




FFU101: How to Play Fantasy Football

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It is highly unusual to enter the workplace or classroom on a Monday morning during football season without hearing some sort of conversation about fantasy football. It has become one of the most popular activities today, played by millions of fans each year. Some people are in just one league, while others subscribe to several leagues. And for some people, fantasy football is what life's all about. So exactly what is it about fantasy football that has every football fan obsessed from August through January? Fantasy Football 101 will teach you what you need to know to make this exciting game a part of your life.

Fantasy football is a game played by football fans in which participants draft a team of real NFL players from any of the 32 NFL teams. Players receive points for their performance each week, most commonly based on touchdowns and yards. Throughout the season, owners can make trades with other owners or pick up available players off the waiver wire. There can be as few as four and as many as 32 teams in a league, with 10-12 being the average number.

The most important part of fantasy football is the draft. This will determine the team you will be working with throughout the season. Each participant should enter the draft prepared with a strategy that will hopefully yield the type of players they coveted heading in. The owners in the league set a date on which their official draft will be held, which must occur before the season begins. The closer to the start of the regular season this takes place, the better. A draft order will be determined, and owners can either be informed well in advance or as late as on draft day itself. The owner with the first pick can draft any player at any position or opt to trade down if so desired. This trend continues for however many rounds the draft contains. Once a player is selected, he is off the board and can't be drafted by anyone else. Most leagues do a serpentine draft, meaning that the participant with the last pick will draft two players in a row, and the draft order in even-numbered rounds is the opposite of odd-numbered rounds.

Also gaining in popularity is the auction draft. In an auction, no player you covet is off limits due to your pre-assigned draft position. So long as you are willing to spend the money, any player can be yours for the right price. But as with a regular draft, there is a strategy involved and you must adhere to a budget and avoid going over the salary cap. Owners should know well in advance of the draft or auction how many players at each position need to be drafted, along with how many bench players. Once each owner has all the players needed to complete his team, the draft or auction is over.

When the season starts, each team must submit a starting lineup every week. Each league differs in how many starters and bench players will be utilized at each position for each team. In most leagues, however, a starting lineup typically consists of one quarterback, two running backs, three wide receivers, one tight end, one kicker, and one team defense. More and more leagues, however, are incorporating individual defensive players (IDPs) in lieu of team defenses. Each league will differ in how many defensive players to start. How well a player has been performing, who his opponent is, and whether or not the player is on the injury list are all factors to consider when setting your starting lineup. Once the kickoff of the first game of the week occurs, your lineup is locked (at least for those games) and there is nothing left for fantasy footballers to do except watch and root for their guys.

Each league has a specific scoring system. For offensive players, points will often be awarded for touchdowns, yards, completions, receptions, and two-point conversions. They will be penalized for interceptions and lost fumbles. Kickers will receive points for field goals made and extra points scored while potentially losing points for missed kicks. Team defenses will receive points for defensive touchdowns, fumble recoveries, interceptions, safeties, sacks, and points allowed. IDPs will also earn points for tackles and passes defended. A good understanding of your league's scoring system is crucial in both preparing for your draft and in setting your weekly lineups.

Head-to-head weekly matchups are what decide winners and losers in most leagues. In these leagues, you match up against a different team each week, and whoever gains more points between the two earns a win for the week. Some leagues, however, go by

total points, in which the winner at season's end is the team that accumulated the most fantasy points at the end of the 17-week season. The top teams make a single elimination tournament which usually takes place from weeks 14 to 16. The last team standing wins the prize money.

Throughout the season, there are many ways in which you can improve your team. You can pick up any available player not currently on anyone else's team in your league off waivers. You can propose a trade, exchanging one or more players from your team for players on someone else's team. You must be aware when one of your players is injured. Some leagues have 'injured reserve', which means you can add another player to your team without having to drop the injured player. The key is keeping informed about your players and making the right decisions as to which players to start and which to bench each week.

If you've never participated in fantasy football, you certainly don't know the excitement, challenge, and rewards you are missing. Sure, it doesn't hurt to have luck on your side, but the owner who carefully prepares his strategy and pays the closest attention throughout the season can be crowned champion. Fantasy football is what makes Sundays worth waking up for!