

FANTASY LAND



Newspaper Post-Tribune (IN) August 4, 2005 | Dave Kindred, The Sporting News

THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM PRINTED VERSION

Fantasy Football is in my ear. How do I keep it from getting into my brain? I've read terrible tales of slithering little earwig creatures that, in the night, slide across the pillow into your ear, and by morning your brain is oatmeal. Look, I am a professional sportswriter. But I just capitalized both F's in Fantasy Football. Like it's A Real Important Thing. Uh-oh, oh no and my God. This is a slippery slope. If I'm not careful, by October I'll be trying to engineer a swindle trade with some Buddhist monk at his laptop in Tibet. I have resisted Fantasy Football because I have been an addict, and I really should grow up. APBA baseball was my habit. It is a complex baseball board game based on statistics and rolls of the dice. I woke up one day, and my brain was oatmeal. I knew the significance of every number on every roll of the dice for every player in every situation. I just didn't know whether I'd eaten in the past three days.

But a man said to me the other day, "Do you know that DirecTV, for \$100 extra, will give you Red Zone Coverage?" He explained: "Whatever game you're watching, they'll leave it to show you a team in the red zone."

"For the gamblers," I said.

"And for Fantasy Football," he said.

When a satellite television service customizes its delivery for gamblers and fantasists, something's up big time.

"And the \$100 lets you watch a game a day later in its entirety, in, like, 20 minutes," my friend said. That way you would know everything about every touchdown-making soul before hunkering down the next Sunday morning to decide your starters and talk trade with that stubborn sheep herder in New Zealand. In the process, you would also certify yourself as A Freakin' Nut. Not that there's anything wrong with that. After all, the evidence suggests you are one of millions.

In 2003 the Fantasy Sports Trade Association estimated that between 15 million and 20 million people owned at least one Fantasy Football team and spent \$4 billion doing it. The Sporting News has produced an entire fantasy magazine (with headlines such as "Peyton Manning: Why it's harder to win with him than without him"). When its darling Lance Armstrong won that bike race again, Sports Illustrated gave him a practically

invisible cover headline while saving its premium space for "Fantasy Football Preview." So: Speculation on fake news trumps real reporting on real news. Yikes.

I talked to a fantasist to ask how America has come to this sad place. He's a 24-year-old Florida State graduate. He likes "pulling trades, claiming guys off the waiver wire, the whole general manager thing."

We talked for a half-hour, after which he said, "Don't use my name."

Turns out that some offices have built computer firewalls against every young man's illicit thoughts, be they about Jessica Simpson or Fantasy Football.

Mark St. Amant quit his ad agency job to get semi-serious. The good news is he wrote a wickedly funny book, "Committed: Confessions of a Fantasy Football Junkie." But he still finished third in his league because, alas, getting serious doesn't always help. There's no prevent defense that will stop the kind of famous crime against fantasists perpetrated by Chiefs Coach Dick Vermeil in 2003.

"To the dismay of Priest Holmes owners," St. Amant says, "Vermeil sat him in Weeks 13 and 14. Good football thinking, keep him fresh, no injury. Bad for Fantasy. Screams could be heard across the country.

To my own dismay, I found myself asking the expert, "So who's a good pick this year?"

As if I were going to draft somebody.

As if I were going to find a league that would take a raw newbie it could abuse.

Oh. No. Stop.

Then I heard St. Amant explaining Shaun Alexander's contract deal that basically guarantees he'll be going all out with every step all season.

And I found myself plotting ways to draft Alexander before some fisherman off the coast of Alaska could get him.

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