

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
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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.

Table 1-1 A Good Week for Your Fantasy Team			
Position	Actual Performance	Fantasy Points Scored	Fantasy Point Total
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.
