

Fantasy Football and the First Fifty Years: The Game That Forever Changed the Landscape of the National Football League, 1963-2013

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History

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The National Football League has become the most popular sport in America. In fact, as of 2012, the NFL had ballooned into a \$9.5-billion-a-year industry.¹ The evidence became clear that football and the NFL had surpassed baseball and become not only America's national pastime but America's obsession. This obsession for all things football spawned the national addiction for fantasy football, which evolved into a unique culture, all its own. Fantasy football has not only altered the demography of fans who watch the NFL but also the ways in which NFL games have been viewed by the fans. Fantasy football has also changed the financial landscape of the NFL, allowing the NFL to sign extremely lucrative TV and endorsement contracts. Although fantasy football was born from the love of the

¹ Miranda Green, "NFL's Shadow Economy of Gambling and Fantasy Football Is a Multibillion Dollar Business," *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/06/nfl-s-shadow-economy-of-gambling-and-fantasy-football-is-a-multibillion-dollar-business.html> (accessed December 20, 2012).

sport, it is now one of the driving factors in the sport's popularity and the NFL's exorbitant revenue.

At its core, fantasy football is a game in which football fans use their knowledge of football to compete against one another in a variety of formats that are directly related to the actual performance of the professional football players themselves. The goal of fantasy football players—among which I include myself—is to select which players will have the most impressive statistical performances during a given week of the NFL season. The athlete's performance is then scored based on the statistics of his performance. The team with the highest point total for the week wins.

In order to be successful at fantasy football, a fantasy player must follow not only the weekly happenings but the daily happenings of the NFL as well. More often than not, this attention to detail will help the participant make better choices than that of his weekly opponents. A successful fantasy player must therefore try to possess the intuition of a general manager, the natural feel for talent of a pro scout, and the strategic mind of a head coach. The idea of being able to take control over their own NFL franchise would be the ultimate dream come true for the millions of NFL fans. Fantasy football allows this dream to become a reality, albeit a virtual one.

NFL fans' obsession for fantasy football seems like such a modern concept; however, the game itself is older than the Super Bowl, which was first played in 1967. Fantasy football was born in 1962. It was the brain child of a minority owner of the Oakland Raiders named Wilfred "Bill" Winkenbach. Winkenbach conceived the idea for fantasy football while traveling on a Raiders' east coast

road trip with Raiders P.R. manager Bill Tunnel and the sports beat writer for *The Oakland Tribune*, Scotty Sterling.²

Winkenbach was not new to the fantasy sports genre and had dabbled in early forms of fantasy baseball and fantasy golf in the 1950's. Winkenbach believed that it was time that football joined the fantasy sports ranks and pitched the idea to Tunnel and Sterling. They fell immediately in love with the idea. Over a night of drinks at the Manhattan Hotel in New York, the three men hammered out the framework for what would become the modern fantasy football league. The purpose of their league was "to bring together some of Oakland's finest Saturday morning gridiron forecasters to pit their respective brains (and cash) against each other" in the hopes that it would lead to "closer coverage of daily happenings in professional football."³

The 1963 football season would be the inaugural season for the Greater Oakland Professional Pigskin Prognosticators League (GOPPPL--pronounced GAHpul). These men did not name their original idea fantasy football; instead, they always referred to it as GOPPPL, even if participants were on the east coast. The original GOPPPL league consisted of an eight-team league. Each member had to meet at least one criterion to become a member of GOPPPL. The first criterion stated that the member must be affiliated with an AFL professional football team in an administrative capacity. The second stipulation was that the member had to have a direct relationship to professional football in a journalistic capacity. The

² Bob Harris and Emil Kadlec, "A Nod (and a Wink) to the Founders of Fantasy Football," *Fantasy Sports Publication*, <http://www.fspnet.com/wink.pdf> (accessed December 20, 2012).

³ *Ibid.*

third criteria that could grant membership into GOPPPL was that a member either have purchased or have sold ten season tickets for Oakland's 1963 season.

In August of 1963, the first ever fantasy football draft commenced in the basement of Winkenbach's house. The draft was a live draft, unlike many online drafts of the early twenty-first century. With the first pick of the 1963 GOPPPL draft, Andy Mousalimas selected George Blanda.⁴ Not only did Mousalimas's pick mark the first fantasy football draft pick; it also marked the first ever draft pick regret. Years later Mousalimas recalled, "I should've taken Jim Brown."⁵

In 1969 at his Oakland sports bar, King X, Mousalimas took GOPPPL's silly little game public. He adjusted the point scoring system to account for yardage gained and not just touchdowns scored. Although there have been many variations, this method of scoring stuck and became the preeminent method of scoring used in the majority of leagues throughout 2012. Due to his influence in not only helping fantasy football become public but helping it spread nationwide, Andy Mousalimas became known as the "godfather" of fantasy football. In August of 2012, after fifty years of playing fantasy football, the 88-year old last remaining original member of GOPPPL decided it was time to hang up his cleats and participated

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Morty Ain, "'I Should've Taken Jim Brown'...and 12 Other Lessons from Andy Mousalimas' 50 Years of Fantasy Drafts," *ESPN The Magazine*, August 6, 2012, <http://sports.espn.go.com/fantasy/football/ffl/story?id=8318592> (accessed December 20, 2012).

in his final fantasy draft.⁶ GOPPPL had changed dramatically in the fifty years that Mousalimas had played it, becoming a game changer itself.

From its humble beginnings in the 1960's, fantasy football has continued to evolve and consume any fan willing to step into the huddle. Fantasy football's popularity spread throughout the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's as fast as it possibly could, by word of mouth from sports bar to sports bar and office chats at the water coolers. However, without computers and the internet, in the early days playing fantasy football could bring a stigma.

In an age before instant news updates and twitter feeds of injuries, fantasy football players could be seen carrying newspapers with stat lines full of pencil markings. They would often be mistaken for bookies while calling their players' local area newspapers to try to get any kind of an edge in hopes of winning their league championship.⁷ However, in the late 1990's the internet boom dispelled the bookie stigma and revolutionized the landscape of not only fantasy football but the entire fantasy sports world.

As of 2012, due largely in part to the internet boom of the 1990's, fantasy football had grown from a small group of all-male diehard football fans to a multi-million dollar industry supported by 33 million participants, of whom twenty percent were women.⁸ To

⁶ Tim Keown, "50 Years of Fantasy Football," ESPN, <http://sports.espn.go.com/fantasy/football/ffl/story?id=8318592> (accessed December 20, 2012).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Green, "NFL's Shadow Economy"; Chip Scoggins, "Playing in a Fantasy World," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), September 19, 2012.

help put the popularity of fantasy sports participation into perspective, we need to look no further than the week ending of May 5, 2006, when participation was still only at fifteen million players. Fantasy sports accounted for twenty-seven percent of all internet visits, which was just slightly more than the twenty-four percent that all of the airlines in the world combined had totaled.⁹

A few underlying factors have assisted the internet in helping to make fantasy football as popular as it has become. The largest piece of evidence is that, even before MySpace and Facebook, fantasy football was a pioneer in social networking. Fantasy football became a way for many people to retain friendships forged during college and employment. According to a Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FSTA) survey conducted in the fall of 2008, 60 percent of participants knew the other people in their leagues, and they lived within 150 miles from each other, on average. Forty percent of fantasy players said that participation increased the camaraderie amongst employees in their workplace, and thirty percent said they had sparked new friendships at work due to playing fantasy sports. Sixteen percent even said that playing fantasy football allowed them to make valuable business contacts.¹⁰

The second factor that assisted fantasy football was the fact that it became an amazing bonding tool that crossed every age, race,

<http://www.startribune.com/sports/vikings/170274106.html?refer=y> (accessed December 20, 2012).

⁹ LeeAnn Prescott, "Fantasy Sports Online," Imedia Connection, <http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/9599.asp> (accessed December 20, 2012).

¹⁰ "Fantasy Sports Demographics," World Fantasy Games, http://www.worldfantasygames.com/site_flash/index-3.asp (accessed December 20, 2012).

gender, or profession. Many varieties of leagues have formed over the years such as married couple's only leagues; leagues for doctors, lawyers, and police officers; father-son/daughter or mother-son/daughter leagues; and all-female leagues. In fact, Mousalimas created the first all-female league, known as the Queen Division, in the King X in 1980. It came about when husbands who played fantasy football in the King X divisions prohibited their wives from playing because most men considered GOPPPL a guys' night out.¹¹ Thirty-two years later, Mousalimas was still setting trends.

In his final fantasy football draft in 2012, Mousalimas passed his torch to his grandson as they drafted together for Mousalimas' final draft. Mousalimas and his grandson represented the growing trend fueling the increase in fantasy football participation. Parents and grandparents passed their love of not only the NFL and football, but of fantasy football, onto their children and grandchildren.¹²

The demographics of fantasy football have spread across the board, so it was no wonder that marketing agencies drooled over this medium. According to Clay Walker, the former FSTA Chair, 12.8 million unique users played fantasy football as of August 2006. In September 2007, 11.7 million of those same unique users reactivated or revisited their fantasy football pages, a retention rate of a little over ninety-one percent.¹³ It was not just the sheer number of players but also the dedication players put into playing the game that

¹¹ Keown, "50 Years."

¹² Scoggins, "Fantasy World."

¹³ Allen Kreda, "Fantasy Football Growth Continues at Rapid Pace." *Upstart Business Journal*, November 4, 2007.

<http://upstart.bizjournals.com/views/blogs/playbook/2007/11/14/fantasy-football-growth-continues-at-rapid-pace.html> (accessed April 23, 2013).

pleased the marketing industry. Nielsen Media Research found that players spent more than 1.2 billion minutes on fantasy websites in 2008.¹⁴ According to Paul Charchian, the current president of the FSTA, the number of fantasy football players reached 36 million in 2012, which was an increase of two million players from 2011. Charchian also noted that since the internet boom fantasy football has been able to maintain a nearly two-million-player increase nearly every year through 2012.¹⁵ Marketing companies absolutely loved that kind of dedication.

After all of the data had been crunched in 2011, the demographics of fantasy football break down into some amazing statistics. The average fantasy football player was a thirty-seven-year-old male who was married and had children. The majority of players had bachelor degrees or higher and owned their own homes. The average annual income ranged from \$60,000 to \$90,000. Eighty-six percent of fantasy players planned on playing for more than ten years. The survey also discovered that while watching NFL games forty percent of players operated in at least a two-screen or more viewing system, whether it was multiple televisions or a television-laptop combination. That percentage would also be much higher if smart phones were included.

Fantasy sports enthusiasts were often far more likely to attend live sporting events, not just football, as well. In 2008, twelve percent of Americans attended at least one Major League Baseball (MLB)

¹⁴ John A. Fortunato, "The Relationship of Fantasy Football Participation with NFL Television Ratings," *Journal of Sport Administration and Supervision* 3, no. 1 (September 2011): 74-89, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.6776111.0003.114> (accessed January 4, 2013).

¹⁵ Scoggins, "Fantasy World."

game. Seventy-eight percent of that twelve percent of attendees were fantasy sports players. Nine percent of Americans attended a NFL game. Sixty percent of that nine percent were fantasy sports players. Eight percent of Americans attended an NBA game. Twenty-eight percent of that eight percent were made up of fantasy sports players. While only four percent of Americans attended a hockey game, twenty-seven percent of that four percent were made up of fantasy sports players.¹⁶ Fantasy players fueled professional sports revenues at games and on television, but they also devoted time away from these venues, expanding with the internet.

Prior to 2008, fifty-five percent of players played fantasy football offline. By 2008, however, eighty-eight percent of fantasy football participants said that the internet was now their main avenue of playing fantasy football. According to the 2006-2007 survey conducted by the FSTA, fantasy football participants also spent about three to four hours online per week dealing with fantasy football. The survey also showed that due to their disposable incomes, fantasy players consumed massive quantities of high-end electronics such as smart phones, large high definition televisions, laptops and tablets, and wireless fidelity (WIFI) equipment. Participants also extended their spending habits and interests in the consumer areas of alcohol (mostly beer), automobiles, clothing apparel (especially hats and shoes), sports memorabilia, technology, travel, finance and banking, professional job sites, and, oddly enough, flowers.¹⁷ Charchian concluded that "Fantasy owners consume twice as much televised football as their sport-loving counterparts who don't play fantasy. These are super-consumers."¹⁸

¹⁶ "Fantasy Sports Demographics."

¹⁷ "Fantasy Sports Demographics."

¹⁸ Scoggins, "Fantasy World."

The FSTA estimated that total fantasy spending in 2008 was close to \$800 million dollars and that this type of spending had a total market impact of roughly \$4.48 billion on the economy. Fantasy football represented seventy-five percent of the market and was valued at \$20.325 million.¹⁹ The NFL quickly realized the power of fantasy football and hopped on board to take advantage of the popularity of fantasy football. The NFL simply could not afford to ignore a medium that on average added two million viewers each year to the NFL's fan base.

During the mid-2000's, the NFL quickly acknowledged that there was money, and a lot of it, to be made in fantasy football. It was during that time that the NFL took a hardline approach to the medium because NFL executives knew that they were late to the game in comparison to the other mainstream fantasy football sites such as ESPN, Yahoo, and CBS Sportsline. In 2010 the NFL launched its own fantasy football platform on NFL.com. ESPN, Yahoo, and CBS Sportsline had already garnered a good grasp, if not a stranglehold, on the fantasy market. However, the NFL had a distinct advantage in the fact that it had only to consume itself with football, unlike the other sites, which offered a wide array of fantasy sporting options. The NFL was able quickly to close the gap due to this advantage and supplanted CBS Sportsline to become a member of the big three. Once the NFL had gained a strong foothold in the realm of fantasy football, it turned its attention to a blitzkrieg of media advertisements and endorsement deals.²⁰

¹⁹ "Fantasy Sports Demographics."

²⁰ Thomas Patrick Oates, "New Media and the Repackaging of NFL Fandom," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26 (2009): 31-49, http://www.colum.edu/Academics/Humanities_History_and_Social_Sciences/Cult

Just as the NFL recognized that football's fan base was consistently growing, that the demographics were widening, and that fantasy football was a main catalyst, so did many advertising and marketing agencies. Advertising agencies and the NFL wasted little time in using this correlation to form a platform that would catapult the advertising revenue of the NFL, advertising agencies, and the television affiliates.

The viewership for the NFL from 2002 to 2004 was in a slight decline; however, so too was the number of viewers for broadcast television. Despite the flagging viewership numbers, the NFL still managed fifty-two to fifty-seven percent more viewers than the rest of broadcast television. However, the NFL rebounded from 2005 to 2011 and increased the average number of viewers every year. The viewership for NFL games drastically increased from 2005 to 2006, with the NFL gaining almost a million new viewers that year. From 2008 to 2009 the NFL gained nearly two million new viewers.²¹

While the NFL was increasing its viewership the rest of broadcast television was in decline. In 2002, the NFL held a fifty-two percent advantage on number of viewers. By 2010 that number had soared to a 144 percent advantage. The same advantage held true in 2011, as well. Out of the twenty-five most watched shows on basic television during the 2011 fall TV season, twenty-three of them were NFL games. The two lone exceptions were the season premiere of CBS' *Two and Half Men* (the first episode in which heartthrob Ashton

[ural Studies/Colloquium/Readings/New%20Media%20and%20the%20Repackaging%20of%20NFL%20Fandom.pdf](#) (accessed December 20, 2012).

²¹ "Must See TV: NFL Games Dominated Ratings in 2011," Cold Hard Football Facts.com, <http://www.coldhardfootballfacts.com/content/must-see-tv-nfl-games-dominated-ratings-2011/12798/> (accessed December 20, 2012).

Kutcher replaced the notorious Charlie Sheen) and game seven of the World Series between the Texas Rangers and St. Louis Cardinals. The same statistics held true for cable TV as well. The top fifteen most watched shows on basic cable were all football: Fourteen ESPN Monday Night Football games and one Thursday night NFL Network game.²²

Football and the NFL truly had obtained a monopoly on television viewership in large part to the number of fantasy football fans wanting their weekly fix of stats and touchdowns. This impact of fantasy football players was not lost on the sporting empire of ESPN. In September of 2011, ESPN renewed its contract with the NFL for the rights to carry Monday Night Football (MNF) thru the year 2021. ESPN paid \$15.2 billion (\$1.9 billion a year), a seventy-three percent increase from the previous contract between ESPN and the NFL, for the rights to televise four preseason games and sixteen regular season games. In 2012, ESPN also changed MNF's tagline of six years from "Is it Monday yet?" to "It all comes down to Monday night." This is a blatant reference to the fact that the MNF game marks the end of the fantasy football week just as it does in an NFL schedule. ESPN also ran advertising campaigns on billboards and in magazines for MNF, such as "Fantasy's last stand" and "It ain't over til it's Tuesday."²³

All of this money being thrown around for the rights of showing football games led to more commercials during the

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jane L. Levere, "For Football Fans, the Focus Is On Monday," *New York Times*, August 9, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/10/business/media/a-new-campaign-for-monday-night-football-advertising.html> (accessed December 20, 2012).

programming to help cover the upfront cost. However, even the prices of commercials were not cheap. In 2011, the price tag for a thirty-second commercial during NBC's Sunday Night Football was \$512,367.²⁴ Commercials became so expensive due to the relevance of the products that were being advertised to the key demographic: football fans, most of whom played fantasy football. The best example of marketing and advertising toward fantasy football participants have been the commercials during the Super Bowl. From 1990 to 2012, prices per thirty-second commercial during a Super Bowl has more than doubled. Taking into account the spending habits of the average fantasy football player, a direct correlation can be made between which companies spent the most money from 2002 to 2011 on commercials during the Super Bowl. Every company fell into the key spending areas of the average fantasy football player.²⁵ It is worth noting that while women had made great strides in becoming involved in fantasy football, they were still not the focus of the advertising. The reason, according to the FSTA survey of 2008, was that while women made up twenty-five percent of fantasy football participants, they were outspent by the males by a ratio of four to one and in some categories as much as ten to one. This meant that although women made up a quarter of fantasy football participants, the men still accounted for ninety percent of the revenue market.²⁶

²⁴ Brian Steinberg, "'American Idol,' NFL Duke It Out for Priciest TV Spot," *Ad Age*, <http://adage.com/article/media/chart-american-idol-nfl-duke-priciest-tv-spot/230547/> (accessed December 20, 2012).

²⁵ Charles B. Stockdale, Michael B. Sauter, and Ashley C. Allen, "Companies That Have Wasted the Most On Super Bowl Advertising," *NBC News*, <http://www.nbcnews.com/business/companies-have-wasted-most-super-bowl-advertising-1C7100634> (accessed December 20, 2012).

²⁶ "Fantasy Sports Demographics."

Many of the endorsements and advertising deals signed by the NFL were on face value driven by the brand name of the NFL. However, many these deals were also driven by the public's insatiable hunger for all things fantasy football. Because of this hunger, the NFL and several other companies altered the way that football was followed and watched. According to *Forbes*, the NFL and Sprint Mobile in 2006 entered into a five-year, \$600-million-dollar contract that was directly aimed at fantasy football players. Sprint's phones would allow their customers to download apps that made it possible to be able to draft and manage fantasy football lineups. Sprint's fantasy football apps also allowed users to listen to live broadcast of every game during the 2008 season and gave them the ability to stream all eight of the Thursday night games in 2008. This type of exposure was groundbreaking for both companies and for fantasy football. Once the five-year contract expired, it was open season on the next contract with the NFL, and Verizon Wireless was the victor. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the deal was worth close to \$720 million.²⁷

The NFL was also able to broker an exclusive deal with the satellite television company: DIRECTV. DIRECTV's deal with the NFL began with the subscription channel NFL Sunday Ticket. NFL Sunday Ticket allowed the viewer to watch every football game that was to be played on a particular Sunday. Sunday Ticket was marketed as a way for fans of teams that were not in their favorite team's geographic region to be able to follow those favorites. However, a closer look revealed a fantasy football player's dream come true. Fantasy football players could now follow every member

²⁷ Derek Kessler, "Verizon Snatches NFL Contract from Sprint," WebOS Nation, <http://www.webosnation.com/verizon-snatches-nfl-contract-sprint> (accessed December 20, 2012).

of their roster with just a simple click of the remote. DIRECTV and the NFL were able to capitalize on the success of NFL Sunday Ticket and soon introduced an even more fantasy football friendly format, NFL RedZone.

NFL RedZone offered viewers a way never to miss a scoring opportunity. RedZone would automatically switch viewers to a game whenever an offence had advanced the ball inside the opponent's twenty yard line, the red zone, and was on the cusp of scoring points. If more than one game had the potential for a scoring play, RedZone would split the screen in half or up to eight mini screens at once. It was a nonstop barrage of touchdowns and field goals, and fantasy football fans could not get enough of it. The NFL saw the potential behind this ground breaking way of viewing football through fantasy football player's perspectives. The NFL quickly signed a deal with DIRECTV that allowed the NFL's own network, NFL Network, to carry RedZone as well. According to the Fantasy Sports Association, Sunday Ticket and RedZone became a \$5 billion a year moneymaker for DIRECTV and the NFL. RedZone became seven hours of commercial-free football, all the while a constant stream of stats and scores from around the league streamed across a ticker. In a game that was designed for offensive production and scoring, NFL RedZone quite frankly was the equivalent of "crack" for the fantasy football enthusiasts.²⁸ Several food chains, such as Buffalo Wild Wings and Hooters, offer NFL Sunday Ticket and RedZone on a multitude of television's to their customers at no

²⁸ Lang Whitaker and Ian Lovett, "Red Meat for N.F.L. Fans: Football Channel Sees All," *New York Times*, September 20, 2011.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/sports/football/red-meat-for-nfl-fans-redzone-channel-sees-all.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1& (accessed December 20, 2012). As in the original.

additional charge. Coincidentally, these same sports bars also offered package deals on fantasy football and catering.

In the beginning, fantasy football's inventor and founding fathers gave the mass appeal of fantasy football little thought. What began as the friendly game they referred to as GOPPPL has ultimately grown into an extremely lucrative business, an industry that generates billions of dollars through fantasy football shows on TV and radio, draft and strategy guides on the magazine stands, league buy-in fees, and even cell phone apps. Fantasy football has supplied the NFL with an annual fresh supply of new fans from all walks of life. Fantasy football has steered media giants such as ESPN, Yahoo, and DirectTV to cater specifically to the needs and wants of the fantasy sports player. Fantasy football helped spawn improvements in the way that fans view television, laptops, and cell phones while changing the way that sports are viewed. It has given the NFL a financial platform most sports could only dream of possessing. In fifty years, fantasy football has left its imprint on the NFL in every facet of the game and on every fan that has ever participated. Although fantasy football could not exist without the NFL, the NFL and fantasy football truly have a symbiotic relationship.

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