're part of the action by controlling an all-star lineup of the best players in the league. Fantasy allows you to imagine the fireworks of all those football studs playing as one unit. In this section, I give you a quick walkthrough of the basics of fantasy football so that you can get a better grasp of this popular activity you're considering playing.

How fantasy and the NFL differ

When comparing fantasy and the NFL, two significant differences stick out. In the NFL, all that matters is which team wins or loses. In fantasy, however, NFL wins and losses don't count. Instead of team stats, fantasy relies not only on scored touchdowns but also on individual stats (such as yards gained) to calculate each fantasy player's performance based on a determined league scoring system (see Chapter 2 for more on scoring). The results are called *fantasy points*, and your team's fantasy point total is the sum of your starting players' efforts. Your fantasy team will win or lose based on those results. So, in a way, fantasy football and the NFL both are about wins and losses that lead up to the best teams battling in a playoff format to decide a champion (see Chapter 12).

The other major difference is that fantasy teams consist of players from every team in the league, not just one NFL team (see the "Drafting the Right Players for Your Roster" section later in this chapter for a breakdown of a fantasy team roster). Only the best players are drafted; thus, each team is a sports fan's *fantasy*. Everything else in the game tries to reflect and simulate real football.

How to play fantasy football

So, you've decided that you want to play fantasy football. Perhaps a buddy asked you to join a league, or maybe a coworker started talking trash and bet that he could easily beat you in a new league that he's forming. Perhaps you don't know anyone who plays, but you're always hearing about fantasy football and you want to join a public league to find out what the fuss is all about.



No matter your reasons for playing fantasy football, you're in for a fun-filled experience that's sure to get you hooked. I can guarantee that at different times, this game can make you cheer, make you nuts, and break your heart. The following list gives you a snapshot of what happens in a fantasy season:

1. You join a league.

You can join a public league, where anyone can sign up for a spot, or a private league, where you need an invitation to play. Some people play just for fun and some play for serious coin. League selection is an important factor, so don't take it lightly. (Chapter 3 discusses the different kinds of leagues and what to look for when signing up for one.)

2. You prepare for your league draft by scouting players.

Before choosing your fantasy team, you need to research all the available players so you can pre-rank them according to your personal preference. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I tell you what I look for when scouting the NFL so you can become your own expert.

3. You build your fantasy team via the draft.

The draft is the most fun and exciting day of the fantasy season. During the draft, each fantasy coach selects one NFL player at a time until the rosters are complete. Chapter 4 explains how to prepare for every type of draft and how the draft works. Chapters 8 and 9 offer in-depth draft strategies to help you outsmart your opponents and create a fantasy force.

4. Your team competes against another team every week.

During the NFL season, the real teams face each other and so do the fantasy teams in your league. The players' real-time stats are converted into fantasy points by your league provider, and the fantasy team that scores the most points wins the game for the week. Check out Chapter 2 for a breakdown of how fantasy scoring works.

5. You make moves to improve your team.

As a fantasy coach, you're in total control. You can drop players you think aren't good enough and replace them with free agents. If one of your starters gets hurt, you can bench him and start a healthy player instead. You may even make a trade offer to another coach. Chapters 10 and 11 explain how to manage your team each week and how to adjust your roster via player movement.

6. Your team (hopefully) makes the playoffs and wins your league.

Only the strong survive, and at the end of the fantasy season, the top teams square off in a tournament to decide the league champion. Chapter 12 offers some strategic advice for managing your playoff team and presents a breakdown of the various playoff formats. The last team standing may win a trophy, a cash prize, or just honor; but make no mistake, there will be only one winner.

How scoring makes you a winner

Fantasy football simulates the real deal by using a performance-based scoring system. A touchdown (TD) is worth 6 points for an NFL team and 6 fantasy points for a player on a fantasy team (in most leagues). Fantasy players are also awarded points for yardage gained, such as 1 point for every 10 yards gained rushing or receiving. Bad NFL plays often count as negative fantasy points; sacks can be worth -1 or interceptions worth -2 . In general, every statistic can be used to rate a player's achievements, good and bad, depending on your fantasy league.



Your fantasy team's final score each week is the sum of all your starting players' fantasy points. Table 1-1 shows an example of fantasy scoring for one week in a league with fractional and negative points. Don't worry about having to calculate all this each week. Your league provider does the math for you. For more specifics about scoring, check out Chapter 2.

<i>Position</i>	<i>Actual Performance</i>	<i>Fantasy Points Scored</i>	<i>Fantasy Point Total</i>
Quarterback	240 yds passing	$240 \div 20 = 12$	22
	2 touchdowns	$2 \times 6 = 12$	
	1 interception	$1 \times -2 = -2$	
Wide receiver	110 yds receiving	$110 \div 10 = 11$	17
	1 touchdown	$1 \times 6 = 6$	
Wide receiver	85 yds receiving	$85 \div 10 = 8.5$	8.5

<i>Position</i>	<i>Actual Performance</i>	<i>Fantasy Points Scored</i>	<i>Fantasy Point Total</i>
Wide receiver	40 yds receiving	$40 \div 10 = 4$	2
	1 lost fumble	$1 \times -2 = -2$	
Running back	140 yds rushing	$140 \div 10 = 14$	35.5
	35 yds receiving	$35 \div 10 = 3.5$	
	3 touchdowns	$3 \times 6 = 18$	
Running back	80 yds rushing	$80 \div 10 = 8$	17.5
	75 yds receiving	$75 \div 10 = 7.5$	
	1 touchdown	$1 \times 6 = 6$	
	2 lost fumbles	$2 \times -2 = -4$	
Tight end	0 yds	0	0
Kicker	2 field goals	$2 \times 3 = 6$	8
	2 extra points	$2 \times 1 = 2$	
Team defense	14 points allowed	14 points = 1	9
	2 sacks	$2 \times 2 = 4$	
	1 fumble recovered	$1 \times 2 = 2$	
	1 interception	$1 \times 2 = 2$	
			119.5

How important fantasy terms keep you in the loop

Like the rest of the sports world, fantasy sports has a lingo all its own. The slang terms are all fairly easy to grasp and fun to use, so don't be scared off! I include the following list so you can get a good feel for these fantasy football terms before you start playing, and I use them repeatedly throughout the book:

- ✔ **Breakout:** When a player goes from average to great.
- ✔ **Bye week:** Every NFL team is inactive once during the regular season; an NFL team's off week is its bye week.

- ✔ **Cheat sheets:** The lists of pre-ranked players — overall and by position (see Chapter 4).
- ✔ **Collusion:** Two coaches working together to win a league; see Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Damaged goods:** When a player involved in a trade is hurt; see Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Elite:** The highest ranked players at their positions.
- ✔ **Fantasy formula:** A simple way to evaluate a player's potential: skill plus opportunity equals success.
- ✔ **Fantasy worthy:** He plays enough to make a fantasy impact.
- ✔ **Fleecing:** Taking advantage of a bad coach in a lopsided trade; see Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Game-time decision:** Waiting to see if a hurt player will start; see Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Handcuffing:** Drafting a backup and a starter from the same NFL team; head to Chapter 9.
- ✔ **Keeper league:** Coaches retain a certain amount of players from one season to the next.
- ✔ **League settings:** The league rules and stat modifiers that determine fantasy point values.
- ✔ **Pre-rankings:** How NFL players are rated before the draft.
- ✔ **Private league:** A league you can join by invitation only and that's controlled by a commissioner; see Chapter 3.
- ✔ **Public league:** Anyone can sign up and play; see Chapter 3.
- ✔ **Sleeper:** A little-known player who's ready to awaken and be great.
- ✔ **Stud:** A top-rated fantasy starter.
- ✔ **Trade bait:** Good players who you can offer to other coaches; check out Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Trading deadline:** Last day of the season to make trades; see Chapter 11.
- ✔ **Vulture back:** A running back who steals goal-line carries from the starter; jump to Chapter 5.
- ✔ **Waiver wire:** Dropped players are here before they become free agents; check out Chapter 11.

Recognizing that Fantasy Success Starts with the Draft

Before the NFL season begins, every fantasy league must conduct a draft to fill the teams' rosters. Because there are 32 NFL teams and often only 8 to 14 fantasy teams in any given league, a fantasy team should have the cream of the NFL crop. I'm talking All-Pros, Pro-Bowlers, and other valuable commodities. This section gives you the highlights of a draft. Chapter 4 gives you the complete low-down on preparing for and understanding a fantasy draft.

What draft? Am I joining the Army?

A *fantasy draft* is where you build your fantasy team in preparation for the season and its weekly management. In a public league, the draft occurs at a preset time determined by the league provider. In a private league, your league commissioner chooses a draft type and a draft date for your league and notifies the coaches, usually by e-mail. (Chapter 4 explains the different draft formats.) Here are the three most common ways that a draft can be run:

- ✔ **Live offline draft:** In a live offline draft, all the coaches decide on a place and a time to meet and select their players. This old-fashioned way to start a season is the most fun, in my opinion, even though it isn't always practical if your league members are spread across the country. Even so, many coaches plan an annual road trip to be at the draft in-person, no matter where it's being held.
- ✔ **Live online draft:** A live online draft is the most popular and the easiest way to gather your league to draft players. Your fantasy league Web site provider (see Part IV) uses real-time technology to run the draft online. Each coach logs into the site at the specified draft time and then uses the draft interface to select the available players he or she wants to draft.
- ✔ **Autopick draft:** An autopick draft occurs online, but your league provider drafts each team for the league. Coaches don't have to log in at a specific time or place, but no one has control over the actual draft. Public leagues often use this format because it's hard to get 12 coaches to agree on a draft time when they don't know each other.

Identifying the two types of drafts

Most fantasy football leagues have drafts that use one of the following formats: the snake draft or the auction draft. The following sections cover these drafts and briefly explain how they work. (Chapter 4 dives deep into the differences between these two draft types and what you need to do to prepare for each one.)



If you're new to fantasy football or don't want to make a huge time commitment, I recommend playing in a snake draft league. If you're an experienced player or just a rabid football fan, read up on the auction draft; you may welcome the challenge.

Snaking through standard-draft rules

The standard draft is in a *snake draft* format. The snake draft is divided into *rounds* — one round for every available roster spot on each team. For example, if your league has 15-man rosters, your draft will have 15 rounds.

In a snake draft, each fantasy coach has one pick in each round. Each team makes its first-round pick based on a predetermined order (see Chapter 4 for deciding draft order). When the first round is over, the team that picked last in the first round picks first in the second round — in other words, the draft snakes back on itself. The team that had the first pick in the first round now has the last pick in the second round and the first pick in the third round. The process continues through all the rounds of the draft. If you can picture a snake moving back and forth in an “S” pattern, you'll get the idea.



The key to building a good team in a snake draft is preparing based on your draft position. If you get an earlier pick, you get the chance to draft one of the biggest studs in the NFL. If you have a later pick, you'll land two top-15 overall players rather than just the one elite player. Either way, you can win a fantasy league by drafting well, regardless of your draft position. (For more on draft prep and strategy, see Chapters 4, 8, and 9.)

Grasping auction-draft rules

A fantasy auction draft works a lot like an auction on eBay, except that you bid on NFL players rather than antiques or gadgets. In an *auction draft*, each NFL player is assigned a unit value, and every fantasy team has a unit budget; each team must fill its roster requirements without going over budget. You can bid as much as you want for a player, as long as you still have enough units left to complete the rest of your roster.

For example, if you have a 20-player roster to fill and a budget of 200 units, the most you could bid for your first player is 181 units, which would leave you with 1 unit per player for the remaining 19 slots. However, doing so would also leave your fantasy team in a lot of trouble!

An auction draft still has rounds — the number of rounds mirrors the number of roster spots — but instead of drafting a player when it's your turn in a round, you place a player on the auction block and start the bidding at an amount of your choice. If no other team outbids you, the player you put up is yours. If another team makes a bid, the bidding continues until no team surpasses the highest current offer; the player is awarded to the highest bidder. Each coach can nominate one player per round; this process continues until all the rosters are filled. Chapter 4 has more info on preparing for an auction draft, and Chapter 8 gives you some strategies.

Drafting the Right Players for Your Roster

An NFL team has 53 players total, with 11 starters on offense and 11 starters on defense. Luckily, your fantasy roster won't be as extensive or complex (unless you play in an extreme league, which is beyond this book's scope). When you research your league and find out how many roster spots you have, you can turn your attention to preparing for your draft based on those requirements.



The roster for your fantasy football team will be quite specific, depending on your league. The following list presents the default roster for a Yahoo! public league (see Chapter 13). This team has 9 starting slots and 8 bench slots, for a total of 17 fantasy players. In this league, the draft would last for 17 rounds:

Quarterback (QB)

Wide receiver 1 (WR1)

Wide receiver 2 (WR2)

Wide receiver 3 (WR3)

Running back 1 (RB1)

Running back 2 (RB2)

Tight end (TE)

Kicker (K)

Team defense/Special teams (Team DEF/ST)

Eight bench players

Breaking down positions

The major positions on your fantasy roster are the same as the major positions on offense in football. RBs take center stage in fantasy football, not QBs, and in Chapter 5, I explain why. WRs are the unsung heroes of fantasy football because they can score plenty of fantasy points, but they're often overshadowed by RBs and QBs. Only a few TEs are major parts of their teams' offensive gameplans; thus, a TE's impact on your fantasy team is often limited. As for the Ks, most of them get the job done, so you only need to draft one.

The last position in your starting lineup isn't based on individual stats but on the stats of everyone on an NFL team's DEF. You select an NFL's defense to start each week, and you score fantasy points based on everything from TDs to sacks (see Chapter 2). Sometimes, special teams' plays (return TDs and yardage) also count for your defensive unit; in these leagues, the DEF will be called D/ST. More advanced leagues use individual defensive player (IDP) positions; in these types of leagues, you draft individual defensive players rather than the team DEF.



If you're a fantasy football novice, focus on the offensive players and a team DEF for now and consider joining an IDP league in the future. For more on scouting defenses, see Chapter 7.

In addition to the starting lineup, each team also has backup players sitting on the "bench." The size of your bench depends on the type of league you're in and on how many starters you have. Most benches range from five to ten players. Every NFL team has one week of the season off (the *bye week*), all players face some tough matchups, and injuries are sure to rear their ugly head, so your bench will play a huge role in deciding your fantasy fate.



Most leagues have roster rules that teams must follow during the draft. For example, you can't draft only RBs and leave your roster without a TE. The common requirements state that each team must have a complete starting lineup based on league settings, but your bench players can play any position. Some leagues also set bench requirements. Usually, you can carry as many position players as you choose, but some leagues have restrictions to prevent collusion and unfair play. For example, some leagues may limit you to two QBs, two TEs, and two DEFs, with no limit on WRs and RBs.

Rating players with the fantasy formula

How do you know whom to draft and which players at each position are right for your team? Every league provider and fantasy expert site pre-ranks the players for you from top to bottom. These spreadsheets of players are also referred to as *cheat sheets*. They're quick reference tools you can use when deciding which player to draft next. (Check out Chapter 4 for more on cheat sheets.)



In order to excel at fantasy football, you need to become your own expert, study the NFL, and trust your own instincts. How do the experts determine their rankings and predict which players will be fantasy studs? They use an equation that I call the fantasy formula:

$$\text{Skill} + \text{Opportunity} = \text{Success}$$

When researching the NFL, you'll be looking for the players with the talents needed to excel and whose teams give them chances to use those skills. I emphasize the fantasy formula in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, which explain how to scout the league and pre-rank all the best players by position. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss important strategies for you to undertake during the draft and help you pick the best available players for your roster.

Your New Day Job: Managing Your Team Week by Week

After you draft your roster and talk trash about your leaguemates' picks while proclaiming your dominance, you can't just sit there and do nothing with your team. If you do, you'll be the one on the butt end of the jokes. If you want to win your league, you have to be proactive and manage your team each week. This section briefly covers the important pointers to remember when managing your team on a weekly basis. Chapters 10 and 11 give you a rundown.

Setting your lineup

The most important responsibility a fantasy coach has is to field the best possible team every week. Even if the real world demands much of your time or your team has a losing record, your league's integrity depends on each coach playing to win for the entire season.



The easiest way to stay in the game and in the championship picture is to make sure you have a complete and competitive lineup before the NFL games begin each week. Here are some of the common reasons why you need to change your starting lineup each week to stay competitive:

- ✔ **Injuries:** Injuries happen in the NFL each week, and they're part of what makes fantasy football challenging. If your best player gets knocked out for the season, you'll be hard pressed to find a worthy replacement. However, with a little research and by counting on your draft depth, you can insert capable players into your lineup each week.
- ✔ **Matchups:** Each fantasy team has a core of stud players that must start every week when healthy. But when making choices at your other lineup positions, you need to consider each NFL game and which of those *matchups* are more likely to give your fantasy players the best chance to produce. Researching matchups is the key to making the best possible lineup choices every week (for more on playing the matchups, see Chapter 10).
- ✔ **Bye weeks:** During the season, each NFL team has one week off (its *bye week*); you need to bench a team's players during its bye week in favor of active players on your bench. If you prepare for your draft correctly, these open dates won't come as a surprise, and your bench players will be ready to contribute.
- ✔ **Performance:** Athletes tend to play in streaks, either hot or cold. When making the tougher lineup decisions, you can check the stats for the last few games and see who's playing well and who needs to take a seat on your bench.

Making changes to your roster

The squad you draft won't be perfect. It may not be balanced, and your players probably won't stay healthy for the whole year; therefore, you need to make roster changes during the season. As a fantasy coach, you're more like a virtual general manager in this way. Of course, the real question is *when* to change your roster in order to improve your team. The following sections let you know your basic options for changing your roster during the season.



Every league provider has different default rules governing player movement (see Part IV for more). In addition, private league commissioners can add to or modify these rules as they see fit. For example, some leagues make all unowned players available only on waivers, and others stipulate that adds/drops must be done by using a blind auction (see Chapter 11). More restrictive league

rules make your job more difficult. Always know your league rules and settings before you draft your team and play the game.

Adding and dropping players

During the season, you can add or drop players to replace injured players or to upgrade at positions of need (where your draft left you thin or where players are underperforming). You can add or drop players in one of two ways (see Chapter 11 for more):

- ✔ **The free agency pool:** In Yahoo! default leagues (see Chapter 13), all undrafted fantasy players begin the season as *free agents*, which means they're available to be added to your roster at any time. You can swap any player on your roster for any free agent player, using your league's list of available players. Simply create an open roster slot by dropping one of your current players and then adding the new player. Many free agent pickups will surprise you and become staples in your lineup, so making good adds/drops is one of the keys to fantasy success.
- ✔ **The waiver wire:** If another team drops a player, the player goes on *waivers* for a limited time before becoming a free agent. This means all coaches have a set amount of time (usually two days) to decide if they want to add him to their teams. In order to add a player on waivers, you must make a *waiver claim* (by selecting him and a player on your roster to be dropped) and wait until the waiver period has expired. If you have the highest *waiver priority* — set in reverse order of your draft at the start of the season — you're awarded that player. After a claim is awarded, your waiver priority drops to the lowest number.

Trading with other coaches

If your team needs help and you can't fix it via free agency, it may be time to make a trade offer. Of course, making a good trade is easier said than done, because you have to give up someone good in order to get someone good (which is one of the reasons drafting for depth is so important). Closing a deal can be tough, but proposing a deal is a breeze.

Thanks to online technology, you just select the players you want and the players you're willing to give up, and your site automatically submits the trade to the other coach. That coach then accepts or rejects your proposal or makes a counteroffer. Your opponents won't always agree with your assessments of the players involved, so always be diplomatic and listen to what they have to say. Trade negotiations that become ugly almost never end well. For more on trade scenarios and for trade advice, check out Chapter 11.



The Hollywood Football League

My passion for fantasy football really took off in 2001 when my friends and I started the Hollywood Football League (HFL). The core group of coaches returns every season, like salmon returning to spawn. We don't play for money, but we have some wacky trophies and pride, which is what it's really all about. Most of us live in Los Angeles, but our online community extends to New York City and even Canada. Being part of an annual league with your friends and sharing the memories (good and bad) is what makes fantasy football such a great game.

Striving for the fantasy championship

As the professional football season marches on and fall becomes winter, the NFL separates its pretenders from the contenders. The same transformation occurs in fantasy football. When the NFL's best teams are fighting for playoff berths, most fantasy leagues begin their postseasons. The formats vary for deciding fantasy championships, but most leagues use a single-elimination tournament among the best teams in the leagues. At the end of the standard fantasy postseason, two teams battle for the league's crown in the championship game. They battle for glory, for trophies, for cash, for bragging rights, or for the love of the game. May the best team win! (Chapter 12 covers what you need to do to succeed in the fantasy playoffs.) The following sections introduce the different facets of the fantasy postseason.

Weeks 10–17: The fantasy postseason

The fantasy playoffs take place during the end of the NFL regular season so that all 32 teams and their players are still playing. Depending on the size of your league and the playoff format, most fantasy postseasons begin somewhere between Weeks 10 and 15, but will end with the end of the NFL regular season in Week 16 or 17. Smaller leagues may feature only two playoff teams and one playoff game. Larger leagues may have six or more playoff teams, which can mean playoff games that cover three to five weeks.

Your league's championship

Getting to the finals and winning your fantasy league is what fantasy football is all about. After all, only first place gets the prize and the bragging rights. Watching your NFL players while tracking your fantasy football championship game online is an adrenaline

rush you can't duplicate in other fantasy sports. You'll be cheering, screaming, and biting your nails! And if you win, don't gloat too much, because your league will be gunning for you next season.

Are You Ready to Play?

Fantasy football can be a fun and rewarding venture. Are you interested in getting in touch with your fantasy persona? If so, jump on in. The water is amazing! Keep the following in mind based on your fantasy needs:

- ✔ If you're a beginner looking to join a league, start in Chapter 3 on league types and then read Chapters 13–16 to choose a league provider. Circle back to Chapters 2 and 4 to get ready for your draft while keeping your league settings in mind.
- ✔ If you've been invited to play in a league for the first time, start in Part IV. Some of the lingo may be new to you, but knowing your league setup will be useful when pre-ranking, drafting, and managing your team. Then, read Chapters 2 and 4 before diving into Parts II and III.
- ✔ If you've played fantasy football before, you may want to start with Part II. Knowing what to look for when ranking players and not just following some expert cheat sheets blindly is what will take your game to the next level. Part III reviews some draft strategies that you may have heard of but haven't fully embraced. Chapter 16 reviews some of my favorite Web sites to surf when doing your homework before and during the season.

How fantasy football began

In 1962, Bill "Wink" Winkenbach, a limited partner in the Oakland Raiders, and a group of die-hard local football businessmen founded GOPPPL: The Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League. Wink and his buddies hammered out the rules for drafting players from all the teams, and on draft day in 1963, fantasy football was born. For more info on the history of the game, check out www.fspnet.com/wink.pdf.

Fantasy football has been going strong ever since, but it really took off with the growth of the Internet in the mid-1990s. Online league providers make playing easy for beginners and experts alike by compiling all the scoring results each week during the football season. The Web also offers tons of fantasy expert sites filled with handy advice and stats to help every coach research the players and make smart choices when drafting and managing teams.

Chapter 2

Just Score, Baby: The Name of the Fantasy Game

In This Chapter

- ▶ Realizing the impact of scoring in fantasy football
 - ▶ Getting offensive for the bulk of your scoring
 - ▶ Examining defense's role in the scoring picture
 - ▶ Picking a scoring format that suits your style
-

In real sports, the team that scores the most points wins — the same goes for fantasy football. There are baskets in basketball, runs in baseball, and goals in hockey, but scoring in fantasy football entails more than just getting the ball into the end zone and between the uprights. Many statistics show the value and ability of players beyond their actual points scored, and those stats translate into *fantasy* points for your team.

This chapter explains how scoring works in fantasy football and how it differs from the NFL. **Note:** The default settings I refer to in this chapter and in this book are the default settings on Yahoo!, but other leagues use different scoring modifiers that may even affect your draft strategy. Check with your league and acquaint yourself with its scoring default settings before you do anything.

Scoring 101: Only the Basics

Winning in fantasy football is no different than winning in the NFL: Two teams play each other and the team that scores the most points wins. However, the big difference is how points are scored. To give you a broad overview of scoring and to touch on something you

probably already know if you're a football fan, in the NFL, scoring breaks down as follows:

- ✔ Touchdowns: 6 points
- ✔ Field goals: 3 points
- ✔ Safeties: 2 points
- ✔ Extra points: 1 point



In fantasy, however, a team scores points based on each player's performance and personal stats, in addition to the standard NFL point system and not on the NFL teams' win-loss records. The stud offensive players who can run, catch, and pass for big yards and not just score are the elite players in the fantasy world. In essence, fantasy rewards a player for playing a good game even if he doesn't score lots of touchdowns. Scoring touchdowns isn't easy in the NFL, and just because an offensive player can't reach the end zone doesn't mean he's having a bad game.

Fantasy football also awards points to kickers who kick field goals and extra points and to team defenses that can score fantasy points by not giving up points and creating turnovers, in addition to scoring TDs and safeties. (Check out the "Shooting for Shutouts: Scoring with Defense" section later in this chapter for more info.) Basically, anything from fumble recoveries to receptions to field goal distance can add up for your fantasy team.

Every league provider has a default setting for the stats that will convert to fantasy scoring, but any NFL stat can translate into fantasy points — only your league commissioner can make the decision to change any defaults.



To know your league's scoring default, make sure you check out your league's scoring system when preparing for your season. The scoring rules of your league may affect your draft strategy (see Chapter 4) and will affect the outcome of each game during the season.

The Proof's in the Points: Offensive Fantasy Scoring

The old saying goes "defense wins championships," but football fans know that offense makes the highlights. Exciting players who move the chains and score the TDs have always been the game's superstars, so fantasy football was designed to focus on the

offense. Big-time QBs, RBs, and WRs are the heart of any good fantasy team, and their total fantasy points scored will make or break your season.

This section gives you a basic breakdown of the default scoring values by position for the individual offensive positions — using Yahoo! as a default setting. I also explain why each position is valuable to your fantasy team and how the players can help you rack up fantasy points on game day. (For a more detailed analysis of each offensive position and how the scoring system will affect your fantasy draft, check out the chapters in Part II.)

Running backs

Running backs are the most important players in fantasy football because they have plenty of opportunities to score fantasy points, and the great ones are hard to come by. More carries and receptions equal more chances to rack up yards and to score in the *red zone* — the area inside the opponent's 20-yard line.

The following list breaks down the default scoring for RBs on Yahoo!:

Rushing yards: 1 point per 10 yards

Rushing touchdowns: 6 points

Receiving yards: 1 point per 10 yards

Receiving touchdowns: 6 points

Kick/punt return touchdowns: 6 points

Two-point conversions: 2 points

Fumbles lost: -2 points

For every 10 rushing yards, your player and fantasy team get a point, compared to 20 passing yards to net the same amount (check out the “Quarterbacks” section to compare). Rushing yards are more difficult to get in the NFL, so fantasy providers make them more valuable. And receivers must rely on getting open and on their QBs finding them; plus they have to catch the ball to get the points — which isn't as easy as it sounds. All the RB has to do is take the handoff from the QB and hit the hole. Because of these reasons, RBs are the most valuable players in fantasy football. And not only do they run for TDs, they gain points for yardage gained via the pass — not too many QBs and receivers can get valuable rushing yards. A RB who can run and receive is extremely valuable. (Check out Chapter 5 for more on scouting running backs.)



Most starting RBs don't return punts or kickoffs due to injury risk, but many backup and *vulture* RBs (a running back who steals goal-line carries from the starter) play on special teams. Because TDs on special teams count (but are rare), the draft value of these RBs increases slightly.

Wide receivers

Wide receivers are the second most valuable players in fantasy football, behind RBs. This isn't because they score more points than QBs; it's because there are fewer high-scoring WRs in the league and you have to start three each week, as opposed to one QB.

In addition, WRs get hit and tackled less than QBs and RBs, so they make fewer mistakes, which means fewer negative points on average. They also have less chance of injury, and they more than likely start every game for your fantasy team.

The following breaks down the default scoring for WRs on Yahoo!:

Receiving yards: 1 point per 10 yards

Receiving touchdowns: 6 points

Rushing yards: 1 point per 10 yards

Rushing touchdowns: 6 points

Kick/punt return touchdowns: 6 points

Two-point conversions: 2 points

Fumbles lost: -2 points



The WR position has more depth in the NFL than the RB position, which makes WRs less valuable during fantasy drafts. However, their fantasy points are very similar — the only difference being that very few WRs gain rushing yards or score rushing TDs on a regular basis — so don't underestimate the need for having good WRs on your team! A great WR can dominate a game and carry a fantasy team if he gets enough passes thrown his way from a good QB. (Head to Chapter 6 for info on scouting and valuing WRs.)

Quarterbacks

Because the quarterback is the one player who touches the ball on nearly every down, it seems like he'd be the player who scores the most points, right? Good QBs do score a lot of points, but most QBs are held back by the many opportunities for negative points based on mistakes and by the scoring systems from most league providers.

The following list breaks down the default scoring for QBs on Yahoo!:

Passing yards: 1 point per 20 yards

Passing touchdowns: 6 points

Rushing yards: 1 point per 10 yards

Rushing touchdowns: 6 points

Two-point conversions: 2 points

Fumbles lost: -2 points

Interceptions: -2 points

Sacks: -1 point

If each turnover is worth -2 points, three turnovers in a game will negate one TD, which brings down the overall value of QBs. Negative points make fantasy football a more realistic simulation of real football. If an NFL QB gets sacked, it hurts his team, so it should hurt your fantasy team, too.

Many leagues don't use negative points, which is a scoring loophole that can improve the draft value of mistake-prone QBs who complete a lot of passes on losing teams. And many leagues count passing TDs as only 4 points (instead of 6), which lowers the draft value of all QBs versus RBs and WRs.



A QB who can run the ball effectively when necessary can score a ton of fantasy points. However, QBs are fragile by nature, so a running QB runs a greater risk of being injured. If you draft a running QB, be sure to draft a good fantasy backup just in case your starter gets hurt. Check out Chapter 5 for more on pre-ranking QBs.

Tight ends

Tight ends score fantasy teams points by catching passes, so their scoring stats are the same as the WRs (check out the "Wide receivers" section earlier in this chapter for the breakdown). Elite TEs get fewer looks than the top-20 WRs, and average TEs don't have much value outside of matchup-based starts, but they often get short-yardage TDs and two-point conversions in the red zone, which raises their value. (Head to Chapter 6 for info on scouting TEs.)



As long as your league awards the full 6 points for a receiving TD, consider TEs more valuable than all the kickers and most of the team defenses, but not as valuable as the big-three offensive positions: QB, RB, and WR.

Kickers

Kickers just score points, which is nice. Having a good K is a key to fantasy success, but because almost every K in the league is good, the depth at the position makes Ks the least valuable of all your fantasy starters. **Note:** Many fantasy league providers award bonus points for longer kicks and penalize Ks for missing short kicks and extra points.

The following breaks down the default scoring for kickers on Yahoo!:

- Field goal 0–19 yards: 3 points
- Field goal 20–29 yards: 3 points
- Field goal 30–39 yards: 3 points
- Field goal 40–49 yards: 4 points
- Field goal 50+ yards: 5 points
- Field goal missed 0–19 yards: –3 points
- Field goal missed 20–29 yards: –2 points
- Field goal missed 30–39 yards: –1 point
- Field goal missed 40–49 yards: 0 points
- Field goal missed 50+ yards: 0 points
- Extra point made: 1 point
- Extra point missed: –1 point



Because of many factors, predicting which Ks will produce can be tricky. Therefore, you should always draft Ks last, and don't be afraid to switch kickers frequently during the season — even on a weekly basis — if need be. (For more on scouting kickers, check out Chapter 7.)

Shooting for Shutouts: Scoring with Defense

Defense often gets lost in the shuffle in fantasy football. People want to watch offensive players dancing in the end zone, not tackles for no gain. But if you want to win your fantasy league, you need to go on the offensive to scout and draft a good defense. Defensive players can create turnovers, cause yardage losses for an offense, score touchdowns, and even play on special teams — in other words, they make plays that impact the game. The scoring system

of most fantasy leagues tracks defensive performance. In terms of defense, most fantasy leagues break down defensive scoring in two ways:

- ✓ **Team defense/special teams:** Standard fantasy leagues combine one defense's stats into one fantasy player, called the *team defense (DEF)* on Yahoo! and/or *defense/special teams (D/ST)* on other fantasy football sites.
- ✓ **Individual players:** In more advanced leagues, each fantasy coach drafts defensive position players and uses an individual scoring system, much like with the offensive players.

This section takes a look at both options and how they affect scoring in fantasy football. Check out Chapter 7 for more info on scouting defenses.

Dissecting team defense scoring

The team defense can be a major contributor to your fantasy team, depending on your league's scoring system. Sacks, interceptions, and fumble recoveries quickly add up and lead to a dominant defensive game. If your team DEF crushes its opponent, it may even score the elusive shutout, worth ten big fantasy points. If your defense gets lit up and gives up a lot of points, many leagues penalize you for their performance. The special teams unit can also score you a quick six by returning a kick or a punt for a TD, but it's very rare.

The following breaks down the default scoring for team DEFs on Yahoo!:

- Sack: 1 point
- Interception: 2 points
- Fumble recovery: 2 points
- Touchdown: 6 points
- Safety: 2 points
- Blocked kick: 2 points
- Kick/punt return TDs: 6 points
- 0 points allowed: 10 points
- 1–6 points allowed: 7 points
- 7–13 points allowed: 4 points
- 14–20 points allowed: 1 point
- 21–27 points allowed: 0 points

28–34 points allowed: –1 point

35+ points allowed: –4 points

Defensive touchdowns aren't common, but they have a huge fantasy impact when they occur. For example, if a linebacker makes an interception, it's worth 2 points, but if he runs it back for a touchdown, he gets another 6 points. Any time you can score 8 fantasy points on one NFL play, that is a sweet play!



On average, a team defense should score around 5 to 10 points in a good week. But a great week (15 to 30 fantasy points) or a terrible week (0 to –5 fantasy points) can decide a game. Every season, coaches will draft the projected top-three defenses early — from Round 5 to 10. The problem is that team defenses rely on so many variables, making their performances hard to predict and their value rarely worth such early round selections. You have 32 team defenses to choose from, so you'll have a chance to own a productive unit even if you wait until a later round.

Getting advanced with IDP scoring

More advanced leagues, with intense commissioners and coaches who want a bigger scouting challenge, offer *individual defensive player* (IDP) scoring options. In an IDP league, each fantasy coach drafts individual defensive players and uses individual scoring, much like individual offensive scoring. (Because you're probably a beginning fantasy player, I suggest you first focus on team DEF leagues. That's why most of this book focuses on team DEF. However, if you do want a little bit on IDP leagues, this section gives a quick overview on scoring.)

IDP leagues break down the defensive players by three positions:

- ✔ Linebackers
- ✔ Defensive linemen
- ✔ Defensive backs

Your league's commissioner sets how many players at each position you must draft. Each position can score fantasy points in any of the following stat categories, depending on your league's default settings. Here's a sample of some of them (not from a Yahoo! league):

Sack: 2 points

Tackle: 2 points

Assist: 1 point

- Interception: 3 points
- Pass defended: 1 point
- Fumble recovery: 2 points
- Forced fumble: 3 points
- Touchdown: 6 points
- Safety: 3 points
- Blocked kick: 2 points
- Kick/punt return touchdowns: 6 points

The roster requirements and scoring variables are different in every IDP league. In general, stats such as tackles and forced fumbles make each defensive player almost as important as the offensive players on your roster. Of course, TDs still rule in most leagues, and your draft should still focus on the play-making RBs, QBs, and WRs. But after you've acquired your offensive stars in the first five to ten rounds, you can start to look at drafting dominant All-Pro defensemen. (For more info on pre-ranking IDP leagues, read Chapter 7.)

You versus Who? Knowing the Scoring Format

Knowing how your players score their fantasy points doesn't mean you know the whole score. What matters in the NFL also matters in the big picture of fantasy football: winning. And just as each fantasy league has unique scoring rules for the players, leagues have different types of rules for competing against the other coaches. Make sure you've researched the league's scoring format before you join so that you know what it takes to win. This section gives you the rundown of how the road to victory is different in certain leagues.

Head-to-head leagues

The classic competition format for fantasy football is the style that mirrors the NFL: going head to head against the other teams in your league. In a *head-to-head scoring league*, each fantasy squad plays one other squad per week, and the starting lineup with the highest score that week wins. If the matchup ends in a tie, a tiebreaker set by your commissioner decides the game (total bench points scored is a common tiebreaker). Your league provider automatically tallies the points, using your league's scoring parameters (see the previous

sections in this chapter). After the week's NFL games are completed, the fantasy results become final.

A larger league may also be divided into divisions, just like the NFL, although most aren't. Each team will usually play the teams in its own division twice and the other teams once, but it depends on how the league is configured by the Web site or by the commissioner.

Each team's win-loss record determines the standings at the end of the season, just like in the NFL. The top teams from the regular season — depending on your league's settings — then go head to head in the playoffs in a seeded tournament format, just like in the NFL. The winner of the championship matchup becomes the league champion. (Check out Chapter 12 for more on the playoffs.)

Rotisserie leagues

In a *rotisserie league* (also called a *roto league*), the scoring rules for each team are the same (see the previous sections in this chapter), but you have no head-to-head games each week. Instead, your league provider compiles each team's points scored over the entire fantasy season (17-week regular NFL season). The team with the most points at the end of the year wins the league.

Because many strange things can happen every week in the NFL, such as an all-pro QB throwing five interceptions or a kicker hitting five field goals, upsets happen in reality and in fantasy. In one week, you may score a ton of points and still lose because your opponent scored just one more point than you did. One or two close games like that can knock a good team out of the fantasy playoffs and put a lesser team in the postseason in the head-to-head format. Because a roto league weighs total points scored over the course of the entire season, not weekly win and losses, it's considered a more accurate measure of a quality fantasy team. I understand that opinion, but I prefer the H2H format because it feels more like the real thing to me.

Chapter 3

Finding a League Right for You

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Becoming familiar with public and private leagues
 - ▶ Choosing from different game variations
 - ▶ Determining the spoils of fantasy victory
 - ▶ Lording over a league as the commissioner
-

People take many different paths into the world of fantasy football. Perhaps one of your friends or coworkers has invited you to join a fantasy league. Or maybe you just want to sign up for a league by yourself to gain bragging rights over complete strangers. Furthermore, some people play fantasy football just for fun, focusing only on offensive touchdowns and bragging rights, while some hardcore players pony up \$2,000 to play in tournaments that feature complex rules.

No matter your motivation, you need to know what you're getting into. Specifically, if you want to play, you need to find a league that fits you and your needs. However you plan on playing, this chapter explains your league options and helps you select the one that will maximize your enjoyment of the game.

Understanding Your League Options: Public or Private

Although fantasy football offers many different types of games for you to choose from, before you choose a specific league, you need to ask yourself one basic question: Do you want to play in a public league or in a private league? When you answer this question, also ask yourself what type of environment you want to play in. The answer may be quite simple. Your cousin Bo may have asked you

to play with him and his buds, which in that case means you join Bo's private league. However, if you don't know anyone and want to play fantasy, then you need to look into a public league.

You can find both public and private leagues that are free or that have entry fees. This section explains the two major types of fantasy football leagues, the free and pay versions of both, and discusses their pros and cons.



Before signing up for a public or private league, check out the online research guide in Part IV of this book. I break down the specific services of the major fantasy league providers for both free and pay leagues.

Entering the public domain: Anyone can play

A *public league* is just that — public. Anyone can play in the league, just like anyone can play in the public park. You don't need to know anyone in the league, and a public league is great for beginners. All the main service providers in Part IV offer public leagues, including Yahoo!, ESPN, and CBS Sportsline. Joining a public league is a great way to learn the fantasy game and meet new people without having to worry about the judgment of friends.



In a public league, you can experiment with different draft plans (see Chapters 8 and 9) and team management decisions (see Chapter 10) without peer pressure; heck, you can sign all your favorite players from one team and not be flamed by your cousin John. I've even met some cool coaches in public leagues, and we've formed our own private leagues the following season.

Free public leagues

Free public leagues are a way to play fantasy football without having to shell out a dime. Anyone can sign up online and create a team. The draft and the gameplay are the same, but the coaches tend to be strangers. If you're new to fantasy football, a free public league is a good place to start playing or just to play casually. In fact, most fantasy players first got hooked on fantasy football in a free public league due to the casual style and ease of use. If you want to practice, doing it in a free, public league also makes sense.



Despite how easy and fun it is to play in free public leagues, the coaches may not play out the season because they're not tied to the leagues by their friends or their money. When coaches don't pay to play and don't know the rest of the coaches, they're more

likely to get bored and quit. Leagues may be decided by these no-shows. If you're eager to chat and talk smack, but not many of the coaches want to rant football with you, you may soon realize that this league is a bad fit for you. Furthermore, most free public leagues don't have a commissioner (although some do allow one of its coaches to act as commissioner). Not having a commissioner means having to live with default settings, public trade votes, and obnoxious coaches. An acting commish/coach can be reasoned with when there are disputes and can help make a league run more smoothly.

Anyone can sign up for a free public league. Just surf to the fantasy pages of the league provider and click on *fantasy football*. Either you'll be randomly assigned to a public league or you can choose from a list of public leagues based on league size and the time of the league's live or auto draft. Some examples of free public leagues include CBS Sportsline's *Free Fantasy Football* (see Chapter 14), ESPN's *Fantasy Football* (see Chapter 15), and Yahoo!'s *Fantasy Football Basic* (see Chapter 13).

Pay public leagues

Pay public leagues are similar to free public leagues, with the exception that you have to pay money to play. (No surprises there, right?) The amount you pay depends on the league. Often, when fantasy coaches grow tired of dominating their free public league, they seek out a public pay league to feed the need for competition.



When you pay to play, you're in essence paying for access to different features including expert advice, real-time scoring during games, a draft kit with team previews and player rankings, depending on the site. (Make sure you read the league default settings and the site's rules before you make your payment to know what you're getting for your money.) By committing your hard-earned dollars to fantasy football, you give yourself the incentive to prepare for the draft and play out the season, no matter what happens. The other coaches will feel the same way, and the competition will be better because of it. Some examples of pay public leagues include *Fantasy Football PLUS* on Yahoo! (see Chapter 13) and *Fantasy Football Double Diamond* on CBS Sportsline (see Chapter 14).

So how do you sign up for a pay public league, and how much money will you spend? After reviewing your options (read Part IV to help get you started), just follow the provider's links to their pay options from their fantasy football main page. Your monetary commitment depends on your personal budget and what you're willing to spend. An average pay league costs around \$100 to create, which is only \$10 per person in a ten-team league. Many sites offer leagues with entry fees from \$50 up to \$2,000 for serious bettors, with the

latter allowing you to enter the World Championship of Fantasy Football for a chance to win \$200,000!



Despite all the benefits of playing in a public pay league, it does have some of the same drawbacks as a free public league. (Check out the previous section.)

Joining the private sector: An invitation required

A *private league* isn't as secretive or exclusive as it sounds. Fantasy coaches are invited to play by another fantasy player in the league (often by the commissioner). So when Joe from Accounting invites you to join his league with his buds, Joe is the commissioner and you're in essence joining a private league. The league's Web site provider doesn't randomly group fantasy players together like in a public league, and the commissioner customizes the rules and setup.



The only way you can play in a private league is if someone invites you (or you set up your own private league). Private leagues tend to be more good-naturedly competitive and more fun than public leagues, and they're a great bonding tool. In fact, a private league is where fantasy football was meant to be played. Your league name and team names can be inside jokes that all the coaches are in on. You'll probably see or talk to the other coaches in your league regularly, so now you'll have even more to talk about.

Most sites require a private league to have a commissioner to run the show. The *commissioner* runs the league by collecting the dues (if applicable), setting the league rules, reviewing trades, and so on. The commish also plays in the leagues. A good commish can help his or her league flourish for years, but a bad commish may discourage coaches from signing up next season. Either way, the buck stops with the commish, so when you have questions or complaints, you'll be heard quickly. (For more on the commish's role, see the "Starting Your Own League: You Want to Be a Commissioner?" section later in this chapter.)

As with public leagues, private leagues offer both free and pay varieties. The following sections break them down.

Free private leagues

A *free private league* means there are no league dues to be paid, but you still need an invite to join. The commissioner can customize the rules and scoring settings and select a draft time.



Just like in free public leagues, when coaches don't have any money invested in playing, they may not be as dedicated to the game. Even if you know all the coaches in a free private league, someone will probably quit before the season is over, I promise. Quitting is less likely in a private league, but consider yourself warned.



Most league providers save their best tools and expert advice for their premium services (in other words, for the pay leagues where players give money to the site). If you don't sign up for the site's services, you should consider surfing around to research your draft prep, and perhaps sign up for an expert pay service like www.rotowire.com. Because good intel is the key to success, I suggest paying for access to an expert site during the season.

Pay private leagues

Joining a pay private league is the best way to play the game, in my humble opinion. A *pay private league* is invite only and has an entry fee that covers the site fees as well as cash awards and prizes. You get the same advantages in a pay private league as you do in a pay public league if you put in money through the league provider (check out "Pay public leagues" earlier in this chapter). To sweeten the deal, though, you get to play with your friends or coworkers in a pay private league.



I don't think you need to play for big money to have fun; just make the fee enough for coaches to care about their teams and play to win. Of course, that amount has to be determined by the commish and the rest of the league.

Identifying Other Important Considerations

When determining what type of league you want to play in (private versus public; check out the previous section), you have to choose a specific type of game. Every league has variables that affect how tough it is to play the game and how tough it will be to defeat your foes. These different considerations can make a game more *competitive* or more *casual*. What do you want from your fantasy experience? Keep these other considerations in mind as you decide:

- ✓ **Draft type:** Most fantasy leagues utilize either a snake draft or an auction draft. For more info on each type, check out Chapter 4. If you're new to fantasy football, I suggest that you join a league that operates in the traditional, casual snake format. However, if you're a bit more experienced with fantasy

and want a league more competitive, consider signing up for a league with an auction draft.

- ✔ **Pay versus free:** The previous sections discuss some pros and cons of pay and free leagues. When you're looking to make your choice, remember that pay leagues are more competitive while free leagues are more casual. If you just want to keep your fantasy games casual, avoid betting on yourself and play for fun. It's all about the Benjamins for the more serious fantasy players. Remember that when people pay, they tend to take it more seriously, and the higher the entry fee, the more competitive a league tends to be. Sometimes, an entry fee just covers the costs of a premium league service, which offers more helpful tools for the casual player to manage his or her team. Higher league dues, on the other hand, means that money goes to the victor or is used to buy trophies. (Check out the "Why are you playing? For love or money?" section later in this chapter.)
- ✔ **Number of coaches (also known as level of competitiveness):** The bottom line is that the more competition you have (the number of coaches in the league), the less casual your league will be. So if you want a relaxed casual experience, look for a smaller league. If you want your league to be more cut-throat, go with a larger league. An 8-team league, for instance, is always easier, because you'll have more great players to choose from in the first ten rounds of the draft. In a 12-team league, the stars will get snatched up quickly, so you'll need a deep understanding of all the NFL rosters in order to build a competitive team.
- ✔ **Size and configuration of league rosters:** Many leagues have different team requirements, ranging from simple to complex. For example, the basic Yahoo! league (see Chapter 13) features nine starters and eight bench players — a manageable number, even for a beginner. If your roster requirement is smaller, team management is easier and the draft is shorter. If your roster is 20 players or more, team management becomes more challenging and the draft takes longer. The starting position requirements also vary from league to league. If your league requires you to start two or more QBs, DEFs, TEs, or Ks, three or more RBs, and four or more WRs, you're playing in an unusually complex league. Hope you have some free time!

Most fantasy football providers use default roster configurations that first-time players can easily use. Be sure to read your league's rules and settings page before signing up, if possible. If your league has a commissioner, e-mail him or her to find out if the league has any wrinkles that you need to be aware of.



Pick Your League: The How-To

Many types of people play fantasy football, and no one league fits everyone. Some people focus only on the draft and spend little time adjusting their teams during the season. Others like to micro-manage their rosters and spend hours reading game stats, expert advice, and injury reports. Choosing the right game type and the right level of competition is essential for having fun in this game.

Ask yourself the questions in this section when you're picking the fantasy league to play in. The answers can help you narrow down your choice. You can then check out the resource chapters in Part IV that cover the main fantasy providers to find one that you like.

How committed are you?

Depending on how much time (and even money) you have to devote to fantasy greatly affects which league is right. For example, if you're busy working 70 hours a week, do you really have the time to devote to your team? You may identify with one of the following as you decide which league is right for you:

- ✔ **You're a fantasy newbie, have only an hour a week to play, and don't want to spend any money.** If so, start with a free public league. A free league runs automatically, using the league provider's default settings. If you want to practice and get better before you decide to take on friends or coworkers, playing in a free public league makes sense.
- ✔ **You're new to fantasy football, don't have any buddies who play, and don't mind spending a little money.** If you're willing to dedicate the time, you may want to consider playing in a public pay league. All the major league providers (see Part IV) offer multiple levels of service. If you have the time, you're probably going to be more dedicated to scouting and preparing for the draft, and then managing your team each week. The higher the league fee, the more bells and whistles you get.
- ✔ **You're fairly new to fantasy football, but your coworker invited you to play.** You don't have much control over how your friend sets up his league. He's the commissioner, and he selects the default settings (such as the draft type, the number of players on the roster, and such; check out the earlier section, "Identifying Other Important Considerations," for more info). A private league can still give you an opportunity to play. Your coworker's league may be free or pay. Before you commit to the league, make sure you can devote enough time so other players won't feel like you aren't doing your part.

- ✔ **You're somewhat familiar with fantasy and played in a few leagues, and you're willing to devote more time (and money).** If so, a more competitive public pay league with certain defaults that you like (such as larger roster sizes, more competitive leagues with more coaches, and such) may be a viable choice. (Refer to the "Identifying Other Important Considerations" section for areas to look.) If you can't find a league that you like, you may want to start your own league and customize it. (Check out the "Starting Your Own League: You Want to Be a Commissioner?" section later in this chapter.)
- ✔ **You're a fantasy expert and love spending hours upon hours playing.** If so, this chapter isn't required reading. Read Part II.

How much do you know?

When picking a league that's right for you, you need to know how familiar you really are with the fantasy football world. If you're like many of the people reading this book, you probably know very little about fantasy football. Or perhaps you've played a season or two and really want to get a better grasp of all the strategies that can help elevate your game. Joining a standard snake draft, head-to-head format league would then be the way to go. If the price is right, feel free to join an affordable pay league that you (and your rivals) will be interested in playing even if your team falters.

If you're more of an advanced player, you may want to experiment with different types of game variations to add some excitement. (If you're a newbie, feel free to skip the rest of this section.) The tried-and-true formula for fantasy football uses a snake draft (see Chapter 4) to create a league of six or more teams that play each other in head-to-head matchups during the regular NFL season (a 17-week schedule). However, many veterans of the game become bored with this setup after a few years. Even a larger buy-in won't satisfy their hunger for competition. For these players, many Web sites have created new variations to spice up their fantasy leagues. By definition, any new variation is harder to play and makes the league more serious, but if you're ready for a challenge, the variations can be great fun. The following are variations you may want to consider if you're a bit more advanced:

- ✔ **IDP leagues:** For true fantasy geeks, IDP may be the way to go. The basic fantasy game focuses on individual offensive players, in addition to a defense that's represented by an entire NFL team's defense (known as DEF). In an *individual defensive player (IDP)* league, not only can your standard offensive players score points, but also any of the 11 guys on an NFL team's

defense (depending on your draft) can score you fantasy points. (Check Chapter 2 for the typical IDP scoring breakdowns.) Because you have to research both offensive players and a team's defensive players, the draft process is much longer, the draft prep is harder, and team management takes more time during the week.

✔ **Keeper or dynasty leagues:** Most basic leagues and beginning players use an *annual format*, meaning that next season each coach starts fresh at the draft with an empty roster, and the league has the option of changing rules and settings each year. However, in *keeper* or *dynasty leagues*, you're allowed to retain the services of some or all of your players each year. This format is more complicated for many reasons. Foremost, your drafting strategy and team management during the season can't focus solely on winning today; you have to acquire players that will help you in the future and for years to come. Keeper and dynasty leagues require a lot more time, energy, and football knowledge than the traditional fantasy game.

✔ **Salary cap leagues:** Salary cap football is a lot of work and research, and it presents a challenge different from basic fantasy football. However, because you have so many options, and you don't necessarily have to interact with other coaches, salary cap football can be fun for both casual and competitive players. Each team in a salary cap league is given a weekly budget that the owner uses to pick a starting lineup. Unlike standard leagues, every coach can select any players he or she wants as long as the total dollar value of the lineup stays under the cap.

The Web site provider assigns a dollar value to each player; like the stock market, a player's dollar value rises and falls depending on how he plays. Therein lies the challenge of salary cap football. If you spend money on an elite RB, can you still afford three top WRs? Will a \$10 QB play as well as a \$25 QB, based on his matchup?

✔ **Uber leagues:** Fantasy games cover all sports, not just football, and many football fans also follow other sports. Along the way, someone got the bright idea to try to compete in multiple fantasy sports for one league. In an *uber league*, you draft teams in multiple sports (usually football, basketball, and baseball), and the site compiles your fantasy stats (also known as *rotisserie stats*) in each sport for a year. The coach who scores the most combined points wins the uber league. Uber leagues are highly competitive and time consuming, but if you're a real sports junkie, you may want to consider going uber.

Why are you playing? For love or money?

If you're just starting your venture into the world of fantasy football, you may not want to spend any money to play while you learn and gain experience. That's perfectly fine. Just keep signing up for free leagues and have fun. However, if you've been playing for a while, or if you're a bit adventurous, you may want to (literally) up the ante.

I've played in many leagues just for fun, but fun doesn't look good when placed on my mantle, and pride doesn't buy me a new MP3 player. Something to play for makes fantasy football all the more fun and exciting. Why not go for a little prize money or a trophy to do the bragging for you? If you're willing to spend a little moolah to play, this section covers what you could win.

Acquiring trophies and other bling

Most fantasy geeks are retired jocks, sports nuts, or coworkers with something to prove, so being able to hoist trophies above their heads after winning it all really is a fantasy come true. A league trophy symbolizes commitment, and committed coaches are what make a league strong and the game of fantasy football more fun to play. (Furthermore, trophies are surprisingly affordable [depending on how huge you want them to be], and adding names to them costs peanuts, so you may suggest this idea to your commissioner.)

Figure 3-1 shows a photo of the championship trophy from my Hollywood Football League. The award is basic, but it works. I've sipped from it twice in my HFL career!



Figure 3-1: Raise the cup and celebrate victory!



Personalized awards: Making fantasy football even more fun

Only one team can win your league each year so why not create additional awards for people to play for? They can be for best coach, best draft, or even worst trade, but they should always be done in the spirit of fun.

In order to share the wealth, the coaches in my Hollywood League began to create other trophies besides the championship award. Having multiple awards, both good and bad, is another great way to inspire and build a league. Many teams will be out of the playoff picture early, but they can still win a trophy or two. You can create awards for most points scored, best regular season record, best draft, and so on. You also can recognize the bottom feeders of the league with funny and embarrassing “awards.” The awards don’t always have to be trophies, either. We’ve created medals, ribbons, and certificates to acknowledge fantasy achievement, for better or worse. Here’s a list of our HFL awards:

- ✔ The Khazei/Signore O.C.D. Coach of the Year Trophy: To the most crazed player
- ✔ The Josh David Sportsmanship Award: To the coach who kept his cool
- ✔ The Peter Maingot Dubious Distinction Award: To a horse’s ass — ‘nuff said
- ✔ The Mike Doria Lifetime Achievement Medal: To a coach entering the HFL Hall of Fame

You can even contact a ring company that will make championship rings for your league! Anything goes, but no matter what prize you choose, giving awards is a great excuse to get together and party with your buddies when the season is over.

Show me the money!

Many fantasy coaches only want to play for cold, hard cash. The key for money players is to determine a comfortable buy-in amount. Many of these types of leagues charge \$10 to \$2,000 to play with the prospects of winning a T-shirt or \$200,000! The fees and prizes can be collected entirely by the site (like in CBS Sportsline’s competitive pay leagues) or by the commissioner, who pays the league provider and then divides the rest of the league dues amongst the winners every season.



Examine your financial situation to determine how much money is worth spending on fantasy football. Personally, I think league fees and prizes should stay in the \$20 to \$200 range. If you’re on a limited budget, you may want to stay on the low end of the range. If, however, you want to play for more money, consider joining a pay

The ultimate challenge: The World Championship of Fantasy Football

If you're entering the World Championship of Fantasy Football (WCOFF), which costs between \$500 and \$2,000, you probably aren't reading my book. For the rest of us, we can aspire to one day play in this competition. A three-day extravaganza takes place in Las Vegas and in Atlantic City every year. Fantasy football fanatics come from all over the country to wear team jerseys, talk smack, and drink beer, all leading up to the live and in-person draft before the start of the NFL season. Hundreds of 12-team leagues compete in a basic snake-draft format for the first ten weeks of the season. At that point, the league winners all compete against each other for the next four weeks, and the team with the highest point total wins the grand prize: \$200,000, a crystal football trophy, and a big, fake check from an ESPN personality.

I attended the main event in 2006, and it's quite a scene. Leagues draft simultaneously in a giant convention hall. Each league has a big draft board and a WCOFF representative to oversee and document the league's selections. The event is a sea of fantasy geeks. There are more female coaches than you'd expect, but the operators still have the sense to hire cute girls to run the draft boards (the Vanna Whites of WCOFF) and balance out the testosterone in the room.

Emil Kadlec, the godfather of the WCOFF, oversees the various functions and parties before and after the main event. The WCOFF is so big that it has many side leagues and other types of drafts, all for serious coin, to fill the fantasy need. All the WCOFF's rules, options, and systems are too complex to explain in this book. For details, check out www.wcoff.com.

public league, where you can be as cutthroat as you want to be without losing friends (see the earlier section, "Pay public leagues").



Playing for money can bring out the worst in people. I've seen many leagues crumble and friendships lost when members put too much cash on the line. Heed my advice here to prevent your league from turning into a reality-show competition gone awry.

Starting Your Own League: You Want to Be a Commissioner?

Do you like the idea of playing in a private fantasy league, but you've never been invited to join one? (Check out the "Joining the private sector: An invitation required" section earlier in this chapter.) Are you organized, blessed with good communication and decision-making skills, a glutton for punishment — and perhaps a

bit of a control freak? Have you considered starting your own fantasy league and inviting your friends and coworkers to play? If so, you're a prime candidate to become a league *commissioner*. Everything that a commissioner needs to know could be an entire *Dummies* book, but this section covers the basics.

Mike Doria, the commissioner of the HFL, provided much of the valuable info for this section. (In fact, I owe nearly all what you read to him and his expertise.) Mike is a coach, a fan, and a professional fantasy sportswriter. We began playing fantasy sports together in 1999, and in 2001 he became the HFL commissioner.



If you don't have experience playing fantasy sports, I urge you to reconsider founding a league before you play in one. Spend a couple seasons getting your feet wet and discovering all the nuances of fantasy football before you start your own league and become a commissioner (see Chapter 4, where I recommend joining a practice league). However, if you've been playing fantasy football for a few years, this section can help you take your game to the next level. I've been a fantasy football commish, and it's a lot of work for little reward, but it can be very satisfying if your league is a success and coaches want to return year after year.

What a commish does: The basics

As a commissioner, your first step is to determine if you want to run a free or pay league. You also have to determine how casual or competitive you want the league to be. After you have those answers, just set up the league accordingly. Here's a bulleted overview of your commish duties before the season starts:

- ✔ **Create a new league:** Pick a league provider, sign up, pay the league dues yourself and choose how many teams you want to have in your league. (Part IV discusses the major providers.)
- ✔ **Invite coaches to join:** You can't play by yourself, right? Try to invite people you can count on to play and to pay you their share of the league dues.
- ✔ **Set the league rules:** This includes roster size, position requirements, roster deadlines, and scoring modifiers. Of course, you can leave the league defaults in place and save yourself a lot of time, but would that be fun?
- ✔ **Set the draft day and time:** The site offers you options, but you have to be in touch with your league and make sure everyone can be there on time if you're not using an auto draft.

After the season begins, you may encounter more headaches. You have to

- ✔ **Review trades and trade protests:** When two teams make a deal, the commish has to approve it in most leagues. If other coaches don't like it, they can file a protest with you and then you have to rule on the deal (see Chapter 11 for more).
- ✔ **Oversee coaches' conduct:** Everything from not benching injured players to using foul language on a public message board can affect your league and make it no fun for anyone. The commish must be proactive all season long to ensure the success of his league by disciplining such actions or warning the coaches to shape up or ship out.



As a commissioner, your friends and coworkers will expect you to be on call 24/7 to answer questions, take harassment, and otherwise buy into doing things *their* way. You'll be bombarded with suggestions leading up to every decision you make. E-mails and calls from your fellow coaches will no longer begin with, "How's it going?" Instead, you'll get "I would have," "You should have," or "I can't believe you." When adults engage in "did to, did not" behavior, they play rougher than children, and as the commish, you must keep the big kids' sandbox clean, safe, and fun to play in.

Leading by example when managing your league

Throughout the season, you'll need to remain fair and balanced when making decisions on league issues. You'll definitely have to deal with controversies in your league, and even if the answers and solutions are clear in your mind, you have to be democratic and hold the interests of the league above your own.

The following is a rundown of some of the ways you can use your commish powers for good:

- ✔ **Accept feedback from fellow coaches — privately and in writing.** A leader should have trusted advisers, but don't turn coaches against one another by having them air their dirty laundry in public.
- ✔ **Consider holding votes on league matters, but do so only on your terms (as specified by league rules).** Don't vote at the drop of a hat or on every last detail. Mob rule doesn't work, but neither does a dictatorship. Use e-mail to ask for opinions, but you must still make the final call.
- ✔ **Don't be swayed by message-board banter.** Let coaches know when their smack talk crosses the line in terms of tone, language, or lack of respect for other league members. Even if a coach writes a strong message in support of a rule change, make sure it works for the rest of the league before acting on it.

- ✔ **You can choose a deputy commissioner to evaluate all trades that you're involved in.** Pick another experienced coach whom you think will be unbiased when making rulings.
- ✔ **Collect the membership fees (if applicable) before the season starts.** After all, quitters don't pay.

The following list presents some of the ways you can ruin your league by making bad commissioner decisions:

- ✔ **Let the whiners and barkers run the league.** The most opinionated coaches aren't always right. Seek out other opinions in e-mail from the coaches who don't use the message boards before making rulings.
- ✔ **Change basic rules/scoring settings after the season has started or after your draft has taken place.** Your league's parameters affect coaching and draft strategy, so tweaking rules after the fact is inherently unfair.
- ✔ **Assume the worst or jump to conclusions when a coach is accused of cheating or tanking.** Always make sure that you can't pinpoint a valid reason for the unfriendly behavior in question. You're playing a game, after all, and as passionate as you can be about your hobby, fantasy should always take a back seat to matters of family, friends, and health.
- ✔ **Drag out the decision-making process.** If you allow a two-day window for trade protests, make your ruling as soon as possible after the 48 hours have elapsed.
- ✔ **Jeopardize friendships and take things too personally in the heat of the moment.** The commish must remain above the league fray.
- ✔ **Overreact to coaches who love to flex their big e-mail or message-board muscles.** The "squeaky" wheel shouldn't always get his grease in fantasy football.

Handling trade protests

It seems as though just about every fantasy football trade is met with cries of "unfair!" A league commissioner can't prevent that all-too-human reaction, but he or she can try to control it by outlining criteria that must be met for a trade to be vetoed or reversed.



Mike believes a league should favor free trade; he leans toward treating coaches as intelligent adults. In fact, he vetoes a trade only if it's lopsided or contains damaged goods. The following list breaks down these terms:

- ✔ *Lopsided* refers to a trade where one team gets great value for giving up little value — an unbalanced equation, in other words

(such as sending a RB1 for a backup RB3). However, some trades may look sketchy on paper and thus cause a raucous in your league but end up being fair or actually favoring the owner supposedly being fleeced. For that reason, you should keep the standards for vetoing a trade high.

- ✔ **Damaged goods** refers to players who may or may not be injured. Any deal involving an injured player should be subject to a commissioner's review. If a coach who's set to receive the damaged goods is unaware of the serious injury, or if an injury that could affect the long-term status of a player occurs during the review period, the commish should veto it. This action prevents coaches from knowingly or unknowingly dealing players who won't be available for extended periods of time. Of course, if owners make a deal for a player who's injured, and the owner acquiring that player is well aware of the situation and wants to take the risk, you should allow it.



At the end of the day, if the coaches in your league believe that you're making decisions in an unbiased fashion, they'll accept your determinations even when they're on the losing side of your calls.

Waiting 'till next year

After you survive your first year as commish, you can take a deep breath and reflect on the season, but your job isn't finished. You need to follow up with the following duties:

- ✔ **Get a tentative head count for next season:** Make sure you save your league's contact information so you can get everyone back next season who wants to play.
- ✔ **Make sure you record your league's settings and get feedback on proposed changes for the next year:** If the settings created some issues, you can make adjustments next season, but only if you remember what the issues and settings were.
- ✔ **Award trophies:** Either arrange a ceremony (like our annual HFL awards banquet) or make sure that past winners deliver the cups, medals, and plaques to the current ones (by mail or in-person).
- ✔ **Distribute prize money:** If you collected additional league dues for the cash payout, now is the time to mail out those winning checks!



All that the owners in your league can expect is that your decisions come in a timely manner and within the framework of your league's rules. Impartiality is a given, and consistency a must. Your league will crumble if your fellow coaches don't trust you, so don't give them a reason to think that any of your decisions are biased or agenda-driven.

Chapter 4

Preparing for Your Fantasy Draft

In This Chapter

- ▶ Choosing your draft type
 - ▶ Relying on research to prep for the draft
 - ▶ Becoming intimate with your league's rules and settings
 - ▶ Setting up a cozy draft home
 - ▶ Experimenting with mock drafts and practice leagues
-

Are you ready for some football? Of course you are. Anyway, the key word in that slogan is “ready.” Being prepared for your draft and the season is all about doing your homework and knowing how both leagues work: your fantasy league and the NFL. If you don’t prepare and gain the knowledge, you’ll quickly find yourself the butt of many joke e-mails from your friends, family, or coworkers. They’ll happily dissect all your mistakes, which isn’t why you signed up for fantasy football.

Anything can happen during the NFL season, which is what makes the league so popular. However, you *can* make educated guesses about which players will continue to shine, which players will burn out, and which players will break through. You need to educate yourself in order to minimize risk and maximize gain on draft day. Draft day is the first and last day of the fantasy season in which you have complete control of your destiny (or at least you’ll feel that way). The future of your fantasy football team rests heavily on your draft. So don’t blow it!

This chapter gives you the lowdown on the two types of drafts and how you may want to modify your preparations for each of them. This chapter also stresses the importance of research. I introduce many tools of the trade that can give you an edge on draft day. Finally, no football team takes the game field without practicing, right? You shouldn’t either. I discuss mock and practice drafts,

which allow you to gain real-time drafting experience. (Of course, knowing *whom* to draft and *when* is akin to understanding quantum physics, but I shed some light on that aspect in Part II of this book.)

Dissecting the Two Main Draft Types

Before you can begin preparing for your draft, you first need to know about the two main draft types. After you know about their characteristics, you can modify your preparations. When playing fantasy football, most leagues use one of two types of drafts: the snake draft or the auction draft. Because of tradition and because it is based on the NFL draft, the vast majority of fantasy football leagues use a standard snake draft. However, many leagues with experienced players use an auction draft to better simulate reality.

If you're a beginner in fantasy football, I strongly suggest you join a standard draft league. After you gain experience, you may want to try an auction draft in a few seasons. This section looks closely at these two types of fantasy drafts. With this info, you can see how these two drafts differ.

Riding the snake: The standard fantasy draft

Fantasy football mirrors the NFL in many ways, including the annual player draft, except the fantasy draft works a bit differently. Most fantasy leagues use a *snake draft* system. The first pick in the draft is usually considered the best player from the previous season. Each team's first pick is in the first round. After the last team picks in the first round, the same team picks again, going first in the second round. The other teams follow in reverse order of the first round as the draft snakes back on itself. The last team to pick in the second round (the first overall pick) becomes the first team to pick in the third round. And so on.



In a standard fantasy football draft (check out Table 4-1), the top three picks are the most coveted slots. This is where the elite RBs are going to be selected and they tend to dominate fantasy football (see Chapter 5). In order to balance out this advantage, the teams that draft later get to select their second players ahead of the owners who selected in the top three.

Table 4-1 The Standard Snake Draft

<i>Team</i>	<i>Round 1</i>	<i>Round 2</i>	<i>Round 3</i>	<i>Round 4</i>	<i>Round 5</i>	<i>Round 6</i>	<i>Round 7</i>	<i>Round 8</i>
Team Alpha	1	20	21	40	41	60	61	80
Babes in Toyland	2	19	22	39	42	59	62	79
Cry Babies	3	18	23	38	43	58	63	78
The Dork	4	17	24	37	44	57	64	77
Studs R Us	5	16	25	36	45	56	65	76
In Your Face	6	15	26	35	46	55	66	75
Hurryin' Hoosiers	7	14	27	34	47	54	67	74
Da Bears	8	13	28	33	48	53	68	73
Smoking Aces	9	12	29	32	49	52	69	72
Bring It On	10	11	30	31	50	51	70	71

Table 4-1 shows the first eight rounds of a draft, snaking back and forth. This order continues depending on the numbers of rounds specified in the league's draft. (Many leagues have 16 to 20 rounds.) The following sections show in more detail how the snake draft works.

Setting the draft order

All fantasy leagues have their own methods for establishing the order in which coaches draft their teams. The league commissioner (or the league provider) chooses which method to use when setting up your league. The two most common choices are as follows:

- ✔ **Automatic:** The online service provider or league commissioner can set the draft order on a first come, first served basis (meaning the order in which coaches signed up for the league), or the order can be randomized when the league fills up. The randomization usually happens less than an hour before the draft. This is commonly used in new leagues and in public leagues where there is no precedent to base the draft order upon.

The obvious drawback to the randomized, automatic method is that you have less time to plan your attack based on your draft position (check out Chapter 8); also, you have no time to practice drafting from that position (check out “Practicing with a Mock Draft” later in this chapter for more info).

- ✔ **Manual:** The league commissioner may set the draft order well before the draft, based on one of two methods:
 - **Reverse order of finish from the previous season:** In an ongoing league, the winner from the previous season would pick last this season, and the team with the worst record from the previous season would pick first — much like the NFL. This is a fair and accepted way of setting the standard draft order, but it isn't as much fun as the draft lottery.
 - **A draft lottery:** In a lottery, the commissioner puts every coach's name into a hat (or bowl, or tin; you get the point) and then draws them one by one. The first name drawn has to settle for the last pick in the draft, and the last name drawn “wins” the lottery and the first pick. A lottery can be a good excuse to gather your buddies in the offseason and keep the league spirit alive.



Determining the number of rounds in the draft

The NFL's annual draft lasts for seven rounds. Each NFL team already has a complete roster of players, so the teams are simply looking to make themselves better. In a fantasy football league,



Draft tales from the Hollywood Football League

My Hollywood league uses a draft lottery to determine the draft order. We always have a couple of new coaches, so using a reverse order of finish wouldn't work.

Every year, I write down the names of every coach in the HFL on yellow index cards. Then, I place the cards in a container, which is shaken well by our Deputy Commissioner, Lance. Some of the past containers have been a paper bag, a purse, and a fedora. Our league mascot, Jayne, picks the cards out of the proverbial hat, and the last name drawn receives the first overall pick. Our coaches reside all over the country, so we can't have a big draft lottery party; however, after the drawing, Lance and I mock draft for hours while enjoying a beverage or two.

each team needs to fill a full roster of players. Therefore, the number of rounds is determined by the size of the rosters in the league. The commissioner/service provider sets the roster sizes; they can be anywhere from 10 to 40 players. On average, most fantasy rosters consist of 16 to 20 players and 16 to 20 rounds of drafting.

Going once, twice: The auction draft

In the NFL, the best players often land on the teams that are willing to pay them the most money. In fantasy football, the *auction* drafting system simulates that modern-day reality. Many experienced fantasy coaches prefer the auction drafting method because of the added realism, the deviation from the standard drafting style, and because every team has a shot at landing every player — for the right price.

In 1994, the NFL instituted a league-wide *salary cap*, which is a set amount that each team may spend on its roster. Auction-based leagues reflect the NFL's salary cap in the form of a *budget*. I use the term *budget* rather than *salary cap* because it's more accurate, and because I don't want to confuse auction-based fantasy football with salary cap fantasy football, which is an entirely different version of the game. (For a brief overview, check out the game variants section of Chapter 3). Each team's starting budget is usually 200 units (set by the commissioner) to be used to buy as many players as needed to complete your roster, in most leagues. Some leagues only auction the top 100 or so players, and then use a snake draft to fill in the bench players, called a *reserve draft*.

To snake or not to snake . . .

Many experts often debate the fairness of the snake draft in fantasy football. Chris Liss of Rotowire (see Chapter 16), for example, thinks that being on either end of the draft offers a strategic advantage because you get to make two picks in a row. Bo Mitchell of Fanball (see Chapter 16) espouses the virtues of having an early pick in order to draft a top-tier RB. If he doesn't have a top-tier pick, Mitchell would just as soon have the last pick so that he can "address a second position before anyone else does." Either way, most experts agree that if your draft position is in the top three of a snake draft, you'll have an advantage going into the season. Because of that belief, some leagues have switched to an auction-based draft format.

Your fantasy budget doesn't equate to the actual NFL player salaries, but the terms *units* and *dollars* are interchangeable in the fantasy world. Because you spend your units on players, most Web sites and magazines just call the units "dollars." When researching overall player rankings for an auction draft (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7), be aware that each player is assigned an estimated dollar value, not just a positional ranking. This allows you to create a spending plan for your draft. (Check out Chapter 8 for more info.)



The following explains how an auction draft can play out:

1. The auction begins when one team puts a player — any player — on the auction block with a dollar amount.

For example, a coach could say, "Larry Johnson for one dollar."

2. At that point, any team can jump in and raise the bid, just like at a real auction.

If you draft offline, you may employ an auctioneer to track the bidding; you can go for someone who isn't playing in the league, or you can count on a coach who's out of the bidding (he or she's either broke or not interested in the player) to serve as the auctioneer for that player's sale. If your draft is online, the auction software will handle the bids and the clock automatically.

3. The bidding on the player continues until there's a long pause; the auctioneer then announces, "Going once, going twice, SOLD!"

Of course, any team can jump in during the countdown and bid one more dollar to keep the sale going. If two teams

really covet the same player, the bidding can go through the roof!

4. The draft continues with the next player put on the auction block.

Draft preparation and research aren't much different in auction format compared to the snake draft. After the season starts, the game plays out exactly the same way as in a snake format. However, draft day and draft strategy are quite different, so be sure to read the auction draft tips in Chapter 8. The draft lasts until every team has a complete roster, even if you have not spent your entire budget.



The auction drafting process can be fun, but it takes much longer than a standard draft, and bidding and budgeting can be quite demanding. Personally, I enjoy the tradition of snake drafting, but I understand the appeal of the auction draft because you have more control over your destiny. If you really want a certain player, you can outbid your opponents for his services. In a snake draft, you have to pray to the fantasy gods that your guy will still be available when your turn arrives. Auction leagues aren't for the faint of heart. (Check out Chapter 8 for more in-depth strategy tips.)

Researching the NFL: Where to Look and What to Look For

As you prepare for an upcoming fantasy football draft, you should rely on several resources for info and help. You can glue your eyes to television shows, flip through magazines dedicated to fantasy football, and pull up Web site after Web site. You may find some of these resources more helpful than others, but they all can help you find the information you need before you start drafting. **Remember:** A well-prepared coach on draft day is a winning coach at the end of the season!

Watching TV programs

Some of you may actually have jobs and real work to do on your computers during the daytime. If so (I'm sorry!), I suggest that you give up a few episodes of your favorite TV drama to gather some football facts from the television. Knowing the NFL is essential to fantasy success, and sports TV can help you scout and pre-rank the NFL players for your draft (see Chapters 5, 6, and 7).



If you have the proper television package, you can experience football heaven on earth: the NFL Network. Its show *NFL Total Access* discusses the minutia of football year round, and it shows highlights of the best four games of the week on *NFL REPLAY* during the regular season. I also recommend watching ESPN and ESPN2 to get the latest team and player updates, especially *SportsCenter* and *NFL Live*. For more on these programs and other TV outlets, check out Chapter 10.

Flipping through magazines

Although I love television and Internet resources, there's something warm and fuzzy about reading your favorite fantasy football magazine every preseason, right before draft time. I love going to the newsstand, browsing the cover pictures of the running backs and quarterbacks who either made my season or broke it last year, and smelling the newsprint on the Top 100 players list. It's the smell of hope! A good draft-prep magazine is a must-have weapon in your arsenal. They include player rankings, team-by-team analyses, sleeper picks, rookie picks, and a variety of cheat sheets for different league types and formats.



I like having a fantasy mag nearby during my draft so I can quickly look up player profiles and NFL schedules, complete with bye weeks. When you only have two minutes to make your draft pick, time and good information are vital. However, a magazine's player rankings and predictions can become quickly outdated. Be sure to check the latest injury reports right before your draft to make sure that the magazine's cover boy hasn't blow out his knee in the preseason!

The following lists some of my top picks for draft-prep magazines:

- ✓ *Fantasy Football Pro Forecast*
- ✓ *Rotowire Fantasy Football Guide*
- ✓ *Pro Football Weekly Fantasy Football Guide*
- ✓ *The Fantasy Football Guide Professional Edition*
- ✓ *Street and Smith's Fantasy Football Guide*

Surfing the Net

Grab your mouse and catch a cyber wave, because fantasy football information overload awaits you online. The game is played online and so online research really is the best way to prepare for your

draft. Many mainstream Web portals (ESPN, AOL, Yahoo!, and so on) have sports sections, and they devote plenty of coverage to fantasy football — including around draft time. In addition, you can find hundreds of fan sites focused on fantasy football. These sites are filled with expert reports and blogs.

You can also use the Web for the following:

- ✔ **Podcasts:** A *podcast* is basically a radio show, but is stored digitally for use at anytime. If you use a program such as iTunes, for example, you can just open its podcast directory and search for “Fantasy Football.” This form of media is a fun way to listen to expert reports on your computer or your music player, on your own time. The only drawback? Podcasters come and go every season, so good luck finding a show you like and sticking with it. For example, Chris Liss from Rotowire (see Chapter 16) gives his fantasy picks each week in a podcast and on his satellite radio show. He also previews the season and uncovers which guys will go “boom” or “bust” during the summer months.
- ✔ **Forums and Blogs:** The Web can serve as a support group for millions of football junkies. You can take advantage by picking their brains before your draft. By joining a forum, reading a blog (sort of like a Web diary), sending e-mails back and forth with your buddies, or participating in a mock draft (see the section, “Practicing with a Mock Draft” later in this chapter), you can talk to other fans, experts, players, and coaches about your draft strategies and player pre-rankings.



The following is a cool list of Web sites to get you started. For more online info, check out the research guide in Part IV.

- ✔ <http://games.espn.go.com/ffl/frontpage>
- ✔ www.rotowire.com/football
- ✔ www.sportsline.com/fantasy
- ✔ www.nfl.com/fantasy
- ✔ www.footballdiehards.com



If you don't have a broadband Internet connection and you're serious about fantasy football, you should upgrade. The major sports Web sites have video highlights (fantasy reports, NFL clips, and so on) and graphic-intensive banner ads (so they can make money), which can be a real drag if you have a slow dial-up connection. Most importantly, if your league is holding its draft online, a slow connection will cause you many problems.

Mastering Your Domain: Focus on League Rules and Settings

All the major fantasy football providers have basic settings that vary from site to site. They also allow each league commissioner to change those settings and rules. Even the smallest of variations can have an impact on your approach to the draft. This section is about knowing the rules and settings of your fantasy league and how to take advantage of them at the draft. (Check out Chapter 3 for more on league rules, based on the type of league you're playing in.) Many coaches will overlook these details, so knowing them will give you an edge on draft day. (As you acquaint yourself with your league's rules and prepare for your draft, check out Chapters 8 and 9 for specific draft-day strategies.)

Roster requirements

Every league has a set roster size and a set starting lineup requirement. The makeup of your bench players is flexible (in most leagues), but each week you'll have to fill the starting slots set by your league (if you want to win, anyway).



Make sure you review the roster requirements and the starting lineup settings in your league, and then plan on drafting enough players at each position to meet them and give yourself some depth at each position. At the end of your draft, you'll have to meet the roster requirements set by your league (or commissioner); if you don't, your team won't be accepted by your league's Web site. For example, here's the default starting lineup requirement on Yahoo! (see Chapter 13 for more on Yahoo!):

1 QB 3 WRs 2 RBs 1 TE 1 K 1 DEF

If you're playing in this league, be prepared to draft four to six WRs to allow for bye weeks and injury replacements (depending on the size of your bench).

Size matters: How big is your league?

The number of teams in the league determines the amount of players being drafted, which directly affects your draft preparation and strategy. For example, in smaller leagues, replacing injured players

is easier than in larger leagues because more quality players are available at all the positions. Roster requirements prevent too much stockpiling. Every team in the league is usually solid at every position; so many viable players are probably still available in the free agent pool. Of course, replacing your RB1 is never easy, but with fewer teams competing for emerging talent on the waiver wire, it won't be impossible to replace him with a player who can come close to his production. This section gives you some tips for drafting in smaller leagues (8 to 10 teams) and larger leagues (12 to 14 teams). I also present some specific free agent advice.

Drafting in an 8- or 10-team league

In an 8- or 10-team draft, you should prepare to take the best available players in the late rounds, instead of employing tactics such as *handcuffing* — taking the backup RBs to your starters (read more about handcuffing in Chapter 9). If one of your stud RBs goes down with an injury, you can probably pick up free agent starting RBs who are better than your backups.

In a smaller league, you don't need to reach for unproven players and look for *sleeper* picks, which are high-risk, high-reward players that you draft in the later rounds after your starting roster is complete (check out the nearby sidebar for more info).

Don't doze off: What's a sleeper pick?

Sleeper picks are the guys that nobody has heard of. They're high-risk/high-reward players that you should draft in the late rounds. They may develop into great players, or they may remain anonymous to most of the football-watching world. By doing your homework, you can target a few sleeper picks at each position. If your sleeper wakes up and has a big year, he can team with your studs to separate your team from the pack and lead you to fantasy glory.

Sleeper picks can really make or break your team in a large league. All the great starting RBs are taken in the first couple rounds, and all NFL starting RBs are usually gone after the fifth round. The elite WRs are gone by the fourth round. So, now what? Every team will have some weaknesses, and every team will have to draft some marginal players. If you scout the NFL thoroughly (and pray to your John Madden voodoo doll), you may find some late-round sleepers who will come through for you in the clutch.

So, how do you identify the high-risk/high-reward players? You use the scouting criteria for each position I present in Chapters 5 through 7 and take educated guesses about which lesser-known players are poised to succeed this season.

Drafting in a 12- or 14-team league

A 12- or 14-team league is different than an 8- or 10-team league because more teams means more players will be taken during your draft, leaving less fantasy-worthy players available in the free agent pool during the season. For example, say I have the sixth overall pick in an 8-team league with a snake draft; here's the order of my first five selections:

Round 1: 6th overall

Round 2: 11th overall

Round 3: 22nd overall

Round 4: 27th overall

Round 5: 38th overall

If I can take four starters in the top-30 overall rankings, I should have a very good team, even if one of them turns out to be a bust. All the other teams can probably say the same thing, and many good players will be left out of the draft. Now, look at my draft picks from the sixth spot in a 14-team league with a snake draft:

Round 1: 6th overall

Round 2: 23rd overall

Round 3: 34th overall

Round 4: 51st overall

Round 5: 62nd overall

Scary, isn't it? I can take only one top-20 player based on my rankings. I don't panic because the other 13 coaches are in the same boat and there are plenty of great players in the top 200. But all the good players will be picked over in the draft, and my team's roster will be quite different from the team in the 8-team league. My overall draft strategies are the same (check out Part II), but I must make some adjustments.

Checking your league's discard pile

Each league has different rules about player acquisition during the season, and you need to know your league's rules when building your team via the draft. (Chapter 11 discusses in-season week-to-week player acquisitions.) The following list looks at two common league stipulations regarding player-acquisition rules — daily- and weekly-transaction leagues:



✓ **Daily-transaction leagues:** In this league, the free agent pool is open 24/7, which allows coaches to move players around at their discretion. In daily leagues, a proactive coach can make numerous moves to improve his or her team while the passive coaches stand on the sidelines (pun intended). If you love to obsess about stats and have plenty of free time, consider signing up for a daily-transaction league.

To have a successful draft in a daily-transaction league, you should draft the best available players in the middle to late rounds, regardless of team weakness. Sometimes, the best available player (the highest player on your rankings) doesn't fit your team. But don't be tempted by need; go for the players that you think will be great this year, even if you wind up with six RBs and four WRs. In daily-transaction leagues, you can easily add WRs and drop RBs; if your RB sleepers do well, you can trade them for WRs or other areas of need.

✓ **Weekly-transaction leagues:** In this type of league, everything goes through the commish and you can't make daily player moves. Each coach must submit new waiver claims directly to the commissioner. The commish processes the claims and the team rosters are changed to reflect the player changes once a week. If two teams claim the same player during the week, the team with the higher waiver priority (see Chapter 11) gets the player. In a weekly-transaction league, coaches can't directly access the free agent pool.

Mr. Versatile: Consider the FLEX

For many years in the past, fantasy coaches bemoaned the fact that some of their bench players outplayed their starters, but they had no room to start a fourth WR or a second TE. Thus, to appease the distraught fantasy masses, the FLEX position was born. The *FLEX position* is a roster slot in your starting lineup, often in place of or in addition to the TE slot. You can use the FLEX spot for an additional WR, TE, or RB in most leagues. In some ways, the FLEX player represents the many complex offensive schemes that you see in today's NFL, such as double TE or four-WR packages.

Don't let the FLEX position throw off your draft preparation too much; just be thankful for the extra production and take the best players you can. You can decide your FLEX starter each week based on your players' NFL matchups and on who's hot or cold on your team.

If you have a FLEX option, follow your overall player rankings more closely in the middle to late rounds. Drafting players who can put up points, regardless of position, is a good strategy because the FLEX slot allows you to start a third RB or a fourth WR every week.



If you're in a weekly-transaction league, you should draft according to your team's needs, while being careful about bye weeks and players on the same team (see Chapter 9 for more on bye weeks and teammates). Your team must be well balanced with a deep bench, because you can't easily fix holes by adding and dropping players every day during the season.



In every league, some coaches are more active than others. Some people pick up hot players every week, send you ten trade offers, and rant on the posting boards about idiot kickers. Maybe you're that person, maybe not. I admit, I'm that guy, so I prefer daily-transaction leagues. I want to be able to draft more backup RBs and then quickly move them if my starting WRs get hurt. If you enjoy dating, movies, or having some kind of life, though, weekly leagues are probably for you!

Scoring system: Look for loopholes



You need to study your league's scoring rules before your draft so you can prepare and adjust your player rankings to take advantage of those rules. Most coaches don't bother with this, so doing so will give you an advantage. (Chapter 2 explains the basics of scoring in fantasy football.) Although touchdowns and yards gained are always counted, each league has different set values for these categories and more. The following list presents some examples:

- ✔ Twenty passing yards may be worth 1 or 2 points.
- ✔ One interception may be worth 1 or 2 points.
- ✔ A 50-yard field goal may be worth 3 or 4 points.

Most of this book's "wisdom" assumes that you're playing with the Yahoo! default scoring system explained in Chapter 2 (or one very similar). But what do you do when the scoring system changes in your league, often due to commissioner preference? Ask yourself this: What do stud running backs do? They look for the hole and hit it hard! In fantasy football, I call this opportunity a *loophole*.

The most common variant in fantasy-football scoring is making passing touchdowns worth only 4 points rather than 6 points (their NFL value). This change decreases the value of QBs and increases the value of RBs, WRs, and TEs. Because elite QBs can dominate in fantasy football, due to opportunities and great weapons surrounding them, many fantasy leagues like to level the playing field. But it's only 2 points, right? Well, it's also a 33-percent markdown! However,



Exploiting your league's scoring system

As a two-time champion of the Hollywood Football League, I credit *some* of my success to my ability to exploit our scoring system. When the HFL's commissioner, Mike, created our league seven years ago, Yahoo! gave him absolute power to adjust its default scoring system. Mike decided to increase the points awarded to team defenses for sacks, interceptions, and points allowed (or not allowed, I suppose).

At first, the changes seemed minor, but over the years I began to notice a big difference. Team DEFs like the New England Patriots, the Baltimore Ravens, and the Chicago Bears were scoring 20 to 30 fantasy points per game in the HFL, compared to only 10 to 15 points per game in the default Yahoo! leagues. That's a huge difference when so many weekly matchups are decided by 10 points or less. Therefore, in the HFL, I have gone against my standard draft strategy (see Chapter 8) and taken an elite DEF in the middle rounds to take advantage of the unique scoring system.

because of the importance of having a good fantasy QB in any league, your rankings shouldn't change dramatically. For more on setting your pre-rankings and draft plan for QBs, see Chapter 6.

Cheat sheets: Fantasy's version of crib notes

Who's the top-ranked player in fantasy football? Who's the fifth-ranked TE? Which below-average starting RB should you take a chance on in Round 5? These are some of the burning questions you face every year during the fantasy draft, and you can find the answers on your cheat sheets.

A *cheat sheet* is a list of pre-ranked NFL players (from top to bottom, overall or by position) that you use to make decisions on draft day. For example, if you want to take a WR with your next pick, and you have a couple good options available, how do you choose? You can use your cheat sheet rankings to make an informed and confident decision. The decisions you make on draft day will make or break your team in the fantasy weeks to come. If the fantasy draft is a test, your cheat sheets are the crib notes scribbled on your hand.

The following sections show you how to use cheat sheets in both common types of fantasy drafts: standard and auction.

Preparing for a keeper league

If you're playing in a *keeper* league where you retain the services of some or all of your players each year, your draft prep will be different from the type of league most beginning players start in. (In an annual-format league, every coach starts fresh at the draft each season with an empty roster, and the league has the option of changing rules and settings.) The biggest difference in a keeper league is you need to decide who you're going to keep from last year's team. Your choices directly affect your draft strategy. For example, you may keep three top RBs, which means you need WRs and QBs early in the draft. Be prepared to draft based on the needs created by the players you kept, not just by overall value and some pre-ordained draft strategy.

After the keeper picks are locked, you'll know who the other coaches are keeping as well. Their choices may create shortages at certain positions (usually RB) that may also affect your cheat sheets and your draft strategy because of position scarcity. When you combine this knowledge with a solid overall plan (see Part II), you can build a winning keeper league team.

Relying on cheat sheets in a standard draft

Cheat sheets in a standard draft can be organized by overall value or by positional value, and the ratings should be based on your default league scoring system (see Chapter 2). You rank the players in the order you think they'll perform this season, from best to worst. Of course, there are many players to consider, and Chapters 5, 6, and 7 show you what factors to consider when pre-ranking these players on your cheat sheets.

A positional cheat sheet breaks down the players based on position. It looks something like what you see in Table 4-2. This table breaks down each position and identifies when that player has a bye week (wk) and won't be available. You can also use an overall cheat sheet that ranks the top players. **Note:** Table 4-2 is just an example. Your cheat sheets need to include more than the top nine at each position. (Check out the next section about using an expert cheat sheet versus making your own.)



I suggest that you use both positional cheat sheets and an overall cheat sheet with the top-200 players during your draft. At different points in your draft, you'll probably have to choose between the best available player (overall value) and a player who fills an empty positional slot on your team (a need pick). Well-kept cheat sheets prevent you from making mistakes that you'll pay for all season long. (For more on drafting for need versus value, see Chapter 8.)

Table 4-2 A Positional Cheat Sheet

<i>Quarterbacks</i>	<i>Running Backs</i>	<i>Wide Receivers</i>	<i>Tight Ends</i>	<i>Kickers</i>	<i>Team Defenses</i>
Colts QB – wk 6	Chiefs RB1 – wk 3	Rams WR1 – wk 7	Chargers TE – wk 3	Colts K – wk 6	Giants – wk 4
Patriots QB – wk 6	Chargers RB1 – wk 3	Panthers WR1 – wk 9	Giants TE – wk 4	Giants K – wk 4	Bears – wk 7
Eagles QB – wk 9	Seahawks RB1 – wk 5	Cardinals WR1 – wk 9	Chiefs TE – wk 3	Broncos K – wk 4	Bengals – wk 5
Seahawks QB – wk 5	Giants RB1 – wk 4	Cowboys WR1 – wk 3	Falcons TE – wk 5	Eagles K – wk 9	Ravens – wk 7
Panthers QB – wk 9	Redskins RB1 – wk 8	Bengals WR1 – wk 5	Redskins TE – wk 8	Chiefs K – wk 3	Seahawks – wk 5
Bengals QB – wk 5	Raiders RB1 – wk 3	Cardinals WR2 – wk 9	Cowboys TE – wk 3	Steelers K – wk 4	Falcons – wk 5
Rams QB – wk 7	Dolphins RB1 – wk 8	Raiders WR1 – wk 3	Ravens TE – wk 7	Bengals K – wk 5	Steelers – wk 4
Giants QB – wk 4	Cardinals RB1 – wk 9	Colts WR1 – wk 6	Eagles TE – wk 9	Rams K – wk 7	Patriots – wk 6
Cardinals QB – wk 9	Bengals RB1 – wk 5	Redskins WR1 – wk 8	Niners TE – wk 7	Cardinals K – wk 9	Panthers – wk 9



During your draft, pay attention to what the rest of the coaches are doing and get your nose out of your cheat sheets once in a while. For example, say it's Round 8 of your draft, and your overall cheat sheet tells you that the Chiefs WR1 is the best player available. However, you observe what the other coaches are saying and doing and you see on the draft board that other coaches have made a run on quarterbacks in recent picks. Checking your QB positional cheat sheet, you see that only one QB you really like is left. You should take the QB and draft a WR in the next round.

Customizing an expert cheat sheet for your draft

For years, fantasy players had to compile their own rankings through hours of research: watching football, listening to sports radio shows, reading the local sports pages, and so on. These days, you can still do the old-fashioned research, but the Internet also has plenty of downloadable cheat sheets created by the fantasy football sites and providers.

You could try building your own home or fixing up an old car or two, but you'd probably do better relying on paid experts who build homes or repair cars for a living. The same goes for cheat sheets. Some guys make cheat sheets for a living and are experts in the field. So, as soon as you find a reliable source of cheat sheets, just download and print them for draft day. How do you find a reliable source? Check out the chapters of Part IV for more info.



That said, you should still use your own league knowledge (and the tips in this chapter) to adjust the cheat sheets for your own personal use. The following list presents the method I use to strike a good balance between my brain, my heart, my gut, and the experts-at-large:

1. Do your research and read plenty of different expert cheat sheets and predictions.

If you just print out the first cheat sheet you find, and the guy who wrote it has a bad year, your team may be in trouble.

2. Print out a set of cheat sheets from a reliable source that you agree with most often.

3. Mark the players who you want to move up or down the lists, using a highlighter.

Keep your cheat sheets close by during the draft so you can mark off who's been drafted and who you drafted yourself.

Using cheat sheets in an auction draft

Auction cheat sheets resemble standard cheat sheets (see the previous section) with one major difference: estimated dollar values are indicated next to the names of the players. The dollar values

Think outside the cheat sheet

Picture this: Round 5 of your draft. So far, you've selected two RBs, one TE, and one QB. You love your team so far, but you have no WRs, and you need at least three WRs to meet your league's requirements (see Chapter 2). You head straight to your WR rankings and see that the top-ten WRs are off the draft board!

Don't panic. Check your cheat sheets again. You see that a rookie RB with great potential is still available. Go ahead and grab him. The next 30 WRs are of similar value, and if the rookie RB breaks out, you can trade him for an elite WR during the season, because RBs are much more valuable than WRs. The moral of this tale? Well-crafted overall and positional cheat sheets, when combined with draft awareness and common sense, allow you to build a solid fantasy roster on draft day.

are in a descending order that corresponds to the sites' overall cheat sheets. For instance, the top-ranked player is the most expensive player, and so on.

Some expert sites even have customizable cheat sheets that project players' dollar values based on your league's scoring system. The values change depending on your league's scoring system. If your league awards one point for a reception, for instance, certain possession WRs will increase in value, as will some RBs who catch more passes out of the backfield.



If you're playing in a league with an auction draft, use an expert site's cheat sheet tool (Rotowire has one) to create a custom cheat sheet, and then customize it (see the previous section). Having both positional and overall cheat sheets, with estimated dollar values attached, at the ready during your draft can help you spend your "money" wisely.

Be sure you use an auction cheat sheet that's based on the same budget as your league provides. If your league allows 100 units and your expert cheat sheet is based on 200 units allowed, the numbers won't work. You don't want to be thinking about altering the math during your draft.

Identifying and Preparing Your Draft Venue

At the NFL draft, each team has a representative on location, but the real brain trust (the owner, the general manager, and coaches)

often stays at team headquarters in what has become known as the *war room*. The teams have their own draft boards, player ratings, stats, and so on — resources that most likely will be much more in-depth than yours (I hope!). All the team's resources are centralized for one day so the experts can make the most of the draft selections.

In fantasy football, you can do your best to mimic this situation to enhance your draft experience. You have three main drafting options: an *online* draft, an *in-person* draft, and an *autopick* draft. This section helps you prepare your tools of the trade for use during these types of drafts and explains how you can utilize a draft board to your advantage. (See Chapter 3 for tips on being a commissioner, to whom the job of preparing the draft venue often falls.)

Drafting online

In an *online draft*, your fantasy league Web site provider (see Part IV) uses real-time technology to run the draft online. Each coach logs into the site at the specified draft time and then uses the draft interface to select the available players he or she wants to draft. In the HFL, we use a live, online draft, so I have created my own war room at home. I know this sounds dorky, but it works! Hey, I don't mind; I'm wearing my League Champion T-shirt right now for a reason.



If you opt to participate in a live online draft, find a quiet location with plenty of space to work in and use your computer, preferably at home. Here's a checklist of things you need to prepare:



- ✔ **A computer with reliable Internet access:** If your computer crashes during the draft, your league provider will autopick your team, and all your draft prep will go to waste.

Be sure to pre-rank your players in your league provider's database to prepare for any unforeseen circumstances. Your rankings will override the site's default rankings, and if your computer crashes, the autopicks will be closer to your own. (Check out Part IV for more details on how to pre-rank on your league's site.)

- ✔ **Pens, pencils, and paper:** Take all your notes and be prepared to cross drafted players off of your cheat sheets or jot down tips for the coming weeks.
- ✔ **The NFL schedule:** A smart fantasy drafter checks matchups and bye weeks when deciding between players of similar value and avoids drafting too many players with the same bye weeks. (See Chapter 10 for more on the NFL schedule's impact on fantasy.)
- ✔ **A draft board:** A draft board allows you to track opposing rosters and available players so you can see the needs of the other

teams and perhaps even predict who their next selection will be. The draft app will have this data, but the draft board is a quick visual aid for easy referencing. (Check out “Utilizing a draft board” later in this chapter for more information.)

- ✔ **Your cheat sheets:** Your player rankings can make or break your draft in the middle and late rounds. (See the “Cheat sheets: Fantasy’s Version of Crib Notes” section earlier in this chapter.)

The online draft tool forces you to make your picks in two minutes or less (depending on the provider), so you and your research tools need to be ready to work fast!

Drafting offline

Many fantasy leagues love to draft in an *offline draft* where you hold your draft at friendly get-togethers with old friends, rivals, or coworkers. This setting makes draft day fun and exciting for leaguemates who live near each other. You’ll hear plenty of head smacking and smack talking, and you may have to deal with alcohol consumption and other distractions, like the pizza guy ringing the doorbell. If you draft offline, be prepared to stay focused or get razzed by your boss when you draft an injured RB by mistake.



If you opt to take part in an in-person draft, you must be mobile and well equipped, like the Marines! The following is a list of things you need for your portable war room:

- ✔ **A notebook computer with wireless access:** This is a great perk if you have the option. You can check injury updates, search Web sites for sleeper picks, and consult the Web experts.
- ✔ **Pens, pencils, paper, and a large three-ring binder:** Take plenty of notes, mark off drafted players, and keep your post-ings hidden!
- ✔ **The NFL schedule:** You need to check matchups and bye weeks when deciding between players of similar value.
- ✔ **Your favorite fantasy football magazine:** Just in case you forgot who someone is playing for this season or when their bye week is, mags are fast and easy-to-use reference tools.
- ✔ **A mini draft board:** You want to track opposing rosters so you know what they still need. You can do this on loose-leaf paper in your binder. You may choose to skip this if your league is using a large, communal draft board.
- ✔ **Cheat sheets:** Use the rankings and notes you’ve compiled to make tough decisions during the draft. Use a hole punch and keep your cheat sheets in your binder and away from prying

eyes. (See the “Cheat Sheets: Fantasy’s Version of Crib Notes” section.)

- ✓ **League-specific extras:** Don’t forget your league dues for the commish and your league trophies to lord over your foes.

Opting for an autodraft

In an *autodraft*, the league provider distributes the players to all the teams in the league automatically. However, the autodraft is based on the site’s rankings, which often aren’t as current or as accurate as your own. For example, if a player gets hurt in a pre-season game the day before your draft, you can’t rely on the site changing its rankings to reflect the injury. Also, the site might love players that you hate and create a team that you aren’t happy with.



Before your autodraft occurs, log into the league site and edit the pre-rankings using your current information. Most interfaces use a simple “drag and drop” feature that lets you move players up and down the overall top-200 list. I suggest that you use the autodraft method only as a last resort because the draft is the most fun day of the fantasy season, and you don’t want to miss out on the fun of fantasy.

Utilizing a draft board

A *draft board* is a diagram that tracks every pick by every team during the draft. The NFL uses one to keep track of the college players selected at its annual draft in April. You may have seen the giant board looming over the audience and league commissioner. Maybe you’ve even seen a wall-sized white board in a certain NFL team’s war room. Figure 4-1 shows a sample draft board from a 12-team league.

	Team 1	Team 2	Team 3	Team 4	Team 5	Team 6	Team 7	Team 8	Team 9	Team 10	Team 11	Team 12
Round 1 →	Chargers RB1	Chiefs RB1	Redskins RB1	Packers RB1	Seahawks RB1	Saints RB1	Colts RB1	Ravens RB1	Vikings WR1	Niners RB1	Rams RB1	Jaguars RB1
Round 2 ←	Patriots RB1	Jets RB1	Eagles RB1	Eagles WR1	Rams WR1	Bengals RB1	Colts QB1	Vikings QB1	Panthers RB1	Colts WR1	Bills RB1	Texans RB1
Round 3 →	Steelers WR1	Redskins WR1	Falcons QB1	Chiefs TE1	Titans RB1	Eagles QB1	Vikings RB1	Bucs RB1	Steelers RB1	Browns RB1	Bengals WR1	Seahawks QB1
Round 4 →	Lions RB1	Seahawks WR2	Jets WR1	Broncos RB1	Jets QB1	Texans WR1	Seahawks WR1	Titans WR1	Titans QB1	Panthers WR1	Saints WR1	Bills WR1
Round 5 ←	Giants RB1	Ravens TE1	Giants TE1	Rams QB1	Lions WR1	Jets WR1	Packers WR1	Falcons TE1	Jaguars WR1	Packers QB1	Dolphins WR1	Giants WR1

Figure 4-1: A draft board tracks the picks during the draft.

Most online drafts (usually Java-based Web applets) allow you to check other teams’ rosters and scroll through available and taken players. In an offline draft, though, you’re on your own. There’s something about the draft board that’s irreplaceable. The board

helps you to see what the entire league is doing and is another great tool that can help you enact your master plan on draft day.



If your venue doesn't have the room for a big board, or if you don't have the motivation to buy the required art supplies, you can just draw a simple grid on a piece of paper and call it a draft board. Another way to track the draft on paper is by team; just add the team names to the column headers and add the positions to the row headers. Any method of tracking the draft results that shows us what the other coaches are doing is useful. You'll be glad you at least did something!



If you want to use a draft board but you don't want the hassle of making one, you may be able to purchase one. Many Web sites now sell them. A draft-board kit comes complete with cardboard and color-coded player stickers to slap on the board during the draft. These kits are cool to fantasy geeks, like me! Check out the following sites:

- ✔ www.fjfantasy.com
- ✔ www.draftkit.com
- ✔ www.commishkit.com

Practicing with a Mock Draft

So, you think you're ready to draft, right? You have your cheat sheets ready, your blank draft board prepared, and your super sleeper picks marked in red. Only one problem: The draft is still weeks away! Another great tool you can use to prepare for your draft as it nears is the mock draft. A *mock draft* is a stand-alone, online, practice draft whose resulting team rosters aren't saved for use in a league. Mock drafts usually occur at a set time; players sign in and enter, much like a chat room. Many major fantasy sites offer these simulated draft rooms at no charge (check out the chapters of Part IV). With just a few simple clicks, you can take your draft plan for a dry run.

You can figure out a lot of valuable info from participating in a mock draft. For example, after a few mock drafts, you'll start to see which players are being drafted earlier than projected and which players' values are falling. You can use this information to adjust your player rankings. For instance, if you're in an online auction league, a mock auction can help you practice your bidding speed and give us an idea of which players are going to be overpriced and which players you may be able to get on the cheap.

If you're serious about winning your fantasy league, you should take the time to do at least two mock drafts before your actual



Trust your gut and your mocks

Two fantasy seasons ago, I picked up a San Francisco 49ers rookie RB in Week 8. He became his team's starting RB, played great, and helped my fantasy team to the championship game. Last season, I figured he would be a steal in Rounds 5 to 7 because he wasn't well known (or so I thought) and the 49ers weren't a great offensive team. When I participated in some mock drafts, my "sleeper" RB was always taken by the third round.

What I failed to realize is that with so many expert sources of information available these days, there aren't many secrets in fantasy football. So, last season I drafted a Bills RB in Round 1, the Rams WR1 in Round 2, and hoped that my 49er would last until the third round. He didn't!

draft. Practice makes perfect. Try to sign up for mock drafts that have the same number of teams as your league so the draft order accurately reflects your draft. If the mock draft matches your scoring system, that's ideal, but it's very hard to find.

Joining a Practice League

When I first started playing fantasy football, I signed up for free, public leagues online with a friend of mine. We called them *practice leagues* because no real stakes were involved and they allowed us to get our feet wet in the fantasy pool. If you're new to the game of fantasy football and want to gain some experience before taking on your coworkers or competitive buddies, a practice league may be a great tutor. Of course, joining a practice league is a larger time commitment than a mock draft because you have to run the team throughout the season, but it isn't horrible. You have to follow football to run your primary team anyway, so shuffling a second lineup isn't that much more time consuming.



If you're already playing at a certain site, I suggest setting up your practice team on the same site, just to make it easier to access and cut down on Web page flipping. You'll also get to know how to navigate the site faster and use its tools to maximize your chances of winning. (See Part IV for a breakdown of the fantasy providers and their features.)

I find practice leagues helpful because you complete a full draft and then follow through with team management. You can then evaluate your draft strategy and your lineup decisions after the season. When you become a serious fantasy footballer, every league will matter to you, so enjoy your rookie season and join a practice league!

Part II

Advanced Scouting and Drafting Secrets

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“Not the most accurate kicker we’ve ever had,
but definitely the strongest.”

In this part . . .

You've signed up for a fantasy league and are familiar with the basics of fantasy football. You also know the nuts and bolts of how the draft works and some ways to prepare for it. Now all you need to know is which players to draft and when to draft them.

In Chapters 5–7, I break down the roster spots by position and present the parameters you need to consider when pre-ranking the NFL players for your draft. In Chapters 8 and 9, I cover the tried-and-true draft strategies (and some lesser-known but useful tactics) that will enable you to make the right picks throughout the entire draft, not just in the first round. A fantasy draft is all about rating the NFL's best players and knowing how to build a strong roster that can compete for a whole season.

Chapter 5

Scouting Running Backs and Quarterbacks

In This Chapter

- ▶ Considering the importance of RBs to fantasy football
 - ▶ Finding suitable fantasy QBs
-

Think scouting sounds like a lot of work? Imagine having to scout hundreds of college football players for an NFL draft! Your fantasy season hinges on the success of your draft-day decisions — especially at RB and QB. If you scout well and make the right calls, you'll have a lot more fun playing fantasy football.

RBs are the foundation of good fantasy football teams and should be your No. 1 priority in the draft. Meanwhile, fantasy production from your QB is important in winning each week, but that doesn't mean you should run out and grab the first QB you see. This chapter breaks down the RB and QB positions and helps you pre-rank the positions so that you can find fantasy-worthy players to draft and know when to draft them.

Running Backs: Riding the Fantasy Workhorses

If you've ever chatted with friends or coworkers about fantasy football or listened to the experts on television or radio, you've probably heard the preaching that you need to draft running backs early and often. Fantasy football is all about reliable offensive production every week, and no position gives more consistent production than RB. Therefore, a solid lineup of RBs is the core of a great fantasy team.



What exactly makes running backs workhorses? They play most every down and thrive in every situation. You can recognize their value by seeing if they fit in the fantasy football formula (skill + opportunity = fantasy success). The problem is that fewer and fewer RBs in the NFL still carry the load (get many opportunities). Many teams rotate their RBs based on the situation (see the later section “What is the coach’s system?”). The elite backs you want to draft have the skills and get the opportunities needed to produce big fantasy points every week.

In the following sections, I explain why RBs are so important to your fantasy football team and what you can do to ensure that you draft the most effective RBs available at your draft position.

Recognizing the importance of RBs

In order to win in the NFL, teams have to score points, either by ground or by air. Traditionally, some clubs are great running teams — the Steelers are a good example — and some are great passing teams — the Colts, for instance. With balance being key, though, the great question of who’s more important to a team — the star QB or the stud RB — may never be answered. However, in fantasy football, the answer is a no-brainer: RBs are essential to your team.

So what makes RBs more valuable than the other positions in fantasy football? Keep on reading.

RB scarcity

Finding enough reliable, productive RBs is difficult because of RB scarcity. Workhorse RBs have high value because you have fewer to choose from, and you may have to start two or three RBs in your fantasy lineup (see Chapter 4). Most NFL teams start one QB, one RB, and two or three WRs; so, right there, you have about twice as many starting WRs to select from on draft day. As for QBs, you only start one QB, so although almost all starting and backup RBs will be drafted, many starting NFL QBs will still be free agents in your fantasy league come the start of the season. This is the main reason RBs are so important come draft day, and why trying to make sure you have two or three reliable, every-week RBs can be so tough; it all adds up to RB scarcity.

Repeat after me: more touches = more scoring

Only the quarterback and *center* (the player snapping the ball to the QB) touch the ball more than the starting RB each game, and you can’t score without the ball. WRs and TEs must rely on the skill of their QBs who throw them the ball, and they must navigate through defenses to get open. Many mitigating circumstances

affect Ks and Team DEFs, which make their performances the hardest to predict from season to season (see Chapter 7). A RB's touches are much easier to predict. Typically, a starting RB will receive 15 to 30 touches a game, from rushing and receiving, and every touch could turn into a touchdown (fantasy points!).



The more rushing yards and touchdowns you have, the better your fantasy team will do. When researching the RBs, always look at their statistical totals (touchdowns, yards gained, and such) and the number of touches they got last season. Getting more touches gives your RBs more chances to score. For where to find a breakdown of RB touches, check out the research guide (Part IV).

Banking on the higher value of rushing/receiving yards

In most leagues, 10 rushing/receiving yards are worth 1 point, while 20 passing yards are also worth 1 point. A lot of leagues only award 4 points for a passing TD, but 6 points for a rushing/receiving TD! These values are designed to prevent QBs from dominating the fantasy world, but they also favor RBs who can score fantasy points from both rushing and receiving.

At six points each, touchdowns tend to decide fantasy games. In any given season, the top RBs typically score 15 to 25 TDs a year. The top WRs score only 8 to 12; the top TEs score 5 to 10; and most QBs throw for 15 to 30 TDs in a season. However, after you factor in the depth at the QB position (see the “Quarterbacks: Counting on the Arms of the Field Generals” section later in this chapter) and the scoring system of your league (check out Chapter 2 for more info on scoring), you can clearly measure the value of a good fantasy RB who gets into the end zone.



Because rushing yards are equal in fantasy value to receiving yards, if you can scout and draft RBs who do both well, you'll be in good shape. This is another reason you want a workhorse RB who stays in the game on every down. In passing situations, an RB can serve as a safety valve for his QB if none of the receivers are open downfield.

Rushing to find the good RBs

If you have a top-five draft pick in the first round of your draft, you can grab an elite RB, and you should! But what about your other starting RB position(s)? Every year, fantasy experts come up with a consensus on the top-three RBs, but after the elite ones, drafting good RBs becomes a guessing game — which is where I come in. The following sections help make drafting RBs an educated guessing game; look to this info when scouting RBs for your upcoming draft.

Is the RB in a position to succeed?

The success of any skill player (QB, RB, WR, or TE) depends on his situation and his team. In the past, many star RBs played on losing teams, such as Barry Sanders and O.J. Simpson. In today's NFL, the trend is fading because losing teams now give up on the run early and pass more often. More importantly for fantasy purposes, losing teams score fewer touchdowns, and touchdowns have the highest scoring value in fantasy football.



How can you determine if a running back is in a position to succeed? Remember the following basic pointers when trying to forecast the future:

- ✔ **Take stock of each NFL team's winning prospects.** Find out the team's win-loss record from last season, and do some research to see if you expect the team to do well again this season. If a team is on the rise, its starting RB's fantasy value probably is as well.



I always rank RBs on potential playoff teams higher. The better teams tend to control the clock by running the ball. They also have good passing games so that defenses can't put eight men in the box to stop the run. Losing teams often have to throw the ball more when trailing, which can lead to good fantasy production at other positions. However, these teams are losing because they can't run the football!

- ✔ **Look at the team's total points scored during each of the past three seasons.** Also check out some expert projections about point totals for the upcoming season. The more TDs an elite offensive team scores, the better the chance that its RB will be doing the scoring. This is another example of finding the players with the most fantasy opportunities.



You may be wondering: Aren't the rushing totals what count for the fantasy RBs and not the team totals? Yes, but a truly great offense will generate enough points for all their starters to be fantasy-worthy. For example, in the early 2000s, Edgerrin James was a top-ten fantasy RB on the pass-happy Colts. When James went to the pass-first Cardinals, his numbers dropped. Why? Because bad teams score less points on the ground and the 2006 Cardinals were really bad.

- ✔ **Check out the team's upcoming schedule.** Every year, the NFL weighs the schedule so that the playoff teams have the toughest matchups and the bottomfeeders have the easiest. The result is excitement for fans and ulcers for fantasy players, who prefer RBs who play for winning teams. You can identify the teams that have easier schedules and move up their RBs in your rankings (especially if they have young RBs on the rise and will face soft run defenses).



Many fantasy Web sites and magazines provide articles and spreadsheets that break down the strength of schedule (SOS) for each team. The experts usually base the SOS on how the offenses ranked last season versus how the defenses ranked, and then adjust the SOS based on the makeup of the current team. The authors of the studies interpret the raw data, but doing so is highly subjective, and the NFL can be unpredictable. I like reviewing expert SOS rankings but I always take them with a grain of salt. I suggest making a quick list of two types of teams for the upcoming season: good and bad. When in doubt, rank an RB from a winning team ahead of an RB from a losing one.

Who are the RB's offensive teammates?

When scouting RBs, you can't overlook the importance of their offensive teammates. A good offense requires all 11 men on the field to work together. So, you need to ask yourself some questions when evaluating talent: Is the RB surrounded by playmakers or journeymen? Is he running for a rookie QB or a future Hall of Famer? The more offensive weapons a team has on the field, the more ways it has to move the ball, and the defenses can't key on any one player — especially the workhorse RB. With increased offensive production comes more trips to the *red zone* (the area inside the opponent's 20-yard line), and most teams run the ball near the goal line; that's when the RBs hit paydirt most often.

When looking for good RBs for your roster, make sure you consider the following points:

- **Don't forget the unsung heroes who block for RBs.** The full-back and linemen may be the most important teammates to consider when scouting RBs. Fantasy is all about scoring, and your RB can't score if he doesn't get the blocks. Identify the best blocking units and bet on them by drafting the RBs they work for.

Sometimes, an unknown RB playing behind a stellar offensive line is better than a stud RB who runs behind a porous unit. (Check out the offensive line breakdowns at www.rotowire.com.)



- **Downgrade RBs who play on teams you think will have losing records.** If a team is behind in most of their games, they'll be forced to pass the ball more, which means its RB is going to get fewer touches. No matter how good he is, if the RB doesn't get the ball (skill + opportunity = success) and his team can't get into the end zone, he won't have great stats in fantasy football.



Just because a RB is on a bad team doesn't mean he still can't have a great season. For example, in 2006, Frank Gore enjoyed a breakout season of more than 2,000 all-purpose yards and nine TDs even though San Francisco went 7–9. Winning and running tend to go hand in hand, but there are exceptions to every rule, especially in fantasy football.

How old and durable is the RB?

All things being equal, two factors may sway your decision to draft one running back over another: age and durability. The following list breaks down these factors:

- ✓ **Age:** One of an RB's most telling numbers is his age. NFL rushing statistics show that RB production declines sharply after the age of 30. All the years of running, blocking, and taking hits really add up, just like mileage on a car. If the RB has been starting for years (and started all through his college career), he may have rolled his odometer, which means that his best seasons are behind him.



Along with production, the age factor can affect another facet of an RB's game: He'll be less likely to recover if he gets injured. I'm not saying to never draft RBs over the age of 30, just be sure to rank them accordingly and don't overvalue their past performance.

- ✓ **Durability:** Find out which RBs are considered "durable" and which are labeled "fragile." I'm not saying you shouldn't draft any backs with health issues (past or present); I'm just saying you should pre-rank players with an injury history accordingly and draft them when they become good value picks (in other words, not too early in your draft).

You may not have access to a RB's actual medical records, but you have the next best thing: thousands of bitter fantasy football coaches with painful memories. By using your preseason research tools (online forums, chats, expert rankings, and so on; check out Chapter 4 for more info), you can find out which RBs are injury-free and which are injury-prone.



No matter how old or durable a RB is, the best bets at the fantasy RB position are those players who are in their *prime*, meaning that their physical tools and mental understanding of the game are at their peaks.

What is the coach's system?

A productive NFL offense can run and pass well, and it will always try to do both in the most unpredictable ways possible to keep defenses off-balance. However, some coaches run the ball more

than others, and some like to throw to RBs regularly on screen plays and the like. You may want to target these players to be your fantasy RBs.



When looking at a prospective RB, make sure you understand his coach's system. If you're scouting a RB who plays on a team that passes 60 or 70 percent of the time, you can bet the player won't get as many touches, which means he won't earn you many points. However, certain systems call for short passes and routes for the RB (like the West Coast offense). Many good RBs play on pass-first teams; they just may not be top-five fantasy draft picks.

Keep the following factors about the coach's system in mind when you're scouting RBs:

- ✓ **The team's total rushing yards over the last three seasons and its total rushing attempts:** No team replaces 60 players a year, and most teams return the same head coaches and the same philosophies. If a team is committed to the run, it needs its personnel and playbook built primarily around running formations. Check the rushing stats; they're a good indicator of opportunity for the starting RBs. For example, the Broncos have had a productive running game for years, even though they have new guys in the backfield every season.
- ✓ **The NFL's offseason and preseason trades:** If an average back is traded to a run-oriented team, make sure you move him up in your rankings. He'll get more touches with his new team, which means more points for your fantasy team. And do the opposite if a back is traded to a pass-first team.
- ✓ **The movement of offensive coordinators (OC) in the offseason:** If a team signs a new OC, then the team's offense is going to change. A great OC should make the entire offense more productive, so look for better things out of his RBs in the upcoming year. If the OC is a run-first guy, even better.

Other dilemmas when pre-ranking the RBs

Two coaching styles have become trends recently in the NFL: the desire to have a bruising RB on the bench who can come into the game to pound the ball into the end zone, and the tendency to give multiple backs plenty of playing time to lessen the load and change the pace of the game. I explore these two strategies in the upcoming sections.

The Bus: A vulture-back Hall of Famer

All fantasy players who don't root for the Steelers are happy that Jerome Bettis is retired. "The Bus" had quite a vulture run in Pittsburgh. In 2001, the Steelers' coach, Bill Cowher, made Bettis the short-yardage specialist on the team. Bettis averaged 150 fewer carries per season thereafter, yet he finished in the top ten in rushing TDs three times! His production wasn't quite fantasy worthy, but it was enough to hurt the value of the starting RBs on the team.

Fearing the vulture back: The effect of goal-line RBs

When you're scouting RBs, you definitely need to keep your eye open for one of the great villains of fantasy football: the vulture back. A *vulture back* is a short-yardage specialist who backs up a speedy but small starting RB and comes into the game near the goal line. His talons snatch defeat from the jaws of fantasy victory time and time again.



Always try to identify the teams that use vulture backs. Don't draft a starting RB too early if he has a short-yardage specialist as a teammate to take away his goal-line carries unless his yardage totals and overall skills merit it. For example, Tiki Barber had such a great 2005 season, that he was a top-five overall pick in 2006. However, Brandon Jacobs, Barber's vulture back, had nine rushing TDs in 2006, compared to Barber's five! No wonder Tiki retired early!

In the mid to late rounds, though, when the starting RBs are picked over, you can look to draft a vulture back to add depth to your roster. These players can be valuable fantasy backups if your studs get injured. After all, two cheap goal-line TDs get you 12 points, which equates to 120 rushing yards in most leagues! In larger leagues (12 or more teams), vulture backs become viable No. 3 RBs because everyone is scrambling for depth at all positions.

Dreading the RBBC: Running back by committee

As you narrow your choices for RBs you want to draft, be on the lookout for the evil system known as *running back by committee* (RBBC). A coach institutes a RBBC if he likes to rotate two (or even three) backs into the offense during the game. The committee approach gives the RBs more rest and keeps them fresher for the second half of games. However, most RBs need plenty of touches to find their rhythm so they can break off big gainers.



The merits of the RBBC are debatable in real football, but not in fantasy football. A committee approach will kill your RB production. You want as many ball hogs as you can find, so be sure to downgrade RBs who split carries. Unfortunately for you, more and more coaches are using the RBBC approach because of injuries and specialized play calling (calling plays for short-yardage backs and passing-catching backs and using backs to block for QBs, for instance).

The silver lining is that more RBs have become fantasy-worthy by sharing time: A team may have two RBs who each rack up 30 to 60 yards a game with a TD, worth about 10 fantasy points each. The bad news is that fantasy owners have a harder time finding stud RBs capable of going for 150 yards and two TDs a game. That kind of production usually wins fantasy games.

Quarterbacks: Counting on the Arms of the Field Generals

From “Broadway” Joe Namath to Terry Bradshaw to Brett Favre to Tom Brady, quarterbacks often are the charismatic leaders of their teams and quite often the keys to winning championships in the NFL. In fantasy football, a flashy smile and a Super Bowl ring don’t mean a thing.

What does matter are his passing stats, not his wins, leadership skills, or supermodel girlfriends. In other words, there are many fantasy-worthy QBs that are less famous and therefore will have better value in the draft. If you know how to scout a solid QB value in the middle rounds, you can use your early picks to build a strong core of runners and receivers (RB, WR, and TE). In this section, I talk about how to scout and draft the QBs who can help your fantasy team win it all.

Contemplating the value of a good quarterback

Owning a good QB is essential to your team’s success. But what constitutes a *good* fantasy QB? Two things stick out:

- ✔ **His total fantasy points scored each week:** A good QB should average between 15 and 25 fantasy points a week for your fantasy team. If yours doesn’t do so consistently, you’ll probably find yourself losing games more often than not.

✔ **His draft value based on how late you can get good fantasy production:** Any elite QB not named Peyton Manning simply isn't worth a first-round pick. The top-ten QBs are all productive and can be had much later in the draft. Therefore, your goal should be to target good QBs in Rounds 5–10 and use your early picks on RBs and WRs.



Few team leaders can be called elite QBs in both fantasy and reality, but if you have one, you can start him every week and count on 20+ points a week. The problem is that elite QBs are drafted in the first three rounds and only one (Manning) has lived up to the hype in recent years. But isn't that when you need to find your RBs and WRs? Yes, and that's why you should.

If you have a good QB, you can confidently start him every week, and you should only consider benching him if his matchup is awful (for example, on the road versus an elite defense). On average, more than half of the NFL QBs meet this fantasy qualification, which lowers their draft value when compared to the top 15 RBs or WRs. But what if your QB1 does have a bad matchup or he is injured? That's why you will be drafting two good QBs, not just one. Check out the next section for more info.

Uncovering a good QB

After you load up with RBs and WRs in the draft (see Chapter 8), a good QB can get your fantasy team the extra edge. You want to try and find the best value you can. The following sections present some key things to look for when pre-ranking the signal callers in the league.

Knowing the QB's offensive system

Very few QBs call their own plays, and none of them get to choose their offensive systems. The bottom line for the NFL is wins and losses, no matter the offensive system, but the bottom line for fantasy football is statistics. So, it's up to you to do the math and decide if the QB's system will add up to fantasy success. Ask yourself the following:

✔ **Does the coach tend to run more or pass more?** You can break up most offensive systems into categories:

- **Vertical passing attack.** Some teams base their offenses on WRs running deep routes and the QB going for broke on many occasions while mixing in a good running game to keep defenses honest. This is a great system for fantasy WRs and a good system for fantasy QBs.

- **West-coast offense.** Other teams use the short passing game to get the ball to the RBs in the flat, as well as their WRs on quick slants over the middle — often called the *west-coast offense*. Although few completions are deep, the number of completions made can add up to plenty of yards gained for fantasy points. Because this system is so reliant on QB execution, west-coast QBs tend to be good fantasy choices. However, this system is complex, so I avoid QBs who are playing in this system for their first season.
- **Run-first philosophy.** Some teams concentrate on the run. Running teams only throw 10 to 15 times a game; their QBs are expected to make low-risk attempts and not make turnovers. Avoid QBs on run-first teams because they won't be scoring a lot of fantasy points.

- ✓ **Is the QB a rookie or on a new team?** When a QB has to learn a new playbook, he often struggles in his first season. When ranking QBs, consider their understanding of the systems they're in. Rookie QBs have much to learn and should be drafted late, even if they were a No. 1 pick in the NFL draft. (Check out Chapter 9 for more on potentially drafting rookies.) Even the proven veteran QBs should be taken a few rounds later than normal if they're going to have to adjust to a new system or a new team. On rare occasions, a veteran QB's new team may be an improvement from his old team, but without a proven track record in that situation, don't upgrade him too severely.
- ✓ **Does the QB have a new coach or new offensive coordinator?** When there are coaching changes, you need to decide if you think those changes will help or hurt the offense and the starting QB. Check the resumes of the new coaches: Have they had success in the pros already or is this their first coaching job at this level? After you decide if the coaches are a plus or a minus, you can adjust your QB rankings accordingly.

Reviewing the QB's arsenal of weapons

A good QB's talents may go to waste if the *skill* players on his team are lacking. The WRs, TEs, and RBs are considered the weapons at the QB's disposal. The fantasy values of QBs are linked to the quality of their passing targets and vice versa.



When scouting QBs, keep in mind that offensive teammates depend on each other. If you see a few top-ten skill players on the same team, you can bet that their offense will have a good season. Try to single out a QB who has talented weapons around him and fits the other criteria mentioned in this chapter.

The following list takes a closer look at the skill players surrounding the QB:

- ✓ **Wide receivers:** A QB has the tightest bond in the passing game with his receivers. If the WR scores, so does the QB in fantasy football. Peyton Manning and Marvin Harrison are an obvious example of a dynamic duo.

An elite QB can flourish even without a stud WR, but a stud WR definitely helps. On the flip side, if a QB depends too much on his WR1 and then loses him (due to injury, trade, retirement, and so on), his stats may decline. When Daunte Culpepper and Randy Moss were split up, both of their careers suffered.



Check the depth charts of the NFL teams to see who's expected to line up at WR1, WR2, and WR3 for each team. Are the receivers in their prime? Are they unproven rookies? Is there a superstar WR in the mix? If you think the WR core is solid, move up the team's QB in your rankings. If the WR unit has problems or relies on only one player, downgrade the QB accordingly. (Check out Chapter 6 for more on scouting WRs.)

- ✓ **Tight ends and running backs:** On most passing plays, the QB looks to his WRs first, but if they can't get open, the QB *checks down* to his TEs or RBs. When scouting QBs, don't forget to check out the receiving stats (both past and projected) of their RBs and TEs. If you feel that a QB's guys are good at catching passes (and not just running or blocking), give him a higher ranking. Many RBs and TEs aren't great pass catchers; they're on the field to run or block. That's why a TE or an RB with great hands is such an advantage for a QB. (Head to Chapter 6 for more info on scouting TEs.)

Rating the QB's offensive linemen

If you closely follow the NFL, you know how important the offensive line is to a team's success. The *o-line* must make holes for the running game *and* protect the QB in the passing game. The four no-name big guys in the middle of the action are the unsung heroes of football — both real and fantasy. And many fantasy coaches overlook the importance of a team's o-line, probably because they don't get you any fantasy points in a tangible sense. The bottom line is that without a good offensive line, skill players — especially QBs — will suffer.

Because everyone has to draft RBs, TEs, and WRs — the skill positions — most fantasy coaches know which offenses are loaded and which are anemic. But if you really want to be a fantasy expert and find a solid QB, make sure to read up (online and offline) on the quality, the depth, and the health of each team's offensive line

going into the season. When you have to decide between QBs of seemingly equal value, it helps to know which QB is more likely to be sacked or be running for his life and throwing interceptions just to avoid getting killed. Sacks and interceptions cost you points in many league scoring systems.



Keep track of changes in the offseason to each team's offensive line. The longer a line plays together, the more effective it will be. Chemistry is big in the trenches. The makeup of the line can change due to player acquisitions, trades, injuries, or retirement. If you feel that a team has improved its o-line, you can be confident its QB will improve as well. If the o-line loses a Pro-Bowl player, don't assume it will play as well without him. Many expert sites — such as Rotowire (see Chapter 16 for more info) — offer team reports that focus on the offensive line, so use them to your advantage.

Does good team = good fantasy QB?

Unlike your RB rankings, don't put too much weight on the NFL team's win-loss record from previous years when ranking QBs. Most productive offensives with good QBs will win games, and most mistake-prone teams and QBs will lose games. However, if you don't draft an elite QB early and you decide to draft two good QBs, then one of them could be a strong-armed QB on a team with a bad defense, because he'll be throwing the ball quite a bit. A player like this could be a late-round steal in your draft. (Check out Chapter 8 for more on strategies about when to draft a QB.)



Although good fantasy QBs often play on winning teams, consider the following before you rank a mediocre QB on a winning team ahead of a promising player on a poor team:

- ✔ **A winning QB isn't necessarily a winning fantasy QB.** Every year, it seems like an unlikely hero emerges from the QB ranks and leads his team into the playoffs. He relies on his defense and running game, making a timely play when necessary while avoiding the big mistake. What can you deduce from this description? This player is *not* a winning *fantasy* QB. His traits don't equate to fantasy points.
- ✔ **A losing QB often can be a productive fantasy QB.** If his team's defense is poor, he'll likely be playing from behind the whole game. And when playing from behind, most teams throw more in order to quickly move the ball as far as possible. The second half of a game is often filled with *garbage time*, meaning that the game is lost but the losing team can score a couple of late TDs against an opposition that just wants to end the game. In fantasy football, garbage time allows decent QBs on bad teams to put up good fantasy numbers.



For example, in 2006, Lions QB Jon Kitna was the 25th player drafted at his position but wound up having a good season and finished as a top-ten fantasy QB under most league scoring systems. Thus, Kitna was a super value pick in the late rounds of the draft even though the Lions finished at 3–13.

Before pre-ranking QBs on losing teams, check to see if your league penalizes QBs for sacks, interceptions, and fumbles. If the negative points seem harsh, downgrade the mistake-prone QB accordingly. For example, in my league that scores –1 for fumbles lost, –1 for INTs, and 0 for sacks, I drafted Kitna. In the HFL, sacks are –1, fumbles lost are –2, and INTs are –2, so I avoided drafting him.

- ✔ **The elite QBs play for the best teams.** A complete offense that can score plenty of points either running or passing is usually a winning team and all their starters become fantasy worthy. However, elite QBs come at a premium in the fantasy draft and they may not have the best draft value. A good QB on a losing team isn't better than an elite QB on a winning team just because he has more opportunity.

Striving for “average” at the QB position

Quarterbacks considered outside of the elite fantasy group often win championships for savvy drafters who concentrate on elite RBs and WRs at the top of the draft. In 2005, for example, Tom Brady — considered an average fantasy QB because he played on a run-first team with a below-average WR core — led all fantasy QBs with 298 points in a Rotowire league. Carson Palmer — an elite QB with a balanced offense and great skill players around him — was second with 297 points. Kerry Collins — a journeyman QB far from the elite group — was 11th with 257 points! The 41-point difference between Brady and Collins averages out to only 2.4 points per week over a 17-week season! If you draft stud RBs and WRs in the first six rounds, they'll make up those 2.4 points and then some.

Chapter 6

Scouting Wide Receivers and Tight Ends

In This Chapter

- ▶ Identifying the cream of the wide receiver crop
 - ▶ Finding value at the inconsistent tight end position
-

Some of the more colorful characters in the NFL spend their time running passing routes, catching touchdowns, and causing mayhem both on and off the field. Of course, I'm talking about wide receivers and to a lesser degree, tight ends. The combination of confidence, courage, and recklessness that it takes to catch passes across the middle of the field or down the sidelines is a volatile mix. But what makes wide receivers (WRs) and tight ends (TEs) great players also makes them unpredictable, and thus makes ranking them on your fantasy cheat sheets more difficult.

With so much of the focus on RBs and QBs in real and fantasy football (check out Chapter 5), drafting quality receivers can separate you from the average fantasy coach. Even casual fans know who the starting QB in Pittsburgh is, but do they know who the WR2 or the TE1 is? This chapter reviews the actions you need to take and the trends you need to look for in order to put together a dominant fantasy receiving core. (After you scout these players, check out Chapter 8, which provides actual draft strategies and identifies when you should draft specific roster positions.)

Eyeing the Go-To Guys: Wide Receivers

When putting together a fantasy lineup, you always want to start as many guys who you think will have a big game as possible. In many leagues, receiving yards (10 yards = 1 point) and touchdowns

(6 points) are the same as rushing yards and touchdowns, which means WRs can dominate a fantasy game on any given Sunday, just like the RBs. Although RBs are more consistent and more valuable for numerous reasons (see Chapter 5), WRs are the second most important position in fantasy football.

The depth of quality QBs (see Chapter 5) is one reason that you need to value WRs ahead of passers, but the other reason is supply and demand. Most fantasy leagues require two or three WRs each week in your starting lineup and only one QB. A two-WR league means keeping three to five guys on your roster in order to have *depth* (in case of injuries or bye weeks) and *matchup choices* (choosing the WRs you think will score the most points each week). But in a three-WR league, you have to draft four to six WRs, and even if you have six WRs, you'll be lucky if half of them have good matchups every week! If you do your homework, you can draft two bankable WRs and a few breakout candidates to complement them, thus making your own luck.

The following sections explain what factors you need to consider when rating the WRs from best to worst and when to choose them during your draft.

Finding a few good WRs

When you're scouting and pre-ranking WRs, first consider the fantasy formula (skill + opportunity = fantasy success, see Chapter 1) and what you already know about the WRs and their NFL teams. If one of the parts of the formula is missing, success can go right out the window. Skilled receivers can fall off the map on losing teams or when systems don't cater to their strengths. And a sub-par receiver may not succeed in even the greatest situation. You can use the formula to identify top-flight receivers and to seek out the lesser-known WRs with real upside.

In order to find a good WR, dig deeper and do your research. The basic way to research players is always to look at their past performance statistically. However, I like to consider the following "human" elements when scouting, not just the numbers.



Yahoo! default leagues require three starting WRs and, as with most of this book, that is the assumed league configuration that I base my WR advice upon. If you're in a two-WR league, the same scouting guidelines apply, but it will be easier to get good value at the position because less are needed by all.

Get to know the NFL depth charts

Each NFL team carries four to six WRs on its active roster. The team's depth chart lists the receivers as WR1, WR2, WR3, and so on. Each position features good WRs on average, but WR1 is where you need to focus your fantasy attention to start. The top WR is the *go-to guy* — the player that the quarterback looks for early and often on passing plays. Some pass-heavy teams also develop productive WR2s who put up similar stats.

When scouting WRs for a fantasy team, I like to check out the depth chart for each team and familiarize myself with the starting play-makers listed as WR1 and WR2. The elite WRs should be familiar names and should be ranked at the top of any cheat sheets. However, the real values at the WR position are the names I don't recognize. Any time a WR starts for an NFL team, he has opportunities, and there is a decent chance he will be fantasy worthy and could help my team. After I know who I should be researching, then I can delve into the fantasy expert sites to find out how to rank them.



You can easily find NFL depth charts on the team pages on any major sports Web site as well as most fantasy expert sites. The expert sites also have their own cheat sheets and WR rankings, but you should always gather info from multiple sources and then create your own WR rankings based on your findings. For more info on cheat sheets, check out Chapter 4.

Two types of WRs: Possession guy or deep threat?

When pre-ranking and scouting WRs for your draft, you need to look at more than just their physical tools. You need to know what his team is asking him to do. Your answer can affect when, and if, you draft a WR and how he will affect your fantasy team. Look to the following list for more:

- A **possession receiver** is the guy who catches a pass for six yards when his team needs five yards for a first down. By moving the chains, he allows his team to retain possession of the ball, hence his title. He spends most of the game running short routes or blocking for the running game. When he does catch a pass, he either goes out of bounds quickly or falls to the ground to avoid being hit over the middle. This type of WR is important in real football, but not so much in fantasy.



What if your fantasy league awards a point for a reception? Many WRs move up your overall cheat sheet because of this bonus. Every season, you'll always see some possession receivers that are fantasy worthy in any format (exception to the rule), but I'd always rather swing for the fences when choosing between average WRs. (See Chapter 2 for more on reviewing the scoring rules.)

✓ A **deep threat receiver** is the speed guy who goes long down the sidelines and up the middle for passes. He tends to make less catches than possession receivers, but his catches are big. And big plays equal big fantasy points. This is the guy I want on my fantasy team, because I get points for yards and touchdowns, not first downs.



Elite WRs can do it all: move the chains, fly downfield, and score from anywhere. When sorting the WR pack and identifying player values in the later rounds, look for guys who have big-play potential that could translate into fantasy points for yardage and TDs. The stats alone won't show you what the WR's role is on his team, but by reading the local sports pages online and by reading fantasy expert columns before your draft, you can find out which guys will be asked to run five yards and which guys will be sent downfield to catch bombs.

Made in heaven or hell? Breaking down the QB/WR marriage

Peanut butter and jelly. Bacon and eggs. They all go together like great WRs and great QBs. Oil and water. Milk and a hot day. Bad WR/QB relationships usually equate to less fantasy points. You get the idea. You won't find a top-five QB in the league that doesn't work with a WR1 he can trust to throw to when the game is on the line. A QB and WR need to be on the same page to post high fantasy points, and for that to happen, they usually need time. They need to practice together and play together, sometimes for years, before they can elevate each other's game.

When pre-ranking WRs for your draft, research which WRs are in great "marriages" and which are still "dating" and lean toward the former. The top ten have proven chemistry, but real value can be found in the WRs who are building a QB relationship and looking to take their games to the next level this season.



When scouting and pre-ranking WRs, be sure to factor in the dynamic between the QB and the WR. For example, if a QB praises an unknown rookie WR during the preseason, move the WR up a few spots in your rankings. If a veteran WR has to adjust to a new QB, move that WR down a few spots. Use your draft research tools (check out Chapter 4) to become familiar with the teams, and remember the fantasy formula.

Does the QB share the wealth?

When looking for a WR, an important factor to consider is what type of offense the team runs. Does the QB throw a lot, spreading the ball around to several different receivers, or does he spend most of his time handing off to the RBs and looking for one receiver occasionally?



The type of offense a team runs impacts how often the WRs touch the ball. Consider the following:

- ✓ **Spread the rock.** Some offensive systems deliberately call pass plays for every WR, TE, and RB on the field in order to keep the defenses guessing. If a defense pays too much attention to WR1, WR3 may be wide open, for instance. You may think that you should avoid players from this offense altogether, but that isn't necessary. Just be sure to rank their value accordingly. A WR1 on this team isn't always a WR1 in fantasy. However, most fantasy leagues start three WRs, so you need to draft four to six WRs for depth. When looking for WR depth in the middle rounds of your draft, keep in mind that a WR1 on a team with options is still more valuable than a WR3 on a pass-first team.
- ✓ **Feed the beast.** Some teams continue to throw to their stud playmakers (WR1s) or best options for long spurts. A team keeps going to this player because he's good and because defenses can't stop him, even if they know he's going to get the ball. If he even gets double-covered, other receivers will be open. WRs on these teams are the fantasy elite or have elite potential, because of the number of passes thrown in their direction.



A well-executed balanced attack tends to score more often, which means fantasy production from all its offensive stars. However, if a QB does favor a particular WR, it increases the WR's fantasy value.

Win or lose, fantasy WRs can thrive

No matter if a WR's team wins or loses, a fantasy WR can thrive. Huh? Are you confused? When pre-ranking the WRs for your draft, keep in mind the overall production of their teams' offenses and the quality of their defenses. You do want to focus on WRs on winning teams because an offense can't score while sitting on the bench. The better teams in the league play better defense, giving their offenses more chances. Better offenses retain possession for longer periods of time, creating more chances for the skill players.

However, just like QBs on losing teams (see Chapter 5), WRs on losing teams can often put up great fantasy numbers in a blowout loss. If a team is way behind on the scoreboard, they may be forced to throw the ball 50 times, which means plenty of scoring chances for their WRs. This is one of the biggest contradictions in fantasy football, especially because I stress my preference for RBs and QBs on playoff teams.

Pocket aces: Does the WR1 have a great WR2 on his side?

Many elite WRs are one-man shows, which can be great some weeks and disastrous on others (based on opposing defenses, mostly). But more often, elite WRs have reliable teammates at the other skill positions (WR, TE, RB). When really breaking down the WRs for your draft, look at the pairings of WR1 and WR2 on teams and pinpoint the best combos.

Why do you need to see if top-flight WRs have good sidekicks? Defenses have depth charts for each position, and the position that must defend the WRs is called the *cornerback* (CB). An NFL coach assigns his best CB to cover the WR1 and also reminds the safeties to provide help in preventing the WR1 from getting open. In some extremes, the coach may assign two CBs to one WR, which is called *double coverage*. If there is a great WR2 across the field from WR1, the defensive coach can't divert his men onto WR1 or else WR2 will be catching passes all day long. Some weeks, a WR2 will have a better fantasy matchup than the WR1 because the CB1 on the opposing defense is so much better than its CB2. (See Chapter 10 for more on considering schedule for drafting purposes.)



Only a few WR2s will rate ahead of WR1s on your receiver rankings, but never forget that football is a team game. WRs on a team tend to complement each other, and a winning pair in real football is a winning pair in fantasy football. After you determine who the great tandems may be this year, consider moving each of them up in your rankings.

Capitalizing on a WR's breakout year

After reading up on every offense in the NFL via my favorite Web sites and magazines (see Chapter 4 for more on research tools), I develop a pretty good idea of the WRs I think will be good in the upcoming season. When drafting, I always look for the safe bets in the earlier rounds at the WR position; however, with only unknown WRs left in the later rounds, I like to take some chances.

When looking for low-risk/high-reward WRs, fantasy football experts have come to believe in the *third-year breakout theory*. Basically, for a wide receiver, learning an NFL playbook, understanding his role in the offense, and building a rapport with his QB — all keys to success at the position — take time: two full seasons, to be exact. I could name a few rookie WRs who have broken out in the league, and a few more second-year players, but every season, many third-year WRs make an impact.



If a rookie WR has a big college career and is saddled with huge NFL expectations, he won't come cheap in your fantasy draft. However, a third-year player who has potential but hasn't done much yet probably will be available in the late rounds.

You can find too many success stories not to take this theory seriously. I'm not saying that you should draft an unproven WR ahead of a proven one, but finding diamonds in the rough is what separates winning fantasy coaches from the bottom feeders.



By searching the fantasy sites, you can find lists of all the NFL receivers who are heading into their third years. (One such site is www.fftoolbox.com.) Check the stats and reports on those players at the end of last season and during this preseason; if they're starting to make some noise, go ahead and try to draft them late.

Blocking Bore or Big-Time Threat? Picking Tight Ends

At one time, almost every tight end (TE) was just another fat guy on the end of the offensive line. In the modern era, more and more TEs have become important parts of offensive schemes in today's NFL. Today's all-around athletic TEs are strong enough to block linemen and still fast enough to elude safeties. This versatility is a deadly weapon when called upon, and more teams are doing that than ever before.

With more teams using game-breaking TEs as receiving threats over the middle of the field, fantasy players have more potential studs to choose from during the draft. However, the true fantasy-elite TEs are rare and will almost certainly require using an early pick (the first five rounds) to get one. Are they worth it? Sometimes, but it will cost you a chance at a top RB or WR to find out.



If you can pick up a reliable fantasy TE without using an early pick on an elite TE, you'll have an edge over your competition both during the draft and during the season! In this section, I show you some of the indicators to look for when pre-ranking the TE position.

TE fantasy production: Feast or famine

Most TEs will be lucky to average 5 fantasy points per game simply because they have limited opportunities. Most offenses look to get the ball first to the RBs, then the WRs, and then the TEs, in that

order. However, when a dominant TE becomes his team's No. 1 receiver, then his fantasy value skyrockets and he may average more than 10 fantasy points per game! Simply put, the TE is a "boom or bust" position and must be valued as such. Your kickers and your defenses will outscore them a lot of the time, but due to the scarcity of fantasy-worthy TEs, you should look to draft a starting TE before either the K or DEF.

So if good fantasy production is so hard to find at the TE position, shouldn't you use an early draft pick on an elite TE? Yes and no. This is where you really need to do your research and be confident in your TE pre-ranking and draft strategy.

If you feel that the elite TE is a sure bet and the rest of the league's TEs are not, then the answer is yes. If you feel you can find a good TE later and would rather use an early pick on an RB or WR, then the answer is no. It's not as confusing as it sounds, trust me. How can you evaluate whether a TE has the top talent for your fantasy team? Keep reading to find out.

Digging for gold: Finding useful TEs, not just the elite ones

How can you identify a valuable TE? To start, take a glance at last year's stats to see which TEs you should rank highest on your cheat sheets. The top TEs lead their position in receptions, yards, and touchdowns. After the first few players, you'll see a noticeable drop-off in production. After identifying the best, you need to separate out the rest.

Opportunity rarely knocks for TEs

When pre-ranking the rest of the TEs, look at both sides of the fantasy equation (Chapter 1). Does he have the size, the speed, and the hands needed to be a great receiver, or is he mainly a blocker (skill)? Is he the primary target on offense or just a decoy over the middle meant to distract a linebacker (opportunity)? To be successful in fantasy, a player needs both, but being in a position to use his skills is crucial for a TE.



This can apply to rookie TEs with upside or veteran TEs with new teams, new coaches, or new QBs. Situational changes can also hurt a TE's value (a new WR may take away some of his looks, for example), so always adjust your expectations accordingly.

In the red zone, TEs can shine

The size and strength of a TE is especially valuable in the *red zone* (the area from the 20-yard line to the goal line). If a TE can move his defender off the line of scrimmage and make a move into the end zone, he becomes a trusted target for the QB. The problem is, most coaches consider running the ball to be the safest option near the goal line, and they have short-yardage RBs to get the ball over the goal line.

Ask the following questions about a team whose TE you're considering drafting:

- ✓ Does the coach trust his QB in the red zone?
- ✓ Is the team's RB strong enough to run inside, or is he more of a finesse, speed back?
- ✓ Does the team have a goal-line specialist or vulture back? (Check out Chapter 5 for more info on vulture RBs.)

If your answers are yes, no, and no, you can be confident that the team's TE will see more red zone looks. Every year, plenty of undrafted TEs will score three to six TDs just by being in the right place at the right time, and those short scoring plays are what make a TE reliable in fantasy football, just not quite elite.

Understanding the system: Offensive threat or extra blocker?

When scouting a TE for your fantasy team, identifying the type of offense the NFL team runs is important. The TE is an offensive lineman, blocking on running plays and sometimes on passing plays, who doubles as an eligible receiver. Depending on the team's play calling, the TE will either stay on the line to block or go out for a pass. The problem is, you don't get fantasy points for a good block (much to the chagrin of the football purists).



Look for the TEs who had the most receptions in the past few seasons. The number of touchdowns scored can be deceiving. Focus on receptions so that you'll know if the TE is a crucial part of the aerial attack or just there for blocking purposes. Pass-catching TEs are always more fantasy worthy than blocking TEs.

Young guns: Targeting young TEs with potential

Every year, the TE position is loaded with potential as more NFL teams draft imposing physical specimens whose size and speed leave fantasy owners drooling. The pedigree of a young TE is a strong indicator of how he may be utilized in the NFL. If he was a playmaker in college — he had a lot of receptions and was a frequent red-zone target — and he was drafted in the first three

rounds of the NFL draft, you can be confident that his coach will use him as an offensive weapon, not just another blocker. Being a top prospect doesn't guarantee success, but in fantasy, you should always look for upside (potential) and keep in mind that teams will give their top prospects every opportunity to succeed. (Check out Chapter 9 for more info about drafting rookies.)



Young TEs (first or second year) are often a better low risk/high reward pick late in the draft than proven TEs who are drafted in the first five rounds because of their relative draft value.

The aging factor

The TE position is one of the most grueling on offense. These players have to run block, pass block, sprint downfield to catch passes, and get tackled after catches. This workload adds up to a short career for many TEs, so be sure to look at the age and injury factors when ranking your TEs.



There is no set formula as to what age or how many seasons a TE will play before breaking down, but after eight seasons, I start to worry.

Chapter 7

Scouting Kickers and Defenders

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting a leg up with the right kicker
 - ▶ Sorting out team defenses
 - ▶ Rating the individual defensive players for an IDP league
-

Fantasy football and real football have many differences, but two of my favorite similarities are the effects of kickers (K) and team defenses (team DEFs). They're often underrated and overlooked, yet if they can produce, they give their teams a huge advantage. If a team has a bad kicker or a porous defense, it can cost them the game. Fantasy football is the same. Your offense is more important, but ignoring your kicking game and your defense can hurt your team. This chapter reviews some of the indicators to look for when pre-ranking the league's kickers and team defenses, and also includes info on the individual defensive player (IDP) format and how to target stud defensive players.

Nailing the Field Goals and Extra Points: The Kickers

Why are kickers important in fantasy football? Plain and simple: The scoring system. In most fantasy leagues, scoring looks like this:

30 yards rushing = 60 yards passing = 1 field goal = 3 fantasy points

Most NFL kickers consistently ring up 5 to 15 fantasy points each week without breaking a sweat. Kickers don't score touchdowns, so their upside is much less than the other positions, but they also have less downside because they're rarely shut out in a game.

Owning an elite fantasy kicker provides peace of mind each week. Unfortunately, finding that guy is a lot harder than it sounds. The K's opportunities rely on his team's offense, and because the NFL changes so much each season (thanks to the weighted schedule), the K who scores the most fantasy points is never the same guy two seasons in a row! So how can you identify which kickers to draft and which ones to avoid like a botched onside kick? That's why I'm here. In this section, I cover the facts that you need to consider when pre-ranking the kickers.

Going with a kicker: The deepest position

Much like QBs, every NFL team has one K, so you have 32 place Ks to choose from. The position is so deep that targeting the Ks that might excel can be tricky. I look for a guy with experience on a winning team with a productive offense. This usually leaves you with 10 to 15 kickers to choose from, which is plenty even in larger fantasy leagues. Now, how can you narrow down the list even further? Look for a quality veteran kicker who:

- ✔ **Is accurate.** No matter how far the ball goes, the kicker still needs to put it between the uprights. A kicker's *accuracy* is the most important measure of his skill in the NFL. How can you determine whether a kicker truly is accurate? His field goal percentage is consistent. Any kicker worth his salt is accurate more than 70 percent of the time, but he's only fantasy worthy if he's converting more than 85 percent of the time.
- ✔ **Can handle the pressure.** He's someone his coach (and fantasy coaches) can count on. If a kicker is clutch, his coach won't hesitate trying a field goal, and the more attempts a kicker gets, the more valuable he is to your fantasy team.
- ✔ **Has a strong leg.** In some leagues, field goals longer than 40 yards are worth 4 points, and field goals longer than 50 yards are worth 5! Check the kicker's stats and if you see a higher number of made field goals from more than 40 yards, that's an indicator of a strong leg. He'll get more chances and score those precious bonus fantasy points if the kick is good.

Eyeing a kicker's chances

More so than any other position in fantasy, a kicker's success depends on the *opportunity* side of the fantasy formula (skill + opportunity = success). If the offense can't get into field goal range or the end zone, then the kicker continues to wear his sideline cap.



When planning for your draft, make sure you look at your kicker's chances of scoring, not just his kicking ability. If he can't score, then you aren't scoring points. Consider the following:

- ✔ **The NFL team's offensive system:** You evaluate the skill players and their overall team offenses. In general, a good offense creates opportunities for its K, so rank the Ks on those teams higher. However, a very dominant offensive team in the NFL can end up having a mediocre fantasy K. If this team scores only touchdowns, then the K is scoring only extra points. Over the course of the season, a K on a premier offense probably has decent totals, but maybe not the monster totals you're hoping for. Kickers on high-scoring teams are safe bets in the draft, but if you want to make a higher-risk/higher-reward pick, look for a K on a good — not great — offensive team.
- ✔ **The NFL team's red zone production:** A great offense gets into the end zone most of the time, while a good offense has to settle for field goals. If teams can't score touchdowns, that means they're kicking more field goals. Good news for the fantasy K!
- ✔ **The NFL schedule:** These matchups also affect the K because the winning team scores more than its opponent, and the winning kicker also scores. This may sound contradictory to my previous bullets, but to coin a phrase: "points are points." Even in blowouts, the winning team usually settles for a field goal once or twice.



When reviewing the schedule, look for kickers with favorable matchups based on who they're playing and the potential conditions for kicking. A favorable matchup for a kicker means that you think the offense will score a lot (both extra points and field goals) or that the defense will force plenty of field goal attempts. Either scenario can add up to a productive fantasy day for your kicker.

- ✔ **The weather:** The weather can wreak fantasy havoc on your entire team, but usually not until the outdoor games in December. However, weather conditions affect the kicking game right from the start. Strong winds make long field goals impossible and heavy rains or snow make planting and following through on a kick harder.



A team whose home field is inside a dome plays half its games in perfect conditions! Also, teams from the south tend to have better kicking conditions in November and December. If all things are equal, rate the K who plays inside or in warm weather higher than the K from the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field.

Selecting just one kicker: No more, and not early

Because kickers are difficult to predict from season to season, and because only half of the league's kickers are drafted in your fantasy league, how do you know when to draft a kicker? A great kicker in fantasy football can be the difference maker, but at what price?

In the last five seasons, no K has scored the most points twice. Therefore, focus on the main skill positions and then draft a proven top-15 K late in the draft. He should be productive enough for your team to win, even if he isn't a top-five scorer at the end of the year. If your K isn't getting the job done, just drop him and add another during the season (even in larger fantasy leagues, about half of the league's kickers are available as free agents each week; see Chapter 11 for more on free agents).

Guarding the Gridiron: The Team Defenses

There are 11 men on the field, united in their evil plan: Stopping your fantasy team from scoring! Actually, they're trying to win football games, but that's not what I'm writing about. Many defenses frustrate fantasy coaches during the season because they shut down your best fantasy players — those you thought were a lock to have big games. Luckily, turnabout is fair play, because team defenses can score tons of fantasy points when they dominate.

In most fantasy leagues, you'll be drafting a team's entire defensive unit, not their players by position (for individual defensive player [IDP] leagues, see the next section). This section highlights some signs to look for when pre-ranking the NFL defenses based on their fantasy potential.

Spotting the important factors

The team defense position in fantasy football is oddly similar to the kicking position. You have plenty to choose from. They're difficult to predict when drafting, and if they don't average 5 to 15 fantasy points a week on your team, you're in trouble. Each position relies heavily on having a good matchup, and forecasting their success before the draft is easier said than done. The following are what to look for when scouting team DEFs:



- ✔ **Know the good teams from the bad:** A good offense controls the clock and keeps its defense well rested and well motivated. Most defensive scoring is about turnovers and sacks, and most turnovers happen on passing plays. If a team is losing, then its offense is going to throw more in order to score sooner and waste less time.

When pre-ranking the defensive units, I like to weigh the list in favor of the quality teams that I think are playoff caliber. They may not have all-pro starters or great stats from last season, but if the team is going to win, then the offense will give the defense plenty of chances to score points for my fantasy team.

- ✔ **Notice any coaching changes.** When evaluating an NFL team's chances on either side of the ball going into the season, check to see if there have been any major coaching changes. A great coach can make a decent unit great, or if an elite defense loses their defensive coordinator, they may regress the next season. The more you know about the coaches, the more accurate your rankings will become.

- ✔ **Study thy NFL schedule.** The number of scoring opportunities a defense has is based on the quality of the opposition, so study the schedule and pre-rank the defenses with matchups in mind. Some mistakes are forced by the defense, and some mistakes are made by the offense. A few teams are always predicted to be bad and then wind up having good seasons, but overall, you can use strength of schedule stats to find a team defense with plenty of favorable matchups versus inept offenses.



Most fantasy expert sites and magazines offer a “strength of schedule” breakdown to use as a reference when considering matchups in your pre-rankings. Check out Part IV for some good places to start surfing!

- ✔ **Look for a home-field advantage in December.** When deciding how to rank team defenses that are fairly even, consider where they play their home games and how many times they are at home during your fantasy playoffs. As the season progresses, weather can affect more games, and defenses with a hostile home field can benefit from it.

The weather and the field are just two small factors to consider when pre-ranking the team defenses. In the age of global warming, I wouldn't bank on a blizzard, but if the snow is falling, your fantasy defense is going to think Christmas came early! If you already like a team defense that plays in one of these bad weather venues and it has some soft foes at home late in the season, feel free to move that defense up on your cheat sheets.

Identifying the starting 11: Look for the superstars

The players on the field at each defensive position — and the skills of those players — are the heart and soul of any defense. Even if your league doesn't use individual defensive player (IDP) stats (check out “IDP: The pursuit of tackles, sacks, and picks” later in this chapter for more info), the all-pro playmakers will score for their team defense — so don't overlook them.



When scouting team defenses, don't be afraid to do a little stargazing. The schedule and the overall quality of the team are important, but one man can make a difference (just ask Lawrence Taylor). The elite defenses are usually led by a superstar or two, so when looking for emerging defenses with good draft value, consider whether they have a stud or two to build around this season. Fantasy football is based on big names making big plays on both sides of the ball.

Big plays on defense only happen a few times during a game, and when a defense converts a turnover into a touchdown on the very same play, it's even rarer. Another big play guy is the kick returner, but very few special-teams players make a fantasy impact. However, big plays do happen and it's usually because of defensive or special-teams studs making one of the following plays.

Ball hawks: Interceptions

Cornerbacks and safeties are the last line of defense versus the run, and the first line of defense versus the pass. One stud player in the secondary can make the entire unit much better, so keep that in mind when scouting the league.

- ✔ A **shutdown corner** is a cornerback who can cover the WR1 by himself, no matter who the WR1 is. This allows the safeties to roam more, looking for interception chances, or even more safety blitzes.
- ✔ A **hard-hitting safety** who can lay out any WR or TE in the middle of the field also affects the entire game. The other corners can protect the sidelines, cover the deep routes, or even blitz more, just because they know the middle of the field is covered.



Most secondary players toil in obscurity, so if one of them makes a name for himself, it's for a reason. Team defenses that feature a star corner or safety usually have more INTs and more fantasy points.

QB killers: Sacks

Football is all about the war in the trenches. The defensive linemen live to tackle, but they love to get sacks. The system that can get to the QB is the system that creates more fantasy points for your team defense. Sacks happen only if the team can pressure the QB — and that pressure comes from using the blitz. Linebackers and defensive ends are going to get sacks, but only if the defensive coordinator lets them. Some teams tend to play zone defense more often than they blitz, which could mean fewer sacks.

Sacks are a big part of fantasy scoring for a team DEF, and knowing what players get them will always give you an edge. The DEs and LBs that get to the QB most often are termed *sack artists* and can help your fantasy defense score more frequently.



Look for teams who led the league in sacks and who have pass-rushing specialists. Good fantasy defenses force the QB to make mistakes that result in fantasy points. By researching the NFL, you can determine which defenses prefer blitzing and are more aggressive in their schemes.

Kick returners: TD threats

Most leagues combine defense and special-teams scoring, so if a kick or punt is returned for a touchdown, the team defense receives credit for it. Thus, D/ST stands for Defense/Special Teams. Some leagues even count return yards for the D/ST rather than for just the player who racks up those yards.



So here's the question: If you know a D/ST has a great kick returner, should you rank that D/ST higher on your cheat sheets? Here's my answer: No. If a team returns more than one kickoff or punt for a TD in a season, that's considered a good year on special teams. Return TDs are too rare to be a factor in the defensive rankings. Keep the D/ST rankings focused on the major stats, and when your D/ST scores on a punt return, it's a nice bonus, that's all.

Check your league's scoring rules! If your league awards points for return yardage as well as return TDs, consider the team's kick and punt return men when pre-ranking the team defenses. These stats, however, should still be low on your list of what to consider.

IDP: The pursuit of tackles, sacks, and picks

In an individual defensive player (IDP) league, you draft players on both sides of the ball. The basic guidelines for team defenses still apply to IDP, so read the previous sections in this chapter about

them. The IDP format is more advanced and intense than team DEF, and most coaches who take on this challenge aren't going to read this book. However, this section uncovers the basics in case you're considering playing in an IDP league.

IDP scoring: Positions and opportunity

The major scoring difference between team DEF and IDP is tackling. In IDP, tackles count; in team DEF, they don't. Team DEF scoring is focused on sacks, turnovers, and touchdowns — and some games wind up with no sacks or turnovers. In IDP, scoring is focused on tackles, and almost every play ends with a tackle.



Because tackles are a reliable source of fantasy points, you can rank the players' IDP value in the order of positions that are most likely to make tackles. That order is as follows:

- ✓ Linebackers (LB)
- ✓ Defensive Backs (DB)
- ✓ Defensive Linemen (DL)

Linebackers typically get more tackles than defensive backs, but that doesn't mean you should take an average LB ahead of a great DB. The following sections examine these positions a bit more closely and help you when you're pre-ranking IDP.

Linebackers

With the linemen going nose-to-nose and the defensive backs lined up on the wide receivers, the linebackers are free to read and react to every offensive play. They're expected to do it all: make tackles, interceptions, and sacks. The great LBs can do it all, but each linebacking position has a different responsibility.



When breaking down the LBs, consider which position they play and the value of that position. Draft them in this order:

- ✓ **Middle linebacker:** This player is the field general who leads the defense. He's literally in the middle of the action and has the most opportunities to make plays during the game.
- ✓ **Weak-side linebackers:** They don't have to contend with being blocked by the TE as often.
- ✓ **Strong-side linebackers:** This LB is often blocked by the TE or expected to cover him.

Defensive backs

The defensive secondary has four positions, but each is considered a defensive back. The positions include

- ✔ **Strong safety.** This player favors the side on which the TE lines up. He tends to make more tackles because the run comes his way a lot.
- ✔ **Free safety.** He moves around the field based on the play calling. Both safeties are heavily involved in the tackling.
- ✔ **Cornerback.** Each NFL team starts two players at this position. The cornerbacks are usually isolated in man coverage, so they have fewer tackling opportunities.



Some dominant cornerbacks are worth drafting, but the safeties tend to score more fantasy points at the DB position because of the number of solo and assisted tackles.

Defensive linemen

When pre-ranking defensive linemen, take the pass rushers who play defensive end over the run-stopping defensive tackles. On your overall IDP cheat sheet, the D-line (with a few exceptions, of course) should be rated below the linebackers and the defensive backs. The defensive line has two positions. They include

- ✔ **Defensive ends.** These men bookend the line, regardless of the number of players assigned to it. Many dominant DEs are premier pass rushers, because they can attack the QB at an angle from which the QB can't see them coming.
- ✔ **Defensive tackles.** The big men in the middle rank at the bottom of the IDP list. A great nose tackle beats his blocker and makes tackles more often than most DTs, but his job is to fill holes and force the runner into the hands of the linebackers. In passing situations, the tackles try to get in the QB's line of sight and flush him into the blitzing LBs or DBs. Either way, these guys are a lot more important in real football than in fantasy because they don't make enough tackles.

Consider the formation

Great players make plays in either a 3-4 system or a 4-3 system, but you should still consider which basic scheme their team uses when pre-ranking IDP. Because a *3-4 defense* features three linemen and four linebackers, the D-line is always going to be outnumbered by the O-line. In that case, the fantasy numbers of the LBs should benefit, while the fantasy numbers of the DTs and DEs may suffer. In a *4-3 defense*, the D-line has a better chance of making plays with four men instead of three.



When pre-ranking defensive linemen, downgrade players in a 3-4 formation. On the flip side, upgrade linebackers in a 3-4 formation.

The best defense is a good offense?

When scouting the NFL for offensive studs, I look at last season's playoff teams that led the league in scoring and time of possession. The better offensive units are creating more looks and touches for their stars on offense. Well, if the offense is so great, what's the defense doing? Staying rested and motivated and not allowing points from the bench. In IDP leagues, the fantasy formula for *opportunity* is reversed.



Defenses play better with fewer opportunities. If they're on the field for fewer plays, they're tackling well or causing turnovers to stay off the field. Their players also stay fresher for four quarters, allowing them to make big plays for 60 minutes. Use your fantasy research on the offenses to help pre-rank your IDP. A strong defense makes the offense better and vice versa! (Check out Chapters 5, 6, and 7 for more on scouting offensive players.)

Chapter 8

Incorporating Important Draft Strategies into Your Game

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Digesting the importance of draft strategy
 - ▶ Reviewing the most popular and useful strategies
 - ▶ Putting the strategies to work throughout your draft
 - ▶ Working with a spending plan for an auction draft
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Being prepared for your league's fantasy draft is about not only scouting and rating the NFL players, but also knowing their values in the context of where you're picking in your draft. With each pick and each passing round, you have to weigh the needs of your team versus the fantasy values of the available players. To this end, a wise fantasy footballer goes into the draft with a well-crafted strategy. Just like an NFL coach formulating his game plan during the week and then implementing it on Sunday, you have to create your plan before draft day and then be flexible enough to adjust it as the draft unfolds.

Draft day is the most important day of the fantasy football season because it's when you lay a strong foundation for success. Your roster is a blank slate, and your decisions on draft day will impact the entire season. A well-executed draft gives you the best chance of winning; a bad draft will bury your team before the opening kickoff. So, what is a well-executed draft? Thankfully, the pioneers of fantasy football have developed proven strategies for drafting in both snake-draft and auction-draft fantasy leagues (see Chapter 4 for more on auction leagues).

This chapter explains these drafting theories and outlines how you can use them based on your draft position. When explaining the strategies, I argue *for* them. There are many ways to play this game as a fantasy coach; it's up to you to decide which one to follow. Your draft prep and research may lead you to go against the grain sometimes, and that's fine, but you should know the rules before bending them.



The general advice in this chapter (and book, really) is based on Yahoo!'s default fantasy scoring (see Chapter 13 for more on this league provider) and on a snake-draft format. If your league's scoring system places different values on certain stats, those differences affect the values of the NFL players. Remember to factor the differences into your draft strategy.

Why Strategy Is Important in Fantasy Drafts

Before you can fill out the roster of your fantasy dream team, you need to develop a game plan for draft day. This is important because you have so many players to choose from at six types of positions and often for nine starting slots, and most leagues allow you to select only 17 or so players. Not to mention that when one of the other 7 to 13 coaches selects a player, that player is no longer available to you! Finding talented starters and quality bench players is your goal, and because you're competing against others with the same goal, a sound strategy can help you select good players during the entire draft, not just with your early-round picks.



When crafting your draft-day game plan, keep these important points in mind; they affect which strategy you use and when you use it (see the following section for more on the strategies):

✔ **Draft position:** More than anything, your *draft position* — the pecking order in which the teams in your league make their selections each round — greatly affects your strategy. Draft strategy based on position is the key to surviving the first five rounds of a standard snake draft, when all the NFL stars are in play and your position changes each round (snakes back and forth). After the NFL studs go off the draft board, the playing field levels off, and teams start drafting based on need and value, so position becomes less critical.

How do you determine your draft order? Chapter 4 explains how your league establishes its drafting type and order. No matter your position, don't despair. Even if you don't have a high pick, you can still build a solid team. You can find stars and value from any draft position (if you have a late pick, you'll have an early second-round pick, giving you the cream of the second-round crop, for example).

✔ **League size:** If you play in a larger league (12 to 14 teams), your talent pool isn't as deep. You don't have as many opportunities to draft stud players early in the draft, and the free agent pool left at the end of the draft will be very shallow. My advice in this chapter is geared toward larger leagues. In a smaller league, you can afford to veer from standard strategy and improvise more.

Identifying the Most Popular Draft Strategies

Anything can happen in the NFL to affect fantasy leagues — injuries to starters can put backups in the spotlight, a rookie can come out of nowhere to shine, and so on — but most fantasy teams' success hinges on their drafts and the play of their top picks. For this reason, your first five draft picks are crucial; the players you select here represent your starting core and your best chance for success. You want these players to stay with you all season or become blue-chip trading pieces. After you make these first five picks, you can draft for value in the middle round and fill needs in the late rounds. Either way, you need your early predictions to pay dividends by scoring the bulk of your fantasy points.

Over the years, fantasy experts have come to agree on some tried-and-true draft strategies. In this section, I cover four of the most popular draft strategies and explain how you can use them to form your draft plans. Which of the four strategies you choose to follow or whether you decide to use one of them at all depends on your draft position, your league size, and what players other fantasy coaches are drafting ahead of you (and behind you).

Taking two RBs: The stud-RB theory

The *stud-RB theory* is simple: You select two RBs in the first three rounds of the draft, no matter what. “Why should I do that,” you may ask? The RBs are the most important players on any fantasy team. They get the most touches and receive plenty of opportunities to score points; and because of that, all the good ones will exit the board early. By drafting two solid RBs in the first three rounds, you increase your odds of having an elite RB. If just one comes through for you, you'll have a chance to make it to the playoffs. If they both pan out, you may be hoisting a trophy at season's end.



Yardage is nice, but NFL scoring equals fantasy scoring, so drafting guys who can punch the ball across the goal line and doing it early is your best bet. Because of the value and scarcity of elite RBs in the NFL, the teams in your league will draft all the starting RBs and any backups with potential. Therefore, many coaches concentrate on drafting quality backs early and scouting serviceable backups for the mid to late rounds. Just do the math: Barring injury, you'll need at least three RBs in order to start two RBs every week.

Stud RBs score more touchdowns

Even though multi-RB offenses have become very common in the NFL, when a stud RB becomes a TD machine, he now scores more TDs than anyone else at his position ever has. The rest of his team — especially the offensive line — feeds off his success, and the end result is winning more football games. The following shows how the NFL single-season record for rushing TDs was tied or broken three times in a span of four years in the early to mid 2000s!

Number of TDs	Player	Team	Year
27	Priest Holmes	Kansas City Chiefs	2003
27 (with one receiving TD)	Shaun Alexander	Seattle Seahawks	2005
28 (with three receiving TDs)	LaDainian Tomlinson	San Diego Chargers	2006



If you have an early pick in the first round, the stud-RB theory is a no-brainer. You'll get an elite RB1 and you'll have plenty of good options in Rounds 2 and 3. If you're drafting in the middle or late portion of Round 1, the strategy isn't *as* important because the elite RB1s will be gone, but keep in mind that drafting two good players at RB is always a good option. I say that the stud-RB plan can work from anywhere on the board and in any size league; it's just especially important in larger leagues due to RB scarcity.

Drafting for best value: The best-available-player theory

According to the *best-available-player theory*, RBs are overrated. In fact, this theory doesn't rate any of the major positions over another (QB, RB, and WR). This strategy is all about finding value. At least that's what a value drafter may argue when she takes an elite QB in Round 1 and an elite WR in Round 2 instead of focusing on RBs early (like the theory in the previous section suggests). Plainly, the *best-available-player theory* is about using player rankings to determine the best overall players and using your cheat sheets (see Chapter 4) to make your draft picks, regardless of position scarcity or value. This is a very sound strategy as your draft passes Round 5 and heads toward the later rounds.

For example, say that you're in a large league; you have a mid to late first-round pick, and the top three or four RBs are off the board. As the elite RB pool starts to dry up, some available QBs and WRs rate higher than the available RBs on your overall cheat sheet. According to your rankings and the expert rankings, you can find better guys on the board away from the RB position. With the best-available-player theory, you stick by your rankings and take the highest-rated QB or WR (unless an elite TE sneaks into the equation, which may happen after Round 2).



When you draft a fantasy team, you have to walk the line between value and need. If you can address your team's needs with the best available player on the board, you're doing something right! Hopefully, every round will present that opportunity to you. When you can't match value with need, though, this approach leans toward taking the best player (the player who's projected to score the most fantasy points) and fixing your lineup holes in another round.

Here's why this theory makes sense to many fantasy coaches:

- ✔ **Injuries:** When choosing between a second-tier RB and the best available player, consider the injury factor. Because RBs take the most pounding, they're more likely to break down than players at other positions. QBs and WRs have a better chance of playing all 16 games, which means they'll produce more. In this consideration, you're weighing the risk factor (higher for RBs) versus the production factor (more production for RBs). Sticking to RBs is a high-risk/high-reward proposition.
- ✔ **Proven fantasy players versus risky RBs:** When the top-five consensus draft picks (usually all RBs) belong to other fantasy teams, you have to weigh need versus value. If you miss out on a top-five back because of your draft position, sticking to the stud-RB theory (see the previous section for more info) can land you two RBs with plenty of question marks heading into the season. The argument for value drafting is simple: Why not take a proven fantasy player while you still can? If you draft your RBs somewhere between Rounds 3 and 5, they'll be just as unproven as the guys who were available in the first round, except now your team has proven studs at other positions.
- ✔ **Balanced lineup:** Every week you start your entire team, not just two RBs. Fantasy production can come from any position at any time (it just happens to come from RBs more often). Some weeks, a 30-point QB can carry your team; another week, a 20-point team DEF may win your game. If you have a good, balanced lineup — built by drafting ranking over position — you increase your chances of winning through team efforts; you don't just rely on dominant RB play.



In smaller leagues (8 to 10 teams), this strategy can work from Round 1 all the way through your draft, regardless of your draft position. In larger leagues (12 to 14 teams), your choices become more difficult after the elite RBs are taken. If you have a mid to late draft position in the first round, consider taking the best available player, even if he isn't a RB. If this plan leaves you without a RB after three rounds, start throwing RB darts in Rounds 4, 5, and 6!

Taking elite WRs ahead of average RBs: The stud-WR theory

The stud-WR theory isn't too difficult to figure out, and is similar to the best-available-player theory. The *stud-WR theory* states that if you can't get an elite RB, you should draft a top-three WR instead of settling for a lower-ranked RB. Because stud RBs are in demand early in fantasy drafts, many stud WRs will be available until late in the first and second rounds and perhaps even into the third round.



If you subscribe to the stud-WR theory, be sure you still take one RB in the first three rounds and possibly two in the next three rounds. After you fill your starting lineup, load up on backup RBs who can possibly win starting jobs during the year. With this strategy, you're counting on your top WRs to stay healthy and score points, so fill your bench with breakout RBs, not with backup WRs who you'll never start. If one or two of your backup RBs emerge and your stud WRs perform as expected, you'll be in great shape!

In other words, if you can't get an elite RB, your backfield will have issues no matter what, so why not take two sure-fire WRs? Here are some more reasons you should consider the stud-WR theory:

- ✔ **You may have more starting WRs in your lineup.** Although you need RB production to achieve fantasy success, most leagues require you to start only two RBs compared to three starting WRs (such as Yahoo!; see Chapter 13).
- ✔ **You'll have fewer opportunities to pick up good WRs later.** Several fantasy teams in your league may change their starting RBs during the season, and some viable (though not elite) RBs will emerge from the depth charts (usually because of injuries to starting RBs). Fantasy teams tend not to change their starting WRs, though, because WR depth charts are less volatile than RB depth charts. That means you won't have many top options to choose from on the free agent or waiver scene.

✓ **Elite WRs are more reliable, which equals better value.** A top WR may not produce as many points as a top RB, but he's more predictable and more reliable. Each season, you see the same names at the top half of the WR rankings, just in a slightly different order. Good WRs tend to play in the same offensive systems and with the same QBs year after year, which leads to continued success. Plus, the stud WRs in the NFL aren't as injury prone and typically stay in the elite class.



If the “can't miss” RBs are gone when it's your turn for your first pick, and you don't want to waste an early pick on a risky RB, the logical thing to do is to draft an excellent WR who will start for your team the entire season. If you take two elite WRs when drafting in mid to late first-round position, be sure to have some undervalued RBs marked on your cheat sheets — players who you can grab in the next ten rounds. In smaller leagues, the stud-WR theory is less risky because of better depth at the RB position.

Punting the other positions to the mid to late rounds

Most coaches spend the first half of the draft fighting over the top RBs and WRs, which leaves plenty of quality choices at the other positions in the second half of the draft. This strategy, which is nearly universally followed in the fantasy world, focuses on the right time to draft QBs, Ks, TEs, and team DEFs. The *punting-the-other-positions theory* says to wait to draft these positions until later in the draft and to use your early picks for stud RBs and WRs.



Although all positions are important to your success in fantasy football, some are more important and predictable than others. Inexperienced fantasy coaches often pick famous players early and select Ks and team DEFs just because they have empty slots in their starting lineups. A savvy fantasy coach can see past the names, be patient, and pick the great players and units at these secondary positions after loading his or her starting lineup and bench with productive RBs and WRs in the first five to ten rounds (with the occasional elite QB or TE breaking the mold).

Most coaches play the waiting game when it comes to QBs, Ks, TEs, and team DEFs, but the question is, “How long do I wait?” The following sections break down the less difficult slots to fill and explain why you can wait until later in your draft.

Quarterbacks

Having a productive QB certainly increases your chances of achieving fantasy success, just as having a good QB on an NFL

team often leads to wins. The thing is, the stats show there to be very little difference in total points scored between the top-ranked QB and the tenth-ranked QB. After you do all your scouting and create the most accurate and thorough QB rankings you can (see Chapter 4), you have two basic choices for drafting QBs:

- ✔ **Draft an elite QB in the first five rounds.** Doing so assumes that you can identify three to five available QBs whom you consider to be head and shoulders above the rest. If you're right about your selection, your elite QB will provide plenty of fantasy points and peace of mind when you go to set your lineup every week. You now can draft your backup QB later than the other coaches because you should only need him during your QB1's bye week.
- ✔ **Draft two good QBs in Rounds 6–12.** After the elite QBs get picked over, and you've concentrated on the RB and WR positions, you can usually pick from about 8 to 12 fantasy-worthy QBs who are still available. These QBs give you great value because they allow you to draft a solid core of players first, and their passing stats aren't as far behind the elite QBs as many people think. This plan works well in leagues of ten or more teams.



I suggest that you avoid drafting an elite QB in the early rounds of your draft. In most fantasy leagues, the top-ten RBs will be gone by the middle of the second round. Coaches will take the top-ten WRs by the end of the fifth round. Because most coaches concentrate on drafting those positions early, a top-ten QB can last into the tenth round! Using an early draft pick on a QB may cost you a chance at drafting elite RBs or WRs, which are hard to come by.

Tight ends

The TE position is a tricky one to plan for in preparation for your draft. If you select the top-ranked TE, you'll have an advantage at that position because of the dropoff from the elite players to the mass of average players, but is it worth using a pick to acquire that player in an early round? That's a tough call you have to make for yourself.

If you draft an elite TE, of which there are only a few, he should give you an edge over your opponents' starting TEs. You'll need to use an early pick (one of your first five) in order to secure one of the best. Keep in mind: A 10-point fantasy game from a TE is considered great, but a ten-point game from a WR is considered just good. When you take an elite TE in Rounds 2–4, you're probably passing on a very good WR who could score more fantasy points because WRs tend to have more opportunities.



You may have only a few elite TEs to choose from, but you have your pick of productive TEs in the next few rounds. In any given week, an average TE can catch a TD and have a great game. I suggest waiting until a later round to take a TE, spending your picks to build depth at other positions, because most of the TEs in the NFL are evenly talented and give you equal value.

Team defenses

An elite team defense can score between 10 and 30 fantasy points a week and may lead your team in scoring occasionally. The problem is that it's tough to predict which DEF will be elite all season long and live up to the hype.



A team DEF is simply too unpredictable to waste an early-round pick on. You have 32 team DEFs to choose from, and many unheralded defenses will emerge as fantasy forces during the season. Football experts make defensive predictions for the upcoming season based largely on the past season, but the NFL schedule can turn the league upside down in just one year. Great team DEFs often play on NFL playoff teams, and playoff teams receive the hardest schedules each season, which can mean less fantasy points for their defenses (see Chapter 10).

Many factors can impact a team DEF; you have to consider the following when researching a DEF's value during the draft:

- ✓ **Injuries:** Injuries can hurt a DEF. Instead of worrying about just one of your players being injured, you have to worry about 11 starting defensive players and their backups! If any of them get hurt, the defense's fantasy performance can suffer.
- ✓ **Weekly matchups:** The performance of a team DEF is based on its weekly matchup — more so than at other positions. Even if you have an elite team DEF, you have to deal with weeks when your DEF faces potent offenses. And if you pick up a free agent DEF, you may get plenty of weeks where it scores a lot of points just because its team plays terrible offenses.



If you can draft a top-three ranked DEF after Round 5, and you highly value defense, go for it. If not, don't panic and waste a middle-round pick. I suggest that you draft your DEFs in the last few rounds and play the matchups game each week via the free agent pool if your picks don't pan out (see Chapter 10 for more on team management and Chapter 11 for tips on the free agent pool).

Kickers

When it comes to kickers, wait. Please wait. No fantasy kicker should ever be drafted before the round numbers hit double digits.

Stay focused on your bench needs in the middle rounds, and only take a kicker in the last five rounds. Kickers depend too much on their teams' ability to generate scoring chances, and their fantasy production varies wildly from season to season.



Why not take a kicker in the last round? Each team should draft only one (unless you have specific roster size rules), so at the very least, you'll wind up with the 12th-ranked K out of 32. He may not be a Hall of Famer, but that sleeper WR you took four rounds ago could more than make up for his production.

Applying the Draft Strategies: Who to Pick and When

No matter your draft position or how many teams are in your fantasy league, no one draft strategy is foolproof. You can't say, "Well, because I have the eighth pick, I'll use this strategy, no matter what else happens today." You always have to stay on your toes and be ready for the unexpected to happen during your draft — just like a true NFL general manager.

For example, what do you do if you have your sights set on a specific stud RB and another coach drafts him in the spot before yours? Do you have a backup plan in place? Furthermore, as you progress to the later rounds of the draft (anywhere from Rounds 13 to 20), you may need to adjust your strategy to ensure that you get the best players you can (the players with value who give you depth and fill your roster). Unfortunately, no one tried-and-true draft strategy works for every fantasy coach. You have to be flexible and willing to make changes to your plans!



The number of rounds your draft has depends on your league's default settings and number of roster spots allowed. By knowing how many roster spots you have (and thus picks you get), you can utilize the draft strategies I present in the previous section better. (A 12-team league that allows for 17 roster spots has a 17-round draft. The first five rounds or so of this draft are considered the early rounds; Rounds 6 to 12 are the middle rounds; and Rounds 13 to 17 are the late rounds.)

This section walks you pick by pick through the draft, helps you apply the appropriate strategies, and introduces any backup plans that can ensure that you'll draft a winning roster. I base the advice in this section on a 12-team, head-to-head matchup league with Yahoo! default scoring (see Chapters 2 and 13) and a snake draft.

Building your core early

The early rounds of a fantasy draft are often the most important. In these rounds, you strive to pick up some big-time studs who can carry your team to a fantasy championship (or at least serve as blue-chip trading pieces later in the season). On top of this foundation, you can add layers of role players and sleepers who can ride your studs' coattails throughout the year.

But even during the early rounds, no one strategy fits every coach, every drafting position, or every league size. Someone who has one of the first few picks in the first round may have a different strategy than a coach who has the last pick in the first round. The following sections help you make your early-round picks, depending on where your picks fall in the draft.

If you have one of the top four picks

If you have one of the first four picks, either the fantasy gods have smiled upon you, or you finished with a pretty bad record last year! In my opinion, the most basic strategy and the best way you can build a good foundation for your fantasy roster is simple: Draft a stud RB with your first pick. The upside of having a workhorse, all-purpose guy with 20-TD potential is excellent. You can count on good production every week. (Refer to the “Taking two RBs: The stud-RB theory” section earlier in this chapter for more.)

The following list walks you through the first five picks of your draft:

- ✔ **Round 1:** Draft an elite RB. You're now halfway home with the stud-RB theory, which means taking another RB in the second or third round.
- ✔ **Rounds 2 and 3:** After seeing many of the studs being drafted (and maybe some of your favorite players), you now have some choices to make for your second pick among RBs, QBs, WRs, or TEs — a second pick in the 21st–24th overall range. The safest choice often is WR, because more elite WRs will be available than stud RBs. Because your next pick is so close — 25th–28th (remember how a snake draft works; check out Chapter 4 for more info) — you can take a WR in the second round and another RB in the third to start alongside your stud RB from the first round. If you want to use the best-available-player theory or the stud-WR theory (see these sections earlier in the chapter), you can take two stud WRs, a WR and possibly the top-ranked TE, or one of these positions and an elite QB. In most leagues, though, you can get good value at these positions later in the draft.

- ✓ **Rounds 4 and 5:** The needs created by your first three picks should dictate these picks, with emphasis still on the RB and WR positions. If you drafted heavy on RBs, think best-available WRs, and vice versa. If you targeted RBs and WRs, consider taking an elite QB or an elite TE to complement them. And even though you had to wait awhile after making your third-round pick, now is too early to draft a K or team DEF.

If you have one of the middle four picks

Being in the middle portion of the draft order (picks five through eight in the first round) allows you to see how some of the other coaches are drafting, and you can use that info to your advantage.



Remember to use a draft board to track the other teams so you don't end up as the monkey in the middle. Refer to Chapter 4 for information on how to use a draft board to your advantage.

Use the following list as a round-by-round template during your early-round picks if you start out in the middle of the draft pack:

- ✓ **Round 1:** Be safe and smart and take a proven, if not elite, RB in the first round. Don't reach for a sleeper RB or a young, speedy WR just because he has more potential; make the boring, safe pick here. You'll be glad you did. Even if the top four RBs have already been drafted, you can still pick a strong RB.



Don't fall into the temptation of drafting a top-ranked QB. Elite and productive RBs and WRs are harder to find later in the draft than a productive QB. For example, Peyton Manning threw for a record 49 TDs in 2004. Many experts projected him in the overall top five in 2005, but that year he came back to earth and threw "only" 28 TDs. Were his numbers bad in 2005? Not at all; if you drafted him in a later round, you got amazing value. But ten other QBs in 2005 threw 20 or more TDs, and they weren't first-round fantasy picks!

- ✓ **Round 2:** If you can be patient and stick to your cheat sheets, you can start out with two solid picks. In Round 2, you'll probably see a run on the elite WRs, and you may want to jump on board. Elite WRs tend to stay healthy more often and produce double-digit TDs and 1,000 yards receiving every year.

You may spot average RBs on losing teams here, but if you can identify a starter who isn't in an RBBC situation, the middle of Round 2 is a good time to draft him (see Chapter 5 for more on RBBC situations).

- ✓ **Rounds 3 and 4:** The best play in the third and fourth rounds is to keep drafting RBs and WRs. The top-15 RBs are surely gone, so the WRs may have better value because you won't see

much difference between the remaining RBs. Even so, solid starting RBs are still a hot commodity, so I suggest taking at least one here if you don't already have two starting RBs.

✓ **Round 5:** By Round 5, the top-10 WRs and top-20 RBs will be long gone in most leagues, so you can start to think about taking an elite QB or TE. The best value picks in Round 5 are often QBs based on their comparative point productions.

This round often features a run on the best available TEs; the few elite TEs may be gone, but if not, jump on one of them. However, don't waste your time here on average TEs, because they rarely produce enough fantasy points to justify a selection so high. You can still find top-20 WRs available at this point.

Even if you don't have a QB or a TE yet, you can still consider taking a third RB, because fantasy football revolves around RBs. But don't take a fourth RB in this round. The stud-RB theory can be overplayed, and taking four RBs in the first five rounds to start a draft is a perfect example.



If you have one of the bottom four picks

When your draft position is at the bottom of the first round, the wait may be only minutes, but it feels like hours! That's because you have to watch anxiously as many great players fly off the board and you wait to see if the player you're targeting falls to you.



A fantasy player can easily get discouraged when drafting at the bottom, but stay focused, soldier! You can still build a winning team. You just need plenty of preparation and determination. In a snake draft, the order snakes back to the bottomfeeders — if you draft 11th in a 12-team league, for example, your next pick will be the 14th selection. So, you may not snag a top-five RB, but you can get two players in the top 20 at any position, which isn't too shabby.

Keep the following pointers in mind as you start at the bottom of the first round and work your way through the first five rounds:

✓ **Rounds 1 and 2:** If you're considering using the stud-WR strategy (refer to the "Taking elite WRs ahead of average RBs: The stud-WR theory" section earlier in this chapter), this is the spot to do it. The elite RBs are gone and you may not have much confidence in the ones who are left. However, in this late position, you still have a great chance of getting the top WR and another elite WR, a top-ten RB, or an elite QB with your second pick. If you stick with WRs, the remaining RBs will be long shots, but with a little luck and some shrewd in-season roster moves, your backfield will be productive enough to support your prolific air attack.



The stud-WR theory is contingent on being able to find productive RBs past the first three rounds. If you're a very thorough coach who loves fantasy football, and you've done extensive RB scouting (see Chapter 5), this strategy can work. If you want to remain a casual player who doesn't spend much time scouting, you could be heading for a fall if you take two WRs in the first 15 picks. Play it safe and take one good RB and one great WR in this case. If you take two RBs in the first three rounds, you can still take a top-five WR. The tricky part is when you're drafting in the bottom of the first round and you have to choose between the tenth-ranked RB and the top-ranked WR. This is a tough call. I still lean toward taking the RB because of the scarcity of quality backs and the stud-RB theory. I'd then take a top WR in the second round when the draft snakes back.

- ✔ **Rounds 3 and 4:** After a long wait — after your second pick, all the spots in front of you go twice before you choose again — you'll finally get to make a selection in Round 3 and soon again in Round 4. The safe and popular play is to stick with the best available RBs and WRs. Doing so may make you RB top-heavy, which certainly isn't bad. By now, you can still find good values at WR and RB, but the studs are likely all gone.

If you want an elite QB, you may have to use your fourth-round pick on him because some will be taken during the long wait for your fifth rounder. Check your cheat sheets and see how many elite QBs are left; if you think you can afford to wait longer, though, consider the other positions.

- ✔ **Round 5:** By your fifth-round pick — another long wait for you — the top 50 players overall are likely gone. The talent pool here is decent but not great. Because player value is fairly equal for the next few rounds, focus on the best available players. Of course, this plan should be tempered by the needs you create with your first four picks. If you went RB heavy, think about WRs, and vice versa. Consider the overall value of the available TEs and QBs, but don't take one just because you have a hole in your starting lineup. Stick to your overall cheat sheet!

Bottom line: Draft strategy by position

The tricky part about being at either end of the draft (#1 or #12) in the early rounds is that teams make so many picks in between yours, depending on the round, so you have a hard time targeting players. For example, if you're in position 9 in Round 3, you know that six players will be drafted before you make your selection in Round 4. You decide to take a proven WR in Round 3. You see one RB left who has great third-round value, but you decide to wait in hopes that the RB will still be there in Round 4. But what if you make the same bet in Round 4? Now you have to wait another 16 picks for your RB!



By concentrating on your draft board, you can see which positions your rivals haven't filled and make educated guesses about their next picks. By tracking play selections, you can see which positions have the most quality players still available and also try to predict who will be selected before your turn comes again. Using this system on either end of the draft is risky, but it can help you when you're making key decisions before long waits. If you're drafting in the middle of the pack, this plan can be surprisingly effective in helping you to "steal" players that the other coaches want to draft.

Moving and shaking in the middle

The middle rounds in most leagues are Rounds 6 through 12. After the marquee players are taken in the early rounds, each team's draft position becomes less critical. Now, you need to focus on drafting the best available players who fit and will improve your team. You can still find good players available at the major skill positions, and you have plenty of choices at TE and team DEF, although only the top five at these latter positions should catch your eye in the middle rounds (and never the kickers!). The ideal middle-round picks address the holes in your team (empty starting-lineup slots).



If you find yourself caught between "need" and "value" in the middle rounds, though, always take the better player. Fantasy football is a marathon, not a sprint, and depth can make all the difference. Good players, not mediocre ones, win championships. You'll have time to fill in your lineup in the latter portions of the draft, and you can improve certain positions through free agency and trades during the season (see Chapter 11). Furthermore, who you drafted in the early rounds affects who you draft in the middle rounds. Being able to adapt your draft plan as different players become unavailable is vital to your draft-day success. Keep the following options in mind when drafting during the middle rounds.

Targeting value and avoiding risk

The best-available-player strategy should apply to most every fantasy coach at the middle stages of the draft, no matter which positions they've drafted in the early rounds. (Check out the "Drafting for best value: The best-available-player theory" section for specifics about this theory.) The question is, "Who should I draft in the middle rounds based on this theory?"



Stick to your (and the experts') player rankings and cheat sheets (see Chapter 4) and your gut feelings. After you get past the early run on RBs and WRs, drafting the best available player is the smart call — especially if you still need a QB. You can keep drafting the available players you like and value now, even if you have a few

players at one position. Many players who are still available in the middle rounds are consistent fantasy performers. They may not score 30 points in a game, but they won't lay a goose egg, either. Sometimes, getting just decent production out of your middle- and late-round players is enough to complement your studs and put wins on the board. The consistent, decent players are the ones you target.

A common draft-day mistake is to fill each spot in your starting lineup with each passing round. When you do this, you occasionally pass on taking value players of better *value* in favor of players who address a *need*. When other coaches are reaching for average TEs and DEFs to plug into their starting lineups, you can stack your bench at the more important skill positions (RB, WR, and QB).

For example, say that in Round 6 you still need a starting TE. So far, you have two starting RBs, two starting WRs, and one starting QB. Because you're going to wait to draft your starting K and team DEF (good call!), you check your TE cheat sheet and see that your fifth-ranked TE is still available. But wait, when you glance at your overall cheat sheet, you see that this TE is ranked 178th overall. The 45th-ranked overall player, a WR, is still available, too. You must decide if the fifth-ranked TE is so much better than the tenth-ranked TE. If he is, you might take a lower overall player just to be stronger at the TE position. If he isn't, draft the best available player, which is the WR, with confidence. The higher-ranked player is more likely to pay dividends for your team down the road.

Glutting your team with RBs and WRs

If you've done your pre-draft homework and ranked your players by position and overall (check out Chapters 4–7), you can use your middle-round picks to load up on RBs and WRs. Having good depth at these positions can help your team in case of injury, bye weeks, or slumping stud players. If you have three RBs already, go ahead and take more WRs, and vice versa. Stick with your cheat sheets when choosing the best available players, but don't be afraid to fill your bench with RBs or WRs even though you have open starting slots at K, TE, or DEF.



Even in a ten-team league, more than 30 RBs will get drafted. Just because you draft a couple stud RBs who you'll start every game doesn't mean you shouldn't plan ahead for injuries, bye weeks, and so on. Adding two more WRs to your team in the middle rounds is about the right amount.

Nabbing your QB ASAP

Take your starting QB during the middle rounds of your draft and a backup QB with plenty of upside in a late round. I always say somewhere in Rounds 6–8 is the ideal time to take a QB in a larger

league. You definitely need to fill this position in the middle rounds. You should still be able to take a QB in the top ten on your cheat sheets if you act now. If not, go for broke and take the high-risk/high-reward QBs (sleepers and rookies), not the journeymen veterans who are just trying to make it to retirement in one piece.

And the upside of waiting until now to take a QB? QBs at this point are usually better values than the elite QBs taken earlier in your draft. Many QBs in the NFL can score a lot of fantasy points in most weeks, and the depth at the position means you can wait until the middle rounds so you can build your team in other areas.



Bottom line: Don't look for QBs early or late. I suggest that you don't wait too much longer than Round 7 or 8 to nab your starting QB — especially if you see the other fantasy coaches plucking them off the board. You may find a decent QB somewhere in Rounds 10–15, but the risk is too high. You may be stuck offering trades, trolling the waiver wire, and playing the matchups game. Getting good, consistent fantasy production out of your QB is essential for winning games.

Picking a TE, but not a kicker

If you check the draft board and see a top-five TE still hanging around in Rounds 6–8, your patience has paid off and now he would be a great value pick. However, in many larger leagues, the best TEs are gone by the middle rounds. If that's the case in your league, don't panic. The remaining TEs are usually reliable, if not spectacular. Check your TE cheat sheets (see Chapter 4) and look at the draft board to see how many TEs have been taken. If many coaches still need a TE, you may see a run on them soon, so if a player you put near the top of your list is still hanging around, draft him right away. If five or more coaches already have starting TEs, you can afford to wait a bit longer because you'll be one of few in the TE market, and TE value at this stage is fairly equal (see Chapter 6 for more on scouting TEs).

As for the kicker position, stay true to your overall rankings and steer clear. If the top K is available now, and he should be, you'll be tempted to draft him. Don't do it! You can still find great Ks in the late rounds (see the "Finishing strong late" section for more).

Taking the top-ranked DEF

The top-scoring defenses vary from year to year, depending on many factors, but you can always identify an elite few that are more likely than not to be elite again. If you really want to get one of these monster units, be prepared to take a team DEF somewhere in Rounds 8–10. If you want the top-ranked DEF, you need to draft it in Round 6 or 7 just to be sure.

Elite team DEFs can be fantasy bonanzas, scoring double-digit points every week as they continue to dominate offenses. Therefore, they likely won't be available past Round 10. Most experts in the fantasy world advise you to wait to draft a team DEF. If you follow this advice, you can still do quite well because many defenses are strong fantasy performers, though you may have to count on two units. A top unit allows you to worry only about the team's bye week. The top-ranked defenses always are in demand, so don't wait too long, if you want one. (See Chapter 7 for more on scouting team DEFs.)

Finishing strong late

The late rounds of a fantasy draft (Rounds 13 through 17 or higher in larger drafts with more roster spots) present you with the opportunity to fill in any remaining holes on your roster, build depth at all the positions, and try to outwit your opponents. Here you can separate yourself from your league's pack by adding depth behind your starters for insurance purposes and by making sleeper picks.

The talent pool is a bit shallow at the end of a fantasy draft, so your draft position and league size don't make drafting any easier or harder now. The pointers in the following sections *can* help you make the best picks at this stage of the draft.

Filling needs

In the late stages of the draft, your main responsibility is to meet your league's starting lineup requirements. More than likely you still need a K and team DEF, and you may still need to fill other roster spots (if your league requires a set amount of players at each position). In the late rounds, you can use your cheat sheets, scouting information, and expert analysis to pick the best lineup fillers and backup players available. The filler picks certainly aren't the most exciting, but you want to carefully think through your options — the points at these positions could mean the difference between a playoff berth and a losing season.



When looking to fill your needs in the late rounds, keep the following pointers in mind:

- ✔ **Draft only one kicker (please, unless otherwise stipulated).** Kickers rarely get hurt and bench space is better spent on RBs and WRs because you need to start more of them. Most fantasy coaches carry only one K, which leaves plenty of options in the free agent pool during the season if your K gets off on the wrong foot. Check out Chapter 7 for more on scouting Ks.

- ✔ **Look for a pair of DEFs that work well together if you don't have an elite DEF.** Check your cheat sheets and rankings to find two DEFs whose teams don't play each other or share the same bye weeks. You can play both defenses based on matchups during the season because you don't have one elite DEF on which to rely. (Check out the "Drafting defensive units" section later in this chapter.)
- ✔ **If you don't yet have a TE, take two TEs late and hope that one exceeds expectations.** Like team DEFs, without an elite or very good TE you'll probably need to rotate players based on matchups. Generally, TE production is unreliable anyway, even with the great players.
- ✔ **If you have starting RBs who have good backups, go ahead and draft the backups as insurance.** This is known as fantasy *handcuffing*, and you can read all about it in Chapter 9. Excellent handcuff RBs may not last too late into the draft, so keep a close eye on your RB cheat sheets to see when they get near the top of the available list.
- ✔ **Draft low-risk/high-reward WRs.** With around three or four proven WRs on your roster already, the latter portion of the draft is the time to reach for the future stars. Don't waste your late picks on mediocre vets just to play it safe. Draft the third-year and rookie WRs you think will shock the world! This is when your cheat sheets can really pay off (see Chapter 4). If even one of your late picks breaks out, he can put your team into the fantasy playoffs.



Being able to draft a good set of WRs (four to six) without compromising your depth at RB or QB is what separates the contenders from the pretenders in fantasy football. Therefore, getting good value at WR in the middle and late rounds is one of the keys to success.

- ✔ **Try to balance your bench.** If your value picks led you to overload your team at RB, draft another WR or two, and vice versa. There's no need to go too deep at the other positions (two QBs, two TEs, one K, two DEFs).
- ✔ **Grab a high-risk/high-reward QB.** If you haven't taken a fantasy backup at QB, address this need late in the draft with a rookie or a sleeper (see the next section). If the player is a bust, you can probably pick up your QB1's NFL backup from the free agent pool. For more QB breakdown, check out Chapter 5.

Taking risks with sleeper picks

After Round 12 or so, you can start to look to make a sleeper pick or two. Sleeper picks can pay off, because they're low-risk and high-reward. *Sleeper picks* are rookies at the skill positions who

were college studs; backups to iffy or injury-prone starters; and other lesser-known players who you think may emerge during the season. (Check out Chapter 9, which discusses drafting rookies.) With these players, you build depth and take chances. At the least, a successful sleeper can be great trade bait (see Chapter 11).

By late in the draft, your core of talent should be complete, so you can look to take the stars of the future, regardless of their position. The more lottery tickets you buy, the more chances you have to win: Late-round fliers are a lot like that. Remember to buy a couple “tickets” before your draft is done.

Drafting defensive units

Fantasy team defenses are a lot like kickers in fantasy football: They *can* score plenty of points each week, but their unpredictable nature lowers their draft value. By doing your homework, you can pick up the necessary info to spot solid team DEFs late in your draft so you can use earlier picks on the positions that are harder to upgrade late in the season: QB, WR, and RB. And if the defenses you draft turn out to be busts, you’ll have plenty of options in the free agent pool (see Chapter 11).

You have some choices to make late in your draft when it comes to defense — assuming that you don’t spend a middle-round pick on an elite unit, in which case you can simply draft for depth very late if you choose. Here are two options:

- ✔ **Draft two good DEFs in the late rounds (Round 10 and later) based on your prepared rankings.** I recommend this strategy for most fantasy coaches — especially if you’re just starting to play fantasy football. With two good options at DEF, you have your choice each week of which to start based on matchup or past performance. Your strategy and your rankings will narrow down your choices every round, but you should also consider what the other players are doing and react accordingly.
- ✔ **Draft an average defense in the last round and then add/drop every week based on matchups.** Why rely on predictions or last season’s results when you can change your DEF each week based on what you know now? In many leagues, 10 to 15 team DEFs are available each week, and a few of those DEFs may be playing bad offensive teams. The add/drop approach is more time consuming, but it can pay dividends by allowing you to spend your draft picks on the more important positions — especially in smaller leagues.

Adjusting your tactics in a keeper league

A *keeper league* allows each coach to keep a certain amount of players from one season to the next. Therefore, you base a player's value on not only your predictions for the upcoming season, but also over the next few years. This format makes younger studs very valuable and makes rookies and other young sleepers hot commodities.

The standard fantasy draft strategy (build around RBs and WRs, wait on TEs, DEFs, and Ks, and so on) doesn't change, but your player rankings and cheat sheets must. Expect to use higher picks than usual to obtain the best young players with upside, even if they haven't yet reached their full potential. For example, in 2006, the media created a hype frenzy about Reggie Bush being the next great RB in the NFL. In my keeper league, his potential made him the fourth overall pick. In the HFL, my regular league, Bush was pick 18. Although Bush had a great season for a rookie RB, his fantasy totals indicate that both picks were a bit early. However, Bush has the potential to be even better in the coming years, making him a strong "keeper."

Adjusting your strategy based on the draft results

No matter how well you think you know football, fantasy football, or your coaching rivals, you'll always encounter surprises on fantasy draft day. All types of football drafts are unpredictable. In fantasy, the players you think will last may get snatched up early, and the players you think will be long gone may fall into your lap. All you can do is trust your instincts, go with the flow, and make any necessary adjustments along the way.

For example, say you plan to draft your team DEF in the last round because some guy you met at a bar told you he did that and won his league. In your draft, Team 12 takes the top-ranked DEF in Round 9 and follows up by taking the second-ranked DEF in Round 10. He types a message on the board in the chat room: "Monopoly!" His crazy play sets off a league-wide panic, and teams take three more DEFs in Round 10. In general, I don't recommend that you make a move based on a run of DEFs (or of any position), but in this situation, you probably can't afford to wait until Round 20 to take your first DEF if you want to stay competitive at that position. Check your cheat sheets and make a move if you get the chance when a good DEF is still on the board.

Manipulating Your Budget during an Auction Draft

Although most fantasy football leagues operate with snake drafts (the chapter up to this point discusses strategies for a snake

draft), the auction format is gaining acceptance and popularity in the fantasy football world. Why change what seemingly isn't broken? Because the auction format is considered a more equitable alternative. (Chapter 4 discusses the specific differences between the two types of drafts.)

In an *auction draft*, each coach has a budget, and you battle over players by bidding up their price; a draft lottery or the records of previous seasons don't determine your fates. You can acquire any player you choose — as long as the price is right, that is. This section covers the key tips you need to remember in an auction draft and discusses the widely accepted strategies of auction drafting.

Preparing for an auction draft

During an auction draft, you bid against the other coaches for the services of the player being auctioned. If you're the high bidder, you can pencil him into your roster and deduct the bid amount from your total budget. The auction continues until each coach has filled out his complete roster, depending on the league rules (some leagues revert to a snake draft to fill their bench in order to save time).

Although you can spend early or spend late on anyone you choose, you can still use the snake-draft strategies and round-by-round breakdowns I present earlier to guide you through an auction draft. Much of the snake-draft strategy is in chronological order — start with RBs early, move to WRs, and then take a QB in the middle rounds. Now, think of that advice as your auction *priorities* — RBs are your top priority, and you should spend more on them. Elite WRs are your second priority, and they have more draft value than elite QBs and will cost more. And so on. So, with your overall draft strategies in mind and your cheat sheets in hand (see Chapter 4), here are a few auction-specific guidelines worth remembering.

Use a league-customized auction value cheat sheet

A *league-customized auction value cheat sheet* (say that three times fast!) projects the average price you might expect to pay for each player based on his fantasy point projections under your league's scoring system (see Chapter 2). You never know when bidding will cause players to cost more or less than you expected, but value-based cheat sheets give you an idea of what you can expect to pay for players. Planning your budget and targeting the players you want — and how much you want to pay for them — is the key to a successful auction draft.



Most fantasy magazines provide cheat sheets for both snake and auction drafts. You can also find one of these cheat sheets at Rotowire (see Chapter 16) and at many other expert Web sites. Make sure you use the cheat sheets for an auction draft if your league uses an auction draft! If you use a snake-draft cheat sheet for an auction draft, you can overbid for a player and then be short on units when bidding the next time.



In order to keep accurate numbers that you can refer to during your auction draft, you can use auction software (sold by www.fantasyauctioneer.com, for instance) or a specialized Web site that offers a customizable cheat sheet (like Rotowire). Simply enter in your salary cap and the scoring rules of your league, and the software or site will compute a new cheat sheet for you!

Track your units

Units are just fantasy dollars. You have a starting budget, and you need to draft your team while sticking to it. Your auctioneer or league commissioner should track all the teams' budgets and prevent coaches from overbidding for players they can't afford. Of course, part of your strategy is to spend wisely, and you can't do that if you don't know how much money you have to spend, right?



To track your units manually, you can just write down your starting budget next to the number of players you need to draft. For example, 260 units divided by 17 players left to buy. With every purchase, cross out the old totals and write down the new ones. If your first player costs 35 units, then your new budget is 225 units divided by 16 players to buy. Knowing what you can spend and what other coaches have left to spend is very important in the later rounds as you bid on players and nominate them.

Stick to a plan and follow your player rankings

Straying from your draft plan is very easy to do during an auction draft. Sometimes, you want to wait for a good opportunity but you get impatient and buy a player who will only lead to regret. Perhaps a player's bid is much lower than you had anticipated, and you decide to place a bid just because the player is "cheap." Well, that player is usually cheap for a reason. As soon as you develop your master draft plan, do your best to stay the course.

A bidding war can blow your budget, and getting a player you never really wanted at a "bargain price" can be painful when he has a bad season, just like you feared. Your player rankings are the keys to staying grounded and focused during an auction draft. The values you (and the experts) set may be thrown off by some reckless spending by other teams, but if you stay true to your preparation, you can stick to who you think are the best players available (for more on draft prep, see the chapters of Part II).

Practice your bidding skills with mock auction drafts

If you're playing in a league with an auction draft for the first time, I suggest that you go online before draft day to participate in mock drafts for practice. A *mock draft* is a practice draft with other fantasy players; the results won't be saved for real league play.

(Chapter 4 has more info on what a mock draft can do for you.)

For the auction variety, you can get a sampling of what some other fantasy fans think of this year's players. Are they paying more or less than your cheat sheets suggest? Are you surprised?

A mock auction draft can be even more helpful than a mock snake draft because it gets you used to the fast and furious pace of bidding and gives you an indication of what values coaches are placing on players. Surf the fantasy sites and sign up for a mock draft or two (see Part IV for more research help).

Eyeing key auction strategies

You may think that auction drafting is fairly easy. You just spend your units on your players, and you aren't confined to taking what the snake draft gives you, right? Not so fast. Auction drafting actually can be more difficult because you have to consider each and every player and do it while balancing your budget to analyze value. The process may be difficult, but you don't have to enter an auction draft with a blindfold on. You can utilize some of the strategies in the following sections.



Whatever overall strategy you choose for your auction draft, stick to it. The auction atmosphere is hectic; you don't want to panic and change tactics a whim. Make a plan, and try to acquire as many of the players you want as possible within the parameters of that plan. I would rather see my fantasy team go 4–10 with the guys I really wanted than 7–7 with guys I drafted because I made mistakes during the auction. Even if you're only playing in an auction league, please read this whole chapter! The same logic about position importance applies to both formats (snake and auction). You need to focus on RBs, wait on Ks, and so on.

Acquiring a few expensive players and many cheap ones: The stars-and-scrubs strategy

The *stars-and-scrubs strategy* believes that elite players win fantasy championships, so you should spend what it takes to get the best and then fill in your roster with underrated players who are fantasy worthy at a bargain price — not with decent players at fair market value. The stud RBs and WRs are at the heart of this plan, but sometimes you can budget for an elite QB, TE, or DEF and still fill your roster under budget.

The chief complaint about snake drafting is that the teams with the top draft picks usually dominate, and if you're drafting late in the first round, you don't have a good chance to win. If you agree with this complaint and it brought you to the auction format, get the "stars" (the stud players) at all costs in your draft and figure out the rest of your team later.

Usually in an auction draft, 75 to 85 percent of your budget can net you two or three elite players worthy of first-round snake-draft status. If these players produce like you expect and just a few of your cheap players pay off, your team can win in this format. The pitfalls of the plan are obvious: How can you replace a 50-unit bust? If your expensive stars don't shine or they fall from the sky, you probably won't have top players at the other positions to make up for the loss in production. All your eggs are in a few baskets rather than nine.

The stars-and-scrubs strategy may sound radical, but remember: Coaches in a fantasy league will be drafting only a third of the NFL offensive players available. The NFL offers enough depth for this strategy to possibly work for you. Plus, you have all season to make waiver and free agent moves to adjust your roster around your superstars.



At the end of the draft, you can spend what little money you have left on sleepers. These *one-unit wonders* — named because you often can get them dirt cheap for just a unit — are unknown players who may become fantasy worthy during the season. Turn to your cheat sheets and grab those one-unit wonders to back up your expensive studs. Who knows, they may turn into fantasy gold!

Getting bang for your buck: The balanced-attack strategy

With the *balanced-attack strategy* in an auction league, you manage your risks. This strategy is like buying a mutual fund rather than investing in one stock fund. You don't put all your dough into one elite RB, for example; you pay the same price (or bid) to get two or three good RBs. What happens if one very expensive RB gets injured? The injury could end your fantasy chances this season! If you play the balanced-attack strategy, though, injuries won't hurt your team nearly as much.



If you decide to use this strategy, allocate most of your budget to RBs first and then WRs. You can always find good value at the other positions because of their available depth. If you consider spending half your budget on one player crazy, this strategy may work for you. The approach to this strategy is all about value at all positions. You let someone else bid high on the big name QBs and TEs and wait to take lesser-known players whose production should be about the same but at half the price. The success of this

plan depends on your research abilities because you won't be able to afford the more obvious studs. Do your homework and stick to your player rankings to build a well-balanced roster within your budget.

Waiting for value: The end-game strategy

Many auction players wait as long as possible to spend their money — known as the *end-game strategy*. They may miss out on the first 20 players up for bid, sacrificing their chance at the elite. But what they gain is control of the auction in the second half. Most of the coaches are itching to spend their allocated units, and not all of them do it wisely. Therefore, the coaches with the most units left can outbid the other coaches fairly easily for players. They can buy good value players for dirt cheap when the other coaches don't have the necessary funds to compete. They can monopolize every sleeper QB, rookie RB, and third-year breakout WR candidate that other coaches were hoping to get for a buck!



Just like the balanced-attack strategy, the end-game strategy requires good draft preparation. You'll be counting on many emerging and lesser-known players whom you must pick later in the draft. Positional priority remains the same, but because you decide to become the "fantasy bargain hunter," you better aim wisely. This is the most dangerous of fantasy games, clever bargain hunter! The best players are expensive for a reason, and the low-cost players aren't expected to produce many fantasy points. By saving units for the end-game, you're not playing the odds. The strategy can work, but I don't recommend it to most players — especially first-timers.

Chapter 9

Considering Other Draft Tactics to Build a Winning Team

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Focusing on personal objectivity during your draft
 - ▶ Using handcuffing to avoid injury devastation
 - ▶ Evaluating rookie talent from a fantasy perspective
 - ▶ Planning ahead for the fantasy playoffs during your draft
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Newbies don't have the experience to know about many of the draft strategies that fantasy veterans use to make tough decisions and to give their teams an edge come playoff time. Some of these draft strategies are just common sense — remaining objective and lowering your expectations for rookies, for instance — and can easily be overlooked. Others are more specific to the game of fantasy football — handcuffing players and planning for the fantasy playoffs — and are therefore foreign to new coaches. All these draft considerations are worth talking about.

You have to make many tough choices on draft day — especially in the later rounds when the studs are off the board — and you have to fill holes and stock your bench with players who may have to play big roles on your team this season. In this chapter, I cover these final rules worth remembering during your fantasy football draft.

Avoiding Personal Biases

Being a football fan is all about rooting for your favorite team. A true fan knows all the players' first names, wears their jerseys, and sometimes even names his or her kids after them. However,

fantasy football is different. It requires some objectivity and a love of all things football. The game puts you in control of your own team and lets you be a virtual coach; and just like any good boss, you don't want to get too personal.

You'll be surprised by how many fantasy coaches favor players in the draft or make in-season moves based on their favorite NFL teams. By strategically avoiding some of the pitfalls I list in this section, you'll give yourself a better shot at reaching your fantasy league's championship. Also, by recognizing when other coaches have fallen into these traps, you can take advantage of them to the benefit of your fantasy team.

Don't overdraft your favorite team's players

Becoming a good fantasy coach means learning about all 32 teams and their rosters. Many fantasy leagues have one guy who takes four or five players from the same NFL team every season. Please don't become that guy. If you do draft heavily from one team, and it has a bad stretch of offensive production, your fantasy team may be sunk. You can still be a fan of your team, but as a fantasy coach, you should support more teams and more players.

If you do root for one team, you probably know more about that team. Make sure you use your knowledge wisely. If a player suits your team *and* he's your hometown hero, grab him and enjoy the season.



If you take several players from your favorite team, you'll limit your fantasy team's scoring potential each week. For example, assume that five NFL players score three TDs each in Week 7. If your leading fantasy players play on five different teams, your fantasy team has a realistic chance to score 15 TDs that week. However, it's highly unlikely that several players from the same NFL team will score that many times.

Do consent to drafting players you dislike

Every fan has his or her least favorite NFL superstars. You may dislike a WR who celebrates too much in the end zone, or you may still resent the golden-boy QB who knocked your team out of the playoffs last year. However, you can't let your personal bias toward certain players affect the way you draft your fantasy team.

Old school versus new school: The fantasy debate

Some NFL experts (the “purists”) dislike fantasy football because they think the fans are rooting for their fantasy players to score more than for their favorite teams to win — even when they have fantasy players going against their favorite teams. What these experts fail to realize is that fantasy football owners root for both things — and the NFL (and even college) has become more popular because of it. In fact, according to CBS Sportsline expert Dave Richard, “Fantasy owners are still being loyal — just to THEIR players! When rooting for your favorite team, you don’t have any control whatsoever at winning the game, but you love your team and root for them nonetheless. Fantasy Football is played because people love football, but they also get a chance to ‘be the boss’ and have more control over winning.”



Sometimes, the best player available is a guy you can’t stand in real life, but don’t let your dislike for him affect your judgment. Making objective decisions based on objective cheat sheets is one of the hardest parts of fantasy football (check out Chapter 4 for more on how to use a cheat sheet). If a player has value in the round you’re drafting in and he fills a need, pick him up and put your fan-based grudges aside (see Chapter 8 for more on value- and need-based drafting).

Don’t live in the fantasy past

The more you play fantasy football, the more memories you collect of past fantasy heroes and villains. You fondly remember the guy whose TD records won you your fantasy league, and you recall with a wince the guy whose dropped passes cost you a chance at a title. When the draft rolls around, you can easily let an emotional attachment (or resentment) cloud your judgment, but you need to avoid this mistake.



Don’t let a past grudge or a man crush affect your draft strategy. If a certain player has value in a certain round, don’t pass on him just because of one fumble he made last season. Also, avoid reaching early for your favorite fantasy players from past fantasy teams. Make a draft plan and stick to it! (Chapters 4 and 8 help you to develop and execute a draft plan.)



I have to admit that I often try to draft the same guys each season and then rant about “team chemistry” on my league’s posting boards. It’s fun, but it makes no logical sense that a fantasy team would have chemistry.

Drafting Your Studs' Backups as Insurance Policies

In the NFL, every bench player is one injury away from an opportunity. But will that opportunity ever come? That's one question you can't really accurately predict. The fantasy formula that I present many times in this book says that skill plus opportunity equals success. Here are the real questions fantasy football coaches must ask:

- ✓ Is this backup to my stud worth drafting in case he becomes the starter?
- ✓ Does he have the skills to achieve fantasy stardom if the opportunity comes?

Drafting the players who back up your studs is an important consideration known as *handcuffing*. Smaller fantasy leagues (eight teams or fewer) feature more than enough quality starters in free agency, so you probably don't need to draft any NFL backups. In larger leagues (ten teams or more), however, many good backups with potential get drafted in the later rounds.

If the fate of your team really falls on your studs, *their* backups become more valuable to you. In this section, I break down handcuffing by position, and I also help you decide when handcuffs are worth pursuing.

Handcuffing strategy by position

Depending on the position, *handcuffing*, or drafting your studs' backups, is a great way to buy fantasy insurance without overpaying. Drafting at the skill positions (RB, WR, and QB) early is always smart, but taking too many players at one position will cripple you at the other positions. By taking the NFL backups to some of your fantasy starters in the late rounds, you'll give your team more starting options if one of your elite players can't play.

The following sections present the positional handcuffs that are worth drafting, in order of importance. Handcuffing isn't necessary for Ks and TEs, nor is it possible for a team DEF. Your backups for these positions should be on another NFL team, not *handcuffs*.

Running backs

Handcuffing mostly applies to running backs. The RB position is the most critical in fantasy football and the hardest to replace if your

early-round stud RBs get hurt. Therefore, the best way to replace them may be with their NFL backups. A running game is built on the offensive line and the balance of the offense, so a good running team still has a chance to rack up the yards if the starter goes down.



However, the backup is usually the backup for a reason; he often won't play as well as the fallen starter. However, he may play well enough to be fantasy worthy and start for your team, especially when compared to some free agent options in a larger league. Sometimes, a backup even outperforms the starter, and that's when you've struck fantasy gold.

A handcuffed backup more than likely will be available late in your draft, after you've built a well-rounded team. Handcuffing your stud RB may be a good option in the following circumstances:

- ✔ **Your stud RB plays in a run-oriented system and has great blocking from his offensive line.** If his backup is called to duty, the offensive system stays the same, so the backup will have a good chance to be productive. Underrated backup RBs who get called into duty on solid, productive offenses tend to be more reliable than starters on ineffective offenses, *and* you can draft them much later.
- ✔ **Your stud RB is an aging veteran backed up by a promising rookie.** Even if the vet doesn't get hurt, he could lose playing time or even his starting job to the kid. If you own the older guy, handcuff him to the new guy. Plan on taking the promising youngster a few rounds earlier than you normally would if you want to use him as a handcuff.



Not all backup RBs are worth handcuffing. Because your fantasy draft happens before the NFL season begins, some NFL team depth charts are still in flux. If a coach hasn't named a clear starting or backup RB, be careful about drafting any RBs from that team. You don't want to waste three or more roster slots on RBs from the same team while handcuffing.

Make sure you do your homework. Your pre-draft scouting (see Chapter 5) should give you an idea of which backup RBs could move up their teams' depth charts and become fantasy studs when their numbers are called.

Quarterbacks

Most fantasy football leagues feature plenty of depth at the QB position, diminishing the need for handcuffing. Also, most starting NFL QBs stay healthy and see the vast majority of snaps during a year, meaning their backups don't see the field very often.



In general, you want to draft two or three starting QBs from different NFL teams, and you don't need to worry about their backups. Most leagues have a few viable QB options on the waiver wire or in the free agent pool in case of disaster. However, you may want to consider handcuffing your QBs in the following situations:

- ✔ **You have a running QB who has a quality backup.** If your scrambling QB has a great backup, consider handcuffing the two QBs. Mobile QBs usually have a higher risk of injury, meaning the backup has a greater chance of playing and producing in an effective offense.
- ✔ **You have a veteran QB whose team is asking him to “mind the store” until his young backup is ready to start.** Many teams say they want their highly regarded (and drafted) young QBs to stand on the sidelines, watch the starters, and learn. Patience often wears thin, however, and the coaches decide to throw the next big thing into the fire earlier than planned. If you draft the veteran and his rookie backup has stud potential, go ahead and handcuff them. (Check out the section “Considering Rookies: Are the Top Rookies worth Drafting?” later in this chapter for more info.)

Wide receivers

Most of the fantasy-worthy WR1 and WR2 players will be drafted, so their handcuffs are really WR3 and WR4 players who aren't starting yet. Although many third and fourth WRs are fantasy worthy, I don't consider them good players to handcuff. I believe you're much better off handcuffing your stud RBs or QBs first. The following list explains why you probably don't need to handcuff your starting WRs to their NFL backups:

- ✔ WRs carry less injury risk than RBs or QBs, because they don't absorb as many hits or have to block in the trenches as often.
- ✔ If you draft a solid core of starting WRs, you'll have enough depth in case of injury.
- ✔ A WR usually takes more time to develop his skills and his chemistry with the QB (see Chapter 6 for more info). A backup WR may take a few games to find his groove after assuming the starting role, if he can find his groove at all.



The best WRs draw double coverage from defenses and open up the field for the rest of the WRs. When they go down, it creates a domino effect on the team's receiving core, which is another reason why a handcuff WR often isn't worth a valuable roster slot.



Poaching tales from the HFL

The key to my HFL victory in 2005 was poaching early, but you have to go back one year to truly understand the importance of handcuffing.

In 2004, Team Silverman drafted Priest Holmes, whose backup was Larry Johnson, with the second pick. Now, everyone knew the two RBs had to be handcuffed because of LJ's potential, but how long would he last in the draft? Team Doria drafted LJ in Round 14, one pick before Team Silverman was up. Later, Doria dropped LJ when Priest was dominating, and I claimed LJ off waivers (see Chapter 11). After Priest went down to injury, LJ stepped up, and he and Shaun Alexander carried my team, Cyber Tuna, to the title.

In 2005, Team Silverman once again drafted Priest Holmes, this time with the third pick. LJ was now proven, as was Holmes's injury history, which made Holmes a risky pick at No. 3. I had the second pick that year and took my old fantasy friend, Shaun Alexander. In Round 5, I poached LJ — again one pick before Silverman was up. This time, Silverman was mad, and his anger proved to be justified. Priest went down even earlier in 2005, and LJ and Alexander carried my team to victory once again. Ironically, I beat Team Silverman in the bowl game. That had to hurt.

Knowing which handcuffs are worth drafting

A fantasy handcuff's value depends on many factors you must research. In an auction draft (check out Chapter 4), you may have to overpay for handcuffs because another coach wants to start a bidding war, but you can usually secure them by tossing out the units. In a snake draft (see Chapter 4), it takes a little luck to get your handcuffs without drafting them too soon, because you never know if another coach values them more than you do and plans to draft them earlier.

The key? No matter what draft format you use, make sure you know which backups have value and which don't by creating and studying your cheat sheets (refer to Chapter 4 for more on cheat sheets).



Keep the following in mind when evaluating whether a backup is worth drafting:

- ✔ **When creating your cheat sheets, take note of the lower-ranked backup players who are worthy of being handcuffed.** Opportunities that make a player fantasy worthy come from his team and its system. Scout and pre-rank the backups, not just the starters (see Part II).

✓ **Keep close watch during your draft and select backups when they're the best players available.** When a backup is the highest rated player still available on your overall cheat sheet, it may be time to grab him. Don't reach for a handcuff early unless he's a high-profile, stud-in-waiting RB.

If a starting RB requires that you take his handcuff in the first ten rounds, you should consider drafting another starting RB whose backup is less expensive.



Your starters may not have backups worth drafting, but you can still “handcuff” to help your squad and even sabotage your opponents by drafting their handcuff players before they can! This is commonly known as *poaching*. Although it may not be very sporting, it happens and is perfectly fair. (See the nearby sidebar “Poaching tales from the HFL” for more on this topic.)

Considering Rookies: Are the Top Rookies Worth Drafting?

Are top rookies worth drafting? In a word, yes. The real question is *when* to draft a rookie in fantasy football. Any rookie pick is a high-risk/high-reward selection because no one knows what he'll do when faced with the intense competition of the NFL. Even if the rookie winds up being a good player, he may not be fantasy worthy in his first season.

With so much fantasy info online, finding a late-round steal becomes harder every season, but it's still possible. Drafting a rookie in the late rounds can really pay dividends. Most casual fans know the top-three rookie RBs and QBs, but that's about it. The college stars will get drafted, and usually too early. If you dig deeper, you can find some super sleeper values that could explode during the season.



Opportunity is key for rookies. Some rookies are named starters in the preseason, but most remain backups. If a rookie is guaranteed playing time, move him up on your cheat sheets. If not, it's anyone's guess whether he'll become fantasy gold. This section breaks down the rookies by position and in order of draft value.

Rookie running backs

Besides their fantasy dominance and the plague of RB scarcity in most fantasy leagues, I can give you some real-world reasons why

RBs are safer rookie bets than other positions. Check out the following list:

- ✔ **A RB's job isn't as complicated as a WR's or QB's.** The RB takes a handoff and runs. Because less thinking and more instinct are involved, young RBs tend to be successful — if they have skill and opportunity — despite the lack of experience.
- ✔ **Speed kills.** Coaches often give rookies a chance to study the veteran backs who work ahead of them. The fresh, strong legs of a young buck bursting out of the backfield can excite coaches and fans alike. These rookie backs can be boom or bust, but they'll see plenty of action.



When ranking rookie RBs, do plenty of research to get around the “hype” of the NFL draft. The upside of rookie RBs is too big to be ignored, but don't let it overwhelm you and talk you into taking a rookie RB over a proven stud. Your team shouldn't rely on a rookie RB; however, if the RBs you've ranked ahead of the rookie are already taken, don't be afraid to bet on the new kid on the block.



Ideally, I first look for a proven stud to anchor my RB unit and a proven starter to complement him. After I have two safe picks, I look to gamble on some lesser-known rookies who can take over in midseason and become dominant just in time for the fantasy playoffs. Admittedly, this strategy is conservative, and I've missed out on some great rookie RBs because they went off the board in the second or third round of my fantasy drafts.

Rookie wide receivers

Once every few years it seems, a rookie WR breaks out and has a big fantasy season. For example, in 1999, rookie Minnesota Vikings' Randy Moss had 52 catches, 1,313 yards, and 17 TDs. In 2003, rookie Arizona Cardinals' Anquan Boldin posted 101 catches, 1,377 yards, and 8 TDs. In 2006, rookie New Orleans Saints' Marques Colston went for 70 catches, 1,038 yards, and 7 TDs. This is the stuff of fantasy legend, because of the top-ten rookie WRs every year, only a few score enough fantasy points to be at all relevant.



I suggest that you stock your roster with three to four proven WRs first (depending on your league's starting lineup requirements). In the late rounds, consider taking one or two rookie WRs who have the potential to surprise everyone. If you decide to focus on proven WRs in the draft, watch the free agent pool closely in the

first three weeks of the season. Legendary rookie WRs typically break out very early in the season.

Rookie quarterbacks

Being able to read defenses, make good decisions, and avoid getting killed by blitzes as a quarterback takes experience and confidence at the NFL level. As a result, drafting a rookie QB as a fantasy starter (or even backup) may not be the best move. Many great QBs (like Troy Aikman and Brett Favre) got off to slow starts before developing into elite QBs. The exceptions to the rule (such as Dan Marino and Vince Young) are quite rare.

Consider the following when contemplating drafting a rookie quarterback:

- ✔ **Great numbers for a rookie QB usually aren't great for fantasy.** Because of the pressure placed on a rookie QB, his team may not have great expectations for him in year one. If he throws for 10 to 15 TDs, his team will be very satisfied, but that isn't fantasy-worthy production for you.
- ✔ **His team will probably run more.** The team thinks the QB has enough to worry about with defensive coordinators throwing everything they have at the QB, so they try to make the game very simple.
- ✔ **The type of offense the team runs is important.** If a team has a run-dominated offense, its rookie QB won't have opportunities to score many fantasy points. For example, rookie quarterback Ben Roethlisberger won a Super Bowl for the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2005, but he probably didn't win many fantasy crowns for his owners.
- ✔ **Rookies go through many normal growing pains when adapting to the NFL game.** Some rookie QBs may get the starting nod during the season and put up monster numbers on losing teams; however, with a lot of attempts comes a lot of mistakes. And when a fantasy QB makes mistakes, he may lose points for his owner, which really hurts his overall value — and his owner's win/loss record.



The big-name rookie QBs will get drafted in fantasy leagues, but they shouldn't be counted on as primary fantasy starters. You should consider rookie QBs as late-round sleeper picks; and if you take one, he should start the season on your bench behind one if not two proven fantasy QBs.

Rookie tight ends

Stud tight ends at any experience level are very rare and expensive in terms of draft value; however, although the chances of rookie TEs becoming fantasy worthy are slim, I think they're worth drafting.

The top-three TEs are usually gone in the first five rounds of a fantasy draft, and the drop-off in talent after that is huge. If you miss out early, you have about ten TEs whose mediocrity is well documented to choose from. The position calls for size, strength, and plenty of bravado (blocking 300-pound linemen and then catching passes over the middle isn't easy); therefore, confident college prospects have a chance to be good fantasy contributors.



Because many rookie TEs are available after Round 10, why not make a low-risk/high-reward pick at the position? The payoff could be huge if he turns out to be the next big player at TE. (Check out Chapter 6 for more info on scouting tight ends.)

Rookie kickers

A rookie kicker who had a stellar college career may be staring you in the face in the late rounds of your fantasy draft. However, you should temper your excitement about him, because you really don't know how he'll handle the pressure in a big NFL game with 75,000 screaming fans cheering him on (or booing him relentlessly).



Although a good rookie K who will receive plenty of opportunities may be fantasy worthy, I advise you to stay with the proven veterans when drafting a kicker late in your draft. Don't bother with a rookie kicker until he proves himself on the big stage.

Thinking Ahead to the Fantasy Playoffs

Making the right calls on draft day — the calls that will enable your team to win in the fantasy playoffs — before your fantasy season begins takes plenty of skill and a lot of luck, but it can be done. December certainly is a long way off, but don't let that stop you from planning ahead, because the decisions you make now will affect your chances in the fantasy playoffs. You need great players

to win in the regular season, but you also need your players to have great matchups in the weeks that make up the playoffs. What good is dominating your matchups in the regular season if you're just going to flame out late in the year? The other fantasy playoff teams will be filled with quality fantasy players, too, so the games will come down to which players have weaker opponents, the injury factor, and which NFL teams will be resting their starters for the real postseason.

Thinking ahead this far is an advanced strategy that requires a strong knowledge of the game and plenty of research. However, it's a way to get an edge on the more casual coaches in your league. This section gives a quick overview on how to draft a solid roster for both the regular season and the fantasy playoffs. (If you do make the playoffs, check out Chapter 12, which gives you some tips as you make your run to the championship game.)

Knowing what to look for

In order to find great matchups in the weeks of your fantasy playoffs (anywhere from around Week 10 to Week 17 of the NFL season), you have to break down the games on the NFL slate for those weeks. Every season, some teams get better and some get worse, but the best teams tend to remain competitive and the worst teams tend to flame out as the season progresses.

Through your years of watching football and/or through your draft preparation (see Chapter 4), you should start your playoff research by deciding on your own NFL power rankings. When you decide which teams you think will be good or bad, rate their late-season matchups for fantasy purposes. Consider the following factors for your fantasy players:

- ✔ **Who are they playing?** A bad team tends to be a good matchup for opposing fantasy studs. The winning team scores more real points, which usually equates to more fantasy points. You can break down the matchup even further by evaluating the team's defense (or offense, for team DEF purposes) versus the run and versus the pass. Now you can lean toward taking WRs or RBs based on the overall quality of the opponent *and* the ability of its defense against the ground game and the aerial attack. This sounds complicated, but many expert Web sites break down their strength of schedule rankings by the run and the pass. Check out Part IV for some great sites worth researching and Chapter 10 for more on the effect of the NFL schedule.



✓ **Where are they playing?** Most teams play better at home, which means their fantasy stars also play better at home. For instance, kickers and team defenses really tend to step up at home; the K knows the conditions well, and the DEF feeds off the crowd's support. When checking out the fantasy playoff matchups for your draft purposes, keep track of the players who will play at home more than once during those weeks.

Late in the season, weather can become more of a factor. An indoor team's offensive players are safer picks, and an outdoor team's defense often can capitalize on winter conditions. Also, as you know, home outdoor teams in the southern parts of the country enjoy moderate temperatures in the winter, which tends to help their offensive units. (See Chapter 10 for more on the topic of weather.)

Getting the edge: The how-to

So, how can you build for the present and the future and draft with your fantasy playoffs in the back of your mind? These steps can help:

1. Check your league settings and find out which NFL weeks are included in your fantasy playoffs.

Your playoffs could be anywhere from Week 10 to Week 17 of the NFL season. Most leagues have two or three weeks of playoffs during Weeks 14 to 16. Whatever the playoff weeks are, those are the dates that you need to circle in your mind (see Chapter 12 for more).

2. Review the NFL schedule and research some expert strength of schedule predictions.

When going over the strength of schedule, pay close attention to the matchups during your league's playoffs. The NFL changes a lot each year, but you may be surprised at how much it stays the same. In other words, you can predict good matchups at the end of the season and make tough draft decisions based on those matchups.

3. On a sticky note in your war room (see Chapter 4), make a list of the teams that have favorable matchups during your fantasy playoffs, and refer to the list during the draft.

You'll probably feel confident about only five or so of the matchups during those playoff weeks. When weighing all the pros and cons of each potential selection, check your



sticky note; if the playoff matchups are better for one player over another of equal value, go for that player.

Be careful not to draft too many players from one team just because they have a killer matchup in Week 16; you have to actually get to the playoffs first! A player's playoff matchups shouldn't be the main factor when pre-ranking your players, but they should be *a* factor.

Part III

Let the Games Begin: In-Season Strategy Guide

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"I may not see you for a long, long time, so remember-I want Larry Johnson for my RB, Randy Moss for my WR, and Peyton Manning for my QB."

In this part . . .

Most people consider draft day to be the most important day of the fantasy season, but I say how coaches manage their rosters during the season decides fantasy championships. Managing your starting lineup and your bench on a weekly basis as a fantasy coach is extremely important, so I devote Chapter 10 to the topic. You're in charge of your own destiny!

In Chapter 11, I explain the various methods at your disposal for adjusting your roster. Maybe you have to deal with injuries, or perhaps you want to upgrade your depth. Either way, your first option for improving your team is via free agency or waivers, but Chapter 11 also discusses the art of the deal: trading players. Brokering a good deal is perhaps the hardest task to master when you first begin to play fantasy football, so this chapter is a must read. Finally, Chapter 12 dissects the fantasy playoffs: how your league's tournament works and how you can prepare your team for the playoff run.

Chapter 10

Setting Your Weekly Starting Lineup

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Figuring out why weekly management is essential
 - ▶ Considering the weekly variables when setting your lineups
 - ▶ Knowing how to adjust your lineup
 - ▶ Researching your team; where to find key NFL analysis
-

Building your team through the draft (and taunting your adversaries for their picks) is just the beginning of your fantasy football season. After you do all the prep work and draft your team, your day job truly begins: You're responsible for making sure you have a complete, active lineup each and every week. Each week, you have to decide which players will start and which will sit. You also have to decide which players to pick up and which to release/trade (see Chapter 11 for more info on the how-to of player movement).

Your weekly coaching decisions will make or break your fantasy season. For instance, your starters in Week 1 won't all be starting for you in Week 16. Some players will get hurt and others simply won't get the job done; either way, you need to replace them. This chapter reviews how to replace players both out of necessity (injuries, bye weeks) and when you think you can improve your chances of winning by starting the players on your bench (favorable matchups, weather, and schedules) instead of the usual suspects. Finally, you see how to use the media to get the inside track on making the right lineup decisions and crushing your opponents.

Why Reviewing Your Roster Is Vital

The NFL landscape changes every week, and although many of your fantasy players will perform up to your expectations, others won't. Fantasy football is more than just occasionally checking on your roster and finding out how your team is performing here and there. If you want your team to do well and if you want to make the fantasy playoffs and earn some bragging rights, you need to manage your roster to make sure your team is successful. There is no autopilot to do the work for you, and if you don't set your lineup every week, your team crumbles (and you won't be invited back to the league next season!).

What does managing your team really entail? You look at your roster and decide which players you think will score the most fantasy points in the upcoming week. Then, you put your best players in the starting lineup and put the rest on your bench. Simple, right? Not exactly, because many variables can affect your lineup changes (see the next section).

Reasons Why You May Need to Adjust Your Lineup

As you manage your team on a weekly basis, you need to take into consideration everything that can potentially impact your lineup's potential. Everything from injuries to the weather can affect how the players on your roster produce. If you drafted well and your "plan" comes together, then you'll have capable backups on your fantasy bench when you encounter the situations in this section.

Sometimes your starters aren't available and sometimes they just stink. When you start one of your bench players in place of one of your weekly starters, and the bench guy has a big game, there is nothing more satisfying. Of course, when it backfires and your overcoaching costs you valuable fantasy points, it'll drive you nuts. Having to make the crucial "start 'em or sit 'em" decisions is all part of the fun of fantasy football.



If you want to improve your roster, you can try to do so in-between games via new player acquisitions. Chapter 11 has you covered there, while this chapter focuses mainly on handling the players you already own. If you follow my advice, you can give yourself an advantage over the average Joe who doesn't put in the time.

Checking the injury reports

The NFL teams issue official injury reports. The sports media relay these reports to the masses. You can use injury reports to decide which players to start and which players to sit. Unfortunately, these reports can be misleading, because NFL coaches don't want to give their opponents too much info.

If a player is done for the season, you can drop him and move on, but it isn't always that easy. There are minor and major types of injuries and each tends to come with an estimated time when the player will be back on the field. This section helps you identify what info to look for when making injury-based lineup decisions and where to find fantasy-based injury reports online.



As I say in the later section “Meeting Your Lineup Deadlines,” do your best to wait until your lineup deadline approaches so you can know for sure (or close to sure) whether your starters will play.

What to look for

When reading a team's injury report, or your own fantasy team's report, you may see several players listed. The severity of their injuries affects whether they're ready to play this week or not.

The following list presents the official injury classes you'll see on a report:

- ✔ **Probable (P):** The “P” rating usually is nothing to worry about. This player is hurt, but his team expects him to play, and you probably should, too. Football is a rough game, and everyone plays hurt, but check the report just before his game. A last-minute downgrade should make you think twice about starting a player.
- ✔ **Questionable (Q):** Unless the player is one of your studs, the “Q” should probably stay on your bench. The player's playing status is a game-time decision that often requires you to stay near a computer on game day to wait for a coach to announce if that player is active or inactive. Sometimes, fantasy coaches bench questionable players, only to watch them have big games. Such is life in questionable purgatory.
- ✔ **Doubtful (D):** When a player on your roster is doubtful, look for other options immediately. The player's injury is serious. A player with this designation rarely plays. Unless you have no other options, I would avoid starting a “D” player, even if he is upgraded and plays the game.

- ✔ **Out (O): This player won't play in the upcoming game; bench him.** Check the injury reports to see how long he is expected to be inactive. Move him to your injured list (if allowed by your league) or drop him entirely if he is going to be out for more than three weeks (unless he is a superstar and it is very early in the season).

Where to look

Injury reports from teams and coaches aren't always helpful, but sports reporting about injury reports can be. The beat writers who cover NFL teams for newspapers and Web sites sometimes discover more about injuries during the week than any other source, and fantasy experts can help you read between the lines when making your lineup decisions.

Before running down your options when filling the holes in your starting lineups, you have to make sure your studs really are hurt by doing some online research. Look to the following sources for useful injury information:

- ✔ **Start with your team page.** Most fantasy league providers have injury news hyperlinked to a player's name. Some sites even mark the player with a red or yellow flag to indicate the injury's severity. The injury updates on a fantasy Web site should include the official statement from the player's team and a fantasy spin given by one of the expert Web sites. Fantasy sites update these reports frequently, so try to check up on your guys at least once a day during the week.
- ✔ **Check the Internet resources.** The experts who write on the Web and report on television get their research from the local media, and you can, too, thanks to the Internet. By searching an NFL team's Web site, the Web sites of local and national newspapers, and the sites of major sports outlets, you can find unique insights that aren't always available on your fantasy league's pages.

Check out the "Hitting the Film Room: Using Media to Your Advantage" section later in this chapter for where you can find injury reports and other valuable info.

Replacing players on their bye weeks

From Week 3 until Week 10, the NFL gives each team one week off, also known as a *bye week*. The break helps players heal and coaches prepare, but in fantasy, the bye week is simply an annoyance.

When your studs take the week off, you have to adjust your lineup and fill the holes left by their absence. If you drafted well, you won't have two studs on your bench in the same week. That still doesn't ease the pain of putting the league's MVP on the bench for a game. No matter how well you prepared during your draft, you have to make critical managerial decisions on a weekly basis in order to deal with bye-week hell.



Think before making rash decisions when replacing your bye-week players and don't weaken your team for future games. Also, your bye-week replacements may outperform your weekly starters during certain weeks. Don't dump your draft picks at those positions based on single games. You drafted your starters for a reason, as well as your backups. Weigh all your options when setting your starting lineup and always keep in mind that the great players tend to bounce back from bad games. (Check out the "The How-To: Making the Actual Adjustments" section later in this chapter for actual replacement advice.)

Making the NFL matchups work

During the season, every team will have its share of seemingly soft opponents and tougher ones. As a fantasy coach, you want to start your guys against weaker foes in the hope that it will lead to more fantasy point scoring for your team. In your draft prep, you tried to predict which players had the most favorable schedules and pre-ranked them accordingly (see Part II), but now you can check the NFL schedule weekly and re-evaluate the games from a fantasy perspective in order to maximize the potential of your starting lineup.

For example, if you have a tough choice between starting two players in a given week, knowing which player has a better matchup may help you make the right call. This section has what you need to know about using the NFL schedule to your fantasy advantage.



Make sure you study the entire NFL schedule and grasp the complex levels of the league. For example, some divisions are tougher than others, and you may be able to spot good matchups for the better teams in weak divisions. The fantasy players who face weaker opposition are more likely to score big for their teams, and if that weaker opposition is in the same division, the fantasy players get to face those teams twice.

Exploiting the NFL schedule

When you follow the league every week, you see trends emerge that may force you to rethink what you had considered a team's "favorable" schedule. After only one game, you'll see unexpected

twists and turns around the league. Guys you've never heard of will score touchdowns, and some superstars will get shut out. Some no-name defenses will score a bunch of fantasy points, and the elite DEFs will struggle to keep opponents out of the end zone.



Always review the schedule and keep in mind which teams are playing well and which teams are struggling. Take action and make lineup adjustments based on the schedule. Be a football fan and know the league, and then apply your football IQ to the fantasy game. As the season unfolds, weak teams become evident, and strong teams separate themselves from the pack. For example, if one team shows a knack for passing, consider starting their offensive players. If they are playing great pass defense, consider benching your QB when he plays them.

Using division rivalries to your advantage

Because divisional opponents play each other twice a season, and because NFL rosters don't change dramatically every year, bitter rivalries develop — not only between the fans, but also between the players. NFL coaches who run divisional rivals also have a better understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses.



Because divisional teams play each other more often, you have more data to use when setting your weekly lineups. Look back at the previous games against that opponent this year and/or at the games from the years before. Use the “team page” on any sports Web site to access the sortable statistics of the past games between these arch-enemies. Look for answers to the following questions when reviewing the matchup:

- ✓ **Which team is home, and which team is away?** If you have a tough lineup decision, a player playing at home against a divisional rival may tip the scales in his favor.
- ✓ **Do the offenses play better at home or on the road?** Home teams tend to play better, but check.
- ✓ **Do any individual stats stand out, for better or worse?** If a slumping WR has had big games versus his rival in the past, go ahead and start him. If a QB is on a hot streak, but, historically, he struggles at his rival's stadium, you may want to sit him.

Starting players based on recent history

Often, as NFL teams go on winning or losing streaks, their players become either hot or cold. You need to know as much about the schedule and the past performances of your fantasy players as possible. Your team page (see Part IV and the chapter about your league provider, if applicable) can show their fantasy scores for each week, but researching *how* and *why* they scored those points

(or didn't) will separate you from the rest of the coaches in your league.



The trick is guessing when those streaks will end or continue. Do some research and ask yourself these types of questions about each player on your squad:

- ✔ **Was he playing quality defenses? How's this week's opposing defense?** If the player was putting up points against good defenses, you can be confident that he'll continue his production. If he was picking on poor defenses and faces a stout one this week, you may want to think twice.
- ✔ **Was he the only healthy player at his position on his team? Is he still?** If he was subbing for an injured star, his stats may go down after the injured star comes back. But ride him as long as you can!
- ✔ **Is he on a good offense, or were his numbers a fluke?** Your league knowledge should tell you the answer, but you can also check the team's recent passing stats online.

Taking managerial advice from Mother Nature

Because football games are played in all conditions (outside of domes), weather becomes a factor when you're adjusting your roster. Fantasy football scoring depends largely on offense, and bad weather can slow an offense (though that helps your defensive unit).

In general, bad weather is better for defenses, because it leads to a lower scoring game. If bad weather becomes an issue, you may need to adjust your starting lineup if you have quality backups to replace your starters who are "out in the cold." You shouldn't bench your studs in anything less than extreme conditions, but if you're torn between two average players, you may want to bench the player who's playing in poor conditions.



Keep a close eye on the forecast. Most sports Web sites include weather reports on their game pages, along with other team info. You also can watch pre-game shows on television. (For more on media outlets, see the final section of this chapter.)

The following sections talk about some different types of playing conditions and how they affect the various positions in fantasy football. Weather should never be the only reason you bench a player, but Mother Nature must be given her due.

In a dome: Good for everyone?

A domed stadium offers a controlled environment. That means for eight games, or half of the home team's schedule, their players get to play without the threat of inclement weather. What does this mean to you? When managing your team weekly, you know sudden weather changes won't bog down your fantasy studs if they're playing inside and that the fast track (not grass or mud) may actually help their offensive production. On the flip side, the conditions that improve offense may hurt the team DEF playing in them. When evaluating the weekly matchups, always check to see if the game is under one roof, but don't overplay your hand.

Of all the positions, no one benefits more from a dome than the kicker. Heavy winds are a kicker's worst nightmare, so the friendly confines of a dome can give fantasy coaches confidence in their kickers. A dome doesn't have any frozen footballs and kickers know that the turf is good and consistent.

Warm-weather teams: Good for offense?

Warm-weather cities have moderate climates, which provide ideal conditions, for most of the football season. If the temperature stays in the 50- to 70-degree range, the playing field is neutral, and weather isn't a factor. But if that heat kicks in, watch out. A football field can become a frying pan, especially in September. If it's 90 degrees and sunny in Tampa Bay, the on-field temperature may be well over 100 degrees!

In hot conditions, all the players will be sweating in their pads, but the offensive players have an advantage. The RBs and WRs know where they're running and what plays the coaches are calling. The defenders, on the other hand, have to chase the offense down and cover the whole field on every play. In general, defense is considered more exhausting than offense, and in hot weather, the disadvantage increases, which can lead to more fantasy points for you and your offensive studs.



If you have tough weekly decisions to make on offense, you may want to opt for the warm-weather players. And on defense, you may want to go for a more unsavory environment. Kickers rarely sweat, so the heat isn't an issue, but QBs, RBs, and WRs may benefit from an overheated team DEF.

Cold-weather teams: Good for defense?

Heat favors the offense, and cold favors the defense, for many reasons (other than universal balance). A cold ball can become harder to grip and catch, which leads to fewer completions and more fumbles.

QBs, WRs, and TEs may be slowed by icy conditions, but RBs tend to get more carries and should be started as you would normally. Some veteran Ks have played for outdoor teams for years and have learned to overcome the elements. If your kicker has bad weather experience, go ahead and start him unless it really is a blizzard.



Many cold-weather teams play in low-scoring games from November to January, which means their fantasy DEFs may be worth starting, even if they're on losing teams. Meanwhile, if a dome team is on the road in bad weather, avoid starting their average fantasy players and their team DEF, in most cases.

The How-To: Making the Actual Adjustments

In Week 1, I don't like to second-guess myself. I usually just play the guys I drafted as my starting lineup and see what happens. After I have seen some games and studied some stats, then I begin to second-guess myself. Fantasy coaching is all about putting the best possible lineup in the game every week, and that is going to mean making changes because I think I can do better.

So how do you know when to make lineup changes? Before resorting to finding new players (Chapter 11), you should evaluate your bench players and your starters and decide if they need to trade places in order to help you win your game. This section addresses when to bench your studs and start your scrubs, and how you should replace players on your roster by position. Time to roll up your sleeves and get to work, coach!

When to bench your studs

You never want to bench your elite players. They'll have some bad matchups during the season, but great players rise to the occasion. That's why you drafted them, after all. Do you really want to second-guess yourself because your best player torched that supposedly "tough" defense after you benched him? No. In order to win in fantasy football, your top performers have to perform. Benching them rarely pays off and isn't worth the smack talk from your league when they have great games on your bench. Besides, choosing the right average players to start is hard enough.



However, you may be forced to bench a stud player in the following circumstances:

- ✔ **He's playing hurt or returning from the injured list.** If a stud player is listed as questionable or doubtful on your team's Web page, and you have a decent replacement for him on your bench, you may want to bench him. Often, when a player comes back from an injury, he isn't in game-shape, and he may not get enough looks or touches to be fantasy worthy.
- ✔ **You must bench one stud for another.** In smaller leagues, owners may have three or four studs at one position, which is a nice luxury. Of course, the luxury forces you to make tough choices and bench studs every week.
- ✔ **He's got nothing to play for that week.** At the end of the season, coaches rest their studs if their playoff position is already decided. Check the NFL standings because if your guy isn't going to play, you need to bench him.
- ✔ **He stinks on ice.** Yes, studs can go bust. You have to be patient with him, but after a few bad games, you may need to pull the plug and bench him.

When to start your scrubs

A fantasy *scrub* isn't a bad NFL player; he's just a questionable choice for a fantasy lineup. Usually, owners draft these guys because they have some fantasy potential. And if that potential eventually turns into production on your bench, it may be time to start them over any underachieving studs or vets you may have.



Trying to decide whom to start between marginal players is one of the toughest parts of fantasy football. Here are the tell-tale signs that may tip the scales for you:

- ✔ **Hot streaks:** One good game may not be enough to promote a bench player, but two or three good games in a row certainly are. Use your team page to review his recent history, and if he's on fire, consider starting him ahead of your usual play.
- ✔ **Good matchups:** Know your NFL teams, and if you see a no-brainer advantage on the schedule for your bench player, it may be time to put him into the starting lineup.
- ✔ **Opportunities created by injury:** Just like in the NFL, injuries may force you to start fantasy players from your bench. If your draft went well, your bench players may not be so scrubby.
- ✔ **A successful or improving offense:** If an NFL team is starting to win and score more points, then your scrub may benefit from that and become a fantasy-worthy starter. Stay on top of team news and scores from around the league.



Always try to stay with your bona-fide playmakers, but don't be afraid to play matchups and hot streaks with the rest of your players. Being proactive is more fun and more satisfying, and when one of your "darts" hits the bull's-eye, you can let all the other owners know about it!

Replacing RBs, WRs, and QBs

When replacing your QBs, RBs, and WRs due to a bye week (or an injury, weather, or other situation), you have a few options in order to give your team the best chance to win that week and in the weeks ahead. Your goal is to win the league, not just a regular season game in Week 3. If you can change your starting lineup without changing your roster, great. If you need to drop a player and make a roster move to replace a player, always make sure to drop the player you think is the least likely to help your fantasy team.

The big three positions in fantasy are RB, WR, and QB, so here are things to keep in mind when replacing your all-important starters, in order of preference:

- ✔ **Turn to your bench.** Because RBs, WRs, and QBs are the most important fantasy positions, your depth chart should include viable backup options. If you have good depth, you can just bench the starter who has the bye week and start your backup.
- ✔ **Look at the free agent pool.** If your starting lineup and your bench are looking shaky, consider the free agent pool. Use your scouting and research knowledge when deciding between the free agents. (Refer to Chapters 5 and 6 for scouting RBs, QBs, and WRs, and check out Chapter 11 for info on free agency.)
- ✔ **Make a trade.** Trading with other owners is never easy, but it sometimes is necessary, especially at the three most important positions in fantasy football. However, one bye-week problem isn't a good reason to break up your team! If you can make a good deal that helps you in the present and the future, do it; just don't get fleeced by another owner who recognizes your roster conundrum. (See Chapter 11 for more advice on making trades.)



It's never too early to address depth issues at QB, RB, and WR, so if you get the feeling early on that your bench won't get the job done (if called upon), search your league for emerging talent every week of the season. Fishing the free agent pool and trading with other owners can address your depth issues, but never let one bye-week or a minor injury cloud your judgment. You'd rather be weaker for one game than be weak for the rest of the season.

Replacing TEs, Ks, and DEFs

You have the same three options of replacing TEs, Ks, and team DEFs as you do for replacing QBs, RBs, and WRs. However, these positions aren't as important to your team, so you have different considerations.



When replacing a TE, K, or DEF, don't weaken your roster or make another team stronger based on one week. By looking at who's hot, finding good matchups, and spotting favorable playing conditions, you can start your backups or pick up decent free agents, even in the deepest of leagues. Unless you have an elite TE, K, or DEF, performance at these positions is more the result of matchups than anything else. Never weaken the core of your team (QB, RB, and WR) by making a hasty roster move just to fill a need at the lesser positions.

Keep the following considerations in mind when replacing a TE, K, or DEF:

- ✓ **Turn to your bench.** If you weighted your draft toward RBs and WRs (as you should have; check out Chapters 4 and 8), you probably won't have backups at all three positions. If you do have a backup TE, K, or DEF, check out their matchups and their recent performances. If your backup has potential that week, start him.
- ✓ **Look at the free agent pool.** If your backup doesn't look like a good start that week, don't hesitate to drop him for an available player you think will be better. The TE, K, and DEF positions are the easiest to replace via free agency. (Check out Chapter 11.) **Remember:** Choosing a player or defense on a hot streak is a good idea, but finding good production from undrafted players at these positions is mostly about the matchup that week.
- ✓ **Make a trade.** Be careful here when looking to deal to improve your team at these less valuable fantasy positions. Only trade if you can make a deal that will permanently improve your team at K, TE, or DEF *and* not weaken your core (RBs, QBs, and WRs).

Meeting Your Lineup Deadlines

After six days of heartburn and hand wringing, you finally get the sweet relief of selecting your starting lineup for your fantasy football

team. For me, the time before Sunday is a stress-filled week, because I'm obsessed with the game. For some fantasy coaches, setting the lineup is a pain-free five minutes, with only a few mouse clicks and very little thought. (Toward the end of the season, the NFL moves games around for more television exposure, and Thursday Night Football begins on NFL Network. Be sure you know about any special game times in advance.)



You need to know your league's lineup deadline and try to make your decisions as close to game time as possible. By procrastinating, you can factor in all the injuries and playing conditions that will affect your fantasy team. All fantasy leagues have a cutoff time for making roster changes during the week. The deadline can freeze your lineup as soon as a day or two before the first game, or go as late as right up until kickoff. If you're the commissioner of your league, let the other owners know about your league's policy. If you're a regular owner, make sure the commissioner makes the rules clear.

Many leagues allow owners to activate or deactivate individual players until their games start. For example, say you have five starters playing at 1 p.m. EST, two at 4:15 p.m. EST, and one on Monday night. When the 1 p.m. games begin, those five players become locked into your lineup. You can still adjust the players in the late games — assuming you have bench players who also play the later games. Some leagues even allow owners to add/drop from the free agent pool on game day (see Chapter 11 for more on free agency).



If your league's rules state that owners must set rosters more than one hour before kickoff, talk to your commissioner about adjusting them. Every week, NFL coaches make game-time decisions about starting or benching injured players (see the "Checking the injury reports" section earlier in this chapter for more info). Because coaches don't announce their inactive lists until one hour before their games, having a far-out deadline poses a problem for fantasy coaches. Unfortunately, many close fantasy games are decided by surprise inactive players.



Make sure you know what time all your players are playing that week, and check the Web before kickoff to make sure that all your starters are active. The next section is a preamble to the research guide (Part IV) and covers the media outlets you need to check out to get the info you need when deciding which players to sit and which players to start.

Hitting the Film Room: Using Media to Your Advantage

Between games, NFL players and coaches split time between the practice field and the film room. They study their upcoming opponents, looking for weaknesses to exploit. In fantasy football, you don't need to break a sweat doing push-ups, but you can watch the NFL games and make plans for the future, just like the pros. After all, in the previous sections of this chapter, I advise you to pay attention to games played so you can spot trends, hot streaks, weaknesses, and so on. Hey, you can even try to give the "research" excuse when your spouse, roommates, or friends try to get you to turn the channel.

Fantasy football is a natural extension of watching football, so I assume you've already logged plenty of hours in the couch-potato position on Sundays. However, getting expert analyses of the previous and the upcoming games during the week is just as important in fantasy football as watching the games. This section also suggests some good sources of inside info that can help you manage your team week to week.

Watching the games on television

When you watch a game on television, you understand why certain players are scoring and why others can't even get first downs. I'm amazed at how many fantasy players watch very little football. The post-game shows may focus on the TDs, and stat trackers may run down all the points, but they don't care about the plays that led to the TDs — plays that may shape your opinion of your RBs, WRs, QB, and so on.

**TIP**

Many football fans watch their favorite teams and know their players inside and out, but that's all. However, in order to be a great fantasy coach, you need to know all the teams and important players. In order to do so, during the season, most fantasy owners try to check out an average of eight teams a week: two in the early Sunday game, two in the late Sunday game, two in the Sunday night game, and two in the Monday night game, for example. Later in the season, you have even more opportunities with games on Thursdays and Saturdays.

**REMEMBER**

To manage your team (lineup changes, trades, adding/dropping players, and so on), knowing why a player had a bad or good week is important — especially when planning for the next week. I

suggest you check out the following sources to watch games and to catch all the info and analysis that you need:

✔ **DirecTV Sunday Ticket:** Also known as the “divorce maker,” satellite provider DirecTV (DTV) has an exclusive deal with the NFL to broadcast every early and late game on Sundays (except your local teams). The package, called “Sunday Ticket,” is awesome for football fanatics. You can watch any game you want, and you can flip between games during commercials! Because fantasy football involves players from all the teams, every game becomes more exciting when watching your fantasy players.

If you’re serious about fantasy football and football in general, consider getting DTV and the football package. Its many features make playing fantasy football more fun. It also makes you a better coach, because you see more plays and players. Why read about games online when you can watch for yourself and use that knowledge to make next week’s critical lineup decisions. To order DirecTV, contact them at www.directv.com or 800-DIRECTV.

✔ **NFL Network:** This network offers “Football 24/7.” You can watch original news and information shows, weekly game preview shows, coaches’ shows, press conferences, fantasy football shows, memorable game replays, and preseason games. I can’t tell you how much time I’ve spent tuned into this channel. The Network has a variety of shows.

Beginning in 2006, the NFL network began carrying Thursday night and Saturday night games after Thanksgiving. More football! What a great holiday gift. Unfortunately, NFL Network is only available on DirecTV (as of this printing), so if you have cable, call them and complain! Every fan needs to see the “Cheerleader Playoffs” show, right? Casie, call me!

✔ **ESPN:** I love ESPN, even though the network has to cover all sports. The godfather of sports networks, ESPN still has plenty of football coverage during the year, including everything from Monday Night Football to NFL Primetime to NFL Live.

Turning to the printed word

In addition to the preseason fantasy magazines you can find on newsstands, the major sports magazines are starting to devote plenty of pages to the world of fantasy football. A good coach is an informed coach, and now that some of the best writers in pro football are turning their attention to fantasy forecasting, you can take advantage of their experience by reading their articles every week.

For instance, *Sports Illustrated*, *Pro Football Weekly*, and *The Sporting News* are weekly magazines that have fantasy features and contain expert advice. *ESPN: The Magazine* has great fantasy articles, but it's published bi-weekly, which hurts its fantasy value.



Many of us grew up reading our local sports pages to glean the insights of our local sports reporters. Newspapers keep you informed about your local team and national issues, but they rarely provide the fantasy focus that you can find in the magazines or online.

Surfing the Net

The major sports Web sites, like ESPN, CNN SI, and CBS Sportsline, offer extensive coverage of the NFL. These pages include injury reports, insider articles, and matchup analyses — features that help you manage your roster. Nowadays, the major sports sites also have pages dedicated to fantasy sports, so finding player and team updates is easier than ever. For more information, check out the chapters in Part IV.

Chapter 11

Acquiring Players via Free Agency, Waivers, and Trades

In This Chapter

- ▶ Dipping your toes into the free agency pool
 - ▶ Picking up discarded players from waivers
 - ▶ Analyzing the art of the trade
 - ▶ Making trade offers that benefit your team and your league
-

After your fantasy draft, your roster is full of NFL players, but your work isn't done. During the season, you don't just play with the cards you were dealt; you have to "shuffle the deck" by making player moves. You have some bad bye-week issues? Make a player move. Having a run of bad luck with injuries? Make a player move. A player isn't getting the job done and you want to replace him? Make a player move.

This chapter reviews the basic process of player movement and exposes you to the worlds of free agency, the waiver wire, and trades. Signing free agents and waiver players is fairly straightforward, but trading requires more strategy, so I give the topic plenty of coverage.



Managing your roster is the "heavy lifting" of fantasy football. When the season has begun, you should already know how to scout the league and find talent (see the chapters of Part II for more on scouting); the same skills apply during the season.

Investigating Free Agency

Free agency in fantasy football is less complicated than free agency (FA) in the NFL. Lucky for you, you don't need an agent, a lawyer, or

a ton of salary cap room to make a deal (although in auction leagues, you do have a fixed budget to spend on players). In fantasy, any players who don't get drafted become *free agents* — players available to any team in the league that's willing to drop an owned player. (Just imagine all the undrafted players sitting around the free agent pool drinking cocktails and soaking in the rays.)

When someone on your fantasy team gets injured or doesn't produce up to expectations, you can replace him with a player from the free agent pool. The player whom you drop because of your new acquisition becomes a free agent or is placed on *waivers* for a brief period before becoming a free agent. During the waiver period, the rest of the league can make a claim for his services to find out who gets the right to add him. (Check out the "Walking the Waiver Wire" section later in this chapter for more info.)



This section looks at a couple different free agency scenarios and how your league rules can affect how teams acquire free agents. Before you try to pick up any free agents, make sure you review your league's rules, and contact your commissioner if you have any questions. Throughout this chapter, I continue to use Yahoo!'s default league rules as a benchmark (see Chapter 13).

Open access: Diving into the free agent pool

In most leagues with the head-to-head format and a snake draft, each undrafted fantasy player becomes a free agent at the start of the NFL season and is up for grabs. This system is an *open-access* free agent system. By following the NFL games and reading the fantasy reports that come out during the week through various media outlets, you can identify players who can upgrade your bench or plug holes in your starting lineup.

So, how do you actually "sign" new free agents to your fantasy team? It's as simple as a point and click. To acquire a free agent in a league with an open-access policy, follow these steps:

1. Browse the list of available players in your league.

The list, which you can access from your team page or your league page (see Part IV), is sortable by position and recent stats. You can find a hot player at a needed position or just search for the free agent who scored the most fantasy points the previous week.

2. Click on the free agent you want to add.

When you find your man, you can just click on his name, which should be a link, and head to the add/drop page.

3. Select the player on your roster you want to drop — if necessary.

If you don't have an empty slot on your roster for an acquisition, you need to drop a player to make room for the free agent. Just select the box next to the player or click his name to make your choice. Choose wisely when making your drop!

4. Click the add/drop button to finalize the move.

Your league provider probably opens a summary page where you must confirm your free agent add/drop. After you approve the deal, the free agent becomes part of your roster, and your dropped player goes on waivers, if applicable (see the "Walking the Waiver Wire" section).

Say a starting RB gets seriously injured during a game and his backup is still a free agent. If the backup plays well, the race for his services is on. The first coach who logs into the FA list can pick up the backup and drop any player who isn't as valuable.

Restricted free agent access: No diving allowed

Because the standard free agent system is based on a "first come, first served" format, it can be especially frustrating. Only a fantasy player who happens to be near his or her computer when an injury or outstanding performance occurs can claim the coveted player. The other fantasy coaches who may not be near their computers during the game are out of luck.

To circumvent this situation, many serious fantasy leagues create some kind of restriction on free agent movement during the NFL games. For example, a league may close the free agent pool before the first NFL game of the week kicks off and then reopen it on Tuesday morning. This system has its downside as well, though. It becomes a race to click on coveted players on Tuesday morning.



Before you attempt to make any free agency moves, check your league settings and talk to your commissioner. Your league may restrict access to the free agent pool. It may use only waiver claims for player movement (see the following section). Or perhaps you have a limited number of free agent moves you can make during the season to put a premium on the free agent pool and prevent overactive owners from hogging all the players.

Considering the FAAB system: Advanced player movement controls

The Free Agent Acquisition Budget (FAAB) system is an advanced method of regulating player movement. The system gives every coach an equal chance to add good free agents during the season. In a nutshell, the league gives each coach a set amount of units to spend on signing available players (usually 100 units). After the week's NFL games conclude, coaches can submit blind bids to the league office or commissioner for available free agents. A bid must include an amount for a player and the name of an owned player to be dropped if the bid wins. Before the next week's games begin, the league or commish awards players to the highest bidders and deducts their bid amounts from their FAABs.

The end result is the same as the standard free agent/waiver system, but the FAAB system requires a lot more time and consideration. Because it's a bidding format, the FAAB system is most commonly used in leagues that hold an auction draft. However, because the system eliminates a lot of the randomness of free agent pickups and waiver priorities, it's growing in popularity in fantasy football leagues.

Walking the Waiver Wire

In a Yahoo! league, if a team drops a player from its roster for whatever reason — injury, poor performance, and so on — that player is placed on *walters* for a set amount of time and goes on the waiver wire. The waiver period often is one to three days. Each week, fantasy coaches have the opportunity to submit waiver claims for the coveted players on the wire. If your team has the highest waiver claim priority, congratulations! You have a new roster member, and you lose the player you designated to drop. If not, you keep the player on your roster and move on tearfully. If a player receives no attention during his waiver period, he becomes a free agent. Some leagues have only the waiver wire and no free agent pool. Be sure to check your league settings to make sure.

Taking advantage of waived players can give your team the extra boost it needs. This section explains how to use the waiver wire and helps you utilize waiver players to your advantage.

How to use the waiver wire

Freeing a player from his waiver prison and placing him on your roster is a simple process. If you want to acquire a player who

currently sits on waivers, you need to submit a waiver claim on the player and then wait for the results.

Follow these steps if you want to use the waiver system to improve your roster:

1. Regularly check your league's transactions list for recently dropped players.

You'll be surprised by how many fantasy coaches dump good players after one bad week. Fantasy football success hinges on making good decisions and capitalizing on your opponents' bad decisions.

2. Determine whether you want to acquire a player on waivers.

Examine your needs and see if the player is a good fit for your squad. Part II tells you what to look for when scouting player potential, and Part IV tells you where to look for the inside scoop.

3. If you want to sign the player, submit a waiver claim on him within the waiver window.

The Yahoo! default waiver period is two days. You can use that time to research the player (see the previous step). A waiver claim works like a free agent add/drop (see previous section); you simply select the player you want to add and click on the player on your roster that you want to drop.

4. When the waiver window expires, the claim with the highest waiver priority wins the coveted player; he's added to the team's roster, and the site drops the designated owned player onto the waiver wire.

You can find your waiver priority on your team page on your league provider's site. In many leagues, the *waiver priority* is based on the reverse order of the draft. The team that picked last in Round 1 starts the season with the top waiver priority. You need to know your waiver priority so you know if you have a good chance of landing a player. If you have a low priority that week and you think the player will be popular, you may not want to wait two days to make other moves.

Different leagues and league providers configure their waiver systems differently. Waiver periods, number of claims allowed, and waiver priority all have a number of options on most sites. Always check your league settings before the season begins.



5. After a coach uses his priority to claim a player, his team's priority cycles down to the bottom of the list, and every other team moves up a slot.

If you don't win the player, your roster remains the same and you move up one slot on the waiver priority list. If no claim is made on a player, he becomes a free agent and is available for pickup at any time. (Check out the "Investigating Free Agency" section earlier in this chapter.)

A high waiver priority is important and shouldn't be used lightly! You never know when a good player will land on waivers; a higher priority could mean the difference between getting him and fawning over him.



After years of mad dashes to the computer during NFL games to add/drop free agents, the teams in my league, the HFL, decided to switch to a waiver system during the weekends. At the start of the first NFL game, our site waives all available free agents and decides on waiver claims at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday morning. After the waiver period ends, free agency resumes and coaches are free to make add/drops up until the next kickoff. Why go this route? Every coach has time to evaluate his needs and has a shot at each available player, and we avoid the "first come, first served" free-for-all. Also, if I miss out on a player I want one week, my chances improve the next week thanks to my improved waiver priority. The system is fair and it makes sense.

Using your waiver moves wisely

If a good, potentially productive player winds up on waivers because his coach wasn't satisfied with his play, you won't be the only coach in your league to notice. Who gets the player all comes down to waiver priority, so you need to use your waiver priority wisely, especially if you have a high priority early in the season.

In order to use your waiver moves wisely, remember the following tips:

- ✔ **Know your waiver priority.** Knowing where you stand can help you plan your weekly moves and gauge your chance at signing a valuable player off of waivers. You can easily identify your waiver number on your team page.
- ✔ **Consider saving your waiver priority for when a potential breakout player comes along.** You should make your required weekly roster moves (injury or bye-week replacements), usually at the K, TE, or team DEF position, via free agency or trade. Emerging QBs, WRs, and RBs will have a bigger impact

on your weekly production; those are the guys you want to use waiver claims on.

Of course, if your league determines waiver priority on a weekly basis (such as through win/loss records), this logic changes. Be sure to know your league rules.

- ✔ **Don't make a waiver claim on a player unless you're sure that he's too valuable to clear waivers.** When the waiver period expires during the week and a waiver player becomes a free agent, he has *cleared waivers*. If the player is marginal in terms of talent and production, he may clear waivers, and you can add him later as a free agent and save your waiver priority. However, if the player has a lot of fantasy potential, he probably won't clear waivers, so make a claim on him if you really want him on your roster.

All the Right Moves: Tips for Adding to Your Roster

After you become familiar with how to make player moves through free agency and waivers, the tough part begins: making the right moves at the right times. You have to decide on an available player's real value, the attractiveness of his future matchups, his likelihood to continue a hot streak, and so on.

When considering a free agent move, start by evaluating your team and answering these basic yes/no questions:

- ✔ **Are you deep at one position and thin at another?**
- ✔ **Do you have an open roster slot due to injury, uneven trade, or a drop with no add?**
- ✔ **Can you identify a player worth dumping on your team?**

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you should go wading into the free agent pool or start walking the waiver wire. Begin evaluating available players who fit your needs by using the fantasy formula (see Chapter 1 for more on this, and don't forget the scouting tools in Chapters 5–7).



You need to assess players before adding them just like you assess them before drafting them. In fact, you may already be familiar with available players because you did your pre-draft homework! Combining what you already know with the following tips can help you determine if a player is a good pickup option based on the previous formula:

- ✔ **Check his team's injury reports and depth chart to see if the player should get more playing time.** Injuries and poor play by starters often present opportunities for undrafted players. If the opportunity presents itself, will the player make the most of it?
- ✔ **Examine the player's future matchups.** If you can spot easy opponents ahead, the player could present you with a solid fantasy opportunity.
- ✔ **Check the player's stats from previous seasons (including college) as well as his draft position in the NFL.** Doing so gives you an idea of the player's talents and whether his coaching staff believes in him.
- ✔ **Get a second opinion.** The major fantasy providers, Web sites that specialize in fantasy information, and fantasy publications offer articles and advice each week on which emerging players are worth owning and which you should stay away from (check out the chapters of Part IV for more on fantasy expert info).

These tips should cover most of your roster riddles, but adding the right players also takes some luck and practice. Make sure you think your moves through before pulling the trigger.

I feel that two common player acquisition situations merit special attention. How do you decide if a hot player is going to flame out soon, and how do you know when to cut ties with an underachiever? I cover these situations in the sections that follow; you can apply the tips from the previous list to help answer these questions.

Is he a breakout player or a one-week wonder?

Every week, multiple free agent players put up good fantasy numbers. One big game can make any player enticing enough to pick up. If an added player keeps playing well, he'll make his fantasy owner happy in what's known as his *breakout year*. Next season, you can expect him to get drafted.

On the other hand, if a guy has a great game and is never heard from again, he gets labeled a *one-week wonder*. Unfortunately, these guys are more common than the breakout studs, and owners who pick them up right away could be spending a lot more time swimming in the free agent pool.



Predicting which players will continue to be fantasy worthy is hard, but that's part of the free agent game. Use the fantasy formula and the free agent checklist from the intro to this section in order to make your guesses. A little luck helps, too.

If you want to make a player pickup, drop the player you think will have the least fantasy impact going forward and the least value to the rest of the league. If you slip up and add a one-week wonder, you can drop him next week and take back the guy you dropped (as long as he's still available).

Should I go fishing or cut bait (trade or drop my underachievers)?



When setting your weekly lineups, a common rule is to never bench your studs (see Chapter 10 for more on lineup management). The same rule applies to making roster moves: Never drop your studs. A stud player usually bounces back from a bad streak (that's what makes him a stud, after all). Be patient with your starting lineup; you drafted these players in the first ten rounds for a reason.

However, if a good-to-average player is really struggling and doesn't show signs of improving after you show your loyalty for weeks, you need to determine if you want to cut him loose. If you *really* want to dump a guy, first look to see what you can get for him in a trade — go fishing, in other words. If no trade scenario works out, though, your second option is to release him — cut bait.

If you have multiple players who aren't producing, put your late-round draft selections that aren't producing under the microscope. Many of your long-shot draft picks won't pay off, so you can afford to drop a sleeper for a guy who will pay off right now. Another reason to cut lesser-known players is that they're more likely to remain on the available list. If your new guy proves to be a bust, you can re-sign the guy you dropped (if no one else signs him).



If you can add a good player to your team via free agency or waivers without sacrificing one of your better players, go for it. If the player you add continues to have success, you've made a great “low-risk/high-reward” move. You don't want to make the mistake of dropping promising players too soon, but being proactive is important to your success in the fantasy game.

The Art of the Deal: Making a Trade Offer

As your fantasy season progresses, no matter how your team starts out, you'll start to notice some weaknesses in certain positions on your roster. After all, you can't draft all elite players on

draft day. To counter your weaknesses, you don't always want to just fill a void, as you tend to do with free agent or waiver acquisitions; you want to upgrade those positions. For example, say your RB1 is ranked in the top ten but you want a top-three RB, or you waited until the late rounds to draft a defense but now you want to upgrade to an elite unit. You can't just go to the available players list to acquire elite players. The only way to do so is by trading.

Trading is the most subjective aspect of fantasy football. Why so? A player you highly value may be worthless in another coach's opinion, and vice versa. When trading, you target a player you want and then decide what you're willing to give up in order to acquire that player. That's just the easy part; the hard part is convincing the other coach to accept your offer or counter with an acceptable offer. Therefore, how you present an offer and to whom are just as important as the offer itself. Many veteran fantasy coaches have learned the hard way how one wrong player addition or trash-talking session can make or break a deal. No worries though. This section introduces some trading strategies and explains how, when, and when not to put together a successful deal that will benefit your team, your trading partner's team, and your league as a whole.

Determining trade values

You've thought about a player you'd like to acquire and the player(s) you wouldn't mind giving up in a deal. Before considering the different types of trades, trade strategies you can implement, and so on, you need to consider a player's trade value.



Trade value is similar to the overall value of players on your draft cheat sheets (see Chapter 4). You wouldn't trade a player ranked in the top 10 for a player outside the top 50, right? Would you trade a top-10 player for two top-30 players? Every deal is different; thus, every player's trade value is a matter of opinion during the season. If your opinion doesn't line up with a potential trade partner, you may be out of luck. To make a solid case, be sure you gather data that will support your opinion and convince your partner that she's getting good trade value in return.



Rely on the following data to support your decision to trade and to possibly sway your trading partner over to your opinion:

- **Statistics:** First and foremost, a player's stats (past and present) don't lie. Carefully study the stats and the current player rankings on your league Web site. If the player you want has sub-par stats (and you want to buy low; see the "Selling high and buying low" section), your trading partner won't need much convincing. If your partner questions the abilities of the

player you offer, feel free to use your player's past performance to say, "Look, he's bound to play better; here's what he did last year!"

- ✓ **Strength of schedule:** A player's strength of schedule has a lot to do with his fantasy production, so find out who the players have played and who they'll be facing in the next few weeks (see Chapter 10 for more on this topic).
- ✓ **Injuries:** You can also use injuries to sway your trading partner one way or the other.
- ✓ **Value of NFL teammates:** You can use the good or bad performance of a player's teammates to support your value argument. For instance, an improving running game may provide better opportunities for a QB or WR who has been struggling. You can argue that the QB or WR you're giving up in the deal will play better in the coming weeks.

Trading from strength

Trading from strength should be your mantra all season long. If you have depth at one position, you can use it to improve a weaker position. And if you have a winning record and your team is playing well, you don't have to make trades at all. Either way, you're in a position of strength, and this is how you want to do business. Look for trading partners who are in positions of weakness — bad overall rosters and losing records — so you get the most value for your players and give up the least in return.



From early to midseason, depth is valuable, so make sure trades don't hurt your depth. If your TE1 gets hurt and you've traded away a valuable backup, you could have a problem. As the trading deadline and the playoffs near, though, don't be afraid to give up some depth to upgrade your starting lineup. Your TE1 could still go down, but later in the year you need a replacement to play well only for a few weeks rather than half the season. Trading away depth is a risk, but the reward could be a championship.

Reviewing the basic types of trades and how to make them

The bottom line: You work to negotiate trades because you want to improve your team for the present and the future. A trade can involve any combination or amount of players and a number of different strategies. (If your league has set roster requirements in place, you must consult them before making trades.) Each coach will have a tendency toward one kind of deal, but you won't know

until you start making and reviewing trade offers. The following sections look at the different trading options you have in your arsenal and how you can use certain strategies to implement them.

One for one

The most basic of all deals is a one-for-one trade — swapping two players straight up. And the most successful of all one-for-one deals is a swap of players from different positions. If you offer one player for another player at the same position, you're very likely to be turned down. The offer raises too many questions in your partner's mind, and rightfully so: "Is his guy really better than mine? If so, why is he making this offer?"



When offering a one-for-one deal, always try to suggest one position for another. For instance, if you have depth at WR and a need for a good QB, and your buddy has two productive QBs, you can make a strong case for a "win-win" deal that makes sense for both parties.

If you need to upgrade your K, TE, or team DEF position and you have good QB, RB, or WR depth, you should be able to find plenty of trading partners. Everyone values RBs, WRs, and QBs in the draft; if you had a good draft at these positions and your team needs a better TE to reach elite status, the TE position now has more value to you during the season. Offer a one-for-one!

The two-for-one special

The two-for-one trade is my personal favorite. If you have depth at a position and you determine that another team is weak at multiple positions, you can offer two players for one — you can upgrade a position on your team by swapping players at that position while also including a player to strengthen the other team's weakness (a player at a position of depth on your team). And you do this without downgrading your starting lineup!

For example, say I have the Packers' RB1 and he's playing well. You have the Giants' RB1, and everyone agrees that your RB1 is better than my RB1. You would never accept a one-for-one swap of the players, but what if I add the Dolphins' TE1 (because I have another good TE on my bench) to sweeten the deal for you? The Dolphins' TE1 is a clear upgrade over your current TE. You may decide to take the deal because you'll get two quality starting players in exchange for one (granted, the one is very productive). I'll give up some of my depth, but, barring injury, I'll improve my chances of winning games each week.



The two-for-one trade is all about packaging two players whose perceived combined value exceeds the one player's. By identifying weaknesses on the other teams and using your roster's depth, you

can make very attractive two-for-one offers to the right coaches with the right needs.

When such an offer comes *your* way, it can be tempting, but remember: One great fantasy player is harder to find than two good ones. Be careful when accepting a two-for-one offer, because as the old saying goes, “If you don’t see the sucker in the room, you’re it!”

Selling high and buying low

The stock market analogy applies perfectly to trading in fantasy football. When you own a stock (a player) and its price goes up (he starts playing really well), the stock’s value increases. If you anticipate that the stock’s value will drop (the player’s production will fall), you may want to sell the stock while you can still get a high return.

On the flip side, if you study the market (your league) and notice a stock that has been underperforming (a stud stuck in the mud), you can buy it at a lower price if you expect the stock to turn around (maybe the player has better matchups in the future). If the stock increases in value, you bought a blue chipper at a low price. Hello championship!

If you want to trade for an underperforming stud at a low price, look at the teams with losing records because their studs are probably bearing the brunt of their failures. If, based on future matchups or other considerations, you think a stud will come around, attempt to buy low now. Perhaps you can send the owner an overachiever on your team who has great stats so far this season but faces tougher matchups later. This method is a bit sneaky (just like a stockbroker!), but it can pay huge dividends because you won’t give up much in order to receive a lot. Besides, no one really knows what the rest of the season holds, right?



Just like a good investment banker, buying low and selling high is a smart way to improve your fantasy portfolio. Browse the team pages to look for guys you may be able to acquire on the cheap by offering hot players who you think will go cold.

The kitchen sink

Every year, one or two teams in your league will sink like a stone. It’s inevitable. (Hey, somebody has to be last, right?) Maybe the owner is a victim of circumstance (injuries, bad luck, and so on), or maybe he just stinks at fantasy football (he obviously didn’t pick up this book)! Either way, this type of owner is a prime trading partner after he or she experiences a few big losses at any point during the season. He or she may be willing to overhaul his or her entire team in order to shake things up by trading away two or three possibly great but underperforming players.

Here's an example of making a kitchen sink offer:

You give: RB2, WR2, WR3, TE2, K1, DEF2

You get: RB1, WR1

If you have enough depth to trade this many players for two, and you can wait for the struggling elite players to turn it around, you're in a position of strength from which to make a deal. Your trade partner may be tired of losing with his elite players and could be willing to accept help at other positions.

But what if your team is fading fast and you're on the other side of the equation? You may be ready to go for broke and offer the kitchen sink as follows:

You give: RB1, QB1, WR1

You get: RB1, QB2, WR2, TE1, DEF1

You believe that the other team's WR2, TE1, and DEF1 would be upgrades for you, and you hope that the other team feels your struggling studs would be worth giving up depth to acquire. If the other team can fill the holes left by this deal (by adding free agents, making waiver moves, and other trades), its roster will be stronger — *if* the guys you gave up start to play up to their potential. Meanwhile, your team could be better in the short term because you need to win now!

How to make a trade offer

The presentation of a trade offer is as important as the offer itself. Be diplomatic and make sure to have plenty of reasons why this is a good deal for both of you. Those reasons should be based on the trade strategies I've outlined in this chapter and should appear as fair and balanced as possible. For instance, you may start out with an uneven offer in hopes that the other team will counteroffer or start a dialogue. However, if you don't explain the purpose of your starting offer, you may offend the other coach. He or she may respond with a rant via e-mail instead of working to hammer out a better deal.

After you've weighed everything on the scales and are ready to present a great trade offer, follow these steps. **Note:** Every league provider's trade interface varies; the following steps are based on Yahoo!'s Web site (see Chapter 13):

1. **Click on Propose Trade on your team page and then select a trading partner from your league.**

2. **Select the player(s) you want to acquire from the other team's roster.**
3. **Select the player(s) from your roster that you want to offer in return.**
4. **Double-check the offer to make sure you haven't made any mistakes.**
5. **Add a message in the text box that the other owner will see when he or she receives the trade offer.**

In the box, you can type a greeting and an explanation for why you're making the offer. Remember to make it sound as appealing as possible.

6. **Click on Submit Trade and cross your fingers!**

Now you wait for a response. The other owner may accept your offer, reject it, or make a counteroffer.

7. **The league notifies you through e-mail and on your team page of an accepted or rejected trade.**
8. **Your league and/or commish approves or vetoes the trade.**

If the other owner accepts your offer, your league's coaches and commissioner will be notified on their team pages of the pending trade. They have a set amount of time to vote against the deal or file a protest with the commish, depending on your league settings.



If your trade gets blocked, you have to take it in stride. You can re-work the proposed deal or move forward and forget about it. What you shouldn't do is go on a tirade that will just anger your leaguemates. If you can't shake the need to get in the last word, take the high road in an e-mail/post to the league, and carefully, calmly, and logically explain why you think your trade should've been allowed. Sometimes, you can convince the commissioner to give you a make-up call and allow your next trade no matter how wacky it is. See the following section for more advice on this topic.

9. **Your league provider processes the trade.**

Assuming no league opposition (or if the commish denies the protests), your site will process the trade in a set amount of time after it's approved.

Offering trades, off your provider

Using your league provider's trading tools is the most common way to make a trade offer, but it isn't always the best way. Sometimes, the following methods can be more personal and more effective:

- ✔ **E-mail:** One problem with making official trade offers only via your team page is that if the other coach accepts the deal, the deal is done. However, if you suggest a trade in an e-mail, you give all parties time to think about it. An e-mail offer can begin a dialogue that can lead to an official trade or to the proposing party coming to his senses after some more thought.
- ✔ **Phone:** E-mails and text messages don't convey your tone of voice and excitement, and they can lead to misunderstandings. A simple phone conversation about a trade before you submit it to the league can be worth a week of e-mails.
- ✔ **Instant message:** With the increasing popularity of instant messaging, many people see it as the fastest way to negotiate fantasy deals. Over IM, you can quickly bounce ideas back and forth. Besides, when you're at work, you want to be seen typing at your workstation, not talking on the phone, right?



You can't make contact without contact info! Make sure your league's commissioner creates a contact sheet (either a document or a Web page) that provides all league members' e-mail addresses, phone numbers, and IM screen names. You don't want to experience the frustration of not being able to reach a coach!

Getting league approval for a trade

What happens after you close a deal with another coach in your league? Sometimes nothing, sometimes a firestorm. Certain leagues believe in free trade, where owners can make whatever trades they want. In more competitive leagues, all trades must be approved in order to prevent coaches from colluding, dumping players, or just plain ruining the league for everyone. Each league has its own approval method, and the process is where all your league actions become scrutinized and the game becomes political.

Leagues that require trade approval usually offer one of three options for getting a trade finalized:

- ✔ **League vote:** The league allows each coach to review deals and cast votes to allow or deny the deals. If a majority of the coaches reject the deal, the trade is denied. These leagues count on their coaches holding the best interests of the league above their own ambition.



If your league uses voting, be a smart and fair politician during the season. By gaining allies in your league, you'll improve your chance of winning more league votes.

- ✔ **Commissioner veto power:** The league commissioner has the right to veto any proposed trade. If your commissioner has

veto power, your fate rests with him or her. Some people are dictators and some listen to the wisdom of their leaguemates. As long as your commish is fair and balanced, this approval method is the fairest system, especially if he or she considers league input when making decisions. (Check out Chapter 3 for more on the commissioner's role.)

- ✓ **Experts' decision:** Some Web providers take the trade approval process to higher authorities by letting their own experts rule on trades. This system is objective and can prevent a lot of league in-fighting. The problem is you can't appeal a ruling, and because the experts only approve "win-win" deals, many trades are rejected, even if league members don't mind the trades.

Understanding your fellow coaches: Trading to your advantage

When bargaining, it helps to know what makes your fellow coaches tick so you can use your negotiating skills and powers of persuasion to your advantage. During the season, pay attention to which coaches are making moves or talking smack and which coaches are laying back and watching the league from afar. How a coach plays fantasy football serves as an indicator of the best way to approach a deal with his or her team. The following sections cover dealing with personas and personal relationships when making trade offers.

Negotiating with the coaching prototypes

Becoming familiar with your opposition is a primary aspect of making trades in fantasy football, in all types of leagues (public, private, auction, standard, and so on). The following list presents the main coaching types you'll encounter in your league:

- ✓ **Proactive:** A proactive coach is the guy with the most transactions in your league, the most annoying e-mails sent, and usually the one with a really good team. A proactive coach is the first to pick up the hot free agents and the first to give up on his drafted players. If you make him a trade offer, he'll always respond quickly, but he'll ask for more in an effort to get the best deal. A proactive coach often is well informed, so a trade could require a long negotiation, but this coach lives for the game and wants to make deals.



If you time your offer right (when he needs a fill-in or he just lost a big game), you can catch a proactive coach in an overzealous mood when he may push the panic button and accept a two-for-one trade when he should've stayed the course. After reading this book, I hope you'll be a proactive coach.

✔ **Inactive:** The inactive guy goes M.I.A. after he loses his first game. Sometimes he won't even show up for the draft, relying on the league site or another owner to pick for him. He doesn't use the message board, and he doesn't make moves to improve his team. You see inactive coaches less frequently if you're playing for money, but they do pop up once in a while.

If you make an inactive coach a trade offer, don't expect a reply. In general, you shouldn't waste your time dealing with him, but if you must, make contact at the trade deadline; he may make a last-minute deal with you just to feel like he made some sort of effort (see the following section, "Working the trade deadline"). And try to hide your disgust if he lucks out, makes the playoffs, and goes to the championship!

✔ **Hard-headed:** A hard-headed coach is a well-informed but stubborn coach. He'll offer a counterpoint to every point you make when you're trying to argue for a deal. This know-it-all never attempts to initiate trades because he thinks his draft was perfect, and he rarely makes any kind of player moves.

If you make this coach a trade offer, expect a sarcastic counteroffer in return — a kicker for your elite RB, for instance. If you identify one of these coaches in your league, avoid him like the plague. You'll never get good value from him or change his mind about the trade value of your players.

✔ **Open-minded:** An open-minded coach usually has a busy life outside of fantasy football (crazy, I know). The coach still puts in the necessary time to field a team and play the game, but he doesn't have the time to actively pursue trading each day. However, if you send him a proposal, he'll consider it.

You won't be able to fleece an open-minded coach, but you can make a "win-win" trade if you're diplomatic in your proposals and don't act like an angry fantasy geek. When you spot an open-minded coach, keep a close eye on his roster and wait for a time when you can send him a good one-for-one offer that helps you both. Specifically, you can try to buy low on one of his struggling bench players you think will improve.

Dealing with old friends or new ones

Maybe you already know the fellow coaches in your league, at least to some degree. Many leagues consist of long-time friends who want to keep in touch through the draft process and on the Web. If you're set to compete in a league made up of your buddies, use your knowledge to your advantage (and try to put them in the categories I introduce in the previous section).



During the week, your buddies will be happy to talk shop, and their advice may help you manage your team. In addition, you can find out which teams and players your buddies like or dislike — crucial information when making trade offers.

If you're joining a private or public league and you don't know many (or any) of the other coaches, reach out to learn some personal information about them. Use your league message board to post general greetings and well wishes at the start of the season, and send e-mails to the coaches via their league IDs. People tend to deal with the people they like and trust; it's just human nature.

Finding the weaknesses of your leaguemates

As you get to know your fellow coaches — their tendencies, favorite teams and players, and managing styles — you want to search for their weaknesses. You can keep an eye out for tangible weaknesses of a team that may prompt its coach to sell low, such as fading playoff chances or an injured stud RB. And you can check the rosters of your opponents to look for bye-week holes, lack of depth, lack of quality starters, and so on.

Specifically, stay on the lookout for the following weaknesses when dealing with your fellow coaches; they often go unnoticed when compared to the weaknesses previously mentioned:

- ✔ **Homer-itis:** This is a common illness in fantasy football. It manifests itself in coaches who draft and trade for too many players from their favorite teams. Do your best to find out which coaches have soft spots for certain players or teams. If you drafted a player who's more valuable to another coach for personal reasons, see what that coach is willing to give up for his favorite player.
- ✔ **Frustrated written posts:** If a fantasy coach's stud QB1 is in a bad slump and he writes a post about buying a voodoo doll of the QB, you've found a weakness! Send an e-mail expressing that you feel his or her pain. Then, suggest trading your QB1 (who isn't as good but isn't mired in a slump) and a WR2 for his QB1. If your ploy works and the frustrated coach gives up his stud QB to get a replacement and help his WR depth, you may have just traded your way into the fantasy playoffs.
- ✔ **Weak fantasy coach:** The ultimate weakness is a weak fantasy coach. Some coaches in your league may be inexperienced, apathetic, too busy to play, or all the above. If you can reach out to a coach who fits this bill, you may be able to swing a trade that any fantasy expert would be praising you for.



This is a cutthroat way to play the game, so tread lightly. You don't want to turn off the other coaches, who may not invite you back next year. And your league approval process may nix your trade before it can go through anyway. But, as the saying goes, if you don't fleece the sheep in your league, another coach will!

Working the trade deadline

Every league sets a trade deadline in order to prevent last-minute trades from upsetting the balance in the playoffs. For example, a coach who needs one win to get into the playoffs may give up a ton of great bench players just for one starter with a great matchup. On paper, this is an unfair deal for the league, but in context, the owner makes it out of a reasonable need. Trade deadlines help leagues avoid these kinds of moral debates at the end of the fantasy season.

In Yahoo! default leagues (see Chapter 13), the trade deadline is before Week 11. The deadline is close enough to the playoffs to allow coaches to make deals with the postseason in mind but far enough away to discourage panic trades with *only* the playoffs in mind. Each league is different, so check your league settings to find out when your trade deadline will come.

The week before the trade deadline is when many coaches become proactive. Circle your calendar and be ready to deal! How you approach the deadline depends on your place in the standings and your chances of making the playoffs (check out Chapter 12). The following sections review the possible scenarios at the deadline.

How to deal as a playoff shoo-in

If you already have a playoff spot locked up or you're very likely to secure one, congratulations. You need to analyze the NFL matchups that your players and your opponents' players have during the weeks of your league's playoffs. If you have good depth and are in a good position to trade, you can try to trade for players with good playoff matchups. Giving up depth for impact playoff players is the best way to prepare your team for the home stretch.

Keep the following in mind when proposing trades before the fantasy playoffs:

- ✔ **Trade good players who have tough playoff matchups, but not your studs.** Use the playoff guide in Chapter 9 to determine who has easy matchups and who doesn't (tough opposing DEF, bad weather, losing team, and so on). Don't rest on your laurels, because even great fantasy teams can be killed by bad player matchups in the playoffs. Sticking with an average to

good player with bad matchups is a death wish; try to sell him high to a coach who needs production in order to win now, because that owner won't be as concerned with the player's playoff schedule.

- ✔ **Don't overpay for backups.** If you don't own the backups of your studs, or *handcuffs*, consider trading your depth at other positions for them — at the right price. Handcuffing (see Chapter 9) can provide playoff insurance and depth, but if you trade a starting WR1 for a backup RB2, you may weaken your starting lineup to acquire a player you'll never need.
- ✔ **Consider packaging a couple of bench players with a starter in order to acquire a better starter.** Giving up depth is a risky move (injuries do happen, even in the playoffs), but I'd rather play to win and assume that my guys won't get hurt. If your best players go down to injury in the regular season, your backups could help you win, but they won't beat the other playoff teams. Try to deal with teams that are just trying to make the playoffs and are looking for ways to improve their lineups as a whole, even if they have to give up a great player to do so.

How to deal just to make the playoffs

If your team is on the playoff bubble, all bets are off. In other words, it's time to throw caution to the wind and get better immediately. You need to take risks in order to win in the short-term. Here's how you can pull it off:

- ✔ **Look to trade for players who have great matchups in the coming weeks but not during the playoffs.** You need to win now; you can worry about the playoffs later. You can offer your guys who have good playoff matchups in exchange for hot players with better matchups in the next few weeks.
- ✔ **Give up a stud who's in a mini-slump.** You don't have time to wait for him to come around. Teams that have locked playoff spots are looking to upgrade their rosters for the future, so you can use that desire to acquire solid players who can help you win now. Let the other guy wait for the stud to find his mojo.
- ✔ **Trade depth in order to improve your starting lineup.** You can't afford insurance right now, and your bench may have some trade value — especially if you have another coach's handcuff RB. Don't worry about injuries that may happen; focus on giving your team the best chance to win the next game.

How to swing late-season deals in a keeper league

If you're playing in a keeper league, deadline deals take on a whole new meaning. Contending teams will be playing to win now, looking to acquire veteran contributors. On the other hand, a team that doesn't have a chance to make the playoffs will start thinking about the future. Most bad teams will have *fire sales* of their veteran players in exchange for young players who have more keeper potential. Consider the two possible standings scenarios and how they affect your trading practices in a keeper league:

- ✓ **If your team is a contender to advance to the playoffs, you may consider giving up a player with potential in order to win now.** Be active in all bad teams' fire sales because you may find a great deal or block another contending team from getting a stud. If you want to be proactive, shop your least-favorite keepers to the bottom half of the league; you never know who will be ready to throw in the towel and start playing for next year.
- ✓ **If your team is dwelling in the cellar, start the fire sale!** Send an e-mail to the league contenders to make sure everyone knows that your older studs are available. That way, you'll get multiple offers and you can pick and choose between them. By collecting as many potential keepers as possible (your league rules stipulate the maximum number), you can strengthen your team before next year's draft and avenge this terrible season!

How to deal as a league bottomfeeder

If your team has tanked and you're out of the running for your league's playoffs, my advice is to not make deals at all. Nothing frustrates other fantasy owners more than watching a last-place team getting fleeced by the first-place team or a bottomfeeder just giving away players to a contender out of sheer negligence. If a contending team makes you an offer, just politely decline and start planning for next season. If you deal from a position of weakness, you probably won't make a great trade (for you) anyway.



If you really want to give it your all and win a few more games for pride's sake (or to avoid a last-place penalty fee in a money league!), try to trade wisely. Make offers to (and accept offers from) the teams closest to you in the standings, and don't take a bad deal just because your team stinks. Always play out the fantasy seasons and make smart lineup decisions. Use the free agent pool and the waiver wire to your advantage.

Chapter 12

Finishing Strong: Down the Stretch to the Fantasy Playoffs

In This Chapter

- ▶ Breaking down the fantasy playoff picture
 - ▶ Preparing your roster for the playoff run
 - ▶ Naming your starters for the postseason
 - ▶ Taking home the fantasy title
-

All your hours of draft preparation, in-season legwork, and smack talk lead up to the ultimate goal: the fantasy playoffs. For some teams, just making the postseason is a moral victory — think about your coworker or pal's spouse who just signed up for fun. For others, only the fantasy title and bragging rights will do.

No matter how skilled you are as a fantasy coach, luck plays a large role in whether you make it to the playoffs and win it all. If you make the dance, enjoy the moment and the satisfaction, but don't rest on your laurels just yet! You didn't just make the playoffs for the sake of it. You may as well win your league, right? This chapter focuses on some important moves you need to make in order to make your playoff run a successful journey.



I base most of my advice in this chapter on Yahoo!'s playoff settings and league defaults. For more on Yahoo!, head to Chapter 13.

Welcome to the Show: The Fantasy Football Playoffs

Maybe you executed your draft plan perfectly, your players exceeded expectations, and you coasted into your league's playoffs as the top seed. Or perhaps your RB1 went down in Week 2 and you made some bold trades, grabbed productive free agent sleepers, and won your last regular season game by a point to make the cut as the last team in. It doesn't matter how you made the playoffs; you made the playoffs, and that's what counts!

Over the course of a full fantasy regular season, the best teams tend to rise to the top, but in the playoffs, every team has a chance. In order for you to compete and advance in your league's fantasy playoffs, you first need to understand how your league's playoff system works. This section can help.

Getting in and going forward

Like most real professional sports, fantasy football has a regular season and a postseason, and only the teams with the best win-loss records qualify for the playoffs (possibly the best records within their divisions). Having a great regular season is nice, but winning in the playoffs is how you clinch a head-to-head league title.

The playoff format you'll use depends on your league provider and the number of teams in your league (see the following sections), but the idea almost always is the same: The best teams play each other in a single-elimination tournament, and the last team standing is the league champion.

The following list explains exactly how the playoffs are run:

1. When setting up the league for the year, the commissioner (or the league provider) determines the playoff format.

The commissioner decides how many teams will qualify for the postseason when he sets up the league. For example, in a 12-team league, four playoff teams with two playoff weeks is the standard amount. When my league, the HFL, expanded to 14 teams, we added two more playoff teams.

The amount of teams in the tournament determines the number of rounds the tourney features and the number of weeks needed to complete the playoffs. A six-team, single-elimination playoff takes three weeks; a four-team system

takes two weeks; and so on (see the upcoming section, “Playoff action by league,” for more).



A single-elimination game between two teams is the standard default for this book. However, certain league providers — such as ESPN (see Chapter 15) — use combined scoring from two weeks of games to determine a single round’s winner, which requires more playoff weeks in larger leagues. This system may prevent one bad week from deciding a playoff round. Some league providers and commissioners also allow the non-playoff teams to compete in a loser’s bracket style format.

2. The league seeds the playoff teams according to their win-loss records.

In a four-team playoff, the top seed plays the fourth seed in the first round. The second and third seeds play each other.

3. The tournament begins in the specified NFL week.

Week 15 is the traditional first week of the fantasy playoffs, but as leagues evolve and expand, playoffs are being played as early as Week 11.



Some leagues freeze rosters when the playoffs start, so you really need to prepare your lineup and your bench to make sure you have good matchups and depth throughout the playoffs, in case you need or want to change your starters. Be sure to get the full scoop on your league rules before the playoffs start.

4. The winners advance each week until the fantasy championship game is decided.

The championship bracket narrows down every week until one team is declared the league champion. The playoff losers usually face each other in the following weeks in *consolation games*. Order of finish is important in leagues that determine the next year’s draft order based on reverse order of finish.

Timing and structure of the playoffs

Because fantasy teams use players from every NFL team, and because not every NFL team makes the playoffs, the fantasy post-season must take place during the NFL regular season. In a Yahoo! 12-team league, the fantasy regular season ends in Week 14, and the playoffs take place in Weeks 15 and 16. The league provider doesn’t use Week 17 because many NFL teams rest their regular starters before the playoffs or the offseason.

The Week 17 controversy

Because of bye weeks (see Chapter 10), the 16-game NFL season actually lasts for 17 weeks. Some fantasy leagues end in Week 17, but many don't, and for good reason. Every season, a few elite NFL teams clinch their playoff positions before the last week of the regular season and have nothing to play for in Week 17. In this situation, the NFL coaches don't play their starting lineups for the entire game. And the starters on elite teams are usually the best fantasy players! Do you want your fantasy league championship game decided by bench players? I sure don't. (For more on how to handle this situation on your playoff team, see the "Help! My stud is resting up for the NFL playoffs" section.)



Depending on your league configuration, your playoffs could begin as early as Week 11 — for instance, if you have playoff teams from different league divisions, often seen in larger leagues — or as late as Week 17 — if you have only two playoff teams in a smaller league. Check your league settings for the exact playoff format (see Chapter 2 for more on league settings).

Playoff action by league

Fantasy playoffs can differ depending on your league type. The size of your league and the number of playoff teams you'll have usually dictate if your league will use divisional play. And if your league has divisions, your playoff picture won't be the same as a league that uses a single division. The following sections look at the different types of leagues and how the playoffs differ between them.

Single-division leagues

Most fantasy leagues have only one division of teams, and the top teams in the league in terms of win-loss record make the single-elimination playoffs. The playoff defaults are different with each league provider. For example, a ten-team league may set aside four playoff slots and two weeks of playoffs in Weeks 15 and 16 of the NFL season. In Round 1, Week 15, the matchups are as follows:

No. 1 seed vs. No. 4 seed and No. 2 seed vs. No. 3 seed

The top seed always plays the bottom seed, which comes into play in larger leagues. In many leagues, the next round in Week 16 looks like the following:

Two winners from Week 15: Championship game

Two losers from Week 15: Consolation game



My fantasy league, the Hollywood Football League, is a 14-team league with six playoff spots. I like this format because the best teams during the regular season are rewarded with a first-round bye. Figure 12-1 shows you the bracket.

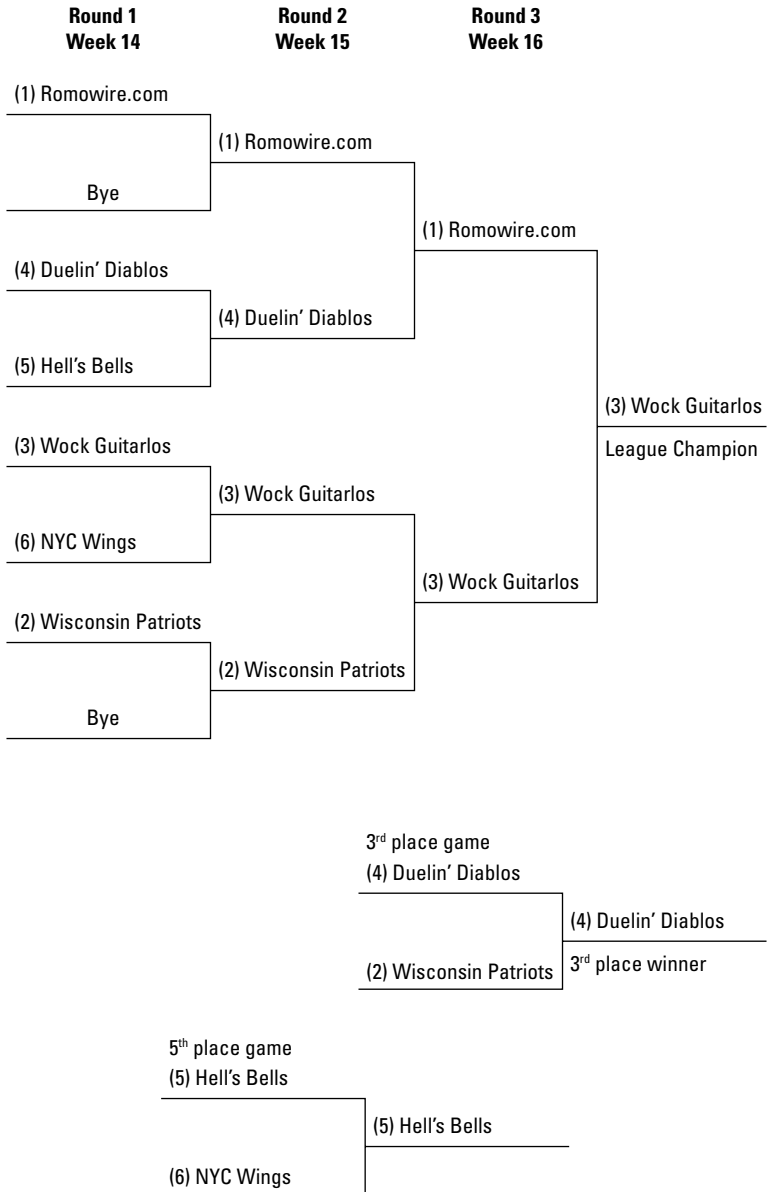


Figure 12-1: A basic bracket for six playoff spots in a single-division league.

There's no tying in playoffs!

Each league has its own set of tiebreakers in the playoffs. In some leagues, the team with the highest bench scoring wins if the game results in a tie. If the teams are still tied at this point, the team with the highest individual scorer wins. Check with your league commissioner before the playoffs to find out the rules of your league.

Personally, I prefer leagues that use fractional points down to the hundredth decimal point, because that makes ties a virtual impossibility.

During Round 2, Week 15, the lowest-ranked team that advances from the first round plays the No. 1 seed. The other winner faces the No. 2 seed. In Round 3, Week 16, the winners of the Round 2 games square off in the fantasy championship game and the losers play each other to decide the third-place finisher.

Multiple-division leagues

As fantasy football grows in popularity, it also grows in complexity and similarity to the NFL. Many larger fantasy leagues (12 to 14 teams) now use a *divisional format* for the season and the playoffs, much like the NFL. The league is set up by the commish based on the number of teams and the resulting math. For example, a 10-team league would have two divisions of five teams; a 12-team league could have two divisions of six or three divisions of four teams. It's really a matter of personal preference.



Each divisional winner — the team with the best win-loss record in the division — receives a playoff spot, and the remaining playoff spots (the *wild card* teams) are given to the non-divisional winners with the best records. If two division winners have the same W-L record, the team that scored the most total points during the regular season is usually awarded the higher seed. Check your settings.

The divisional winner with the best record is the No. 1 seed in the playoff tournament; the second best divisional winner is the No. 2 seed; and so on. The best wild card team is seeded right after the divisional winners, even if it has a better record than a divisional winner. This type of league puts a lot of weight on winning the division, just like the NFL.

Here's how a 12-team league with three divisions and six playoff spots would structure its playoffs in Round 1 — a format similar to the NFL's format (except that the NFL has four divisions):

No. 3 seeded division winner vs. No. 6 seeded wild card team

No. 4 seeded wild card team vs. No. 5 seeded wild card team

No. 1 and No. 2 seeded division winners — bye

In Round 2, the lowest-seeded winners play the No. 1 and 2 teams in the final four. The losers play each other in a consolation bracket to determine fifth and sixth place. In Round 3, the winners of these two games move on to the championship game. The losers play each other to determine third and fourth place.

Aiming for the Playoffs: Ways to Improve Your Roster

As you near and enter your league's fantasy playoff season, your team roster should be mostly set. The trade deadline has passed, so you can't swap big-name players for quick fixes (see Chapter 11). However, you can still do some fine-tuning to your roster. You can add depth, make some lineup decisions based on matchups, and perhaps find some better starting options at your weaker positions.

This section covers some key reminders for you as you enter your league playoffs. Staying active and motivated can help you get the extra edge over other owners who may be content to relax.

Zeroing in on the matchups

Ideally, when you prepped for your draft and drafted your roster, you looked ahead to the playoff weeks and focused on favorable player matchups late in the season. Making predictions that far in advance doesn't always work, but you'll be glad you did as the playoffs near (see Chapter 4). Of course, identifying favorable matchups in Week 13 is easier in Week 12 than in the preseason, so always continue to search for favorable matchups for both your current players and the available free agents.



When the playoffs near, predicting good fantasy production is easier because you have a whole season of data to refer to. So do it! Every playoff team will have a solid lineup and a couple elite players who anchor the team. In close playoff games, role players who get hot often make the difference. Study the players' matchups and pay attention to the latest stats to find the best starting options.



Follow the matchup guidelines in Chapter 10 and use them to make adjustments to your starting lineup and your bench. Of course, you should never abandon your studs; see the later section “Setting Your Playoff Starting Lineup.”

Adjusting your bench after the NFL bye weeks

After Week 9 of the NFL regular season, the bye weeks end. This is the point in the season when you can probably drop the players you’re carrying on your bench for bye-week depth (see Chapters 8 and 10). For instance, for your playoff run, you don’t need to carry two kickers, and if you have an elite team defense with good matchups ahead, you don’t need an extra DEF. If your TE2 is only average and your TE1 is healthy, you can drop the TE2 for a RB with more value in case your RB1 gets hurt.



If your league has a playoff roster freeze, you’ll need a backup at every position because you won’t be able to make add/drops via free agency. Consider the following pointers as you prepare to adjust your bench for the upcoming playoffs:

- ✓ **Search your bench for players who you can drop, and look for possible roster upgrades.** Time to lose the underperforming deadweight or the guys buried so deep on your bench that you will never start them during the playoffs. Check the free agent pool for possible upgrades at your weaker positions — on playoff teams, often TE, K, and DEF (see Chapter 11 for more on the free agent pool). Perhaps you don’t have three must-start WRs on your team. Injuries may even force you to look for a temporary starting RB or QB, and with so many NFL starters wearing down toward the end of the year, you may be able to find great value on waivers or in the free agent pool.
- ✓ **If you haven’t been carrying handcuff players and some become available for pickup, consider adding them now.** A *handcuff* player is the backup to the starter at his position (see Chapter 9 for more on handcuffing). The other coaches will be looking to drop players, too, and they may drop backups to players that you own. Watch the waiver wire closely, and if other coaches give up on hoarding your handcuffs, pick them up, because you never know when an injury could turn a benchwarmer into a stud.
- ✓ **Look to see if your opponents need certain players, and if you can identify some, block them.** *Blocking* is when you add a player just to make sure no one else can pick him up, even

though you don't really need him. It's an important strategy as the playoffs near, cutthroat as it may sound.

For example, say a backup RB lands a starting NFL gig in Week 13, which makes him a factor for the fantasy playoffs. You may have enough stud RBs, and you would never start this player, but another playoff team might. So, if you have an expendable player on your bench, you can pick up the RB first and block your rival.



Never block if it means you have to drop a player you need on your team. Don't hurt your own production for strategy's sake. If you have the roster space, though, be proactive and add players you think other playoff teams may want.

- ✓ **If you don't have an elite team DEF, make sure you have at least two serviceable team DEFs for your playoff run.** Team DEFs will always be available, so make sure you scout and take advantage of the best matchups for the next few weeks. (Chapter 7 covers scouting DEFs.) Many NFL teams have already thrown in the towel, but others are gunning for the NFL playoffs, which can create favorable mismatches.

Continuing to coach

Some playoff coaches get cautious or even superstitious as the postseason nears, and they stop making add/drops, stop paying attention to the waiver wire, and vow to stick to their studs, no matter how unproductive they've been recently. Some leagues even mandate this behavior by freezing rosters or limiting what coaches can do. No matter what, keep on coaching.

In the days leading up to your playoff games, the NFL will still produce plenty of player news, injury updates, and weather reports to read. If your league allows, stay proactive, just like you've been doing all season long. (Check out Chapter 10, which covers important pointers for you to remember week to week.) Keep looking for an edge that can help you win playoff games.

Setting Your Playoff Starting Lineup

So, you made the playoffs? Congratulations! After you build a good and deep playoff roster (see the previous section), you want to ensure that your roster is ready for each playoff game. This is the

hard part: choosing your playoff starters. Most playoff teams will have a few tough lineup calls — often between two productive players at a position, a good problem to have (if a team is full of holes or lacks depth, it usually doesn't make the playoffs) — and those calls could decide games.



As you set your playoff starting lineup, you want to stick with the guys who got you this far and mix in some guys with great matchups who can help out. Find a balance between these two extremes:

- ✔ **Sticking with the status quo:** Some coaches stick with the same starters, no matter what, just to avoid jinxing a winning fantasy team.
- ✔ **Riding out players on a tear:** Some coaches focus only on the hot streaks and favorable matchups, even benching their elite players in the playoffs.



You may be tempted to replace a recently cold stud for a hot backup with a good matchup. Be careful when benching your studs, because it tends to backfire. By *studs*, I mean not only your elite, early-round draft picks, but also the guys who've been your best starters throughout the fantasy regular season. If you lose a fantasy playoff game in which you started your best players (regardless of matchups, weather, hunches, and so on), you'll sleep better in the offseason than you will if you lose because you benched your studs due to rainy weather. Your lineup is your call, but I've played it both ways, and I've won and lost both ways. When I lost because of risky lineup choices, it made me sick to my stomach afterwards.

As for the rest of your roster — from role players to solid contributors — you have some very tough decisions. Here are some guidelines for making your own game-time decisions about who to start and who to sit:

- ✔ **Lean toward healthy players/teams.** A banged-up stud WR who gets plenty of looks and catches is a better start than a WR3 who plays only on third down. However, if you must choose between marginal starters on your team, go with the guy who isn't playing hurt. Also, make sure his supporting cast — the other fantasy-worthy starters and offensive linemen on his offense — is healthy as well.
- ✔ **Check the player's motivation.** Regardless of team standings, some players want to break NFL records, break the bank in the offseason with new contracts, or just land starting gigs in training camp next season. A motivated player works harder to get and move the ball and scores more fantasy points than a guy who can't wait to get to the golf course in January.

- ✔ **Check his team's motivation.** Team goals can affect fantasy scoring just like individual goals. A must-win game can mean good things for the fantasy players driving toward the playoffs. A meaningless game could very well mean the opposite.
- ✔ **Get the weather forecast.** Winter conditions tend to help fantasy defenses and hurt fantasy offenses (although bad weather can mean more touches for an RB1). All things being equal, check the weather report to help you make your decisions. (See Chapter 10 for more on weather reports.)
- ✔ **Ride the hot hands.** A check of your players' stats over the last few weeks will tell you who's playing well and who needs a motivational speech. When making close calls between average players (not studs), play a streaking player instead of hoping that a struggling one wakes up.

Reaching the Big Kahuna: The Fantasy Title Game

With any luck and some great roster management, your team will make it to your league's championship game. Hopefully your studs weren't injured during your semifinal victory (and you didn't hurt yourself tearing down any goalposts or get sick when your spouse dumped the bottle of sports drink on your head). Just like every week up until now, you need to run through your coaching routine.



Make sure your players have good matchups, you have no injury concerns, and you can't do anything to block your final foe from adding a key player (see the "Adjusting your bench after the NFL bye weeks" section). This section highlights some things to consider as the big day approaches.

Help! My stud is resting up for the NFL playoffs

Most fantasy finales occur in Week 16 or 17 of the NFL regular season. When the last couple weeks arrive, some elite NFL teams have already clinched playoff berths and/or home-field advantage. These teams may sit their starters in the upcoming meaningless games in order to avoid possible injury. Hopefully you planned ahead by stashing some good alternates on your bench. If so, you can simply start the next player on your fantasy depth chart in the championship.

If you didn't plan ahead or are desperate because of injury or unforeseen circumstances, go to your league's available list of free agents (see Chapter 11) and cross-reference it with the start/sit checklist I present earlier in this chapter. When you identify the best option, make the add/drop while crossing your non-mousing fingers!



Make sure you know if your stud is going to rest or play. Check expert opinion on Web sites, listen to local and national sports news shows and radio reports, and visit the major sports news Web sites. You may have to wait until late Sunday morning when the last-minute active player lists are released. If a guy isn't going to play, make sure you replace him in your starting lineup.

Taking the booty: Prizes and pride

If you win the big game, congratulations! You didn't get to the championship game for nothing, after all. But remember that fantasy football is just a game. Play hard and have fun. If you win, great. If not, the loss isn't the end of the world.

If you won, it's time to claim your prizes. Collecting rewards usually takes a long time in fantasy football, so be patient. Yahoo!, for instance, sent my league plaque six months after the season ended. If you're in a money league, your commish should send you a check ASAP — if you're lucky.



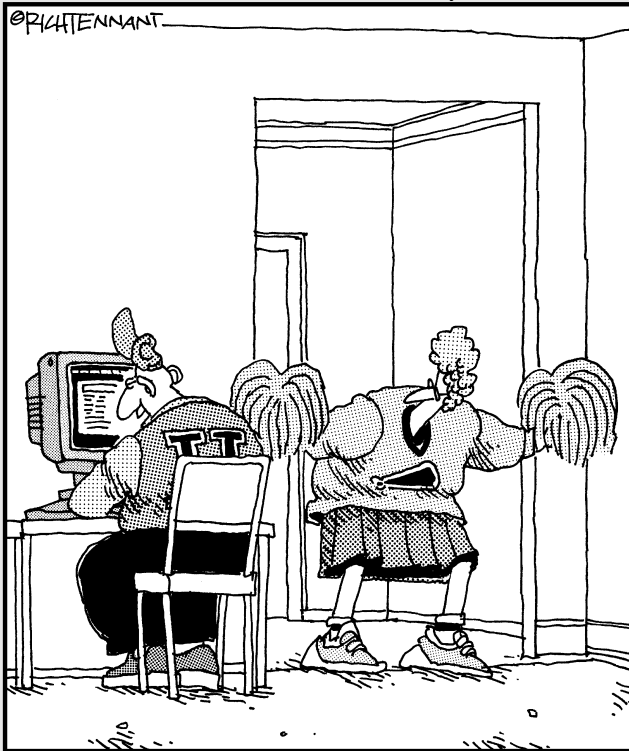
After winning the championship game, you'll feel the pure joy of victory, and you may do a little bit of boasting. Big parts of fantasy football are bragging rights and pride. If you win, don't gloat too much, though, because you don't want to make enemies for next season! And if you lose, don't be a spoilsport. Congratulate the winner and never forget the bitter taste of defeat when preparing for next year's draft.

Part IV

The Research Guide to Online Play

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"Get ready, Mona - here come the stats."

In this part . . .

Watching the NFL is fun, and it's most likely why you want to play fantasy football in the first place. However, fantasy football lives in the online world and consists of two parts: managing your team and hunting for information. And in order to give yourself the best chance of winning your league, you need to know how to use your league provider's fantasy tools and where you can find "insider info" that could make or break your weekly lineups.

Part IV focuses on the specific Web sites where you can play fantasy football, research news items, and read advice articles that allow you to make educated fantasy decisions. Within the league-provider realm, the "big three" dominate the industry. Chapter 13 discusses Yahoo!, Chapter 14 covers CBS Sportsline, and Chapter 15 focuses on ESPN.com. I take Chapter 16 to discuss some great Web sites that provide and/or cover fantasy sports: Rotowire, Fanball, and Rotoworld. These are my favorite sites to check out for expert fantasy opinions. You have hundreds of cool links to choose from online, so surf's up!

Chapter 13

Playing Yahoo! Fantasy Football: Simple and Effective

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In This Chapter

- ▶ Playing with the largest provider in fantasy football
 - ▶ Examining Yahoo!'s free service and pay service
 - ▶ Using the experts to give you the fantasy edge
-

Fantasy football on Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) is one of the most popular fantasy sites on the Web. Why? Yahoo!'s Web portal does just about everything you can think of online. Its interface is well designed and easy to learn, making Yahoo! a great place to start your fantasy career. Of course, its leagues tend to be less complex and customizable, which can make Yahoo! less appealing to experienced players who want to play more advanced versions of the game.

Yahoo! Fantasy Football Basic and Fantasy Football Plus are two great services with tons of bells and whistles. They also have a staff of experts who provide plenty of analysis during the season. This chapter is my breakdown of the Yahoo! tools and how they can help you win your Yahoo! league if you decide to set up camp there.

Playing Yahoo! Fantasy Football Basic: A How-to Guide

If this is your first time playing fantasy football and you don't have a league to join, consider trying the free league provided by Yahoo!. Plenty of players are always online for you to play against, and you

may even make some new friends. This section explains the public league options and its features.

Signing up for a league

When playing in the Yahoo! fantasy football system, as with other providers, you first have to sign up for a league. You have three basic choices to start. You can

- ✓ Join a public league
- ✓ Join a friend's league
- ✓ Create your own league and invite whomever you like

The following sections explain how to sign up for the different Yahoo! Basic leagues and give you some helpful setup tips you need to know to be successful when playing.

Joining a public league

A *public league* is one that anyone who signs up for Yahoo! Fantasy Basic can join until it fills up. For more info on public leagues and which one may be right for you, check out Chapter 3.

If you choose to join a public league on Yahoo!, follow these steps to get started:

1. Go to www.yahoo.com.
2. Select the Sports tab from the list of services Yahoo! provides.
3. Select the Fantasy tab on the Sports page.
4. Scroll down to the Fantasy Football box and click on the Sign Up Now link.
5. Select the Join a Basic League link after you get to the sign-up page.

This box is opposite the more prominently featured Football Plus box, which is Yahoo!'s pay product — check out “Grasping Yahoo! Fantasy Football Plus” later in this chapter for more info.

6. **Yahoo! asks you to make two choices; after you make these choices, you're placed in a league with open spots and with the options you've selected:**
 - **Casual versus competitive:** If you just want to play fantasy football to add a little action to your Sunday football viewing, join a casual league. If, however,

you're possessed by the burning desire to crush your opponents and bask in the misery of their defeat, a competitive league is for you.

- **Autodraft versus live online draft:** The autodraft feature enables the Yahoo! engine to automatically select the best available player in a random snake draft for your league. Yahoo! has its own pre-ranking system that it uses for this. In a live online draft, each coach goes online at a designated time and all the coaches select players together. (See Chapter 4 for more on draft types and specifics.)
- **Choose your league:** A list of open leagues appears, and you can select either a small league or a large one; larger leagues are more challenging (see Chapter 3).

Joining a private league

If you're invited to join a friend's league, you've probably received an e-mail with a link to the sign-up page. Just click on the link, accept your spot, pick a team name and logo, and start talking smack with your pals!

If your friend's league is being set up by invitation only, that makes it a *private league*. Coaches can join only if they have the league info and password. This type of league works exactly like a public league when the season begins (see the previous section), but the league's commissioner can customize the set up. Yahoo! has a certain set of standard defaults for roster requirements, scoring, free agency, and so on. The commissioner can decide to alter many of those defaults based on feedback from the other coaches.



Some custom leagues have membership requirements and generally aren't recommended for beginners. If you have some experience and are looking for a challenge, this is a good way to try out different rules and formats — such as individual defensive player leagues (see Chapter 7) — that most leagues don't normally use.

Creating your own league

You don't need to always join other fantasy leagues; you can lead and others will follow. Yahoo! Basic also allows players to start their own free, private leagues, where they can customize the league settings and invite their friends and family to sign up and play. On the fantasy football page (see the earlier section "Joining a public league"), just click on *Create Your Own League* when entering the site.

If you create your own league, that makes you the *commissioner* of the league. To get started running your own league, check out the commissioner information in Chapter 3.

Looking at the features

After you sign up for any type of free basic league with Yahoo! fantasy football, your league's home page (or *league overview*) is the hub from which you manage your team. This section helps you navigate your Yahoo! fantasy league home page.

Under the name of your league, you can choose from the following three tabs:

- ✓ **Standings tab:** Each team is listed in its order of performance. Under this tab, you can find the following:
 - **Rank:** See which team is in first place, second place, and so on.
 - **Instant messenger status:** If a team manager is logged on to Yahoo! Instant Messenger, you can chat with him. You can tell whether he's logged on by checking his IM smiley face; if the face is lit up next to his team name, he's online.
 - **Team name:** Every coach creates a moniker for his or her squad.
 - **Win/loss record:** The total head-to-head results so far.
 - **Total points scored:** This is often the first tiebreaker when it comes to fantasy matchups, making it a crucial statistic.
 - **Win/loss streak:** Each team's recent run of luck. If you've won three games in a row, you'll see W3 by your team name. If you've lost two, you'll see L2.
 - **Waiver priority:** The order in which each team can claim a player off waivers (see Chapter 11).
 - **Moves:** The number of transactions each team has made.
- ✓ **Schedule tab:** The *schedule tab* shows the upcoming matchups in your league and previous matchups for each team (see Chapter 10 for more on the NFL schedule).
- ✓ **Playoffs tab:** The *playoffs tab* is empty until the end of the regular fantasy season (see Chapter 12); at that point, it shows which teams made the playoffs and which teams are playing each other.

Also on the league home page is another schedule module that displays the matchups and scores for the upcoming week, along with a series of links to Yahoo!'s fantasy experts and their weekly articles. For more info on the links and tabs on the fantasy league home page, check out the following sections.

The other important links on your league page

Your league home page is filled with all kinds of tools and data to inform you about the latest league stats and to help you research the league, your team, and the NFL. The following list presents some of the highlights:

- ✔ **Recent Transactions:** Here you can quickly see which teams have added or dropped certain players in your league. Keeping tabs on player movement is helpful if you're looking to put together trade offers. For example, if a team is grabbing one-week wonders at QB and you have a quality QB on your bench, you may have a potential trade partner.
- ✔ **Commissioner's Note:** The *Commissioner's Note* is a fairly self-explanatory text box in which the commish can post his news and notes for the league to view.



Because this box requires the player to scroll down in order to view it, I suggest that you use the e-mail league feature instead if you're the commish (see Chapter 3).

- ✔ **Recent Messages:** The league home page contains your league's bulletin board, named *Recent Messages*. This is where the smack talk lives and dies. Every league's posting participation varies wildly from the banal to the ridiculous.



I encourage healthy debates and some trash talking, but if you anger the wrong coach, you could hurt trade talks down the road. Yahoo! also has rules prohibiting harsh and offensive language, and you may get suspended from the league if you break them.

- ✔ **Managers:** Select this tab to get a complete, concise list of teams, their managers, and their contact info. If any managers leave their contact info blank, complain to the commish or post a comment on the message board. Being able to reach every manager is part of having a successful fantasy league.
- ✔ **E-mail League:** This link takes you to a page where you can e-mail any or all managers with suggestions, complaints, or observations. Yahoo! added the ability to select each coach via a check box a few seasons back, and I find this feature to be quite useful.
- ✔ **Starting Rosters:** Click here for a one-page view of every team's starting lineups, sortable by week. This page lists only players — not their stats — so I don't think it's that useful. Most of the time, I go to the coach's team page for a more in-depth look at his or her complete roster.
- ✔ **Settings:** This link shows a full summary of all league information, deadlines, and — most importantly — the scoring system.

When doing pre-draft preparation, you should find this page and study it. The scoring system may affect your player pre-rankings, and the waivers rules and the trade rules (see Chapter 11) may affect your draft plans.

My Team tab

One important tab takes you to the heart of your fantasy world: your team page. The Roster link is the first page displayed, and the other links also are useful and fun:

✓ **Roster:** The *Roster* page is sorted by starting positions, followed by the bench players. Each player's name is a hyperlink to the player's stat page, and next to each player's name is a pull-down menu that you can use to switch the player's starting position or place him on your bench. The team page is also cross-linked to every week of the season, so you can go back and review stats or go forward and check your matchups.

Each player's stats are shown in every category that's relevant to your league. These stats are also sortable by week, by average, and by totals. The following links change the roster view accordingly:

- **Stats:** What your players have done for you lately
- **Projected Stats:** Covers the week, the month, or the season of each of your players
- **Split Stats:** How your players performed at night, during the day, at home, and so on
- **Game Day Decision:** Expert predictions for the upcoming games
- **Extras:** Preview your team's upcoming NFL matchups, for instance

The Yahoo! *Roster* page is feature rich, with a lot of bells and whistles. The *Projected Stats* feature, for instance, is useful when you have multiple options at one position. Checking the experts' predictions is better than flipping a coin.

You can also use the nifty pull-down menu that allows you to switch teams and check up on the competition.

As of this printing, Yahoo!'s *Roster* page doesn't show your players' bye weeks, so make sure you keep track of them yourself! Hopefully, that omission will be corrected by the time you're reading this.

✓ **Add Players:** Selecting *Add Players* opens up the player list that, by default, shows all available free agents. The list can be sorted by teams, positions, points scored, weeks, and so



on. You can then sort those players by fantasy points produced to see the most productive players first. You can also find these sub-links:

- **League Leaders:** Another way to access all the stats you need, the *League Leaders* page offers hyperlinks to sortable stats by position, by fantasy team, and by stat category.
 - **Trading Block:** Take advantage of this feature — I wish more coaches did in my league. With the *Trading Block*, a coach can offer five players he's looking to deal and list the positions and/or stats that he wants in return. Anything that can help in making trades is a good thing (see Chapter 11 for more).
 - **Can't Cut List:** Some lame coaches tend to quit leagues, dropping all their players back into the free agent pool. The list prevents a team from randomly signing a stud RB just because someone bailed on your league.
 - **Status Changes:** When players become eligible at different positions or new players are added to the free agent pool, Yahoo! alerts the leagues via the *Status Changes* page.
 - **Stat Corrections:** Even Yahoo! isn't perfect. Sometimes the site makes a scoring mistake, or the NFL changes the official stats on Monday. The NFL doesn't change the final score of the real game, but other stats (such as sacks, fumbles, total yards, and so on) may change — and that can affect the outcome of your fantasy game.
- ✔ **Drop Players:** When you select the *Drop Players* option, Yahoo! adds a row of check boxes next to each of your players. Just check the box next to the player you want to drop, click *Submit*, view and confirm your selection, and then click *Submit* again. The dropped player(s) now appears on waivers per league rules.
 - ✔ **Propose Trade:** This tool allows you to send a trade offer to any other team in the league. On this page, you can view other owners' players by stats to help you look for the two most important indicators that another owner may be interested in a trade: a severe shortcoming in production at a specific position or a surplus of productive players at one position. The sortable stats allow you to search for a certain position or browse the rosters, team by team. For more on this feature, check out Chapter 11.
 - ✔ **Watch List:** This tool allows you to track the production of players who aren't on your roster. By adding a player to your *Watch List*, you can see how he's doing with one click instead of finding him individually through a player search.

- ✓ **Matchup:** This screen shows your team and your opponent's team each week, side by side with player projections. At the bottom of the screen, the other league matchups can be expanded to full view with one click.
- ✓ **Edit Team Info:** The *Edit Team Info* screen allows each coach to select a logo, team name, and customized avatar for his Yahoo! screen name. Again, this page isn't crucial, but the more ways Yahoo! can find to make the game personal, the more players it attracts.

Tools tab

The *Tools* page is limited in the free version of Yahoo! fantasy football, so I cover them in the next section.

Grasping Yahoo! Fantasy Football Plus

The two products on Yahoo! — Basic and Plus — play the same way, but Yahoo! Plus offers many more research tools to use when you're preparing for your draft and managing your team during the season — for a price. As of this writing, Yahoo! charges \$19.99 to upgrade one team from Basic to Plus or \$129.99 to create a Plus league. Be sure to check the Yahoo! pricing before each season to see if the site has changed the price.

To sign up for a Plus league, follow the same steps as listed for a Basic league; just click the *Plus* box, instead of the *Basic* box, and follow the steps, including entering your credit card info. This section navigates the Yahoo! Plus site and helps you get a better grasp of how to play fantasy football using Yahoo! Plus.

Comparing Plus to Basic: Why Plus is better

Yahoo!, like many of the other major providers, has its own expert writers and built-in fantasy resources, and these tools come at a premium. When you pay for a Plus league, you get many bonus features that make the game more fun and help you become a better coach! You may be able to purchase some of the features with Basic — such as StatTracker, the draft kit, and the scouting report — but with Plus, you get all the features listed in the following sections in one exciting package.

Identifying the essential features of Plus

You can find everything from real-time scoring to in-depth fantasy analysis in a Plus league, if you know where to look. This section guides you through the maze of add-on features in Plus leagues that make them different from Basic leagues and well worth the expense.

Advanced commissioner controls

If you're playing in a serious competitive league, you probably have a serious commissioner. The advanced commissioner controls provide more access to each player's team and more adjustable league settings. If your league is casual, your commish doesn't need these controls.

Enhanced customer service

Enhanced customer service may sound lame, but I've seen the difference. Yahoo!'s support staff is swarmed with thousands of e-mails per day, and when your league is feuding over a trade or a rules debate, you want Yahoo! to reply ASAP. This is another Plus function that best serves fantasy diehards.

Preferred draft times

Each season, many leagues vie for the limited number of slots on Yahoo! for when you can run the live, online draft. Of course, nights and weekends are the most popular, because that's when most people have two hours to burn. The Plus leagues are given priority to these draft times, which is nice.

StatTracker

Yahoo!'s real-time Java applet for following your league's scoring — called *StatTracker* — is so cool that the site copyrighted the name for it! Every year, Yahoo! refines the *StatTracker* and makes it easier to read and to use.

StatTracker shows every matchup in your fantasy league and in the NFL, and it updates in real time. In the old days, you didn't know the results of fantasy games until Monday or Tuesday, but the *StatTracker* does a good job of keeping you informed as the games actually happen. All the major Web sites now offer real-time stats, and some of them are free, but Yahoo!'s technology is solid and justifies the cost of a team in a Plus league.



If you're in a free league, you can add the *StatTracker* for a small fee (\$9.99 the last time I checked). If you're in both types of leagues (like me), you only have to pay for it once.

Draft kit

The Plus package also includes the Yahoo! draft kit. The kit consists of overall cheat sheets, positional cheat sheets, team overviews, NFL schedules, and so on. (Check out Chapter 4 for info on how you can utilize cheat sheets to your advantage.) Yahoo! gathers its kit from KFFL.com and www.fantasyguru.com, and it comes in PDF format so you can make printouts.



I find Yahoo!'s draft kit a bit cumbersome to use, with all the PDF downloading and printing involved, but you get a lot of information for your money. (For advice on some great draft kits, check out Chapter 16.)

Scouting report

Each week, Yahoo!'s experts upload game breakdowns and weekly cheat sheets to the Plus league subscribers. The PDF reports are similar to the draft kit, but they're updated weekly.



These reports are in-depth and well written, but they're also time consuming to read. For casual players, some of the other Yahoo! tools (like projected fantasy points, matchup ratings, sit or start, and so on) are probably easier to use when setting your lineups. If you're a fantasy addict or want to become one, though, the scouting report is a must-read.

Eyeing the additional features

In addition to the main features that Yahoo! advertises in the Plus leagues (see the previous section), you can access more tools from the league page and the team page. The following sections show you which links are exclusive to the pay version of Yahoo! fantasy football.

Record Book

The *Record Book* link contains league stats like “margin of victory” and “team with the most points scored by kickers.” Because fantasy sports are stat-driven, why not keep more complete stats on your fantasy team? I love the minutia that this feature offers, although you may consider it another way to waste time on fantasy football.

Finances

If your league has an entry fee or a prize pool, the commish can use this feature to keep track of who has paid his dues and who's

still in debt. If you're the commissioner and you put about \$130 on your credit card, and your "friends" never pay you back, you'll come to appreciate the *Finances* window.

Buzz Index

The *Buzz Index* tracks all the player "adds" and player "drops" across the Yahoo! universe. If those players are available in your league, just click to add them to your roster. The most added player in any given week usually had a great week that most people didn't see coming — now that player has buzz.

The *Buzz Index* is a helpful tool and a way to follow the herd when you're looking to improve your fantasy roster without having to watch every game on Sunday. The danger of relying on the *Buzz Index*, though, is that someone in your league may have already jumped on the bandwagon and added that player before the index reflected the trend across Yahoo!.

Who's Hot

Each week, the *Who's Hot* page ranks all the fantasy players by their total points scored in your league. The stats are sortable by position or by overall score. When you want to upgrade your team through a trade, search for who's hot at a position you need and then make an offer to that player's owner.



You can take advantage of your hot players by using this list to convince other owners to buy high, and maybe you can get some better players in return just because they're on a cold streak. See Chapter 11 for more trading advice.

Latest Trades

This feature provides insight by showing a list of other trades that have occurred in other Yahoo! leagues. If you're shopping a player, you can see what other teams have given up to get him, thus giving you a better idea of his overall trade value. This page can be sorted by "one-for-one" offers and "multi-player" deals and by deals involving any player of your choice.

Meeting the Yahoo! Experts

If you're playing Yahoo! fantasy football, I strongly suggest that you check out what the experts have to say. Yahoo!'s expert team of writers preview the upcoming season before kickoff and then continue to provide in-depth fantasy analyses each week of the season. Each expert contributes weekly articles that summarize the fantasy

news and help coaches make decisions, and they may even host live Web casts. You can find expert articles on the following types of topics:

- ✔ **The week's injuries:** The experts break down all the major injuries in the NFL that affect the fantasy world. These types of articles look at the cause of the injuries, the effect they'll have on the players and the teams, and the estimated length of time that the players will miss.
- ✔ **Player rankings:** Yahoo!'s experts rank the top players for the week by position, and the site averages their picks to create a complete list of players by rating. Many sites provide a weekly version of a cheat sheet, but it's often done by one writer. Yahoo! shows a consensus-based chart, called the Big Rotowski, which tends to be more accurate.
- ✔ **The values of lesser-known players:** The experts recap the past week and then make some bold predictions for the upcoming week. Most of the players they mention aren't the obvious studs of the league, so when you're not sure of your lineup, check these types of articles for some timely advice.
- ✔ **The week's pickups:** The experts rate some breakout players who may be available in your league. The ratings are done like stocks: strong, moderate, or weak buys. If the player had a great week and has future potential, he's a strong buy. If he looked good, but the experts think he's a flash in the pan, he's a weak buy.
- ✔ **Team matchups:** The experts review some of the more intriguing team offense versus team defense matchups. Yahoo! experts often provide complex grids that break down the number of fantasy points allowed by each team defense, both in the previous week and in the season overall. For how to use these reports to your advantage, refer to Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Opportunity stats:** Most of the major sites have started to report these stats, and Yahoo! is no exception with its *Looks and Touches* column. A *look* is how many times a receiver is targeted by a QB, regardless of completions. A *touch* is how many times a RB is handed the ball, regardless of yards gained or touchdowns scored. The experts comment on the players who are getting more looks and fewer touches, and they include a list of the totals each week across the league.

Chapter 14

Trying CBS Sportsline: Professional Pigskin

In This Chapter

- ▶ Mixing it up in a public league (for free or pay)
 - ▶ Breaking down Sportsline's customizable commissioner services
 - ▶ Navigating your league home page
 - ▶ Controlling your players from your team page
-

CBS Sportsline (www.sportsline.com) is a popular Web site where you can follow every sport under the sun and play fantasy football. Sportsline offers up an award-winning league commissioner service, which is great for running your own league or joining a league with a bunch of friends. Sportsline also has a variety of public league options to choose from, including a high-stakes game if you're feeling lucky! And even if you don't have a league on Sportsline, you can follow all the Sunday action by using the site's real-time action tracker — called *GameCenter* — on your computer.

This chapter looks at the different options the site offers and helps you navigate them. If you're still undecided about where to play, or if you want a site that offers great game-day coverage, Sportsline is certainly worth a look.

Analyzing CBS Sportsline's Lineup of Games

Unlike other sites, Sportsline caters to more experienced gamers by offering more customizable league features, year-round access to keeper and dynasty leagues, and ultra-competitive money leagues (see Chapters 3). Because of that, Sportsline public leagues may not be the best place for the casual beginner (especially their big-money games!). All private leagues on Sportsline must be run through the

Fantasy Football Commissioner, which is a pay product and a very good one.

The following sections cover the ins and outs of CBS Sportsline and the different types of leagues you can join. All gameplay is the same across the board; only the setup and the stakes are different. I also review some of the great tools and resources available to you at this massive fantasy sports archive.

Joining Sportsline's public leagues

A public fantasy league is where you go to play against coaches from across the country that you've never met (see Chapter 3 for more on the pros and cons of this type of league). Sportsline's public leagues use default scoring settings and have no commissioner. Any problems or complaints are handled by tech support at Sportsline. Sportsline actually offers six different levels of public leagues. The league services are all the same, but the level of competition rises along with the entry fees:

- ✔ **One completely free level:** A good option for players new to their site with no private league options.
- ✔ **One basic level:** You pay a small entry fee but don't compete for prizes.
- ✔ **Four levels of pay leagues:** You compete for cash prizes based on the size of the entry fee and the level of competition. These leagues are for the most serious fantasy players around.



In all Sportsline public leagues, Sportsline acts as the commissioner (see Chapter 3 for more on this role). The scoring rules and roster requirements (see Chapter 2) are standardized and not adjustable. Members of the league are called on to veto trades because no individual team owner acts as commissioner (as is the case in a private league). The site announces trades agreed upon between two owners, and the other owners are given a certain amount of time to object.

When researching a public league, make sure you pore over the league's description to make sure it's a fit for you and your needs. The following sections detail Sportsline's public leagues in more depth.

Completely free leagues

In Free Fantasy Football, you get everything you need to play: live drafts, player ratings, roster breakdowns, and so on. The feature comes with the same live scoring system and real-time *GameCenter* as all the pay leagues (see the "Scoreboard" section later in this

chapter). These options are some of the best of their kind, so this is a very nice upside of the free league.

Sportsline has plenty of cool features as a league provider, but its free leagues do have their limitations. The biggest problem with free public leagues of any kind is that without a vested interest — no money is at stake — coaches may quit on the league (see Chapter 3). If you want to prepare for the next level of fantasy football, you may be better served by playing in the next level of public league. If you're in it just for fun, though, don't let the quitters get to you. And don't become one yourself!

Fantasy Football Basic

Fantasy Football Basic is a public Sportsline league with a nominal fee for joining but no cash prizes awarded. The difference between the free league (see the preceding section) and the basic league, even though neither has a monetary incentive for winning, is that the people who join a basic league take the game of fantasy football a little more seriously than those who jump on a free site to gain experience. Consider this: If you join the gym, you're more likely to work out, right? If you pay, you should play!

The cost of a Fantasy Football Basic league is only \$14.95 per team for the whole season. This is a small price to pay for the opportunity to play a full fantasy season with players who will give their best every week. If you want to buy additional teams, the cost drops to \$7.95 each.

Money leagues

CBS Sportsline offers four money leagues where fantasy players play in hopes of capturing some cash and prizes. Each league requires different amounts of money, depending on how much you want to gamble on the game. The higher the entry fee, the bigger the cash prize for the winner. The features provided by Sportsline are all the same, though. The four money league tiers include the following levels of competition. (CBS does exclude some people who live in a few states from winning; check the site for updated exclusions.)

- ✔ **Fantasy Football Gold:** \$39.95 per team with a \$200 league prize for first place. For intermediate players.
- ✔ **Fantasy Football Platinum:** \$99.95 per team with a \$600 prize. For experienced players.
- ✔ **Fantasy Football Diamond:** \$249.95 per team with a \$1,600 prize. For very serious competition.
- ✔ **Fantasy Football Double Diamond:** \$499.95 per team with a \$3,500 prize. The best of the best only, please.

Obviously, you want to make sure you feel confident in your fantasy football coaching skills and that your bank account is sufficient before you join a higher-tier league. If you're new to the game, I suggest that you spend your money on research tools (like this book!) instead of betting it in a pay league, at least until you've played a full season.

Building a Sportsline private league: Fantasy Football Commissioner

If you decide that CBS Sportsline is a site you enjoy and you want to play in a private fantasy league with people you know, Fantasy Football Commissioner is the way to go. The service costs \$149.95 per league for the full season. I contend that the cost is well worth it — especially if you want to change the default settings in your league or start a keeper league (see Part I). Spread out over 12 teams (an average league size), the cost is less than \$13 per team.

Fantasy Football Commissioner (FFC) is a very powerful, extremely customizable tool for creating or joining your own personal league. You can have almost any league size (up to 30 teams), any league type (head to head or salary cap), and any league scoring modifiers, which you won't find on other sites. Other league providers offer free private leagues, but to get the kind of tools and functions that Sportsline offers, you have to pay to upgrade them (like Yahoo!'s Fantasy Football Plus; see Chapter 13).



If you're invited to join a private league on Sportsline through an e-mail, simply click on the link and follow the instructions to join. Before signing up, however, talk to the commish about the history of the league and the costs. If the coaches are sharks and the stakes are high, you may want to think twice before accepting the offer to join.

To start creating your own league with Fantasy Football Commissioner, follow these steps:

- 1. Go to cbs.sportsline.com.**
- 2. Click on the Fantasy link.**
- 3. Click on the Football Commissioner link in the Football section.**
- 4. Follow the steps to customize your league.**

You'll find a huge range of options for league type, structure, and scoring. There is a lot to do, so if you're a fantasy newbie, I don't recommend being a commish in your first season. (See Chapter 3 for detailed info on a commish's job.)



As a Sportsline commissioner, you can charge fees for any number of actions, such as trades, add/drops, activation/deactivation, and so on. Charging league fees is a smart way to raise the stakes and encourage coaches without forcing them to lay out big money at the start of the season.

The “Fantasy Football Tribune”: Sportsline’s League Home Page

No matter if you play in Sportsline’s free public leagues or in a Fantasy Football Commissioner league, you start all your business at your league home page. The league home page is set up like a newspaper cover page, which helps you access the stuff you need easily.

Many of the features you’ll find on the league home page are self-explanatory, but you need to know your way around the links to draft information and the in-season analysis. These, along with the other options, are vital tools that you should fully exploit. The following list presents links on the league home page that provide all kinds of fantasy information:

- ✔ **Top Story:** The lead football/fantasy story of the day dominates the home page, with links to the stories, columns, and expert advice you need to know to make the tough weekly decisions. You can also create a fake news story and put it in on the cover, which is a great way to taunt your opponents!
- ✔ **Fantasy Exclusives:** Another way to link directly to some of Sportsline’s top fantasy columns.
- ✔ **Player News:** A column with the latest player news league-wide.
- ✔ **My Player News:** Here you can find the latest news on the players who populate your roster. Great for last-minute lineup decisions. (For more on team management, see Chapter 10.)
- ✔ **Message Board:** With the board, you can post questions about the game, create polls for the league, or leave some smack talk for the coach you just beat. This section is archived so you can access any posts for the entire season.
- ✔ **League Standings:** A quick look at your league’s current standings, by division and by overall win/loss record, with links to the teams.
- ✔ **League Info:** Here you can find links to your league rules and settings for reference (very important!), as well as an entire section on draft prep for the preseason (including player

rankings, auction values, projections and stats, and so on; see the following section).

- ✔ **Scouting Links:** Roster trends, depth charts, and injury trackers all work together to inform you. You'll find out who's hot, who's not, who's down for the count, and which players may be stepping into the injured players' spots while they're gone.
- ✔ **Write an Article, Post a Poll:** In FFC, you can use this feature to communicate with the rest of your league. Coaches can write and post their own articles under *League News*, post pictures, and create polls. A poll can be a great way to poke fun at the competition interactively.

The rest of this section walks you through the major parts of the league home page and explains the different links so you can utilize this site to better your game.

Draft Prep

The *Draft Prep* section contains all the links you need to prepare for the pressure cooker that is your league draft. The Sportsline experts create their own cheat sheets of players based on projected stats for the coming year. You can use these pre-rankings as is or customize them to your liking (for more on preparing, see Chapter 4). In addition to rankings, you get the following tools:

- ✔ **Average player draft position** so you can see the latest values being put on players in real drafts (see Chapter 4 for more on mock drafts)
- ✔ **Auction values** of players for anyone in an auction league (see Chapter 8)
- ✔ **Columns** that analyze rookies and potential sleepers, break-out players, and busts — all to give you the “why?” behind some of the numbers
- ✔ **Basic draft-strategy tips** for the complete neophyte who may be struggling to come to terms with the ABCs of building a fantasy team (Chapter 8 has more on draft strategy)

Scoreboard

The *Scoreboard* tab on the league home page contains the links that take you to all the features that deal with weekly head-to-head action. For instance, you can go directly to live scoring of all the current week's fantasy matchups, with live play-by-play coverage of all NFL games. You can also access previews of how you'll match up with your upcoming opponents at every position, a view of

every team's season schedule, and a list of each week's top performers at every position.

The following list presents some *Scoreboard* tools that will help you keep a close eye on how your players and your opponents are doing:



- ✓ **GameCenter:** *GameCenter* shows you scores and real-time stats for all your fantasy players and your opponents' players in your league. Just click on the score of the matchup to get live scoring and stats for that game. Additionally, you can click on any NFL game score and Sportsline will transport you to the NFL *GameCenter*, where you can see live scoring, play-by-play, and updated player stats for every NFL game in progress.

GameCenter also gives you a bar-graph image of every play in the offense's current drive. You can just mouse over the bar segment to get all the details of every play, which allows you to see who's getting the looks and the touches. For the true fantasy football junkie, this is vital information.

- ✓ **Preview:** This feature of the Scoreboard shows how your guys stack up against your opponent's guys. Sportsline's *Fantasy Guru* makes point predictions for members of both teams' starting rosters as well as their backups; what sets Sportsline apart is that its experts offer their reasoning behind the numbers.
- ✓ **Leaders:** This link shows you the NFL leaders in offensive and defensive production, broken down by position for the week.
- ✓ **Full Schedule:** A link to your fantasy matchups every week of the season.
- ✓ **Schedule Grid:** Click here to see every fantasy matchup for every team and every week of the season.
- ✓ **Playoffs Schedule:** When your fantasy tournament begins, this is where you can go to get a look at the road ahead. (See Chapter 12 for more on the fantasy playoffs.)

Standings

The *Standings* link gives you a more detailed breakdown of your league's leaders in many categories. For instance, you can search through info on the following:

- ✓ **Win/loss records:** Which teams are on their way to the playoffs, and which teams need to swing deals quickly to salvage their seasons?
- ✓ **Division records:** Which teams have locked up their divisions, and who must battle for the wild-card slots?

- ✔ **Points for and against:** How many fantasy points your team scores and how many were scored against you often are used as tiebreakers if teams' win-loss records are the same.
- ✔ **Head-to-head comparisons:** Check out how your team has played versus the other teams in your league.
- ✔ **All-time league records:** Who established bests in your multi-year league? Click on *Record Book* to find out.

The league standings have nothing to do with how you play the game, but sports fans like stats, and fantasy fans live for stats. Sportsline gets that, and these kinds of features are what make the site's service stand apart.

Stats

The *Stats* link is your one-stop shopping center for statistics. You can pull up stats on your opponents' players, on free agents, on players by position, and on weekly leaders. You also can design a custom report that allows you to track what stats matter to you and have it sent to your e-mail account.

For the most part, you don't need to know every stat in the book, but it's fun and helpful to browse through them once in awhile. Stats do come in handy when looking to improve your team via free agency or waivers (see Chapter 11). By comparing the players' stats and sorting them by date, you can find guys who are hot right now and in a position to help your team.

Teams

The *Teams* link takes you to a list of your league's teams, their owners, and their owners' contact info. From here you can contact any owner individually or move to his or her team page to see the team's roster (check out the "Fantasy-Traffic Controller: Your Sportsline Team Page" section later in this chapter for more info). You also can find links here that will bring you to your team's page, your full season schedule (including the outcomes of previous games), and the *Schedule Grid* (see the earlier "Scoreboard" section). Keeping in touch with the teams in your league and knowing the schedule always helps when making trade offers down the road (see Chapter 11).



The *Warnings* link alerts you to teams that have illegal rosters during the season. When moving players to and from your bench, you could make your lineup illegal. This is fine during the week,

but if a game starts when you're in violation of the roster requirements, your team will automatically forfeit the game!

Players

The *Players* page is where you get all your vital player information for the fantasy season. You need to spend a lot of time here if you want to be a fantasy contender! Within this link you can search through player news, with several sub-links to all the info, and stats you need to make free agent pickups, research or evaluate trades, and read the buzz on who's hot in the Sportsline universe. The following sections break it down.

Latest News

Latest News is an archive of NFL fantasy news for the entire NFL year, starting with the latest, up-to-the-minute stuff. News is sortable by team, for all free agents, or for all players currently "employed" in the league. During the week or just before kickoff, you can check this page for updates that may affect your lineup and roster decisions.

Free Agents

Free Agents (FA) is the hub of available player information. The main page offers a list of FAs — sortable by position, by offensive stats, or by defensive stats. Click on the category you want to see, and you'll get a list of all the FAs and all the relevant stats, including bye weeks. Sportsline ranks players by production, starting from the most fantasy points and going to least. For much more on free agent strategy, see Chapter 11.

Other Players links

In addition to the main links, you can access the following useful links under the *Players* section:

- ✔ **Player Search:** You get to the player you want directly by entering his last name in the dialog box. You can also search through lists of players based on last name, NFL team, FA category, or fantasy owner's team.
- ✔ **Compare:** You can compare stats of any players you choose on a separate page.

Transactions

Not satisfied with your current team? What can you do about it? Go to the *Transactions* section of the league page. If you've scoured

the free agent lists to try to plug the holes in your roster only to come up empty, the *Transactions* section is the next place to go.

Here you get a list of the entire year's transactions, starting with the most recent additions, drops, and trades. By clicking on *Lineup*, you can even see each team's activations, deactivations, and moves to and from injured reserve. This is good info to have when stating your case during trade proposals. For instance, if you know that the Grape Apes have had a guy you really want sitting on the bench for the last five weeks, you can convince the owner that he or she obviously doesn't need the player that much.

You can sort the transaction and lineup lists to show only add/drops, only trades, only billable transactions (any move for which your league charges a fee), or all transactions. The following sections present even more you can do with the Transactions page.

Add/Drop, Trade, On the Block

The *Add/Drop*, *Trade*, and *On the Block* links are the main links that you'll use when making team changes during the season. Here's how you navigate the links:

- ✓ When adding or dropping, click *Add/Drop* and then highlight both the free agent you want to add and the player you want to drop. Click *Submit* and you're on your way.
- ✓ The *Trade* button presents a drop-down menu of teams to choose from; select a team, highlight all the players involved in your proposal, and submit the trade to the other team for review.
- ✓ After clicking *On the Block*, you can highlight the players you want to trade, list the positions you're looking for in return, and the site will display your options for your entire league to see. If all the coaches in your league use this option, trading becomes easier and less time consuming for everyone.

Trade Bait

The *Trade Bait* feature gives you another way to identify the players who aren't being used by their owners (potential trade bait!). Go to this link to see a list of players who sat on the bench this past week. The list is sorted by position and then by fantasy points produced (or would've produced, I suppose). Each player has his owner's team name next to him, which lets you know who to get in touch with when you find a player you want.

Injuries

The *Injuries* section provides a list of all the players who missed games due to injury, suspension, or any other reason, along with their expected return dates. The list is sortable by all players, all free agents, or all players for a specific team in your league.

Preventing NFL injuries is impossible, but starting injured players in your fantasy lineup is avoidable. Staying up-to-date on injuries is essential when managing your lineup during the season; the *Injuries* section tells you what every fantasy coach needs to know.

Help

If you're unfamiliar with some of the terminology or abbreviations used in fantasy football or by your leaguemates, or if you're having trouble with some of Sportsline's features, just click on *Help* to find the answers you seek. The link provides many topics for research, and several drop-down menus allow you to seek questions and answers that deal with your specific problem.

Fantasy-Traffic Controller: Your Sportsline Team Page

Your Sportsline team page is where all your team info lives. It's like your switchboard for managing and controlling your fantasy universe. By just clicking on your team icon on the top line of the league page (see the previous section), you can link directly to your team page.

You can use the tools and information on your team page to manage your players and conduct the necessary roster changes to make your fantasy team as successful as possible. On the team page, the players are your main focus — your players if you select your team. You can use a pull-down menu that allows you to switch between all the team pages in your league and all the team rosters.

For now, how about I focus on your team. The team page displays your entire roster, broken down into starters and backups. Each player is shown with one set of statistics during game time and another set of stats during the week:

✓ **During the week**, you'll see detailed information about each player:

- His next NFL opponent
- His bye week
- His average fantasy points per week
- His projected stats for the coming week (developed by Sportsline's *Fantasy Guru*)
- His ownership (how many coaches own him) and starter (on how many teams does he start) percentages in all Sportsline leagues

These stats can help you make start/sit decisions, based on performance and matchup, and add/drop transactions in preparation for the coming games.

✓ **During game time**, you'll see live stats next to each of your players as they rack them up, including attempts, rushes, yardage, and so on. You can click on YTD Stats to see your players' compiled stats for the year. And by clicking on any of the Week numbers representing weeks of the NFL season, you can see any player's year-to-date stats up through that week.

Live stats really make the fantasy game more fun to play and the NFL games more fun to watch. I always keep a computer near my television on game day!

You also see a pull-down menu for each player at the far right of your team page. This is where the real team management magic happens. Each menu allows you to move each player from your bench (*reserve*) to your starting lineup (*active*), and vice versa, or to the injured list (*injured*).



Every time you move one of your starters to the bench, Sportsline gives you an *Illegal Roster* warning. Don't worry about it; if you go ahead and replace the player with someone from your bench, the message will disappear. This is an annoying feature of Sportsline, but the site is doing all it can to prevent you from forgetting to fill your roster before kickoff on game day.

The following options also appear on your team page; you can use these options to manage your roster on a week-by-week basis:

- ✓ **Add/Drop:** If you know which player you want to pick up, just click here for the quickest route to making roster changes (see Chapter 11 for more on player acquisition).
- ✓ **Find Free Agent:** This links you to the *Player Search* page (see the "Players" section earlier in this chapter).

- ✔ **Trade:** You can use this link to initiate a trade (see the “Transactions” section earlier in the chapter).
- ✔ **Top Lineup:** This function is a quick way to put all your best players at every position in your starting lineup (as long as the site deems it legal).



Be careful with the *Top Lineup* link; it considers your “best” players to be the ones who have the highest average fantasy points per game *at that moment*. If some of your studs are returning from injury, the weeks they missed count as zero points, so Sportsline won’t consider them the best. Make sure you decide who you want to start and enter your choices manually, just to be safe.

Chapter 15

ESPN Fantasy Football: Virtual Sportscenter 24/7

In This Chapter

- ▶ Breaking down your options on ESPN's fantasy site
 - ▶ Getting the EDGE or being an Insider
 - ▶ Walking through the home, league, and team pages
-

ESPN.com is the now-grown-up little Web sister of the giant ESPN television and radio network. This massive site covers sports from A to Z, and it has plenty of in-depth coverage of fantasy football. The site also is a major provider of league services, and its fantasy tools are state of the art. This chapter gives you the nuts and bolts of ESPN's fantasy football offerings and premium services.

If you've been invited to join an ESPN league, you can get a jump on how to navigate the site and take full advantage of its tools. If you're still considering joining an ESPN league or starting your own league, you can compare ESPN to the other major providers in Part IV before paying any league fees.

Understanding ESPN's Fantasy Site and Your Three Options

To explore the fantasy portion of ESPN's Web site, start at ESPN's main page — espn.go.com — click on the *Fantasy* tab, and you're there. You can utilize the toolbar to navigate the entirety of ESPN.com, but below the toolbar is a plethora of fantasy advice, games, and stats.



The fantasy main page is a bit cluttered with banner and video ads, so I recommend that you have broadband if you decide to play on this site. The interactive bells and whistles (Web casts, full-motion NFL videos, and so on) are fun to use and watch if your computer

can handle the data. From the fantasy page, you just click on the *Football* tab to start your journey. You can join a league or create one, or you can buy an ESPN product. After you choose a product (see the following breakdowns first), just follow the instructions.

This section explains the three options offered by ESPN for playing fantasy football (free, the EDGE, and the Insider), covers their features, and helps you navigate the options and their Web pages.

Playing ESPN.com's free fantasy football

The free version of fantasy football on ESPN's site is fully functional, despite what the many site ads may say in order to convince you to upgrade to EDGE or the Insider (see the next two sections for more on these pay games). The various links and pull-down menus are fairly intuitive, and the page's format is wider than on other sites, which is nice if you're using a widescreen monitor.



ESPN's free version of fantasy football offers the basic tools needed to play in a league, but most of the expert fantasy advice isn't available. If you don't want to pay for this site's premium content, you can surf the Web for other fantasy sites to round out your fantasy knowledge without the fees.

How do you draft and manage your team on a weekly basis while using the free portion of the ESPN site? What are your options, and what features do you get? Don't worry. The following list has you covered:

- ✓ **League manager controls:** The *league manager* (also known as the *commissioner*; see Chapter 3) sets up the league using the league manager controls. Free leagues give the manager control over the customizable settings, such as scoring rules, trade deadlines, league size, and so on. I like that ESPN.com doesn't charge for full functionality in league managers.



ESPN's projections, tools, and columns are based on the standard scoring system. If you're creating or managing a league, I strongly recommend that you use the standard scoring system. The site's advice, especially its draft kit, may be affected by a customized league.

- ✓ **Create/Join a private or public league:** You can join a free public league or get invited to a private league by your friends, among other options. ESPN.com's public leagues are divided by regions, which is a clever idea. The division puts all the players in the same time zone, and they can get to know each other while ranting about their home team on the message board.



When joining a league and preparing for the draft, make sure you send a league e-mail (using the link on your league home page) and ask if the commish changed any settings when creating your league.

- ✔ **Live online draft or offsite draft:** A rich Java applet supports online drafting in all the leagues. Available players and team rosters are easy to find and even easier to read. The ESPN draft board even shows a picture of the player selected, which adds to the fun. The overall presentation mirrors ESPN's television coverage of the NFL draft, blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. ESPN also allows the commish to enter the league's rosters manually if you have an offsite draft.
- ✔ **Community features:** You can keep in touch with your friends or foes via your league chat room or taunt everyone at once on ESPN league's message board — the *smack board*. You can also e-mail the other coaches with trade offers or just whine to your commish about the waiver rules. Here's another unique ESPN idea: If you want to taunt someone personally, you can just send the owner a "smack card."
- ✔ **Custom league name and team names/logos:** Although the "Hollywood Football League" is taken, original and humorous league and team names are a must in fantasy sports. Just fill in the blanks in this feature to get going. And why settle for a generic helmet for your team when you can create your own? The *Logo Builder* tool lets you choose the colors of your helmet and place letters or phrases on the side.
- ✔ **League polls:** Coaches can create polls and call for votes at any time. The polls can be general NFL rankings or more personal references to the rest of the league.

Becoming the Insider

ESPN.com offers its Insider service for \$6.95 a month. With this subscription, you get advice, columns, and stories from ESPN experts. For die-hard fans who already love the reporters on ESPN, this info is fun and helpful to read; for casual fans, though, I think the cost is a bit expensive considering all the crucial NFL news you can find elsewhere for free.

Here's what you can expect from Insider just for fantasy football:

- ✔ **Scouting reports and expert analysis:** ESPN's top football analysts and fantasy experts provide in-depth coverage of all the NFL teams before and during the season. You can find statistics and injury reports online at no cost, but ESPN's reporters offer unique insight into how the stats and injuries affect fantasy teams.

- ✔ **Player projections:** You get full access to preseason player projections by ESPN experts, and the site updates the projections on a weekly basis during the season.
- ✔ **Wireless updates:** With Insider, you can link your team page to your cellphone. If one of your players gets a touchdown, gets injured, or gets arrested, you'll know right away. That way, you can excuse yourself from the dinner table to get online and change your lineup!
- ✔ **Real-time scoring:** For every NFL game, you can log on to ESPN and get updates on every play as it happens. This feature covers the actual game scores, not your fantasy scores.

Gaining the EDGE

For \$29.95, you can upgrade your ESPN.com fantasy team to give it the EDGE. For a casual player, this may be too much to pay, but if you're serious about winning your league, the EDGE offers all the free features plus plenty of additional tools and articles that make drafting and managing your fantasy squad easier. In free leagues, each team has the option to upgrade to the service, and if you do upgrade and other teams don't, you literally have an "edge"!



The Insider service is geared toward year-round sports nuts, not just fantasy football players. If you just want more fantasy advice, sign up for the EDGE. **Note:** You get all the free and pay fantasy tools with EDGE, but not Insider content.

The following list presents some of the added features in the EDGE; the more knowledge you can get, the better your team will be:

- ✔ **A draft kit:** You get a full set of preseason player rankings, team breakdowns, sleeper picks, expert draft tips, cheat sheets, and more. Many Web sites offer great draft kits, and you may prefer working from fantasy magazines, but ESPN does provide a nice draft package.
- ✔ **Premium integrated content:** Although ESPN's content is solid and its delivery system is excellent, the site reserves its best content for paying customers. With EDGE, you get the latest stats, injury news, matchup analysis, and fantasy projections for the week from ESPN's fantasy experts.
- ✔ **FantasyCast:** An in-game Java applet that tracks your team's (and league's) results in real time during the NFL season. The software works well with a broadband connection, and it gives you a fun way to follow your team.

- ✔ **Prize-eligible league:** For \$99.95, you can create a premium EDGE league and split the costs amongst the owners. Everyone in the league will get the EDGE features. If you have a league of ten or more coaches, this is a good deal. Your league's winner receives either a championship T-shirt or a mini-banner, and he or she becomes eligible for a grand prize from ESPN.
- ✔ **Advanced trade review:** Normally, a league's commissioner handles trade reviews, or they go to a vote amongst the league's coaches. In an EDGE league, a panel of ESPN experts reviews trades that have been accepted by at least two owners. This is a nice option to have, especially if your league is filled with competitive friends who want to remain friends after the season!



You can add additional teams to EDGE for \$17.95, and if you're already an Insider, you can upgrade to EDGE for only \$19.95 instead of the regular fee of \$29.95.

Navigating Your ESPN League

ESPN makes the navigation of its fantasy site easy for users, which is one of its main advantages. On ESPN.com's fantasy football main page, you can find the links to your team(s) and league(s) right below the tools section. You can head to your league page or your team page directly after signing in with your ESPN.com user name and password.

The fantasy football main page is your primary research source during the season, but much of the action will take place on the league and team pages. This section covers all the pages so you can find your way around the fantasy site and utilize the features.

Painting the big picture: The fantasy football main page

You can find all the NFL news you can stomach and useful fantasy reports on the fantasy football main page. The following sections break down the main page.



Much of the advice you find here is available only if you purchase Insider and/or EDGE. The premium services are worth paying for if you want a lot of solid fantasy advice all under one roof.

Words of wisdom on the main page

The following list gives you a rundown of the weekly words of wisdom from the ESPN staff:

- ✔ **Fantasy Insight:** The ESPN experts give you their takes on the week's games, how you can expect the major names to perform, and who may play a sleeper role in a big game. They also break down the previous week's fantasy studs and duds and lay out predictions for the upcoming games.
- ✔ **10 Things:** This article gives you ten of the most important developments that could affect your fantasy world. Think you know what's up in the NFL? This column gives you news about emerging players, team trends, personnel changes, and so on. Keep up with this column to find out why the coming week may be different from the last.
- ✔ **Out of the Box:** This page gives you a bunch of cold, hard facts about hot players for the week's matchups.
- ✔ **Stopgap Seven:** So, your star WR went down with a hamstring injury and his backup broke his leg? Check out this page for expert opinion on the best available players on the free agent market. You can plug your holes with quietly productive no-name guys or underachievers with especially good matchups; the guidance is at your fingertips at Stopgap.
- ✔ **Injuries:** ESPN's injury guru gives detailed analyses of injured players and their prospects for the current week. Will they play or not? If they do play, will they be effective or run around the field as decoys?
- ✔ **Player projections:** During the season, experts provide you with specific fantasy projections for all the major positional players in every game, and they back up their predictions with solid reasoning. No player is a lock to produce on any given Sunday, but these guys give you the inside scoop on who's going to have a big day, who's going to be a bust, and why. Their predictions are fully sortable by position, team matchup, and total projected points.
- ✔ **Live chats with experts:** Log into the chat rooms at the posted times and ask the experts directly for analysis and advice.
- ✔ **Ranks:** You can find rankings of the expected top fantasy producers, by position, based on matchups and season production to date.
- ✔ **Matchups:** The matchups page gives you another perspective on the week's games from a fantasy point of view. The writers often reference factors to consider that I stress in Chapters 10 and 11, such as weather outlook and key injuries.

- ✔ **Positional notes:** You can find comments on specific QBs, RBs, and WRs, illustrating which recent trends the writers think are likely to continue or come to an end.
- ✔ **Mailbag:** Experts answer reader questions for the upcoming week. You can look to see if any questions address a player on your roster, or you can write in with your own question.

Specialized tools

On ESPN's fantasy football main page, you see a box labeled "Tools." The box contains a vast assortment of links to the many resources that ESPN.com has to offer a fantasy football player. Some of these tools will keep you informed while you're preparing for the draft (see Chapter 4); some will help when you're making player moves during the season (see Chapter 10); and others will just be fun to review as the season unfolds. Here are some highlights from the tools available on the main football page:

- ✔ **FFL Points Against:** This is my favorite research tool on ESPN's site. As the season progresses, this tool keeps track of how many fantasy points the NFL defenses surrender, by total and by position. It's an invaluable way to see how your players' opponents have fared against each position. When making tough lineup decisions, you always want to start the player who has the best chance of scoring fantasy points that week. The FFL Points Against tool lets you know who has the better matchup. You may want to make a switch.
- ✔ **Live Draft Results:** A compilation of actual drafts that allows you to find out the average fantasy draft position of the top 200 NFL players. Use this list to see, at a glance, if you're reaching for a player who should be available later or if you have a chance to steal a high-value pick.
- ✔ **Player News:** This feature is a weekly must-check for any serious fantasy player. You discover all the latest on injuries (did your WR with the bad hamstring practice on Thursday?); you find out who's in the coach's doghouse; and you see who got the snaps with the first team. Don't get caught out of the loop; check this link on a regular basis right up until game time.
- ✔ **Leaderboard:** This page shows the overall standings for ESPN's full-season contest. Anyone who's a member of an EDGE league with a standard scoring system is eligible for this contest. The eligible team with the most accumulated fantasy points, system-wide, that also finishes in first place in its league wins the Grand Prize.
- ✔ **Correspondents:** The pieces on this page, written by ESPN's NFL beat writers, are sorted by NFL team and archived. These articles give you current outlooks and past analyses of each team in the league.

- ✔ **Briefing Room:** Another place to go for all the latest news on your players. See how the latest QB controversy or running back by committee situation develops during the week, get injury updates, or find out who had a “domestic incident” and severed a tendon in his hand.
- ✔ **Added/Dropped:** Sometimes, it seems like other fantasy players know something you don’t. This link gives you a list of the most added and dropped players over the last week so you can get up to speed. You find out what percentage of owners had a certain player on their teams last week, how many have him this week, and the percentage gain or loss in ownership.
- ✔ **Stat Changes:** The NFL’s scorekeepers are only human, and mistakes are made. The Elias Sports Bureau reviews the games and confirms the stats. When the stats are changed, they can change the results in fantasy football matchups. If you went to sleep with a win and woke up with a half-point loss, this link will tell you why.
- ✔ **Injuries:** A cross-referenced guide to player injuries. This page gives you the latest injury news, plus links to the injured player, the injury archive, ESPN content, and the player’s team. The archive and player links are the most useful tools, because they allow you to see the injury’s history as well as the player’s injury history.
- ✔ **Scoring Leaders:** Sortable stats for every player, ranked by fantasy production. You can research the top points-producers for any week; for the whole season; for a single team; for a single position; or for the entire league.
- ✔ **Undroppables:** A short list of players whom teams in your league can’t drop. This restriction prevents collusion.

Focusing on the competition: The league page

Your league’s main page is the bridge from the main page to your team page and it has everything you need to follow your league’s action. It may not have all the bells and video whistles that ESPN’s other pages have, but it does use an intuitive “click and go” interface to help you navigate. The following list walks you through the page and explains the function of each feature:

- ✔ **Standings/matchups:** The shaded box displays either the current league standings or current matchups, depending on the tab you select. In the matchups tab, you can access any league box score and launch the live FantasyCast application (if you’re signed up for EDGE).

- ✔ **League messages:** A posting board where you can leave messages for the coaches in your league or just read the messages left by the other coaches. (Another option, the smack board, is live chat.)
- ✔ **My player news:** The latest headlines with respect to your fantasy team: injuries, stats, and sound bites. This box shows a collection of news briefs pertaining to players on your roster.
- ✔ **Recent league activity:** A rundown of the latest free agent signings, waiver acquisitions, and trades in your league. The ability to easily keep track of other teams' movements is a nice perk and is something that could easily be forgotten otherwise. (Check out Chapter 11 for more on how to sign free agents, acquire waiver players, and trade players.)
- ✔ **League player news:** This box gives you the major headlines from around the league on a player-by-player basis, not just the players you own.
- ✔ **Tools:** You can find a set of useful links grouped in a box on the league page. Here they are:
 - Added/dropped
 - Scoring leaders
 - Injuries
 - Send an e-mail
 - League message board
 - League chat
- ✔ **Top toolbar:** You can find the following links on the top toolbar of the league page:
 - **Standings:** A more detailed look at the standings.
 - **Players:** Takes you to the list of available players, sortable by position. This page features the players' fantasy projections if you have EDGE (see the earlier section "Gaining the EDGE").
 - **Scoreboard:** Displays all current league matchups, with the scores in progress (updated automatically), links to limited or full box scores, a preview of the matchups based on current lineups, and another link to FantasyCast (offered on EDGE). You also can review completed weeks from your league.
 - **League info:** A complete rundown of your league's settings, rules, owners, draft results, current rosters, schedules, and contact options. You also find a summary of scoring adjustments for the season. The page is like a hyperlinked table of contents, as opposed to endless scrolling. Just point and click on what you need to know.

Managing your team page

Your fantasy team's page is the station from where you, the captain, control your ship. Your complete roster is on display, and pull-down menus attached to each player let you choose between making that player *active*, putting him on the *bench*, or *dropping* him altogether.

There are also plenty of tabs and links that allow you to quickly access fantasy information and your fantasy tools. Here are some of the highlights:

- ✔ **Add a player:** You can see a list of the available players at each position.
- ✔ **Schedule:** See a complete list of your league's matchup schedule.
- ✔ **Transaction log:** A list of your league's transactions for the year.
- ✔ **Waiver order:** The current waiver priority list, in reverse order of finish based on last week's fantasy results. The losing team with the lowest point total receives the first waiver priority, and so on.
- ✔ **Your opponent's team page:** Check out what he or she plans to do this week.
- ✔ **Box score:** Check out the rosters for each team and your score during the week's game.
- ✔ **Edit:** You can alter your team info and logo.
- ✔ **Extras:** You can sign up for wireless alerts with a paid account.
- ✔ **Overview:** You can see your starters and your bench players, complete with recent stats, rankings, and pull-down menus you can use to start or sit them (only with EDGE).
- ✔ **Stats:** A complete breakdown of individual player stats.
- ✔ **Projections:** Fantasy point predictions for your players by ESPN fantasy experts (only with EDGE).
- ✔ **Schedule:** A list of all the upcoming NFL games for each of your players.



If you're using the free version of ESPN fantasy football, the info you get from these tabs is minimal — as of press time — but you can click on any player on your roster to receive more detailed information (such as his point totals for the season). Also, you can click on any NFL game score to get the complete box score from ESPN.

Chapter 16

Checking Out Some Other Popular Providers

In This Chapter

- ▶ Using Rotowire to bolster your team
- ▶ Taking your game to another level at Fanball
- ▶ Assimilating fantasy facts at Rotoworld

The first three chapters in Part IV review three of the more popular fantasy football providers on the Web. If you're new to fantasy football, those three sites are great places to start. If you've been playing fantasy for a few years, and/or you want access to great expert fantasy advice and information, though, you're now in the right place. Fanball (www.fanball.com), Rotowire (www.rotowire.com), and Rotoworld (www.rotoworld.com) offer the fantasy football player all the extra insight and advice he or she can handle.

Of course, to access the great info on these sites, you do have to drop some bucks. But look at it this way: If you're playing in a free or low-stakes league, you can take the money you save and get this great advice to gain an edge on opponents. And if you're playing in a higher-stakes league, why not spend the extra money to make sure your investment is a wise one?

This chapter focuses on the unique features of these sites, not their league provider services. To really get to know them, I suggest you check them out for yourself as you read along.



Rotowire is offering a 30-day trial and a free draft kit to you, the loyal *Fantasy Football For Dummies* reader — a great value and a must-have for your draft prep (see Chapter 4)! For more details, check out the coupon in the back of this book.

Rotowire: Charge Up Your Game

Rotowire (www.rotowire.com) is an online source for fantasy facts and figures that focuses on expert analysis and late-breaking injury news 24/7 so that you can outmanage your leaguemates and get a jump on signing potential free agent breakout stars. The site sets itself apart through its depth and breadth of fantasy coverage, and it offers a number of unique features of great value to both the fantasy novice and the expert.

For instance, Rotowire's expert writers provide the daily player updates to Yahoo! (see Chapter 13) and ESPN (see Chapter 15) in all the major fantasy sports. Each player update contains a brief spin on how the news affects fantasy coaches.



For the more in-depth player updates and fantasy implications, you have to become a premium member of Rotowire. Subscribers receive complete draft kits for football (and baseball) and daily and weekly player rankings based on your league's scoring system (for more on scoring systems, see Chapter 2). In fact, to access the vast majority of the fantasy materials on Rotowire (including most of the helpful information), you must pay for the services. For \$35.99, at press time, you get a full-season pass to access all the tools in this section — tools that help you draft your fantasy roster and manage your team.

This section focuses on the subscription services of Rotowire, which make up a great deal of the site's content. To sign up for membership, just head to www.rotowire.com and click on the Sign In link. If you're not a member already, just follow the instructions to join. After you sign up as a paying member, click on the NFL link at the top of the main page to access a goldmine of football stats, tools, articles, and advice.

Subscribing to Rotowire's premium links, articles, and tools

Rotowire's fantasy features are what set the site apart. It offers many articles by fantasy experts, tools you can use to put the best team on the "field" each week, and links to great fantasy information. The following sections highlight some of these features.

Rotowire links

Rotowire has plenty of links on its site that you can click on for more information. This information can give you an edge when playing fantasy football. This list highlights some of the best:

- ✔ **Latest Player News:** This link presents all news items with any fantasy significance, starting with the most recent events and dating back to the beginning of the season. The list is sortable by team or by position.
- ✔ **Injuries:** Here you can find the latest news about a player's health status. Your draft and your lineup decisions often hinge on the players' health concerns, and no site gives you a better fantasy spin on the injury reports than Rotowire.
- ✔ **Top News Recap:** Gives you only the top fantasy developments from the past few days. This is a great tool if you've been out of touch and don't want to skim over the scores of entries since you last logged on to the site.
- ✔ **Team News:** Here you can keep up with each team's prospects for the coming year. You can visit this page quickly to catch up with a month's worth of info about events that can have important implications across the league.
- ✔ **Advanced Search:** This link allows you to look through news about a specific player.

Rotowire articles

The articles on Rotowire can give you some insight and perspective about players that can help you make decisions with your roster and draft strategy. The following list covers some of my favorite fantasy articles, written by fantasy experts and found only on Rotowire:

- ✔ **Barometer:** A weekly take on some of the major fantasy players and what kind of production you can expect in the weeks to come. Which rising stars are here to stay and which will fade away after a few good weeks? Which studs are likely to go bust in the near future? Which sleepers are about to wake up? Come here to find out the answers.
- ✔ **Injury analysis:** Rotowire's own orthopedic specialist discusses fantasy players' injuries from a clinical point of view and explains the science behind the injury. Few fantasy Web sites have their own resident medical experts.
- ✔ **Value Meter:** Weekly player rankings at each position based on team and individual matchups. The *Value Meter* can help you decide who to start and who to sit during the regular season.



Personally, I find the *Value Meter* fairly conservative. For example, the article will always rank a great QB with a terrible matchup ahead of an average QB with a great matchup. For novice players, this is good advice, but sometimes I like to start players with a higher risk factor for a higher reward.

- ✔ **East Coast Offense:** Rotowire's senior editor rants and raves about the NFL in his column. His humorous and well-written comments on players and playing fantasy football are both entertaining and informative.
- ✔ **Breakfast Table:** This article is a compilation of e-mails sent between two of Rotowire's top staff writers on Monday and Tuesday mornings. *Breakfast Table* is unlike other player rankings and game breakdowns in that these guys take their time in explaining their thoughts and opinions on the latest football news. They also tend to disagree and debate, which makes for a good read and a useful coaching tool.
- ✔ **Game Capsules:** Every week, Rotowire breaks down all the NFL matchups in this article, putting recent player performances and team developments in perspective and making predictions for all the major fantasy players.

Rotowire tools

The following list of tools and features found on Rotowire are similar to other expert info at other fantasy sites, but Rotowire's writers really dig deep when making their opinions heard, giving you a good amount of bang for your buck:

- ✔ **Fantasy-driven NFL team pages:** On the Rotowire NFL page, you can see that Rotowire provides a page link for each NFL team. Unlike at other sites, these links won't send you to the teams' official sites. All the pertinent fantasy information about a team is right there for you in a neat, condensed form. Each page includes the team's full schedule, full roster, recent Web logs/comments about player performance, recent player and team news, and so on.
- ✔ **Depth charts/quick depth charts:** These links provide you with updated offensive depth charts for a single team or for all NFL teams. If you're looking for help at any position, see who's next in line to move into the starting lineup if a starter gets hurt.
- ✔ **Cheat sheets:** This section of Rotowire gives you rankings for all offensive positions (including team defense). From there, you can link to any player's page if you want to know more about him, or you can link to individual defensive players if your league features those positions. Bye weeks are included for all players. You can print out the sheets and take them to your draft! (For more on creating cheat sheets, see Chapter 4.)

- ✔ **Expert advice:** You can submit questions about anything fantasy related to the Rotowire experts and wait for answers, and you can read Q&As from other Rotowire subscribers. You can ask two questions per week; I use my two questions almost every week during the season!
- ✔ **Team Defense Analysis:** This tool tracks all the offseason moves on defense and tells you what they mean so you can prepare before your draft (see Chapter 4). During the season, this section will help you keep track of injuries to defensive starters and analyze the competency of their backups. The experts also detail how each defense matches up against its opponent for the week.
- ✔ **Offensive Line Grid:** This report covers the issues that affect run blocking and pass protection in detail to warn you about any potentially nasty Sunday surprises. No matter the issue or injury on a team's offensive line, you need to know about it, and this feature will tell you. An invaluable tool for any serious coach!
- ✔ **Red Zone Stats:** This tool lets you know how often your fantasy guy is his team's go-to guy close to the goal line. Yardage is nice, but touchdowns are key (or everything if you're in a TD-only league). This feature is especially useful for WRs and TEs. For the most part, you know who the goal-line RB is on a team, but you may not know who the quarterback likes to throw to in red-zone situations.

Opting for Rotowire's draft kit

As a premier fantasy information provider, Rotowire offers an excellent draft kit for all types of fantasy leagues and scoring systems (see Part I for this information). Without this book, the kit costs Rotowire users \$14.99, but with it, it's on the house. Rotowire's draft kit includes the following features that can help you as you prepare for your draft day (for more on draft preparation, see Chapter 4):

- ✔ **Custom Rankings:** Rotowire can provide you with player rankings catered to your scoring system. Just fill in the points your league awards for yardage gained, TDs, and bonuses (if applicable), and the site will give you cheat sheets for all positions, which you can use to make draft decisions. (Chapter 2 covers the basics of fantasy scoring systems.)
- ✔ **Dollar Values:** This feature provides you with suggested dollar values for players in an auction league (for more on auction leagues and auction strategy, see Chapters 4 and 8), based on your league's scoring system. This is a great tool if you're in a non-standard scoring league, because auction values for unique scoring systems are very hard to find.

- ✔ **Custom IDP Rankings:** Individual defensive player (IDP) rankings are fully customizable for your league's scoring system. Just enter your system to get a cheat sheet of rankings for all IDPs, or you can get separate sheets for each defensive position. (To get the scoop on IDP leagues, see Chapter 3.)
- ✔ **Projected Stats:** Rotowire projects season stats for all offensive and defensive positions, based on past performance and good old-fashioned football know-how.
- ✔ **Projected Stat Changes:** A list of recent changes made to their projections which could affect your own pre-rankings.
- ✔ **Mock Drafts:** Whether you're a first-timer or a fantasy warrior, participating in a mock draft can be an invaluable experience. You do a dry run in real time and then make any necessary adjustments to your draft strategy before draft day. Seeing what players are being drafted in certain rounds can help you decide whether to take a player in a particular round or wait and see if he lasts another round.

Fanball: Gaining the Edge

Fanball is one of the biggest fantasy football sites that isn't linked to a search engine (like Yahoo!) or a sports Web site (like ESPN.com). Fanball has a variety of fantasy options and contests, in addition to one of the most customizable league commissioner features anywhere (see Chapter 3 for more). The advice and research are detailed and thorough, and the site's years of fantasy experience have earned it trust and a loyal fan base.

Fanball has some free resources, but the site's pay feature, Owner's Edge, is outstanding. Owner's Edge gives you access to fantasy information for *all* fantasy sports and is available for purchase on a monthly or yearly basis. The monthly fee is \$9.95, and the yearly subscription is \$59.95. Just click on the OE symbol anywhere on the Fanball home page and follow the instructions. The expert articles are excellent, and I've found their predictions to be reliable over the years. If you're serious about fantasy football and have some experience under your belt, Fanball's fee is a good investment — especially if you're playing for more than bragging rights!



The monthly price doesn't offer you much of a break, so if you play multiple fantasy sports on Fanball, I suggest that you sign up for the full year.

Fanball articles

The following list breaks down the expert articles you can access by signing up for Fanball's Owner's Edge:

- ✔ **Bench/Start:** This article gives you hardcore info so you can make those tough calls on who to bench and who to start. Specializing in borderline players — not just the studs everyone has heard of — this column tells you which mediocre players have the best chance to come up big this week and which will likely tank.
- ✔ **Fantasy Football Mailbag:** Real questions from real Fanball coaches, and real answers from real Fanball experts. If you have a specific question about your fantasy team (“Should I drop a player?” “Can you review a trade offer?”), you can ask the staff at Fanball. You can also check in to see if someone else in the same boat just got your question answered.
- ✔ **Hot Pickups:** Be the first to read about potential breakout players or hole-pluggers right here.
- ✔ **Pick Up Joint:** This article provides waiver-wire advice (see Chapter 11) along a few different lines of interest:
 - **One Night Stands** makes recommendations for players that the experts expect to do well in the coming week.
 - **Irreconcilable Differences** picks several studs that you can label as busts and advises you to give up on them and cut your losses.
 - **Nothing to See Here** warns you about attractive free agents who the experts think will be heading south in the near future.
- ✔ **Off Tackle/Go For Two:** These columns are discussions on selected apropos fantasy topics with no particular theme other than current relevance.
- ✔ **Buy Low/Sell High:** This article gives trading recommendations and advice to help you improve your lineup as your season progresses. Keep up with this column to stay ahead of the curve — in other words, to get rid of players nearing the end of their honeymoon periods and replace them with guys who are about to bust out of slumps.

Fanball tools

Fanball offers several helpful features and tools, not just excellent articles. You can utilize these features to ensure that you get your money's worth from Fanball and that you have an advantage over

your unsuspecting leaguemates. The following list helps you navigate the many features on the Owner's Edge main page:

- ✔ **Cheat sheets:** Fanball's expert staff creates multiple preseason rankings based on different scoring systems. When making your cheat sheets, you should start out by basing them on the expert sheets you research; Fanball's experts are solid in this regard. They also update their cheat sheets weekly during the season. (Check out Chapter 4 for information on how to make your own cheat sheets.)
- ✔ **Mock draft:** Practice makes perfect, so Fanball allows its Owner's Edge subscribers to participate in as many mock drafts as they want before their actual drafts. A *mock draft* is simply a practice draft that isn't attached to a league; you can test out some draft strategy without committing to another team for a full season. (Chapter 4 explains why mock drafts are important.)
- ✔ **Position-by-position previews:** Fanball breaks down its expert player rankings by position before the season begins. A lot of league providers have player rankings, but Fanball offers plenty of insight to explain how its experts came to their conclusions.
- ✔ **Matchups:** Each week, Fanball gives you a look at the major fantasy players in every NFL game and predicts how they'll produce this Sunday. The advice here may tip the scales on a lineup decision you're struggling with.
- ✔ **Injury tracker:** This feature provides detailed injury updates before the season, throughout the week during the season, and on game day. The site has injury information on the entire league, of course, but the injury tracker will quickly notify you about any key injuries on your team.
- ✔ **Overall rankings:** Every week, Fanball ranks players in terms of production and matchup. The site gives rankings by position for all offensive positions, for team defense, and for linemen, linebackers, and defensive backs for individual defensive player leagues (see Chapter 3 for more on IDP leagues). When making weekly lineup decisions, check with the Fanball experts and see who they think will score the most points that week.
- ✔ **Podcasts:** You can find and download helpful and entertaining podcasts, where the guys from Fanball recap the previous week and make predictions for the upcoming games. I prefer to read the articles on my computer, but you may prefer to listen to comparable information on your MP3 player.
- ✔ **Live chat:** Fanball hosts chat rooms for fantasy coaches and experts to share their fantasy questions and wisdom with the masses. If you have questions, why not poll the experts and some other coaches in a chat room? You might find answers that can win games!

Playing fantasy football on Fanball

If you're interested in finding a site at which to join a fantasy league (check out Chapter 3 for more info), Fanball Commissioner is an excellent league-hosting feature. If you're joining a Fanball league, you'll find all the tools you need to manage your fantasy squad, just like at Yahoo!, ESPN.com, and CBS Sportsline. And if you want to start your own league, you can just choose the Fanball Commissioner link under the Fantasy Games heading and then click on Create a New League on the next page. Fanball will walk you through the steps to customizing your league size, structure, schedule, playoff format, scoring system, and free agent acquisition rules.

Having many options for scoring systems is one of the best features of Fanball Commissioner. You can choose from a number of different standard scoring options, or you can build your league's scoring system from scratch. If you choose the latter option, you can award points for virtually anything. I highly recommend taking the time to use this option if you want to be a Fanball commish!

Rotoworld: A Compendium of Fantasy Facts

Rotoworld is one of the best and most established Web sites for fantasy information and is a great complementary resource to your hosting site (see Chapters 13, 14, and 15 for the most common hosting sites). Why do you want to use a Web site like this if you already get player news from your fantasy football hosting site? Because you're a fantasy football junky, you want every scrap of info you can get your hands on, and you want to get an edge over your teammates!

You can access a huge amount of free information or pay for premium content. This section gives you the 4-1-1 on Rotoworld. Head to www.rotoworld.com, click on the NFL link, and search along with what I discuss. **Note:** As of press time, Rotoworld's league provider site was being retooled, but be sure to look for it when visiting the main page.

Rotoworld's free services

You don't have to pay any money to take advantage of some of Rotoworld's fantasy football content. The following list details the free links you can access on Rotoworld's site. Scour this info as you scout for players and manage your team on a weekly basis:



- ✔ **Player News:** You can search for all relevant player news, starting with the most recent events. You can sort the news to highlight only certain teams or only certain positions, including individual defensive players (IDPs; see Chapter 3).
If you're in an IDP league, the player news information on Rotoworld is almost indispensable, because many other sites don't have this kind of in-depth IDP news.
- ✔ **Headlines:** This link gives you another way to access an archive of all the top stories for the season. Rotoworld gathers these articles from various local newspapers, based on their fantasy relevance.
- ✔ **Injuries:** Rotoworld's coverage of injuries is very comprehensive. Team by team, you get a list of every player whose status is in question for the coming NFL week — due to injury, suspension, or for any other reason. The list includes all offensive and defensive players.
- ✔ **Transactions:** This link provides a record of all the latest NFL transactions — from trades, to signings, to roster cuts. When scouting players, you need to know where they'll be playing, right? (Check out Part II for more info on scouting the league.)
- ✔ **Depth Charts:** This page provides a quick look at NFL depth charts, sorted by division (which means you see four teams to a page). You can look at charts for just offensive, just defensive, or both offensive and defensive players. Click on any player for a pop-up window featuring the most recent news about him.
- ✔ **Local Papers:** Here you can access all the local news you can handle. This link gives you direct links to two or three newspapers from all 32 NFL cities. If the fantasy headlines aren't enough, you can read every local article for every team — in total, close to 100 local papers (although you may need to quit your day job!).

Rotoworld's premium content

Rotoworld also offers a great deal of premium content. If you're a stat junky and you want to get an extra edge in your fantasy league, the premium content is well worth the cost. As with all pay sites, Rotoworld covers the popular fantasy topics, but I recommend this site because of the quality of the writing and the spot-on analysis.



If you want to become a serious fantasy football player in the years to come, I suggest that you frequent multiple research sites, read their articles, and see how their predictions pan out during the season. If you do this with multiple expert sites, you'll build your own list of expert bookmarks that you can count on for years to come. Good fantasy research is all about comparing the expert rankings and then using the results to form your own opinion.

To get Rotoworld's special features and customizable reports, you must subscribe to the *Rotoworld Season Pass* at a cost of \$14.95 a year. Rotoworld also has a great draft kit for only \$9.99.

The following list presents some of the features you can enjoy with the *Pass* and the *Kit*:

- ✔ **Target Reports:** These tell you how many times your receivers (WRs and TEs) were thrown to during last week's games — not just how many receptions they had. This stat is important because you can determine if a player just had a bad day (and should still start next week) or if he really isn't in his team's game plan anymore and should be reevaluated as a fantasy starter.
 - ✔ **Workload Reports:** The total percentage of offensive plays *and* the percentage of team production a player was responsible for in last week's game. Basically, this tool gives you a full performance review, including the following:
 - Rushing attempts plus targets
 - Total plays the team ran versus total plays your guy was involved in
 - Rushing and receiving yards
 - Touchdowns
- If one of your RBs had mediocre numbers but was still responsible for 53 percent of his team's offense, for example, you can remain confident in his ability. However, if he had mediocre numbers because he split carries with the rookie RB who may be replacing him in the future, you may want to consider other options.
- ✔ **Wired:** Rotoworld's weekly look at players who are probably available in most fantasy leagues' free agent pools. Here you can find out which promising likely-to-be-available players may not be available for long. With the information here, you can shore up the weak positions on your roster through free agent acquisitions (for more, see Chapter 11).

- ✔ **Sunday Schooled:** This is where Rotoworld's experts break down the action from the early and late games every NFL Sunday. You can find stats analysis and commentary all in one place, and you can get Rotoworld's take on player performances. You can't make smart coaching decisions without knowing how your players are playing, and this tool helps you out.
- ✔ **Play-By-Play Report:** This feature provides a sortable collection of every play from every game of every week of the season. Here's how you can mimic a coach breaking down game tape: Pick a week, pick a game, and look at the entire play-by-play for that game, or choose a player and look at only the plays in which he was involved. Super stat geeks may be the only fantasy players who are interested in playing NFL coach during the week.
- ✔ **Running Back Report:** Due to the position's importance, Rotoworld brings you a special weekly report on just RBs. The *Running Back Report* gives you complete stats for starting RBs, their backups, and fullbacks. Stats are given for the previous week and for the year to date. Rotoworld provides written comments with the stats, noting how each back is currently being used (as a starter, a third-down back, a goal-line back, and so on) and his likely usage going forward. Need to make a tough starting decision? Need to scout new running backs? Need to propose a RB trade? This report will help.
- ✔ **Dynasty/Keeper Rankings:** If you play in a keeper (or dynasty) league (see Chapters 3 and 8), you value players on your roster and before your draft based not only on their current performance, but also on their potential in future seasons. These rankings are created with that in mind.
- ✔ **Rotoworld Oracle:** This is a fantastic feature that gives you start/sit recommendations customized for your league's scoring system, using Rotoworld's projections for the coming week. This feature gives you confidence that you're making the best choices without having to constantly tweak the numbers to fit your league's scoring system (for more on managing your team, see Chapter 10).
- ✔ **Weather Report:** The weather can play a role in who you play and who you sit each week. Rotoworld gives you the weather for game time in each home team's city. If it's 20 degrees and snowing in Chicago with high winds, maybe you should jump into traffic before starting the Bears kicker over a dome kicker! (For more on the effects of weather on fantasy football, see Chapter 10.)

A few fantasy sites you may not have heard of

As a fantasy football player, you're not on an island, making decisions based on your own opinions. In fact, hundreds of helpful expert sites on the Web can assist you as you scout, draft, and play from week to week. Take advantage of these resources and find your own personal favorites. Here are some of my other favorites:

- ✔ **Fantasy Sports Central** (www.fantasysportscentral.com): Fantasy Sports Central has a really cool angle on projected fantasy points and player rankings — and it's free. Although most sites offer their own experts' projections and rankings, Fantasy Sports Central takes projections and rankings from several other Web sites and combines them to come up with an average.
- ✔ **Fox Sports** (msn.foxsports.com/fantasy): This Web site is the little sister of the Fox Network and its many Fox Sports affiliates. The site covers all fantasy sports news and has a solid league-providing service, even if it isn't as extensive as some of the more venerable sites. However, the presentation is state-of-the-art, with plenty of high-resolution pictures and streaming videos.
- ✔ **Football Diehards** (www.footballdiehards.com): Emil Kadlec, co-founder of the World Championship of Fantasy Football (WCOFF), oversees this site, which provides in-depth fantasy football info for the true "diehards." The list of tools includes the following: game recaps, targets, box scores, weekly matchups, cheat sheets by the staff experts, and a combined cheat sheet. The targets tool is especially useful when researching how many chances your WRs are getting, not just receptions.

Because this site is involved with the WCOFF, it's no surprise that it also offers downloadable drafting software called DDT (Diehards Draft Tool). The DDT is a spreadsheet that keeps track of an entire offline draft — just drag the drafted players over to the correct team columns — and even makes suggestions right on your computer.

- ✔ **Mr. Fantasy** (www.mrfantasy.com): At this Web site, you can find draft ratings and weekly player rankings, free of charge. Mr. Fantasy's articles are always entertaining, and his predictions are always solid. When I first started playing fantasy football, this was one of the first sites I found. The positional rankings are well organized and tend to go against the grain more than other sites.
- ✔ **Fantasy Football Whiz** (www.fantasyfootballwhiz.com): I'd be remiss without mentioning this newer site by Jim Day, my technical editor for this book. The site has a staff with more than 25 years' experience in fantasy football. The main twist of the site is a focus on dynasty and IDP content, but it also provides plenty of info for every other type of league format you can find. Fantasy Football Whiz provides up-to-the-minute news coverage, as well as player rankings for virtually every category. Forums allow fantasy coaches to discuss anything football related, and team pages capture everything you need to know about any team on one page.

(continued)

- ✔ **Fantasy Football Toolbox** (www.fftoolbox.com): This site is nothing fancy to look at, but its complete lineup of fantasy sports information is very useful — and it's free! I love the pre-rankings of WRs in their third year and of the players entering their contract years (the last year on their current deals). In addition, the site features articles that cover the following: drafting tips, fantasy news, NFL rumors, keepers, sleepers, rookie rankings, mock-draft results, fantasy advice, fantasy picks, and auction info.
- ✔ **Game Day Draft** (www.gamedaydraft.com): GDD isn't an expert site; it's a new way for experts to compete against each other for cash prizes. Each week, coaches pay to draft a new team, and the highest-scoring team wins the pot! It's a new way to play the game and it's easy to learn (just not so easy to win!)

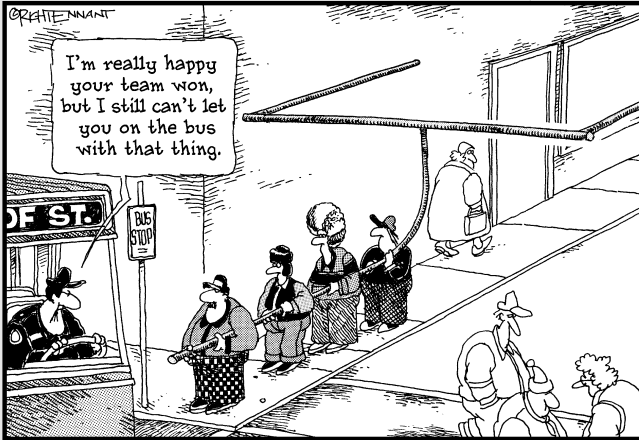
Unfortunately I don't have the space to list all the cool fantasy sites available on the Web, but I hope this short list helps you get started.

Part V

The Part of Tens

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



In this part . . .

Every *For Dummies* book has a Part of Tens where you'll find short and fun chapters that provide really useful tidbits of information. Hey, it isn't the size of the part, just the quality of the info in it! In this part, Chapter 17 discusses ten quick fixes you can make to your roster immediately after your fantasy draft, and Chapter 18 presents the ten biggest rookie mistakes coaches often make and lets you know how to avoid them.

Chapter 17

Ten Quick Fixes to Make the Day after Your Draft

In This Chapter

- ▶ Checking up on bye weeks and injured players
 - ▶ Evaluating your strengths and weaknesses
 - ▶ Exploring trades and free agency
-

No matter how many players you scout or how thoroughly you prepare for your draft, no fantasy team will be perfect. The fantasy season is all about making adjustments, and you may need to adjust your roster immediately. This chapter is about evaluating your draft and making quick fixes before the season begins. (For in-depth info on how to avoid needing these fixes, head to Chapters 8 and 9, which focus on draft strategy.)

Look for Bye-Week Problems

Each team has the chance to sit out one week of the season and not play. This week, called the team's *bye week*, is a huge relief for teams and players, but it can be a huge headache for fantasy football coaches because it creates huge holes in your starting lineup when your best players aren't available.

After your draft, cross check the NFL bye weeks with your entire roster. Ideally, you tracked the bye weeks during the draft and avoided drafting players with identical bye weeks (unless you have solid options on your bench during that week). If you have two of your stud starters or key contributors on the same bye week, you need to make preparations, because your team's chances of winning that week will be hurt. Keep a sharp lookout for players with good matchups during problematic bye weeks. (Flip to Chapter 10 for more info on dealing with bye weeks.)

Replace Injured Players

A common post-draft problem is finding out about injuries to your team the next day. Some injuries are short-term, but many impact a player's fantasy performance for the season, even if he plays again that year. Why deal with a player with nagging injuries that forces you to make a game-time lineup decision if you don't have to?



If you have a good alternative easily available (on your bench, through free agency, see the section “Swim in the Free Agent Pool”, or through a beneficial trade), go ahead and drop that player and let someone else worry about his injuries. If the player is too good to give up on just yet, see if he qualifies for the injured list in your league. If he does, then move him onto the list and pick up the best available free agent.

Assess Your Team's Strengths

Even if your draft plan worked perfectly, you may already be second-guessing your draft decisions (most people do, out of need or sheer wanderlust). Now is the time to take a step back and evaluate your team. Check your pre-rankings, the players' schedules, and the bye weeks for your entire roster.

After you finish evaluating your team, you'll know which positions are strong and which positions need some help. By trading from strength, you'll be able to improve your team.

Know Your Team's Weaknesses

Just as you should determine your team's strengths (see the previous section), knowledge of your team's weaknesses is crucial when making decisions about player moves and lineup changes.



Most of your weaknesses take time to address (via trading or adding free agent standouts during the year), but the sooner you know where you want to upgrade or where you need to add depth, the sooner you can make it so. (Check out Chapter 11 for more info.)

Swim in the Free Agent Pool

Depending on the size of your league, there will be a number of desirable free agents after your draft. (A smaller league has more available free agents, while a larger league has fewer; check out

Chapter 11 for more on free agents.) If you drafted the wrong guy (perhaps you confused two guys with the same name?), an injured guy, or have bye-week issues (see Chapter 10), you can quickly add free agents and drop the players you consider useless (how quick depends on your league settings).

Put NFL Teammates on the Trading Block

You may end up with two or three NFL teammates on your fantasy roster because their value was too high to pass on during the draft. However, depending heavily on one NFL team's offense is never a great idea (see Chapter 9). Fantasy scoring is based on offensive production, and if that team has a bad day, all their offensive players are likely to have bad days as well, which isn't good for your fantasy team.



You can fix the problem of having multiple NFL teammates *and* strengthen your team by putting the teammates on the trading block right away (see Chapter 11). Your league opponents are likely to give you a fair trade, because they know that you just want to diversify your roster and that you aren't trying to fleece anyone. If you can't get equal value for a player, try to get two players in return for your one. Normally, taking a two-for-one deal is risky (one great player is better than two good ones), but if you can spread your eggs, it may be worth it.

Find Trading Partners

Stick to your draft plan and don't overhaul your roster before the season begins. However, you can start to plan ahead. By sending friendly e-mails to the other owners, you can grease the wheels for future trade offers. Compliment one owner on his RB depth; question another owner's starting QB.

If you can start dialogue with other owners early, your opponents will be more receptive to trades down the road. (Check out Chapter 11 for more on the psychology of trading.)

Know Your Opponents' Rosters

Even if your commissioner constructs a big draft board to track your entire league's draft, each owner still focuses on his or her own team during the draft. (Check out Chapter 4 for how to use a

draft board.) Therefore, before the season begins, you should take the time to get to know the rest of your fantasy league. All fantasy sites allow owners to look at their opponents' rosters. Make a mental checklist of each team's strengths and weaknesses in your league, and jot down the names of players you covet and what their owners may want/need in return.



As your season moves forward, your team management will be easier and more successful if you can predict the moves of the other coaches. By knowing their rosters, you'll know which coaches need a certain player for trade purposes. Additionally, you'll know which coaches are more likely to make waiver claims on certain positions each week. Do not coach in a vacuum — know thy enemy! (Refer to Part III for more info on in-season management.)

Upgrade Your Kicker and Defense Positions

If you followed conventional draft strategy, you avoided taking the elite Ks and DEFs in the early and middle rounds and used those picks on QBs, RBs, and WRs. However, you may end up with an average K or DEF and a terrible matchup in Week 1. Check the free agent pool and look for fantasy-friendly matchups (refer to Chapters 7 and 10) for the available Ks and DEFs, based on everything from the weather to the opposing offenses.

If you don't value your current K or DEF too highly, go ahead and replace the positions with players/teams with better matchups in Week 1. You can continue to swap based on matchups each week until you find a combination you're comfortable with.

If It Isn't Broken, Don't Fix It

If you see a glaring hole in your team, or if you made a big mistake during the draft, you'll need a quick fix. However, if you've prepared properly and made good decisions, your team should be sound, so don't second-guess yourself. Most fantasy coaches are afflicted by *post-draft anxiety*, which can lead to rash decisions. Trust that you made the right choices until proven otherwise.

No one really knows what's going to happen in an NFL season before it starts or even as it nears its end. If you did your homework, you should be good to go. Wait and see how the season unfolds before assuming that your fantasy team needs a major overhaul.

Chapter 18

Ten Newbie Mistakes to Avoid

In This Chapter

- ▶ Making early-round draft mistakes
 - ▶ Brushing aside the NFL schedule
 - ▶ Failing to prepare properly
 - ▶ Turning into a poor sport
-

You're probably fairly new to fantasy football if you're reading this book. If you're one of these cyber-pigskin neophytes, you may be trying to figure out all the ins and outs of the game. And if you've played for just one season, you may have made a few slipups that hurt your team's chances the first go-round. Not to worry; even if you're not brand new to fantasy football, you'll still occasionally make mistakes. When I was new to the game, I made plenty of the classic gaffes that I present in this chapter. This chapter covers ten of the top rookie mistakes players make and how to avoid them.

Taking a Kicker Too Early

One of the biggest temptations fantasy coaches face on draft day is to complete the starting lineup before adding bench players (in other words, adding depth at important positions). Don't fall into that temptation with the K. You can still spot top-100 overall talent on the board, so now is *not* the time to draft a K.



Draft a K in the last couple rounds. Every other position in fantasy football has much more value and much less depth than K. Plenty of great kickers will be available in the last round, so don't panic.

Drafting a Team DEF Too Early

The NFL has 32 teams, which means each team in your league has 32 team defenses to select from during your fantasy draft. Even in a

large fantasy league (14 teams, for instance), every coach can draft one of the NFL's better defenses (perhaps even two). Plus, many low-ranked DEFs have decent fantasy prospects when they face bad offenses and are available for pickup during the season.

Because of such depth and matchup-based production, you can wait until at least Rounds 10 to 12 before you draft a DEF and still get quality production. Even the top pre-ranked DEF shouldn't be drafted before Round 6 (Chapter 7 covers DEF in deeper detail).

Picking a QB Too Early

Football fans know and love their favorite teams' field generals, so many new or casual fantasy players will draft QBs too soon based on their name value. Even though a few elite QBs are superior fantasy producers, you want to concentrate on drafting RBs and WRs first based on position scarcity and draft value (see Chapter 8).

If you study QB stats from previous seasons, you'll see that the top-ten QBs were all about the same from a fantasy-worthy standpoint. You can build your RB and WR cores until the middle rounds and still draft a fantasy-worthy QB (refer to Chapter 5 for more info).

Selecting Players with the Same Bye Week

Every NFL team plays a 16-week schedule over a 17-week period, which means that each team gets a *bye week* during the season to rest players and regroup. When your fantasy starters are on bye, you need to go to your bench to replace them. But what if your two best players have the same bye week? And what if they play the same position? Your team's fantasy production will almost certainly drop, and you'll probably lose that week's head-to-head matchup. (Flip to Chapter 10 for more bye-week tips.)

If you research the NFL bye weeks and manage your draft well, you can avoid the production loss that comes with having multiple players on the same bye. Having two players on the same bye can be acceptable if the strategy makes your team better for the other weeks of the season, but you need to have a solid plan in place.

Ignoring the NFL Schedule

The NFL teams with the best records and that advanced the furthest in the playoffs have harder schedules next season (more quality

opponents) than the teams that missed the playoffs. This formula leads to league parity and gives all fans new hope each season. Unfortunately, parity doesn't help a fantasy stud's production.

Great fantasy players on winning teams may have a tougher time producing big numbers next season when they face stiffer opposition. Know the NFL schedule when making your draft picks. If you think one player has better matchups during the season than another, use that info to help you choose between them. By studying the NFL schedule, you can make a better decision between two or three players that seem equally awesome on paper. (Chapter 10 covers the impact of schedule on fantasy football.)

Trash Talking Too Much

A good fantasy coach treats his leaguemates with respect; he doesn't brag about players too much or obnoxiously trash the other coaches in the league. A little smack talk and joking are good for your league and make the game fun, but if you take it too far, the league commish won't be too tempted to ask you back next year.



Maintaining good relationships with the other coaches is particularly important if you have to make a trade. If your leaguemates dislike you because of your message board rants and vicious e-mails, finding someone to listen to your trade offers will be harder. (Chapter 11 breaks down the trading game in detail.) Until you really know the boundaries of acceptable behavior in your league — especially in a public league with strangers (see Chapter 3) — don't become a pariah by being a loud-mouthed rookie.

Failing to Create or Neglecting Your Cheat Sheets

Many first-time fantasy coaches are life-long football fans, so they assume that playing fantasy football will be easy. They show up at their league drafts (online or offline; see Chapter 4) without pencils, paper, or preparation. The drafts begin, and they select the superstars they should, but after three rounds, leaguemates inevitably hear them say "Who?" after every selection.

Make sure you use cheat sheets to familiarize yourself with your hundreds of options and to develop your draft plan. Cheat sheets are lists of player rankings that help you track your team, plan your next draft pick, and select the best available player when your turn comes. During the season, you can access updated cheat

sheets online (at various fantasy and sports sites; see Part IV) to help you make roster changes. (Refer to Chapter 4 to find out how to create and use cheat sheets.)

Ignoring Injury Updates

Staying on top of injuries to major fantasy players is part of being a complete fantasy coach. Injury reports tell you when fantasy players may not be able to play and when you'll need to replace them in your lineup. From the draft to the waiver wire to trades, you'll be surprised by how many novice coaches try to deal or acquire guys who aren't even capable of playing!

Always check a player's health status before starting him, picking him up off waivers, or offering him in a trade. On draft day, double-check the injury reports to make sure that no one was recently hurt.

Missing the Draft Entirely

Some coaches who can't make it to the draft venue set by the commissioner or who don't have access to computers during draft time trust the rest of the league, or specific people, to draft good teams for them. Doing so is a big mistake. Your team will be drafted based on the best players available overall, not on what your team needs. An online draft program autopicks your team in a similar manner, with similarly bad results.

Draft day is the best day of the fantasy season, and it's why most people play the game. If you can't get to the draft venue or log on to a computer for your first draft, and your league won't change the date, consider joining a different league.

Believing the Fantasy Hype

Many rookie coaches dive too deep into the fantasy hype on their first try, and they drown in a world of fantasy Web sites, magazines, sports talk radio, and TV shows. Many experts tout their breakout players, probable busts, and sleeper picks in order to make names for themselves in the industry.

Keep a level head, and don't fall victim to the hype. Take proven fantasy players first, and try not to reach for high-risk talent too early in the draft. When doing your draft homework (see Chapter 4), look for players *late* in the draft who can help your team.

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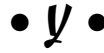
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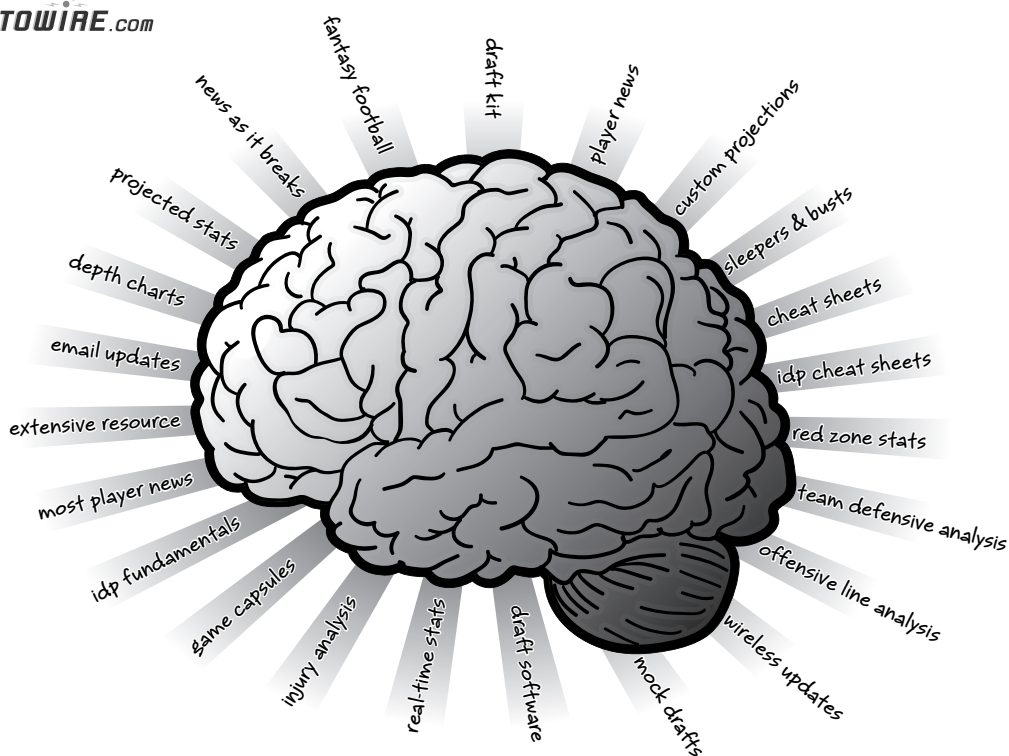
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