

Dominate Your Fantasy Baseball League

David Sabino

Games not counted in Overall Total below

DOMINATE YOUR FANTASY BASEBALL LEAGUE

DAVID SABINO

THOMSON



COURSE TECHNOLOGY

Professional ■ Trade ■ Reference

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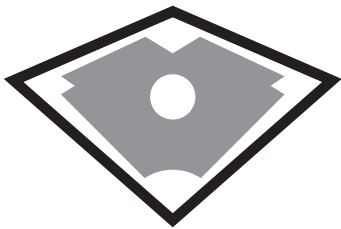
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To my sister, Donna, who has been my one true source of strength and guidance throughout my whole life and has been there for me from the very beginning during all of the good and bad times, and who has helped me on the path that my life has taken. Thanks for the late-night stats pointers and for keeping the Sabino family stuffing alive.

And to my parents, who are somewhere out there looking down on me. I know they must be shaking their heads at what their little boy has become.



FOREWORD

I've been a diehard baseball fan since I was old enough to turn on the TV—which was a little harder back then since there were no remotes. There was also no fantasy baseball, which meant I grew up watching games and reading box scores just for the fun of it. That's probably why, truth be told, I never had much use for the fantasy game. I had always regarded myself as something of a purist, and I figured fantasy baseball served mainly to muddle the traditional concept of simply being a fan of your team and its players.

That viewpoint started to change in 1996, when Greg Kelly, a fellow editor at *Sports Illustrated*, asked me to be a partner in managing his team in *SI*'s fantasy baseball league, which was composed almost entirely of *SI* cognoscenti past and present. I reckoned that after all those years of knocking something that I had never tried, maybe I should put a toe in the pool, and if I was ever going to take that dip, this was the time and place to do it.

So I told Greg that I'd give it a whirl. I added that I didn't know much (which turned out to be an overstatement), but I did know one thing: There's this kid in the reporters' group, David Sabino, who we have to bring in as a co-owner. He seems to know his stuff (which turned out to be an understatement, like saying Barry Bonds can hit a little).

David was amenable to joining us (thank goodness), and he was deferential at first, because his co-owners were higher up on the *SI* totem pole. But it soon became apparent who the brains of the

outfit was. Sabes was a veritable Theo Epstein—and in many ways his skill set probably would've been better suited to running a real major league team as opposed to a fantasy one. His hardest task in those early days was adapting his vast knowledge to the relatively simple rules of the fantasy game. (If he were evaluating talent for a big league club, his below-the-radar pickups of minor leaguers like Mike Cameron and Alfonso Soriano would've paid huge dividends; but in a fantasy league with a two-year freeze limit, some of those players didn't blossom until they had hit the open market.)

It wasn't long before David had helped us assemble a top-notch collection of freezes, and by our third season, after a dominant draft and a summer of running rings around the opposition at the trading table, Sabes had produced a runaway fantasy baseball champ. (In the process, one *SI* writer dubbed him "The Mainframe," as in computer parlance.) Cashing that first-place check was pretty sweet, but also was the realization that playing the fantasy game had made me an even more astute and attentive fan, while not messing with any of my "traditional" values. Sabes had taught me how to win, and that got me hooked.

I wish I could offer every fantasy owner the opportunity to partner with David. In the game of fantasy, there's nobody better in terms of talent and temperament. The guy is relentless, and he's got it all down. But hey, he can only be in one place at a time (and thankfully that's running my team). Fortunately, though, you've got a pretty solid fallback in your hands right now: this book, which represents David's collected wisdom. Read it, learn it, and don't be surprised if you finish first in your league. They might even start calling you Mainframe.

—Larry Burke



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Thanks to Mark, James, and Mark for not caring one lick about fantasy sports and still wanting me around anyway. Folks I can't thank enough: Steve Poulin, co-owner of the now-defunct Vermont Dancing Bears, who helped me get my first taste of what dominating a fantasy league really meant; and Chris Dold, Roberto "Chico" Duran, Andrew Felbin, Rob Geary, Steve Henderson, Mark Pyskadlo, and Jill Safro for being there for all of those swings, shots, tackles, catches, goals, putts, hits, and every other imaginable athletic activity, both on the field and off.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also thank David Bauer, who helped me create a career out of his concept; Gabe Miller for all of those days spent dissecting everything from Dylan to the Devil Rays at stadiums and arenas everywhere; Craig Neff for first giving me my first chance in this business; Albert Chen for being an indispensable part of so many fantasy victories; Chris Ballard for keeping me in mind at the right time; Steve Wulf and Rob Fleder for inviting me to join the original league; Terry McDonell for allowing me to write this book; every member of my fantasy leagues past and present for providing me with so much material; and to Michael Jaffe: right back at you big guy.

Thanks also to those who have made my last few years possible: Dr. Richard Silver and Dr. Gregory Berk, for being physicians and not just scientists, and the entire staff at Doctor's Hospital in Coral Gables, Florida, without whom I wouldn't be sitting here today.

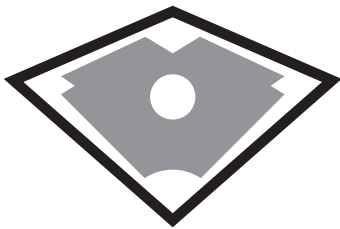
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And special thanks to Dan Foster, this book's line editor, for cleaning up all of my messes and also to acquisitions editor Emi Smith for being so understanding and easygoing throughout the entire process.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Sabino holds a dual communications and business degree from Syracuse University's Newhouse School and School of Management. He also earned an MBA in Marketing from the University of Miami Graduate Business School. He began working for *Sports Illustrated for Kids* magazine as a freelance writer/reporter in 1992. Sabino began his full-time career at *Sports Illustrated* in May 1995 and rose from the position of reporter to his current role as Associate Editor in charge of Statistics. He currently resides in Wyckoff, NJ.



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INTRODUCTION

If baseball is America's national pastime, then fantasy baseball is the nation's obsession. By picking up this book, it's safe to say that you consider yourself an avid fantasy baseball player and that you're searching for every edge you can get to win your league. That's good, because aiding avid fantasy players in the never-ending quest for fantasy superiority is this book's main purpose. As the resident fantasy sports expert for *Sports Illustrated* magazine for the past decade and a weekly fantasy sports columnist for SI.com, I've prided myself in sharing information with readers in the exact same way as I do when my friends ask for advice about their teams. I'm not out to prove that my way is the only way that works, and I haven't discovered the "Fantasy Rosetta Stone" that unlocks all the secrets of the baseball universe. What I am convinced of, however, is that the common-sense techniques that I've developed throughout the years really work. I've had very successful teams more often than not while competing in some unbelievably tough leagues. I've gone head-to-head not only with those who are considered fantasy baseball experts, but also with some of the most informed baseball insiders anywhere. In this book, I will share all of my techniques and tips—some that you might know already, some that will raise your eyebrows, some that will make you say "Wow!," and all of which, when employed together, will propel you to the top of your league nearly every year!

HOW DOES SOMEONE BECOME A "FANTASY EXPERT"?

One of the questions I'm asked most often when people find out what I do for a living is, "How do you get a job like that?" (Some other common questions are: "Have you ever met any supermodels?" Yes. "Did you ever meet Michael Jordan?" No, he stopped talking to SI before I started working there, but I have actually seen him play baseball in person. "Can you get me tickets to...?")

Ironically, and unknown to me at the time, fantasy baseball had a direct effect on my life even before I really began my career as a sports journalist.

It was early April 1995, and I had returned to New York after spending nearly two years in graduate business school at the University of Miami. I was working as a freelance reporter for the **Sports Illustrated For Kids** book department on a project called **Amazing Athletes**, which was a compendium of short items about roughly the 250 greatest athletes. It was a pretty cool job for someone who by all indications should've been living in the buttoned-down world of sales and marketing, so I really was in no hurry to get a "real" job.

The head of the books department, Neil Cohen, had previously worked at **Sport Magazine** with an editor named David Bauer who had recently been promoted to editor of a new experimental department called **Sports Illustrated Presents**. Bauer's division produced stand-alone professional sports previews and commemorative issues for championship teams (the ones in all those annoying **Sports Illustrated** commercials that basically say, "Hey Patriots fans, now that your team has won the Super Bowl, order a subscription and we'll send you this great issue). Knowing that "**Presents**" was understaffed and overwhelmed, Neil suggested that I'd be a good fit as a project reporter for the premier preview issue, "NFL '95." Although as a kid, or even really up to that point, I had never dreamed of being a reporter or writer, it was a job and seemed like it would be fun for a little while. Neil (among others) helped me set up an interview that brought me into contact with the intense world of fantasy baseball for the first time.

I went to the 19th floor of the Time & Life building to meet with Chief of Reporters J.B. Morris (who later would go on to become the commissioner of the Frenchy Fuqua Fantasy Football Association, which featured Vince Vaughn among other notables) and with Bauer. Having already been trained as a Time, Inc. reporter at **SI For Kids**, I assumed the interview process would be short, but never could I have guessed how short. After talking to J.B. for about 10 minutes, we made our way to the big corner office. Bauer welcomed me in, and I sat down on the opposite side of his big wooden desk. I could tell something was up. I had heard stories about what a great editor this guy was and how intense he was in his work, so I assumed that the workload that day had everyone frazzled since they had just closed a commemorative issue for the UCLA Bruins NCAA Basketball Championship.

HOW DOES SOMEONE BECOME A “FANTASY EXPERT”? (CONTINUED)

We spoke for about the same time it takes a NASCAR pit crew to change four tires, and just like that I was out the door.

As I walked down the hallway with my head spinning a bit, J.B. told me that I shouldn't conclude too much from the short meeting because it wasn't necessarily a bad sign. He explained that **SI's** Rotisserie League Draft was taking place that night, and Bauer was in full study mode and expecting a call from his fantasy partner.

From that point on, for better or for worse, fantasy baseball has had a huge influence in my life. Having grown up in the Bronx in the '70s and '80s, I was a huge baseball fan, mainly following the Yankees. My childhood bedroom had two windows. One faced east with a clear view of the lights and upper rows of Shea Stadium; the other faced south, and through it you could see the glow from Yankee Stadium lighting up the sky. When I wasn't playing the game (I still haven't seen a New York schoolyard that can contain me) I was studying it. First it was collecting baseball cards, and indexing them in every possible way. Then my sister, Donna, bought for me as a gift a game called Longball. I played that game, which was similar to the more popular Strat-o-Matic Baseball, for countless hours, collecting all of this seemingly useless data and learning the ins and outs of baseball strategy. I watched baseball, played baseball, played baseball games, and collected baseball cards. If that wasn't perfect training for a job at **SI**, then I don't know what is.

I got the job that day in April 1995 and since then have evolved into the resident fantasy sports expert at **Sports Illustrated**. In addition to my myriad duties and assignments over the years, my career has been defined by the creation of the Player Value Ranking, or PVR. Before each baseball, football, and basketball season since 1996, I have had the task of ranking every useful fantasy player for inclusion in the pages of **Sports Illustrated**, so that fantasy players would have a good idea of whom to draft. While on the surface it appears to be a science, the formation of the PVR is more of an art. It's true that fantasy sports are all based on statistics, but I've learned over the years that studying statistics only is the quickest way to fail. Success in fantasy sports has as much to do with identifying opportunity and states of being as it does with numbers. If you take nothing else from this book, I

Holding Up Your End of the Bargain

For this book to be effective, you'll have to hold up your end of the bargain too. Reading and knowing what to do without employing the strategies herein is of no help and actually could make your season more frustrating.

Being an elite fantasy baseball player in high stakes leagues is more than just a small hobby. You can get lucky every once in a while and win a season without going all out. In baseball, however, where there is so much player movement during a prohibitively long season chock full of streaks and slumps, it's just not advisable to get involved with one of the big leagues if you're not ready, willing, or able to devote your full effort. It may sound a little harsh, and you may be in it just for a little fun, which is great, but I'm of the mindset that no one wants to fail (or even be average) at anything. I, for one, don't like losing. In fact, you can say I detest losing. I've been on both sides of the win-loss ledger. As I'm sure you've discovered, looking at your fantasy team and knowing that it sucks is just no fun, especially when you know that along the way you could have changed your fortunes but didn't, or that you couldn't see which were the right moves to make. My goal is to help you get to a point where you experience that unexplainable rush of happiness and relief when the final out of the season is recorded and you realize that all of that time and energy you put into the season was well worth it.

“Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it.”

—Henry David Thoreau

It Really Isn't Rocket Science

While other authors write about their Earth-shattering equations and theorems that would confuse Stephen Hawking, my philosophy is to share with you tried and true methods that I've used to win leagues on all levels, including the highly competitive RLBA (the Rotisserie League Baseball Association, a.k.a. The Original Rotisserie League) and the less cut-throat but much more informed and baseball-connected *Sports Illustrated* Baseball League (SIBB). It's

really not rocket science, but winning consistently from season to season takes quite a bit more effort than most players want to believe. Despite the urge to concentrate solely on statistics, my strategies look much deeper into baseball players and their bosses as people, not just numbers.

The advice in this book will be useful to those in all types of leagues but caters mainly to those in the most competitive and involved leagues. Since it is nearly impossible to make every point in this book relevant to all different permutations of fantasy baseball games, I will concentrate mainly on the 4×4 and 5×5 category keeper leagues that use auction drafts, have minor league systems, free agency budgets, no bench, and a salary cap. By seeing everything through the eyes of someone playing in the toughest possible league, you should be able to see your league, no matter what your rules, in a different light.

While this book will use some familiar players in its examples, there is no section devoted to evaluating individual players for the upcoming season. You can get that from plenty of other sources right before the season when the information is up to date and more than just guesswork. What this book does for you is map out the framework you need to effectively evaluate players yourself. Throughout the book, I point out the information you should be looking for, where to find it, and, most importantly, what it means for you once you actually acquire that information. After reading this book, not only will you be able to construct a great fantasy *team*, but you'll develop a great fantasy *franchise* over time. You'll be *that team*—the one that everyone in your league looks at, shaking their heads and asking, “How do they do it year in and year out?”

How This Book Is Organized

This book is divided into the following five parts:

Part I: Fantasy Baseball Basics. In this first part, I'll talk briefly about the world of fantasy baseball and the differences and similarities of all the different games. Most of the book is directed toward those of you playing eight- or ten-category, single-league (American League or National League) auction keeper leagues (the hardest games to play because of the scarcity of great players), but I also discuss the other kinds of fantasy games.

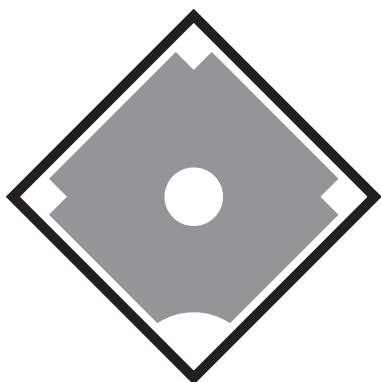
Part II: Preparing for the Draft. The second part covers everything having to do with your preseason preparation—evaluating your keepers, finding sleepers (which are the best sources of information), drafting strategies for each position, managing your budget, and how to get ready for the all-important endgame segment of your draft.

Part III: The Draft. The third part deals exclusively with what you do in your draft room. From what you need to have with you at the draft table, to how to gauge other people in the room, to when to make your move and how to keep track of your progress during the draft.

Part IV: Managing Your Team. The fourth section is the most involved and is devoted to the art of the deal and how to make trades and pick up free agents. I'll let you know when to panic if you get off to a slow start, and when not to rest on your laurels if you get out of the gate quickly. I also discuss something that I find very lacking in many of the leagues I've been part of: etiquette. Although the game looks like it's nothing more than a bunch of numbers on a computer or TV screen, it's really a study in interpersonal relationships. The way you handle yourself when dealing with other teams can go a long way toward their willingness to deal with you and ultimately toward your success.

Part V: Down the Stretch. The final part covers the final few weeks of the season, which for many years often degenerates into a free-for-all both in your league and in the majors. You'll find helpful information about how to decide whether it's time to play for the championship or time to start looking toward the next season, and how to strike a balance between both. You'll get tips on how to finish strong during the last month of the season when everyone's roster goes haywire, and you'll find general strategic tips that apply universally to all leagues, no matter how hard or easy.

In the appendixes at the end of the book, I've included a glossary of common lingo, and I explain how the lingo applies to your fantasy baseball team. After that is a team-by-team listing of information sources you can use during the season to follow each and every major league team (and their minor league affiliates). I've also included a compendium of stats services who will either run your existing league or help you join a new one. And finally, I've taken a look back at the most valuable fantasy hitters and pitchers for each season of the fantasy baseball era.



PART I

**FANTASY
BASEBALL
BASICS**

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FINDING THE FANTASY

In this first chapter, I'll introduce the basics of this book and the differences between the most popular forms of fantasy baseball games and the methods used in playing them. I'll introduce a brief history and rationale behind fantasy baseball, and I'll explain how the basic idea of fantasy baseball is really not the same as the game that's played on the field.

Here's what you'll find in this chapter:

- ◆ The origins of fantasy baseball
- ◆ Why you should (or shouldn't) play
- ◆ Isn't this gambling?
- ◆ The main differences between real baseball and fantasy baseball

What Is Fantasy Baseball?

Fantasy baseball comprises any number of games where the goal is to accumulate the statistics tallied by major league baseball players for your team. Teams are drafted among groups of team "owners" who compete either in weekly head-to-head match-ups or in cumulative categories in which points are awarded for their relative standing in those categories (otherwise known as Rotisserie).

In the Beginning

The accepted originators of fantasy baseball were a group of New York professionals who gathered in the early 1980s in a French restaurant called La Rotisserie Francaise. They were all baseball-o-philes searching for a different way to follow their favorite game. Longtime magazine editor and writer Daniel Okrent, who is generally acknowledged as the father of fantasy sports, had devised a game in which the participants tested their baseball knowledge and general managing skills against one another. What Okrent ultimately came up with was something like this: Each of 10 teams would have a budget to draft 25 players (all from the National League), thus simulating the formation of an actual team. The group chose eight categories to keep track of: home runs, runs batted in, batting average, stolen bases, wins, earned run average, saves, and whip (or walks plus hits per inning pitched, which is roughly the same as base runners allowed per inning). That league, the Rotisserie League Baseball Association (RLBA) has existed now for nearly 25 years.

I have first-hand knowledge about that league because for the last three years I've been a member of the RLBA and have played with (and beaten) some of the legends of the game. For years, the RLBA has produced a book sharing the rules of the game, previewing the upcoming season with opinions of noteworthy players, and telling anecdotes of their past season. While I'm not going to give player recommendations here, I will share with you all of the tips, secrets, and strategies that have led me to the top of the first competitive fantasy leagues anyone has played in.

In addition to the RLBA, I've also been a member of the SI Baseball League (SIBB) for 10 years. (Shortly after my interview I teamed up with SI Baseball Editor Larry Burke to form a team.) I've competed head to head with many of *Sports Illustrated's* most respected writers and editors. In the SIBB, you're competing with people who are actually out in the field talking to the players, pitching coaches, managers, and general managers. They're people who have the true inside story of what's going on, so to be at their level, you have to be good.

To me, Rotisserie (a.k.a. category) leagues are the most challenging form of fantasy baseball. Having to master an auction draft, free agent budgets, the ability to retain players from year to year, and

restricting the player pool to one league really makes the game very challenging. Playing in an American League-only league is the most difficult because the player pool from which to choose is the smallest (there are only 14 teams, as opposed to 16 in the National League), and AL teams tend to have fewer opportunities for bench players.

Why You Should (or Shouldn't) Play

The main reason to play any fantasy sport is for the love of the game. Really. There's no better way to get to the essence of a baseball season than by following along with something at stake. You see the game in a different light than if you were just watching game to game.

Another byproduct is that your breadth of interest and knowledge expands to include every team, not just your favorite team. It always baffles me how so many people know everything there is to know about *their* team but so little about every other team. I've spent a lot of time at Yankee Stadium, and I've provided more than my share of back stories for opposing players, some of whom I've come across because of my job, but some of whom I would have no clue about except for my fantasy teams.

I've been in AL leagues for a decade but have been playing in the NL-only variety for only five seasons. The main reason that I sought out an NL team was because I found that I really knew much more about the AL than I did about the NL because I followed it so closely. I knew something about every player who put on a uniform in the AL but had never even heard of the Brewers' leader in pitching appearances.

Don't get me wrong—the competition is great too. I've developed some great rivalries with different teams in my leagues, and it's so sweet when you go *mano-a-mano* for an entire season and finish on top.

Isn't This Gambling?

Although few people are willing to admit it, fantasy sports are a very popular and generally accepted form of gambling, although you're much more in control of your destiny than in a normal game of chance. As I'm sure you know, many leagues have large prizes available to teams who finish in the “money slots.” Prizes can range from as little as \$50 to as much as seven figures for leagues operated

by large gambling organizations. So it can be very lucrative if you're good at it. But if you're in it for the money, you're looking at this in the wrong light.



There are much easier ways to turn a profit than playing fantasy baseball for a six-month season. If you're in it for the gambling aspect, take up Texas Hold 'Em, betting on horse racing, or even Las Vegas-style sports betting. The only real reasons to play fantasy baseball are because you love the game, you're looking for a different way to follow it, and you like the competition and camaraderie of being in a league with like-minded people.

Fantasy Baseball versus Real Baseball

While on the surface it appears that being a good player on the field and being a good player for fantasy purposes go hand-in-hand, that isn't always the case. In fact, sometimes those two things are in direct opposition to each other.

Since fantasy baseball deals solely with statistics, the intangibles necessary to make someone a good or even great player are ignored. Many players make a career out of doing the little things like moving runners along on the base paths by bunting or hitting behind a runner, going from first to third on a single, throwing to the right base, and so on. Since I've never seen a league with an "extra base taken" category, none of these things matter at all for your fantasy team. All that most fantasy owners care about is numbers. How many home runs does a player have? What's his ERA? Does he have a lot of stolen bases? In most leagues it doesn't matter if a hitter strikes out 200 times or if he grounds into 50 double plays. All that matters is how the player performs in the statistical categories used in the league. For that reason, many people overestimate or underestimate the relative values of players.

Winning in real baseball requires players to give of themselves, sometimes sacrificing their personal statistics for the good of the team. In fantasy baseball, you're looking for the players who are selfish—those who are looking to pad their stats at all costs. Of course,

REAL VERSUS FANTASY PLAYER VALUE

One of the best examples of a player who is much better on the field than he is in the world of fantasy baseball is Derek Jeter of the New York Yankees. Jeter is the consummate professional both on and off the field. He's the most popular and most reliable player on the best team of the last decade. Everything Jeter does on the field is designed to help his team win. He has good power and speed and drives-in a large number of runs for someone who hits at the top of the order. But when compared to other elite players or even other shortstops throughout the major leagues, Jeter's numbers don't really set him apart. He never leads his position in home runs, runs batted in, or stolen bases (he does provide his fair share of runs scored and a good batting average), but ask any player in the big leagues if they'd want to play with the Yankees captain and the answer would be a resounding "Yes!"

not every good player is selfish, but toward the end of the season, when you'll need them most, many players will have nothing to play for but themselves. With that in mind, the best players to look for are those looking to pad their stats.



More often than not, hitters in the final year of their contracts have big years, trying to put up the best numbers they can to bring into their negotiation sessions for the following season. If they're healthy, they're bound to be among the most productive players as the season winds down.

Relative Player Value

While many players are equally good or bad in fantasy as they are on the field, some have much greater value in one than the other. Following are two lists of players from the early 2000s. Some players have more cache as a fantasy player than they do on the field and vice versa. The players on the left are examples of the old adage about a great team on paper. The team on the right would be more likely to win if placed on the field.

| Position | Better in Fantasy | Better on the Field |
|-----------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| C | Mike Piazza | Mike Matheny |
| 1B | Paul Konerko | Darin Erstad |
| 2B | Alfonso Soriano | Mark Loretta |
| SS | Jose Valentin | Derek Jeter |
| 3B | Pedro Feliz | Bill Mueller |
| LF | Reggie Sanders | Hideki Matsui |
| CF | Scott Podsednik | Mark Kotsay |
| RF | Jeromy Burnitz | Jacque Jones |



FANTASY BASEBALL VARIATIONS

In this chapter, you'll learn about different styles of fantasy baseball leagues, including the following:

- ◆ Single category leagues
- ◆ Straight drafts versus auction leagues
- ◆ Head-to-head versus category leagues
- ◆ Single season versus keeper leagues
- ◆ All MLB versus single leagues
- ◆ American versus National Leagues
- ◆ Other variations

The types of fantasy baseball games vary greatly because there are so many permutations possible in the basic styles. With the exception of single category leagues, all the other options can be, and are, played with the others in leagues all around the world. Every possible combination of the aspects described in this chapter are used. It's not uncommon to see a league with a straight draft using players from both the AL and NL and having no keepers. The kinds of leagues that are the focus of this book are pretty much the opposite: single leagues with keepers and an auction draft. To each his own. So, with no further ado, following are the different types of fantasy baseball game variations.

Single Category Games (a.k.a. Pools)

The simplest forms of fantasy baseball are single category games, better known as *pools*, where people buy in for some denomination of cash, and usually the winner takes all. One that I've been part of (at Bobby Valentine's restaurant in Stamford, Connecticut) is a home-run pool. The goal is to pick any number of players (generally 5 or 10) and get credit for each home run that your players hit throughout the season. It can also be played with wins, saves, stolen bases, hits, runs, or any other stat. This is more or less pure gambling and strictly a game of chance, so I will not spend much time on it.

Advantages of a pool include:

- ◆ Very simple to organize.
- ◆ One-shot draft; no team management.
- ◆ Following your team is not time consuming since the players selected are usually the biggest stars who get the most exposure.
- ◆ Easy to administer with a very large group of people.
- ◆ A single person can quickly compile the statistics and standings without using a stats service.

Disadvantages of a pool include:

- ◆ It's not especially challenging.
- ◆ You have the same players for the whole season.
- ◆ The game becomes one-dimensional to you since you're only looking for your players to do one thing.
- ◆ There's very little interaction between teams throughout the season.

Straight Drafts versus Auctions

In a straight draft, an order is selected by some means, most often by some form of random assignment such as picking a name from a hat or having it generated by a computer or by reverse order of the previous year's standings. As your designated draft slot comes up, you have your choice of any player not previously taken (or protected) by any team. This process repeats in a number of rounds that match the number of players allowed on each roster. Some leagues go back to the top of the order when each round is completed; others "snake"

around so the team with the last pick in the first round has the first pick in the second round, and so on. Most online fantasy games employ the straight draft so that they can assign players orderly to teams spread out over multiple venues. Some leagues (most notably the very popular free Yahoo! games) can also automatically assign players based on lists submitted by each team in order of preference.

In an auction draft, each team is assigned a dollar value (usually \$260) to spend on a certain number of players (usually 24 players in the AL or 25 players in the NL). Each team has to fill out an entire roster, although they don't have to spend all the money. Players are brought up for bid, and any team can "buy" any player at any time if they are willing to spend enough of their draft budget and have an appropriate remaining roster slot to fit the player into.

Although some have varying roster sizes and position requirements, most players are in fantasy leagues that use the following standards, set nearly a quarter century ago, for the National and American Leagues.

BASIC MAKEUP OF FANTASY TEAM POSITIONS

| National League (25) | American League (24) |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Catchers (2) | Catchers (2) |
| First Baseman (1) | First Baseman (1) |
| Third Baseman (1) | Third Baseman (1) |
| Corner Infielder (either 1B or 3B) (1) | Corner Infielder (1) |
| Second Baseman (1) | Second Baseman (1) |
| Shortstop (1) | Shortstop (1) |
| Middle Infielder (either 2B or SS) (1) | Middle Infielder (1) |
| Outfielder (5) | Outfielder (5) |
| Pitcher (10) | Pitcher (10) |
| Utility (any offensive position) (1) | Designated Hitter (1) |
| Utility (any position, including an extra pitcher) (1) | |

Compared to the straight draft, the auction is by far the more difficult yet more fulfilling for many reasons, not the least of which is that it gives you a chance to acquire any available player, not just the one who is left when it is your turn. The auction most realistically mimics real free agency in that the highest bidder wins.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

Each year that I've been part of the RLBA, I have had the player with the highest price tag, including Sammy Sosa and Vladimir Guerrero. And in 2004 it was Albert Pujols who had exactly the kind of strong season I was expecting. In his four major league seasons, only three or four other hitters can even be mentioned in the same sentence as Pujols when discussing greatness at the plate. If I had been in a straight draft, there would have been very little chance that I would have been able to grab each of them over the years. The reasoning behind this strategy is to secure the player who you think is a sure thing. The extra money you spend will be well worth it in the end when you realize that no one will have a better player than you.

In the straight draft you have less control of your fate. It's all the luck of the draw. To me, there's nothing more frustrating than knowing the right move to make and not being able to pull it off just because of bad luck. You may be a Cardinals fan who knows deep in your heart that Albert Pujols is the most valuable player in baseball, and if there's no one else you get on your team, you want Pujols. If you don't get the first pick, chances are you'll have a hard time getting baseball's best young hitter for your squad. In an auction, you can spend whatever it takes to get the players you want.

Another great advantage of the auction draft is that you can wait before acquiring sleepers—the players with low expectations but whom you value more than everyone else does. But the challenge is to figure out exactly the right amount to spend to allow yourself enough remaining money to acquire the players you want. Sometimes great players are overlooked and can be acquired at a dramatically reduced rate, depending on the market value at the time. Each auction has its own tempo and rhythm due to player availability, and if you can learn to read it, it will give you a huge advantage over your fellow players (more on this later in the draft preparation part of this book).

Head-to-Head versus Category (or Rotisserie Style)

Head-to-head leagues pit teams against each other on a weekly basis. The team that has better numbers in the greater number of applicable categories for seven days is declared the winner of the game that week. Each week of the season counts as one game, and standings

are recorded over the course of five to five and a half months. The teams with the best records make the playoffs, which are usually contested over the final two weeks of the season.

In category leagues, teams don't go head-to-head in individual weeks; they accumulate statistics and earn points based either on their ranking in each individual category or by points awarded for each statistic accumulated (for example, a home run is worth 10 points, a stolen base 5 points, and so on). Most of the standard categories are aggregate totals like home runs, stolen bases, wins, and saves, so it's of the utmost importance to have players who actually play. Ratio categories like earned run average (ERA), which is the number of earned runs allowed per nine innings (earned runs times nine divided by innings pitched), WHIP (walks plus hits divided by innings pitched), and batting average (hits divided by at-bats) give more value to players who don't see as much action as others but are especially effective when they're in the game (like platoon players, pinch hitters, and middle relievers).

Most category leagues fall into two different groups: the 4×4 leagues and the 5×5 leagues. The main difference is that the 4×4 leagues use two fewer statistics—one offensive and one pitching: most often runs scored and strikeouts. The more categories a league uses, the more realistic the game seems. With the advent of *Moneyball*, the Michael Lewis book about the statistics-heavy inner workings of the Oakland A's, more fantasy leagues are including more esoteric and ratio statistics such as OPS (on-base plus slugging percentages) and strikeout-to-walk ratio. Some leagues just go all out and use as many categories as they can.

I was the silent partner for novelist Michael Jaffe (owner of the Big Hoss Posse fantasy franchises) in a Yahoo! MLB league run by members of the legendary rock band R.E.M. That league used 20 different categories, including innings pitched, losses, triples, complete games, and shutouts—the latter two being some of the rarest occurrences in baseball in this era of specialized bullpens and closers. There were too many categories, and the rare ones that have become devalued in real baseball had too much importance placed upon them. That was also the only league I've ever been part of where errors was a category. It was an interesting twist because the thing that fantasy baseball usually ignores is defense, and it's something that I'd like to

try in another league. While errors aren't the best judge (sometimes you're penalizing players for getting to balls others wouldn't have even reached), I'm in favor of some kind of defensive component to fantasy baseball.



While your league may not count defensive statistics at all, don't ignore a player's defensive ability. In real baseball, defense is one of the most important parts of the game to managers, many of whom will often choose the defensive player who is average at the plate over the offensive player who is below average in the field. So before you make a major investment in a player, make sure that he isn't a defensive liability who could lose at-bats either by being pulled from the lineup for late-inning defensive replacements or by being removed from the lineup altogether. More than a few players who could hit were sent back to the minors to work on their defense.

Common Categories

These are the most common categories in traditional 4 × 4 leagues:

4 X 4 LEAGUE CATEGORIES

| Hitting | Pitching |
|-----------------|---|
| Batting Average | Wins |
| Home Runs | Saves |
| Runs Batted In | Earned Run Average |
| Stolen Bases | WHIP (Walks plus Hits per Inning Pitched) |

Runs and strikeouts are added to make a 5 × 5 league:

5 X 5 LEAGUE CATEGORIES

| Hitting | Pitching |
|-----------------|---|
| Batting Average | Wins |
| Home Runs | Saves |
| Runs Batted In | Earned Run Average |
| Stolen Bases | WHIP (Walks plus Hits per Inning Pitched) |
| Runs Scored | Strikeouts |

Single Season versus Keeper Leagues

Single-year leagues can be fun but are nowhere near as interesting or involved as keeper leagues. If the goal of fantasy baseball is to mimic the running of a real major league organization, then keeper leagues are the only way to go. In single-year leagues, all players are released back into the pool of available players at the end of each season. In keeper leagues, a certain number of players may be retained by each team from one year to the next. Some leagues stagger the number of retainable players, giving the teams that finish lower in the standings the opportunity to save more players for the following season, but most allow each team the same number of keepers, usually between 5 and 10 per team.

There are many rules surrounding keepers, including making it mandatory to retain players acquired via free agency or trade. In many keeper leagues there is a fee to freeze a player on your roster from one season to the next. There are also topper rules in which players are in essence restricted free agents who may be bought back by their teams for \$1 more than the final auction price. In the RLBA you're allowed one season to retain a player without being charged. To save a player for a second season, a \$10 fee is added to the player's contract. No player may be kept three times. There is no keeper fee in the SIBB, which also has a limit of two times per freeze per player.

The main advantages of keeper leagues are:

- ◆ Trading is fostered because more players have long-term value rather than single-season value.
- ◆ Teams can acquire players during their development and enjoy them as they fulfill their potential.

RETAINING VALUE

Mark Prior was the product of someone's farm system and was assigned the price of \$2. He was kept by that owner one season at \$2. During his second season, I traded for him, banking on the fact that he would have a great second half of the season. He did and helped me to the top of the league. Before the next draft, I froze him and was charged an additional \$10 because it was the second time he was kept. Unfortunately, he was slowed by a bad Achilles tendon and was barely worth his original price of \$2 for most of the season. Still, at \$12, keeping him was a no brainer, injuries and all.

- ◆ Owners have the sense of building a franchise, not just a team, creating more differentiation between owners according to their styles.
- ◆ Every team stays involved until the end of the season since they can build for next year even if they're not in contention for the title in the current season.
- ◆ Owners can retain their favorite players without risking losing them in the draft every year.

All MLB versus Single League

I'm really not a big fan of fantasy leagues that employ a pool of players from both the American and National Leagues unless there are 20 or more teams in the league. While everyone is on an even playing field, it's much too easy to overcome adversity when All-Star caliber players are readily available on the waiver wire. Single league games are much more challenging and test your player evaluation skills to the fullest. If you're going to challenge yourself, challenge yourself!

A majority of fantasy players, either in private leagues or in the public leagues provided by Web sites like Yahoo!, play the two-league style with 10 or 12 teams. That's akin to playing blackjack and using only face cards. Everyone has a great hand, and winning and losing depends more on luck than on skill. You can do very well in these league just by knowing the league leaders. Many of my friends play these leagues, and when they ask me for sleepers, I try to tell them that it's not worth it. Why take a chance on a pitcher like Scott Kazmir, Tampa Bay's hard-throwing lefty who may or may not have great success in his career, when established winners like Greg Maddux and Odalis Perez are available as free agents. Does anyone really care who wins the All Star game in July? That's how I feel about it.

National League Only versus American League Only

Although on the surface the American League and National League look the same to the fantasy player (with the exception of the designated hitters versus utility players), the American League games have a bit more edge to them. In the National League there are 16 teams,

meaning there are 16 closers, 16 number one starters, 16 clean-up hitters, and 16 lead-off hitters. In a 10-team league, chances are that six teams will have two of each of the aforementioned positions. In American League games, only four teams have two of each of them, leading to some very interesting choices and many more gambles being made. The harder players are to acquire, the more difficult it is to win by chance, giving the owner with the most information and the best instincts the advantage.

Another thing that gives the American League more of an edge is that the pitcher bats in the National League, so more players are used every game due to pinch hitting and double switches. Bench players in the senior circuit thus have inherently more value than those in the AL, so when you need to replace a player in the AL, it's more difficult to find someone who will contribute regularly. The same can be said for relief pitchers, more of whom see regular and extended work in the NL than in the AL.

Farm Systems

A fun twist in a keeper league is the introduction of a farm system where each team selects a number of minor league players to retain on a separate roster until they reach the majors. If and when they get promoted to the majors, a roster space has to be cleared for them or they have to be released. Every year many minor league players get called up during the season and play a big role. It's a huge bonus if you already have the best of them in your organization, because your task is to maximize your resources, and sometimes rookies will be the most marketable resources you have.

FINDING 'FONSO

One of the players I'm most proud of "discovering" as a minor leaguer was Alfonso Soriano. When I selected Soriano in the SIBB minor league draft, he had yet to play a minor league game in North America. He had been signed by the Yankees after playing in the Japanese minor leagues. While there was some press about his abilities, one of the scouting reports I read compared him favorably with Vladimir Guerrero and Derek Jeter. While those comparisons were a bit overblown, especially when it comes to strikeouts and defense, I was very happy to have the speedy and powerful Soriano as part of my team for nearly six full years.

Free Agency

Every league has some form of free agency, in which players either not selected in the draft or released at some point in the season are able to be picked up, either for a free agency fee or some waiver order. In many easier leagues, free agency is on a first-come first-served basis. In leagues using a free-agency acquisition budget (FAAB), players are picked up using a weekly bidding process, much like the start of the season auction. This gives every team the ability to pick up every available player during every free agency period while using a finite budget, often with fees that equate to real money. If a team wants to make a move, it costs them.

Most waiver orders are determined by reversing the standings, thus giving the worst teams the first pick. This was the method that the SIBB used before I became commissioner and was one of the first changes I campaigned for. There's something inherently wrong about rewarding ineptitude or misfortune by handing the last place team the best available player. Fantasy baseball is a great experiment in the free market, and fostering parity goes against all of its principles.

Benches

Many leagues employ reserve benches, while many others have rules mandating that every player on the team must be active at all times. Here are some arguments for and against allowing teams to hide away players who aren't active for them.

Pro-bench arguments:

- ◆ Teams can replace slumping players while still retaining their services for later in the season.
- ◆ Teams can take a chance by signing an unproven player who they believe could earn a job later in the season without having to absorb a lack of production while waiting.
- ◆ Benches create depth on individual teams and encourage more trades between teams.
- ◆ Shrewd owners can keep valuable players away from their competitors without having to make other valuable players available.

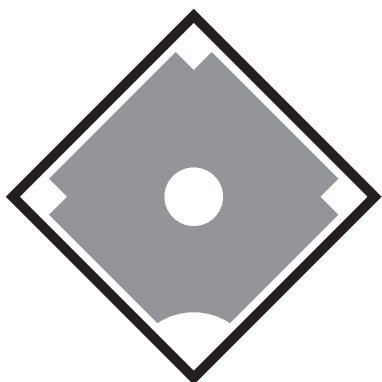
Anti-bench arguments:

- ◆ Encourages hoarding players from already talent-thin free agent pool.
- ◆ Major league teams have to live and die through player slumps, and so should you.
- ◆ It becomes too easy to decide to add players with relatively no risk.

Disabled Lists

In the SIBB there is a limited disabled list, one that allows only two injured players per team. This makes the signing of too many players who tend to be injury prone (for example, Juan Gonzalez, Frank Thomas, and Ken Griffey, Jr.) a risky proposition. Most leagues have unlimited disabled lists, which actually makes it somewhat beneficial to pick up injured players. There's relatively little risk in signing one of the often-injured players because he's either in the lineup producing or is hidden away on your bench and replaced by a player who could prove to be even more valuable in some ways.

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PART II

**PREPARING
FOR YOUR
DRAFT**

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ESTABLISHING YOUR FANTASY IDENTITY

In this chapter I discuss the major concepts you need to think about as you prepare for your draft. Here's what you'll find in this chapter:

- ◆ There's no substitute for preparation
- ◆ Is the draft really all that important?
- ◆ Sorting out your potential freezes (a.k.a. keepers)

There's No Substitute for Preparation

One of the biggest mistakes I see scores of people make every year (even in some of the most competitive leagues) is not devoting enough time to getting ready for their draft. It's not like the baseball season sneaks up on anybody, with six weeks of spring training games, yet still people procrastinate and try to cram all of their information gathering into the few final hours before the draft. They spend the day or two before the draft reading a baseball preview magazine or surfing the Web and then enter the draft room ice cold. There's no way you would go into a final exam without studying for weeks, right? So why would anyone go into the draft without preparing for it enough to be successful?

A sad fact is that many of my friends are some of the worst offenders. During draft time my phone rings off the hook with people asking me for sleepers and tips for their various leagues around the country. I try to help whatever way I can, but many times it's too

late to be any good. It's difficult to offer suggestions about relatively unknown players to people who don't even know about everyone they should. So, for instance, when I tell someone to draft a Khalil Greene, it should be with the understanding that if Edgar Renteria or Miguel Tejada is obtainable, he's the right choice instead. Many times that fact gets lost in translation because people enter their draft knowing less than they should. They usually don't understand that I can't know their league well enough to plot a strategy for them in a single phone call. Heck, I have a hard enough time keeping up with my leagues. And that's an important point for you to remember as you get ready for your season. No one should know more about the workings of your league than you. The person who figures out the landscape the best usually wins.

"Luck is the residue of design"

—Branch Rickey, Hall of Fame Baseball Executive

Branch Rickey, the man who is remembered most for giving Jackie Robinson the opportunity to break baseball's color barrier in 1947 for the Brooklyn Dodgers, had perhaps the greatest baseball mind in history. Although he had no concept of it when he first uttered those immortal words, his philosophy applies as much to fantasy baseball as it does to every other aspect of life. No matter how many good decisions you make, you have to have a bit of good luck too. Good preparation puts you in position to succeed, and a little bit of luck makes that possibility a reality.

The group of players you walk away with from your draft table is the hand you've been dealt in poker. You have a base that you can build on. Sometimes you're dealt four aces, and you can stand pat and roll to an easy win. Most times, however, you get what my friend Steve refers to as the "Royal Sampler," a collection of useful, potentially useful, and useless parts. On average, I expect to retain only 25% to 30% of the players on my final roster that I had when I walked out of the draft room, for a large array of reasons, including:

- ◆ Players are inevitably traded, not only by you but also by their big league clubs, and sometimes you'll lose them because of it.

- ◆ Players are going to get hurt. There's nothing you can do about injuries, especially those to players who usually don't get hurt.
- ◆ Players will outlive their usefulness, and you'll want to replace them.
- ◆ Someone better will become available, and you'll have to sacrifice one of your players to clear the roster spot.

How Important Is the Draft?

To say the draft is the most important part of the season is the same as saying the foundation is the most important part of a building. You can build a beautiful house on a cliffside in Malibu, but when the rains come and the ground your house sits on gets washed away, everything you worked so hard to obtain gets demolished. That's not to say, however, that a few well-placed columns couldn't save your house even if most of your property has slid down the cliff. The same is true for your fantasy team. You want to have enough depth on your team to help you survive events that for other teams could be catastrophic.

Anyone can draft from the top 50 players in any league. That's why I don't like all-MLB or mixed leagues. The fun part of each draft is the endgame, and the difference between great teams and everyone else is in the depths of their rosters. Just like in real baseball, the stronger a fantasy team is top to bottom, the better it will fare. With few exceptions, to have a winning team, every spot on your roster has to bring something to the table. And more importantly, no spot should hurt you. In no endeavor have I seen the concept of "addition by subtraction" apply more than in fantasy baseball. To take a flammable pitcher off of your staff or to get a .220 hitter out of your lineup does wonders. It's better to have a couple of players who do nothing than to have those who will hurt your chances of winning. This is not to say that you will keep your roster intact for the whole season; in fact, you'll be far from it, but the more marketable commodities you have, the better shape your team will be in.

It's not a hard concept if you think about it, but too many people don't devote enough study time to the less-established players whom they inevitably will be forced to choose from at some point on draft

day. Those who choose smartly give themselves the head start to success; those who do not will find themselves either scrambling to find new players early in the year or sinking to the bottom of the pack while they wait for the journeyman fifth outfielder or fourth starter for the Colorado Rockies to have that breakout season that's never going to come.

I'm not like most "experts" who are of the mind that the draft is the absolute end-all of the entire fantasy season. I've been able to salvage seasons after having picked a poor collection of complementary players to start with (although it is impossible to win if your core players all stink). Most of the time it's rather difficult and not all that enjoyable to manage such a year. The best way to try to avoid the ordeal of swimming upstream in your league during the season is to go into your draft fully prepared.

Acing the Draft

The richest opportunity you will have to build depth throughout the entire year begins at the draft table. It doesn't matter how proficient a wheeler and dealer you are during the season; someone has to buy what you're selling, and if you don't have any marketable commodities, you'll be living in the world of second-tier players who will ground you firmly into the bowels of your league's standings. While free agency provides other opportunities for you to acquire talent, players are usually there for the taking at the draft if you know who they are, and many times for the minimum bids.

For example, in the SIBB (*Sports Illustrated* Baseball League) there is a bench draft held after the regular auction. Each team is allowed to add five extra players for a uniform price of \$10 each. During the draft of 2004, the Deitsch Marks (co-owned by *SI* editors Mark Bechtel and Richard Deitsch) were able to snag Angels utility man Chone Figgins and White Sox rookie (although a veteran of Japanese baseball) Shingo Takatsu. Any team at the table could have drafted either of these players for \$1 at the end of the auction phase. Figgins ended up among the leaders in stolen bases in the American League and qualified at half a dozen positions, while Takatsu became Chicago's closer midway through the season (a role he had in Japan).

Just by knowing the potential of Figgins and Takatsu, the Deitsch Marks got ultra-productive players for free.

The key to a good draft strategy is to get players who a) you think will be the top performers overall (in other words, the Barry Bondses, Vladimir Guerreros, and Randy Johnsons of the world) and b) you believe will have greater value during the season than they have that day in March or early April. You'll devote most of your resources to acquiring Category A players, while for Category B you'll force yourself to find bargains.

The players you leave the draft with (along with whichever keepers and minor league holdovers you have) form the base of everything else you can and can't do the rest of the season.

Building Your Foundation

Every league is different every year, so your spending strategy should vary based on player scarcity. It's a simple example of supply and demand. If most of the top home run hitters are going to be kept by other teams, then you'll have to spend more on home runs than you normally would if your league started from scratch.

I've never believed in draft guides that give suggested dollar values for players for their fantasy draft previews. You didn't necessarily get a great deal by drafting Torii Hunter for \$30 even if the magazine said he was worth \$40. Why? Well, maybe Manny Ramirez, Alex Rodriguez, Garret Anderson, and Eric Chavez were all available for around \$30 too, because pitching was more in demand than power. Specific prices are set by the availability of players, and only their fantasy value rank is an absolute. That's why I created the *Sports Illustrated* Player Value Ranking (PVR) the way I did. These days you see the scarcity issues most among established closers and base stealers who tend to always be overpriced and overrated. (I'll talk about this more in the "Managing Your Team" section about punting a category.) More often than not, the best of them are keepers, thus making the remaining players with those skills all the more valuable.

HOW'D HE DO THAT?

For three straight years in the RLBA, esteemed sportswriter Steve Wulf (now of ESPN) owned Albert Pujols for \$1. Needless to say, that was the greatest freeze I've ever seen in any league in any season. So not only did Steve benefit from having a superior player at a microscopic price, he removed one of the great players in baseball from the available player pool, thus raising the price of other players.

Pitching Staff

I've developed a budget guideline that I like to follow whenever I can. I'm a big proponent of the belief that you have to assemble a strong pitching staff to succeed in fantasy baseball, although I seem to be in the minority, based on the decisions of many of the other owners with whom I've played. Since pitching categories make up 50% of the points allotment in nearly every league, shouldn't you spend 50% of your budget on them? It's harder to pick up elite pitchers during the season than it is to get players who drive in runs, hit home runs, and yes, even steal bases. Good pitchers can be had. Great pitchers are much more rare. Therefore, I'm in the habit of spending more than half of my budget on pitchers. Some of the old-timers spend close to 90% on offense and sew together a makeshift pitching staff out of journeymen. That's not for me. Give me Clemens. Give me the Big Unit. Give me Schilling. I want sure things and will spend handsomely to get them.

Caveat Emptor: Having said that, I must warn that there's no bigger way to get burned than to have bad years from two of your elite pitchers. One year my team dedicated \$65 to two normally awesome starting pitchers: David Cone of the Yankees and Randy Johnson of the Mariners. The two were seriously injured for most of the season and combined for a mere 12 wins. Johnson's bad back and Cone's aneurism in his shoulder proved that the best laid plans can fail as well. However, that season was merely a hiccup in the strategy that has worked every other year.

Cornerstone Players

Just as in the major leagues, your first step as a general manager should be to decide who are the players best suited to be your team's corner-

stones. Every team needs that slam dunk, can't miss, hang-your-hat-on-guy so that if all else fails, you still have someone producing. In general you can't go wrong picking one of the top 10 players as rated by any fantasy expert, including me. But sometimes many of those players aren't available because they're going to be kept. Don't fret, though, because you'll be in great shape to have next year's super keepers.

Choosing your cornerstone player is like picking your favorite dessert. In NL-only leagues, Todd Helton is apple pie, Albert Pujols is a canoli, and Barry Bonds is a huge sundae. No matter which you select, your sweet tooth will be satisfied, and your offensive categories will fill up nicely. In those rare instances when one has a bad year or suffers a major injury, it's like finding a hair in your dessert. It's not the recipe's fault, it's just that specific instance that was tainted, and you have to chalk it up to bad luck. My best advice is when you have to decide between the greatest of players (by which I mean those who year-in and year-out are consistently healthy and productive), pick the one you like the best even if he costs a few dollars more. Remember, fantasy baseball is a game and is meant to be fun. It's a lot more fun following players you like or from your favorite teams than those you normally wouldn't be rooting for or even would be rooting against.



There's a national broadcast ad for an electronics store. In it a bunch of football fans are gathered in a room watching a game and rooting for the same team. A big moan goes out throughout the room when the opposing team scores a touchdown and only one guy cheers. Why is he so excited? "That guy was on my fantasy team," he yells as everyone looks at him with scorn. I can't stress this enough: **Don't be him!** You have to be true to your core values, and just because someone is on your team doesn't mean you should throw out all of your other allegiances. Chances are that you'll still be a fan of your team well after your fantasy days are over.

Warming Up to Your Freezes

In those leagues in which you get to keep players from one year to the next (keeper leagues), choosing the right players to keep can be even more important than your draft. Many players spend a good part of the season trying to acquire potential keepers either because

they've fallen out of the race or because they have enough talented players on their roster that they can take a chance on potential.

There are five categories of players you should consider keeping:

The first are the no-brainers—players you picked up at a very low price and who are now producing at a high level. This can happen for a number of reasons—for example, you drafted them before their full potential was realized (Carlos Beltran, Adrian Beltre), they were injured at the time of your draft, and people shied away from spending money for uncertain returns (Jason Schmidt, Mark Prior, J.D. Drew, Jermaine Dye), you had them in your farm system and they became regulars (Joe Blanton, David Wright, B.J. Upton), or their role on their team dramatically changed as the year progressed (Brad Lidge, Johan Santana, Pedro Feliz).



There's a saying that's sometimes used at **SI** when trying to decide whether to do a story: "Once is an accident, twice is a coincidence, three times makes a trend." That's a good rule of thumb when trying to decide on whom you should invest your big bucks. You should be cautious after just one big season because the player could have been in the zone and may never return there again. You can be a little more liberal after a second good year, but as Alfonso Soriano has shown us, upward trends don't always continue on that path. After three superior seasons, however, you can be reasonably sure that a player is the real deal and worthy of a healthy chunk of your budget.

The second are the players who are too good to let go at any price. The top price for a player in both of my leagues hovers around \$50 every season. Some players are priced around that amount (give or take \$5) at every draft, so instead of risking losing your big bopper, lock him up if you have the space. Sure, you'll tie up a large portion of your budget, but you'll have one of the top-rated players in the league.

The third are players who are priced well below their projected draft value should you release them back into the pool of available players. They might not be the least expensive players, but they could also be the best bargains. One example of a mistake I made a couple of years ago had to do with one of these players. I had picked up Tampa Bay third baseman Aubrey Huff (a fellow Miami Hurricane) for \$13 as

a free agent. When it came time to make my freezes, and thinking I had overpaid for him, I underestimated Huff's value at the draft. Thinking I could get him back for under \$10, he went for nearly \$20, which was out of my affordable range at the time. Many closers who have solidified their roles also fall into this category.

The fourth takes a bit of analysis in determining what positions will be available. If there are eight power-hitting third basemen in the league, and seven will likely be kept, then that scarcity points to you keeping yours, even if you think you could have him back for a few dollars less. It's amazing how someone's price goes through the roof when he's the last man standing at a position.

Finally, the fifth category includes players who have some potential and whom you obtained at rock bottom prices. Later on in the actual draft section I'll discuss more in-depth the players whom I like to call "sophomore surgers," or players who had somewhat disappointing rookie years and thus have seen their second year draft value plummet. Before shrugging off any of these players as useless, make sure you won't regret it later by thoroughly researching their second season role. You may be pleasantly surprised.



Always use the maximum number of freezes allotted to you. With such a high turnover through trades and free agency, it doesn't hurt you to take a chance on one or two \$1 freezes instead of lowering your dollars per player average in the draft. Chances are that, if you had the players on your roster in the first place, they were there for a reason. Perhaps their potential will shine through in the upcoming season. And if it doesn't, you have players that you can painlessly cut once the first attractive free agents rear their heads.

Finding the Yang for Your Keeper's Yin

The players you keep will help you logically plan your draft strategy and actually present you with opportunities that other teams won't be able to afford to capitalize on. The key to creating your roster is knowing your strengths and weaknesses and creating a balance between them. Since very few players make an impact in every category, you should always examine the strengths and weaknesses of all of your potential keepers and judge how they might mesh with available players.

If you freeze a hitter like Ichiro Suzuki who posts an extremely high average every season but with little power, you'll want to draft a home run hitter like Tony Batista, whose batting average makes him less attractive to some teams but will be a huge asset to your home run total without hurting your team's Ichiro-driven average. Or if you have a couple of big base stealers like Juan Pierre and Luis Castillo, you can absorb the fact that someone like Mike Piazza will rarely ever attempt a steal but will give you power and average.

On the mound, if you keep a pitcher like Ben Sheets, who generally allows few base runners and gets lots of strikeouts, but as a by-product of the team he plays on never gets many wins, you'll want to also find a Mike Hampton-type—someone who always wins a bunch of games and generally posts a low ERA but surrenders too many base runners to be counted on alone. Mixing and matching those with complementary roles is both sensible and in most cases cost effective when filling out your roster.



Wins and losses are not a great indicator of how good a pitcher will be. Another example of numbers from a previous season being deceptive is Odalis Perez, who had among the NL's best ERAs and WHIPs in 2004 but won only seven games in 31 starts because of poor run support. With an improved offense around him, he could be among the most valuable pitchers in baseball for a long time to come.

Just Don't Do It

Now you know what kinds of players you should be looking to freeze, but what's almost as important is who not to freeze.

Pitching Woe

The biggest disappointments are always starting pitchers who take up more than 10% of your budget. Moundsmen are so injury prone that paying the premium for all but the most consistent hurlers is a big risk and not worth one of your freezes. In 2003, Mike Mussina, Mark Mulder, and Roy Halladay were worth every penny that everyone paid for them. Unfortunately, none of them was worth the price paid for them in 2004 due to injury and plain ineffectiveness. Even the slightest strain, pain, or twinge can cause a pitcher's mechanics

to go, and the domino effect takes hold. Next thing you know, you have either the most attractive disabled list in your league or a high-priced middle reliever on your hands. So unless it's one of the two or three best pitchers in the league, don't bother freezing him. If his price is higher than you want to spend, let him go and let someone else deplete his resources on a gamble.

Tommy John Surgery

Not all previously injured pitchers are bad bets. It seems like nearly every hurler has undergone nerve replacement in their pitching elbow (a.k.a. Tommy John Surgery) at some point in his pitching career. The surgery has become so routine and players have recovered so well from the procedure that they normally gain velocity on their fastballs after undergoing full rehabilitation. The key term here is *full*. It usually takes 18 months for a pitcher to return to major league action; however, it usually takes two full seasons for him to be as effective (or even more) as he was pre-surgery. Yankees starter Jon Lieber, who was a 20-game winner before having the surgery in 2002,

WHO IS TOMMY JOHN?

Tommy John was a major league pitcher who in 1974 suffered a torn tendon in his pitching elbow while pitching for the Dodgers. His physician, Dr. Frank Jobe, decided to perform a radical procedure to replace the tendon in John's left elbow with one from his right forearm. Without the procedure John never would have pitched again. With the surgery he would have a chance. He sat out all of 1975 but returned to pitch in the majors an incredible 14 more seasons. Ever since, Dr. Jobe and his associate Dr. James Andrews have become famous for saving the careers of scores of pitchers.

Prominent Pitchers Who Have Had Tommy John Surgery

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| Kris Benson | Jose Mesa |
| Dewon Brazelton | Matt Morris |
| A.J. Burnett | Mariano Rivera |
| Ryan Dempster | John Smoltz |
| Alan Embree | Billy Wagner |
| Eric Gagne | David Wells |
| Tom Gordon | Kerry Wood |
| Billy Koch | Victor Zambrano |

came back and by the end of the 2004 was one of the most effective starters in baseball. So keep an eye on the disabled lists and track the progress of players who had the surgery. If they were good once, chances are they'll be good once again.

Flashes in the Pan

You don't want to get burned by the flash in the pan. It's not a crime to save someone who had a career year that was totally out of character for him—in fact, it's recommended, because you never know if he's going to be for real. What is a big mistake is to expect him to duplicate those career-year numbers. My advice is to keep the player with the least expectations possible. If he hit 25 home runs, expect 10 and find other players who can supplement that production if he fails. Who knows, you may get lucky.

FROZEN GARCIA

Karim Garcia screwed up my strategy a few years ago when he came up with the Indians. The Charlie Sheen look-alike, who has since become best known for his role in a 2003 ALCS fight with a groundskeeper in the Fenway Park bullpen, was among the AL RBI leaders after the All Star break in 2002. In 2003 I froze him and counted on him continuing the hot pace. That left my team with a gaping hole in home runs and RBIs as Garcia sank back into his journeyman status. He played for three teams in the next two years, showing only an occasional flash of the talent I thought he'd have.

What About Last Year?

There's a tendency to feel an obligation to freeze players you acquired late in the previous season because you likely traded away great players to get them. The problem is that sometimes the players you already had are put into situations that make them more valuable at the beginning of the season than the ones you traded for. There's no embarrassment to evaluating every player the same way, no matter how you acquired them. Many times in the past I wished I had the guts to let a player go while keeping one I had already before any trades. Of course, the one I didn't keep was the one who became a stud, while the one who appeared to be the big time producer fizzled.

The moral is that you have to know the story behind every player before you decide whether to freeze him. Is there any reason to believe that he's going to have a better or worse season than he did last year? Did he undergo an intensive off-season training program? Did he get laser eye surgery in the off-season? Did he tear down his swing and start from scratch? Is he one more year removed from major surgery? All of these things are readily available if you know where to find them. The next chapter will give you a head start in doing just that.

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CHAPTER 4

FACT FINDING

In this chapter you'll find the best sources for the information you need to prepare for your draft, including:

- ◆ Print media
- ◆ The Internet
- ◆ Broadcast media

Where to Find Your Information

Now that you have an idea of what kinds of things you're looking for to formulate your draft strategy, this chapter will deal with the best places to find the necessary information. We've undergone a huge information revolution in our society over the last decade, and like everything else, fantasy sports have been greatly affected. With a cell phone you can get your players' live stats from nearly anywhere in North America. Entire television programs are dedicated to the fantasy player. National network coverage of baseball games, both cable and broadcast, has a fantasy component to their telecasts. There are countless magazines, newsletters, Web sites, radio programs, e-mail services, newspapers, and beeper and other wireless providers that cater to the fantasy player. With such a glut of information bombarding you all the time from every angle, it's difficult to sort the useful information from the clutter. I'll try to help you by giving some recommendations of the best places I have found to find information from all of the different media.

YE OLDE STATS SERVICE

Not that I'm old by any means, but I'm sure I'm in the minority of fantasy players who can remember when their league would get updates from the stats service only once a week...and that came via fax. Others not much older than me can remember getting the stats mailed to them. Not e-mailed. Mail mailed, like having your postman sidestepping your beagle to drop them off in your mailbox. At the beginning of my first season as commissioner of the SIBB, I sat for three hours keying player's identification numbers into a phone for each and every player. Now with the information explosion and the omnipresence of the Internet, setting up a league has become no more difficult than pointing and clicking from the correct menu. Viva la difference!

The best favor you can do for yourself is to start your research early. This will allow you enough time so that you'll not only be able to absorb the information, you'll know it cold. The earlier you start, the less pressure you'll be under as your draft date approaches. Instead of spending the final days of the draft worrying about how you're going to fare, you'll get a feeling of confidence, knowing that you're as prepared as anyone and you're ready for every situation that arises. There is a fine line, however, between making up your mind about players too early and not early enough, but it's much easier to make minor changes to your strategy as different situations arise than to cram in the final hours.

Print Media

Being in the industry, I'm most familiar with print media, especially when it pertains to draft preparation. There are many different magazines, books, and newspapers that have the information you're looking for, but how do you choose? In the following sections I break down each type and let you know the advantages and disadvantages of each.



It's sometimes hard to sift through what you should believe when something is reportedly said by players, coaches, and front office officials. Many times these folks are walking the company line, saying what they want to happen while keeping secret what they know will actually happen to them. Other times, comments are totally misinterpreted. I had a big argument with someone a couple of years ago

over one of these comments. He believed that Jeremy Giambi was going to get 500 at-bats for the Red Sox in 2003. I thought David Ortiz was a much better player and would have much more value. He insisted that he read in a Boston paper that Grady Little was determined to give Giambi 500 at-bats. I looked up the article and specifically that part. In fact, it wasn't a quote from Little but was instead a quote from Jeremy's brother Jason, of the rival Yankees, saying that he hoped his brother would get 500 at-bats. That wasn't a good source, if you ask me. Ortiz went on to finish fifth in the AL MVP voting.

Preview Magazines

For the hardcore fantasy players, baseball preview magazines are a must. There are dozens of titles available of varying quality. Some are targeted directly at fantasy players (usually called fantasy guides), while others preview the season for the general fan, but trust me, they're all trying to capture a piece of your fantasy sports dollar. They generally allow the fantasy player something tangible to have and to hold during the all important draft prep period.

Fantasy Guides

The most appealing thing about fantasy guides is that they are usually broken up by position, with a blurb on each player followed by an in-depth stat line, grade on his performance, suggested dollar value, and career trend. The blurbs usually pertain to the player's past performance in relation to what is expected from him for the upcoming season. The stats provided both on the player or position pages and in agate leader lists are the ones used in most fantasy leagues, meaning that if you have a fantasy guide, you'll never find yourself trying to calculate a player's WHIP or on-base percentage in your head. They normally provide a ranked cheat sheet of 50 to 100 players at every position, with a checklist and/or rating system of each player's strengths and weaknesses.

The major drawback of these guides is that most of them are written before the first of the year so that they can be rushed to the newsstands as quickly as possible. That tends to make the information provided stale because it doesn't take into account many of the changes that happen from the start of the calendar year to the start of the season. Stale information is a problem, especially when you're

trying to uncover hidden gems that have dramatically changed their standing since the previous season. It might be better to refer to these magazines as reviews instead of previews because most of the topics they cover point to the past.

To sum up, fantasy guides are somewhat useful for their fantasy-centric stats and for the ability to look up a player's dossier quickly. But the things they tell you won't be much different than what you saw during the previous season.

Regular Baseball Previews

Most of the same publishers that market fantasy guides made their reputations in the business by making general baseball preview magazines. The most popular of these are *The Sporting News*, *Street & Smith's*, *Lindy's*, and *Major League Baseball* (year). Each provides feature-length stories, odds and ends, stat packs, leaders, lists, notes, and most importantly team-by-team scouting reports. All have their own special qualities that appeal to different readers, depending on their preferences.

Athlon is normally the first one to the newsstands, which makes it the one you'll likely buy first (and that's no coincidence) but also makes it the one that will be the most out of date. Over the years *Athlon* has taken on many of the design elements of the other publications. They do employ some of the most well-respected writers in the business to create their feature stories, and they have many innovative ideas. Aesthetically, *Athlon* is among the nicest, with its full-color pictures and good artwork.

I've been reading *The Sporting News* baseball previews for longer than I can remember. The scouting reports are written by the regular *The Sporting News* magazine correspondents, all of whom are beat writers who are normally with the team on a daily basis during the season, which means you can be sure that the information they're telling you is right on the money. They regularly have a fantasy component and ratings of players in the back of the issue, and they provide quick facts and stats. In recent years, the magazine has been coming out later in the winter, allowing coverage of all but the very latest moves heading into spring training. I highly recommend picking up a copy to assist in your early preparation.

Although the *Spring Training Baseball Yearbook*, published for nearly two decades by Vanguard Sports Publications, has stats, stories, a reliable prospect watch, and rosters, the best part of it by far and quite appropriately is the spring training coverage, complete with reporting dates, schedules, directions, and maps of the general area surrounding every spring training park. I've spent many a day deciphering these directions to get to the park, and for the most part they're right. It's one of the best resources to have while cruising Arizona and Florida during the month of March, and if you're going to carry only one thing with you while you're watching spring training games, this is it.

Lindy's is one of the few preview magazines that also focuses on college baseball as well as the pros. They provide individual scouting reports on each player on a team-by-team basis with a grading system for each. Stats are more tuned to the individual player and not the leaders, although the top of all of the major statistical categories is listed.

The official *Major League Baseball Preview* magazine is produced in the same way that playoff and World Series programs are. The paper is heavy, the printing is excellent, and the features are well written. The scouting reports, however, are provided by each individual team, so instead of getting much criticism, you're getting the company line. In other words, everyone's a winner. I'm not saying don't pick it up, but take what you read in it with a grain of salt.

Street & Smith's proclaims itself "America's Sports Bible for Previews and Predictions," but for whatever reason, it's my least favorite of the top-tier bunch of stand-alones. Although it appears to be chock full of information, I don't normally take much from it. Perhaps it's just me.

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED PREVIEW

It was a sad day when I was told that **Sports Illustrated Presents** was no longer going to produce a stand-alone preview issue. Although the preview issues took an amazing amount of work to produce, all of us who toiled on them knew that we were giving our readers the best information, written by the most talented writers in the business (including Steve Wulf, Tom Verducci, and Tim Kurkjian). Although they weren't targeted directly to the fantasy player, most of the stories and statistics were useful for both the fantasy player and non-fantasy playing reader alike. The Player Value Ranking and many other elements still seen in **SI** previews today are a direct byproduct of those magazines.

Newspapers and Subscription Magazines

Although it's much maligned in many journalism circles as being fast-food news that caters to the lowest common denominator, I'm a huge fan of *USA Today's* sports section. Its baseball coverage is right on the money with a good mix of stats and quick hit notes for every team, every day. As spring training gets underway, its baseball coverage picks up, and it is one of the few places in print where you can find full spring training box scores and stats leaders—very important tools for you as you do your research.

USA Today also produces the incredibly informative *Sports Weekly* (formerly known as *Baseball Weekly*), which is also sold at most newsstands. In addition to individual team reports and regular feature stories by *USA Today's* baseball writers like Bob Nightengale, Paul White, and Seth Livingstone, *Sports Weekly* has a large section devoted to fantasy baseball, written by renowned fantasy expert John Hunt. I've been a subscriber for three years and in every issue have learned something I didn't know before.

The true bible of the baseball community is *Baseball America*. From columns written by respected baseball writers Peter Gammons, Jayson Stark, Alan Schwartz, Tracy Ringolsby, and Mike Bearadino to the unparalleled coverage of the minor leagues, every issue of *Baseball America* is a must read. The thing that sets it apart from everyone else, however, is the prospect reports. Each year, over the course of a few issues, the paper rates the top prospects in each organization as well as in all of baseball. Many times the first place anyone hears about an up-and-coming player is right there. Let's put it this way: Every person who has ever won a league I've been in has been an avid *Baseball America* reader. Enough said.

Although I'm a bit biased, I know enough people who swear by *Sports Illustrated* and don't work there to be able to recommend it with a clear conscience. Tom Verducci may be the best baseball writer anywhere these days, and he has a special talent to marry the higher concepts and strategies of the game with interesting and informative tidbits and numbers. The "Inside Baseball" column provides great notes and stats, many of which you won't find anywhere else. *Sports Illustrated's* award-winning baseball preview issue is one of the highlights of the year for many subscribers and provides the most up-to-date

information possible because it's published about three weeks before the season. Although it's not as big as the stand-alone magazines, the readers, including the fantasy community, get more bang for their buck than in any other general sports publication. *SI's* preview issue includes projected starting lineups with pertinent, themed feature stories and the all-important PVR fantasy player ratings.

ESPN the Magazine normally has a punchy and less dense baseball preview, with short scouting reports, pithy comments on most players, and player ratings. Their features are quite good, although for sheer draft study purposes, there are better sources.

Books

Print doesn't include only magazines and newspapers. You've got to have the following books to help you with your draft prep:

The Baseball Register, published by Stats, Inc. and *The Sporting News*, provides every meaningful professional statistical and biographical information for every player to appear in a major league game during the previous season at your fingertips. A large number of prospects with a good chance to make their big league debuts are also represented in this annual report. Every baseball writer, announcer, producer, and editor has a copy and wouldn't think of going to a game without it.

The Scouting Notebook, also by Stats, Inc. and *The Sporting News*, gives the reader an in-depth report on every aspect of every prominent player's game, with features such as a grade, split stats, and projections for how he's expected to perform in the upcoming season. It's well organized, interesting to read, and another must have for your draft preparation.

The Baseball Prospectus is a bit abstract for many folks, but for the most astute seam-heads among you it will prove to be invaluable. Using factors such as pitcher abuse, park effects, and equivalent averages, this book provides a great means to predict the breakout players of tomorrow. Couple that with humorous player analysis and evaluations and you have another tool that's well worth the investment.

Baseball America's Prospect Handbook has more in-depth analysis of each team's farm system and top prospects than those included in

the regular *Baseball America*. A substantial scouting report on each of the top 30 prospects for every team is among the best features of this book. Although the handbook is more useful for those of you who play in leagues with farm systems, it's a great place to find quick info on hotshot phenoms.

The Web

There are dozens of Web sites on which you can find player information. These are the ones that you have to know:

MLB.com is the official site of Major League Baseball and includes such features as up-to-date rosters, up-to-the-minute stats, and official press releases. During spring training, one of the greatest features on the site is the inclusion of the NRI list for each team. NRI stands for “non-roster invitees,” who are players (many of whom are established major leaguers) who signed minor league contracts but were invited to major league spring training camps. While most sites list each team's 40-man roster, this is the only one that keeps its NRI list up to date. Why is that so important? Every year nearly every team adds an NRI to its 25-man roster. In 2004, the Dodgers invited pitcher Jose Lima to camp as an NRI. Not only did he make the team and was a very good fantasy starter all season, it became “Limatime” when he pitched a complete game shutout for Los Angeles in the playoffs.

Minorleaguebaseball.com is the official site of (you guessed it!) Minor League Baseball. While you can get much of the same player information in other places, this site has stats for every player in organized baseball and links to nearly every minor league team's official Web site. If you really want to know how a player did in a specific game, this is the place to go. (Note: Don't worry about going to this site before your draft. It's much more useful during the season.)

ESPN.com is the most popular general sports site with good reason. Besides being a fantasy game provider, they present baseball information reported by esteemed baseball writers Peter Gammons, Jayson Stark, Tim Kurkjian, Jerry Krasnick, Rob Neyer, and Buster Olney. For potential player movement you can turn to the subscriber-only Rumor Central section, although it's rarely on the mark. At least you'll know if one of your players is being shopped around by his team.

Rotoworld.com is one of the best sites that provide breaking player news in a number of sports. Culled from local newspapers, Web sites, television shows, and other sources, the site provides any and all news that relates to baseball—from injury updates to great performances to the birth of a player’s child. There are usually pithy comments added to each update, which makes this site not only informative but entertaining. You have the ability to search previous news plus major, and in some cases minor, league stats for nearly every player in organized baseball. Feature articles such as the prospect report, the week that was, and the week ahead are very informative and helpful.

Rototimes.com is a bit slicker looking than Rotoworld and has similar information without the pithy comments and humor. They tends to post information a bit more quickly than Rotoworld and has some more fantasy tools to play with. As far as information gathering, either of these two sites should serve you well.

SI.com is the Internet site of *Sports Illustrated* and the sports outlet for CNN. Besides columns by *Sports Illustrated* baseball writers Tom Verducci, and Albert Chen, there is a full fantasy site with columns written by Jason Grey of Masterball.com, James Quintong, and, well, me! Much like this book, my column deals as much with strategy as it does player evaluations. I also share a no-nonsense, team-by-team fantasy analysis in the spring to help you cut through the information overload that you may experience.

Baseballprospectus.com is run by the same people who write the book. Although there is a fee to subscribe, the information they provide is well worth it. Smart analysis of every aspect of the game by a wide variety of contributors can give you the edge you’re looking for.

usatoday.com has a rather large fantasy baseball area and is my favorite place to find position eligibility for every player on every team. In addition to regular departments and features like the prospect report and a tool that will calculate dollar values for players in your league, many of the features from *Sports Weekly* can be found on the site.

Sportspages.com is the place to turn when you’re looking for general news on a specific team. This site provides easy links to every news outlet that covers every major league team and lets you get the home town prospectus for your favorite teams. Get the news of the day from every big league town from any place that you have Internet access. (See

Appendix B, “Team-by-Team Online Research,” for a complete listing of places to find specific team-by-team baseball information.)



You have to be careful about information you cull from the Internet. While many “reputable” sites clearly state that sometimes items are speculation or rumor, many others present rumor and speculation as fact. The closer you can get to a first-person or official source, the more you can trust what you read.

Television and Radio Coverage

I try to avoid listening to sports talk radio because too much of it is clutter and totally useless. Opinions are nice, but I’m more interested in facts, which are very difficult to sift through on the radio. However, ESPN Radio often has well-informed guests and commentators, and you can hear good, useful information, especially during the baseball season and on baseball broadcasts.

One of the richest sources of information for the upcoming season for individual teams is when a general manager or personnel director sits in the booth for an inning or two of a spring training broadcast. If the announcers do their job well, they can unlock many answers to the questions surrounding that particular team.



In 2004, during a spring telecast of a Mets game, general manager Jim Duquette sat in the booth with Mets broadcasters Tom Seaver and Ted Robinson. During the telecast, Duquette basically laid out the plan the Mets had for budding third base star David Wright, saying that the team wasn’t happy with incumbent third baseman Ty Wigginton and that, despite the fact that he had not yet played above A ball, there was a good chance that Wright would find himself playing third base in Flushing by the middle of the season, which is exactly what happened. And Wigginton was a Pittsburgh Pirate by August. If you were watching that game, you knew to grab Wright and leave Wigginton alone from the very beginning, while no one else in your league did.

Broadcasters

I love when recently retired players are in the booth. They have the wisdom of an older player, but they're still in tune with what's going on in the clubhouse since in essence most of the players on the team were his teammate in the past couple of years. When someone like that says something is going on with a team—whether it's an injury, trade rumor, or whatever—it's usually true, so listen up.

Many of the old sage color commentators are a bit too far removed from the game to be fonts of fantasy information. They know what the manager has told them, which again usually follows along the company line, or they've been briefed by the public relations department. Many broadcasters are controlled by the team they work for, so don't expect unadulterated journalistic integrity.

Baseball Tonight

Pretty much every baseball fan and player religiously watches ESPN's highlight show *Baseball Tonight*. With features like the Web Gems and the listing of every player who hit home runs for the night, *Baseball Tonight* is a great way to catch up on your team without expending much energy. There are few more satisfying feelings for a fantasy owner than when your players are the ones that the stats department at ESPN decided to highlight on the ticker or on the end of highlight stats panel.

The hosts and analysts are all very well informed, although sometimes their arguments are obviously staged. Peter Gammons is the dean of the show and is an absolute must watch for every fantasy player. He generally has the best scoops from his myriad contacts throughout the game.

How About That?

Once the best baseball show on television during the 1970s and 1980s when the late Mel Allen was still hosting, the syndicated *This Week in Baseball* has changed its demographic and is aimed more at the very young fan. I really can't complain much with the show, however, because for the last few years it has featured softball superstar (and all around babe) Jennie Finch. Still, with so many other better sources of information available on the media landscape, there's not much to be gained by watching the show anymore.

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KNOWING YOUR LEAGUE'S RULES

Before you get involved in any big transaction, you always have to know the parameters of the deal, right? It's no different when you're in a fantasy league. Not only should you know all of the rules you'll be playing by, you've got to know how to use them to your advantage. In this chapter you'll learn about the following:

- ◆ Your commissioner and you
- ◆ Disputes and how they're settled
- ◆ Knowing your categories
- ◆ Trades, free agency, and deadlines
- ◆ Reaping what you sow

Your Commissioner and You

Outside of your teammates, the most important person you'll be dealing with throughout the season is the league's commissioner, and it's important that you know what that job entails. Like the commissioner in a professional or college sport, your fantasy baseball commissioner wields great power and in some cases has the last word on the day-to-day activities in your league. The commissioner should be someone who is easy to get along with, is well respected, and, most of all, is above reproach. Many online leagues have become largely automated to the point that they have all but eliminated the duties of the traditional fantasy league commissioner except for the most basic organizational tasks (such as, getting everyone to show

up and participate in the draft), but in many leagues, including the SIBB for which I'm commissioner, the job is still a big one.

While the tasks of a commissioner are complex, they can be broken down into the following categories: organization, administration, public relations, and problem solving.

Come Together

Starting at the draft, the commissioner has to organize the league's teams so that they get to the same place at the same time to conduct a draft. You'd think that this was a simple task—just set a date, time, and place, and everyone will show up. While that may be true for many leagues, in most of the leagues I've been involved in, it gets a bit more complicated. People have very busy schedules, whether it's business commitments, vacations, family commitments, and so on. One of the quickest ways to get on the commissioner's bad side is to be that owner who continually has a problem with the draft date. Once or twice isn't usually a problem, but more than that and you're setting yourself up as being a league troublemaker.

Running a League

With the advent of online leagues, administration has become much simpler over the last decade, but it is still not enjoyable by any means. When I began my first commissionership in the mid to late 1990s, league transactions for the week were done by hand and faxed to the stats service. Normally this wasn't too bad, but at certain times (like

COMPASSION FOR THE COMMISSIONER

Before becoming angry with anything the commissioner does, keep in mind that he is either not getting paid or getting only a token fee for the work that he is doing. While you have to deal only with issues surrounding just your one team, the commissioner is embroiled in every controversy and problem that arises throughout the year with every team. From questionable trades to wrong statistics to teams not submitting their league fees, I've had to confront myriad problems throughout the years. Sometimes the solutions are obvious and simple. Other times the choices are agonizing and leave people not only angry but sometimes out of the league altogether. So if your team has some sort of problem, please understand that the commissioner will try to be fair, and you should try to be fair and understanding too.

after the draft or at the trade deadline) this was a tedious exercise that took hours to accomplish and left me cursing and pulling my hair out. Now, however, with a few pull-down menus and clicks of the mouse, the league stays up to date rather easily. That's not to say that there aren't problems that occur from time to time, but for the most part administration is simplified to the point that it's no longer a hardship, although it is time consuming and tedious in its own right. Commissioners are bound to make mistakes, however, so make sure that the moves you asked for were handled correctly and made exactly how you wanted them.

If you do find a mistake, first make sure that you were clear in your request. If the mistake was made by the commissioner, he should fix it with no problems, so long as you approach it in the correct way. Commissioners aren't looking to screw you, so don't attack them for making an error. That can cause hard feelings that could last well beyond the rather insignificant incident that started it. If it was your error, you should still bring it up to the commissioner, and I guarantee that if you've had a good relationship and simply made an honest mistake, the commissioner will cut you some slack and likely give you a break. If you've been a pain in the butt, complaining about every little thing and treating the commissioner poorly, you'd better believe that he will hold you to the strictest letter of the law.

PR Is More than Just the Island from Which Pudge Rodriguez Hails

The public relations, or PR, aspect of the commissioner's job is one of the most important. Just like in your player research, where you want to know every aspect of each player's role, you want to know everything going on in your league's business as well. Make sure that the league transactions are either distributed or clearly posted in a central location. When you're competing with someone, you have to know all of the moves he's making. It's also important to know any rules or decisions that are made, even if they don't involve your team directly, because every commissioner's decision creates a precedent that every team will be bound by for at least the rest of the season. The bottom line is to make sure the commissioner communicates with the league. It's your responsibility to know about your players; it's your commissioner's responsibility to let you know about league business.

When Problems Arise

Problem solving is the trickiest and sometimes messiest role that the commissioner plays. Most leagues are played between friends, and when an allegation of wrongdoing comes up, it can be hurtful not only to the league but also to the friendships involved. It's the commissioner's role to diffuse those situations and find appropriate solutions. One of the most common problems that arise is seemingly one-sided trades. In fact, my basketball league nearly folded in the middle of the season due to controversy raised by an owner surrounding a trade made by two other owners. It was said to not be in the spirit of the league. To that I say that in all of these leagues there should be as little interpretation of the rules as possible. The more black and white the rules are, the better—the less chance there is for any improprieties (or simply the appearance of any) to occur, and the healthier and smoother the league will function.



If you are your league's commissioner, you know that the biggest challenge you face is keeping the league running smoothly while maintaining a good rapport with all of the league owners. Remember that most people playing with you are very competitive and have a tendency to get a bit huffy from time to time. Knowing that it's not personal should keep you at even keel and make your experience as the commish more enjoyable. Realize that being the commissioner in leagues in which you're also an owner is a big advantage since you're the only one regularly in contact with every team. That keeps you on top of everything happening in the league, from free agent trends to trade talks that few other owners know about.

Your League Constitution

The best way to guarantee that everyone knows the rules and has access to them is by creating a league constitution. Usually the constitution is no more than one or two pages, containing all of the leagues rules, regulations, and guidelines. It's available to everyone at all times, makes it easier to solve problems, and makes it much less likely that problems will ever arise. Of course, the more elaborate the constitution, the more possibilities are covered. For most leagues, however, a simple constitution like the one shown in this chapter should suffice.

Rules Committee

The RLBA publishes an entire book every year, much of which is dedicated to rules; however, there are still disputes that come up from time to time. The solution they've come up with is appointing a committee of three of the league's 10 members to serve as a rules committee, sort of a council of elders who hear arguments and decide the correct outcomes.

Categorically Thinking

Knowing the rules isn't only about what you can and can't do. It's also what you have to do to win. Your goals for player selection could be completely different, depending on which categories you're trying to fill up. Strong-armed pitchers who rack up a lot of strikeouts are always good to have, except in those leagues that don't feature strikeouts as a category or, even worse, those that feature a *strikeout-to-walks* ratio instead.

Some leagues vary their categories so much (including some that use no aggregate categories at all) that if you don't find out what the categories are beforehand, it's a whole different ballgame than what you expected when you show up at the draft. Drafting for someone with the best on-base plus slugging (OPS) is a lot different than trying to draft the home-run leader. And stolen-base leaders are a lot different than stolen-base *percentage* leaders.

PROBLEM SOLVING

In my first season in the RLBA I was in frequent contact with the rules committee. There were a few instances in which illegal trades that violated the league's salary cap rules were made that directly affected my team. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it) I really wanted to prove that I could win the league as a rookie, so I was paying extra close attention to everything that was going on. I didn't suggest any wrongdoing, it was just that the teams were sloppy in their arithmetic. One time, however, a bad trade occurred, and it was weeks before anyone caught the error, and the rules committee had to be brought in to sort out the fairest way to resolve the issue. Which they did to everyone's satisfaction. When all else fails, it's a good practice to have some sort of checks and balances in your league.

A Sample Constitution

League

- The [*league name*] is to be comprised of [*number of teams*] teams who participate in fantasy baseball.
- Each team is responsible for its own actions and obligations during the season, including but not limited to financial responsibilities and code of conduct.
- If for any reason a league member is found to be in violation of any rule, he or she may be sanctioned or, in extreme cases, removed from the league.

Season

- The season lasts from major league opening day through any tiebreaker games deemed by Major League Baseball as counting toward regular season statistics.
- Scoring is categorical. The categories are batting average, home runs, runs scored, runs batted in, stolen bases, wins, saves, earned run average, walks plus hits per inning, and strikeouts. Pitchers accumulate stats only in pitching categories. Position players accumulate stats only in hitting categories.
- Teams get 10 points for finishing first in each category; 1 point for last and each subsequent value in between. Tied teams split the points awarded for their respective positions evenly.
- In case of a tie at the end of the season, the team leading in more categories between the two tied teams will be proclaimed the winner. If that remains a tie, the prize for the two spots will be pooled and split evenly.
- The deadline for transactions is Monday, at 5p.m. Eastern Standard Time.

Rosters

- The [*league name*] uses players from the American League only.
- Each team is required to have 14 position players (two catchers, one 1B, one 2B, one SS, one 3B, one middle infielder [can be either 2B or SS], one corner infielder [either 1B or 3B], five outfielders, and a designated hitter) active at all times. Each team must have nine active pitchers, starters or relievers, at all times.
- Minimum position eligibility in the preseason is 20 games from the previous season or a majority of games at the position if fewer than 30 games were played. For the upcoming season, should a player be deemed by acclimation the regular at a position he has never played before, common-sense rule prevails. Designated hitters must have been the DH for 15 games in the previous season. During the season, new-position eligibility is acquired after one appearance at the position as determined by the official statistics service of the league.
- The maximum active roster size is 23 players.
- A bench of up to five players originally acquired at the draft may be retained.
- A disabled list of four players comprised of those actually on the disabled list of a major league club may be maintained.

- A farm system made up of players with exactly no major league experience when they were acquired may be maintained.
- The rosters will be made up of keepers and those drafted. The draft will be an auction in which each team has a total of \$260 for 23 players. Every position must be filled, although not all allotted money must be used.

Free Agency

- Teams have a free agency budget of \$75.
- Players must be on an active AL roster to be bid for.
- Minimum bid of \$1; there is no maximum.
- Players lost to the NL will be given a value of 33.3% of it's contract; that figure is added to the free agent budget.
- Bids must be in whole-dollar increments.
- Bidding is blind and is to be submitted via e-mail.
- Ties are awarded to the team with the lowest position in the standings.

Contracts/Keepers

- Teams may keep a player for up to three years.
- Each year a team may keep up to eight players, submitting a list of their names to the commissioner for distribution a minimum of three days prior to the draft.
- The minimum contract term is one year. Open roster spots also have a value of one contract year.
- Free agents are eligible to be kept.
- A player with an expired contract is immediately eligible for the next season's draft.

Trades

- The trading deadline is the second Monday in August. No trading can occur from then until the end of the season. Trading can occur at any other time.
- Trading can involve a combination of up to eight players, with no more than a one player difference.
- The difference in value of the contracts involved for each team must not exceed \$25.
- Trades cannot be retroactive. They do not take effect until the following scoring period.

Prizes and Penalties

- The prize breakdown will be as follows:
 - 50% of the league entry fee to the first place team
 - 25% to the second place team
 - 15% to the third place team
 - 10% to the fourth place team
- To encourage full participation until the end of the season, the last place team is responsible to provide food and drinks for the following year's draft.



Before you go to your draft, take a look at the final category standings for the previous season. Look at the leader's total in each category and calculate the average player's output necessary to reach that mark. For example, if the first place team had 280 home runs using 14 offensive players, that means that each player averaged 20 home runs per game. I'm not saying that your players will get that production in every category, but it will provide a guideline as to the correct balance you're trying to achieve on your roster.

Since the goal of fantasy baseball is to best replicate the processes involved in running a real team, some rules are needed to make sure no one gets too far off the beaten path of accepted practices. With the introduction of multiple ratio statistics, a need for category minimums has developed to prevent teams from getting too "creative" in how they construct their teams. In other words, to keep teams from fielding a pitching staff comprised solely of middle relief specialists who have incredible ERAs, WHIPs, strikeout-to-walk ratios, and opponents' batting averages; or an offense pieced together mainly with productive pinch hitters who have astronomical on-base and slugging percentages; minimum playing requirements for each team have been established.

The accepted standard for pitching minimums is between 100 and 150 innings per pitching slot, and for the less common but no less effective offensive minimums, 400 to 500 plate appearances per offensive position works well. Those rules ensure that everyone is trying to put the best players on their active rosters each week and is playing the game the way it was originally intended.

Riding the Trade Winds

One of the main reasons why people like to play fantasy baseball is so they can propose and execute trades. For you to do so successfully, however, you not only have to know the value of the players involved, but, even more importantly, you must know what restrictions your league places on the swapping of talent between teams.

Trade Rules

Some of the most complex rules in any fantasy league revolve around how trades are made. League rules range from *laissez faire*, where anything goes at any time, to those leagues that legislate every aspect of the deal and further restrict moves by establishing a salary cap or floor. You should familiarize yourself with everything involved in making a trade, preferably before you enter the draft, but at the very least before the regular season starts.

Typical rules have the effects of

- ◆ Limiting the number of players involved in any single trade.
- ◆ Mandating that traded players can or cannot be kept in subsequent seasons.
- ◆ Mandating that if those players are kept, then their values are increased.
- ◆ Limiting the differences in value between the contracts of all of the traded players.
- ◆ Limiting the players swapped for each other to those who play the same position.
- ◆ Allowing the transfer of free agents, free agency funds, minor league players, or some form of draft picks.
- ◆ Not allowing a player to be traded back and forth between the same teams during the same season.

Trade Deadlines

Most fantasy leagues have trade deadlines that land somewhere around the major league non-waiver deadline on July 31. These and earlier dates are in theory a way to stabilize league standings by keeping bottom-feeder teams from shipping their best players to contending squads. With diminished major league trade activity leading up to the July 31 deadline in recent years, we in the SIBB decided to extend the cut-off date for deals to the second week of August to allow major league waiver trades to shake out.

In Chapter 13, “Let’s Make a Deal,” I’ll discuss the best time to make a trade during the season and a whole variety of trades you can make to lead you to victory.

Free Agency

Your draft strategy is directly affected by your league's free agency rules, so be sure you know them. Many leagues place tight restrictions on the number of free agent acquisitions that a team can make during the season. In those, you'll have to be a bit more conservative in the draft than you would be in the leagues that allow for many or even unlimited moves throughout the season.



Position eligibility plays a huge role in your drafting and trading strategy, so make sure you know the ins and outs of how much a player has to appear at a specific position to gain eligibility. Nearly every league has a standard of somewhere between 1 and 20 games at the position to be eligible. Make sure in your draft prep that you know the players who are eligible at positions other than their usual one. (Later on, in the "Team Management" section of Chapter 12, I'll delve more into being creative with position eligibility.)

Down on the Farm

For those leagues that allow minor leaguers there are a few rules that you should know. The first is the definition of a minor leaguer. In the RLBA, a minor leaguer is anyone not on a major league roster who still hasn't exhausted his rookie status by accruing too many days of major league service. In the SIBB, the definition of a minor leaguer is a bit more drastic in that a player can have exactly no days of major league experience to be eligible. This makes it a bit harder to correctly choose between these players, since many times these players are chosen sight unseen; however, this is another place where well-prepared teams have an advantage.

Which minor leaguers you choose also depends on how long you can retain them and how your regular draft went. In both of my leagues we are able to draft three minor leaguers. I usually draft the best available player, no matter what level he's playing at, with my first pick. With my second pick, I always like to take a player nearly ready for the major leagues at a position I feel I'm weak at. In the third round, I always like to grab a player who is nearly ready, regardless of position.

STAYING AHEAD OF THE CURVE

In leagues in which you can make as many moves as you like, you have less to lose by taking a chance on rookies or players who show some promise but are risky. If they succeed, your gamble pays off. If they don't, you can simply replace them with another player through free agency. In more restrictive leagues you have to play it closer to the vest and draft players who are better known entities and more likely to put up reasonable but more modest numbers than those that risky choices could potentially accumulate.

Here are the most important questions that you should be asking regarding free agency and your league:

- What players are eligible to be acquired as a free agent?
- Is there a waiver process, or once a player is released does he immediately become available?
- Does your league allow you to make moves on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis?
- Is there an order of pickup, or is every player available to every team each transaction period?
- Is there a fee to make a transaction? If so, how much? And is it real money?
- Is there a free agency acquisition budget (FAAB)? If yes, how much is it?
- If you lose a player to the other league (American for National or vice versa), how is your free agency budget affected?
- Can players either in the minor leagues or on a major league disabled list be acquired via free agency, or do they have to be on the major league roster at the time?

Farm players are useful on multiple levels. Every year, more than two dozen first-year players make major contributions to their major league teams. They can contribute to your team when they're called up too. Later in the year they also become excellent trading chips to entice non-contending teams to send you their non-keepers. It's the same concept that major league teams live by. Certain players produced in the farm system are retained and become part of the team's foundation. Others are packaged to acquire more established talent to go for a championship.

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

It's no secret that the New York Yankees have been the most successful franchise in baseball for well over a decade. The rap on them, however, is that George Steinbrenner just buys all of the best players to win championships, and that's correct to a point, but the Yankees would not have won a single title without the contributions of home-grown talent. Stars like Derek Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada, Mariano Rivera, and Bernie Williams were all products of the Yankees farm system, while others such as shortstop Cristian Guzman, third baseman Mike Lowell, and pitcher Eric Milton were traded away to bring in important veteran players. Consider your fantasy team in the same terms (although you have to stick to a budget more than Steinbrenner does). If you can field three players on your roster who are home-grown bargains, it makes your life easier and lets you allocate more of your resources to cornerstone players. If you do your research, I guarantee you can uncover the can't-miss minor leaguers.



CHAPTER 6

SPRING TRAINING— SEEING IT WITH YOUR OWN EYES

Up to this point in this book, I've been delving into all of the ways to prepare for your draft from afar. Since most people don't have the opportunity to see players before the season starts, nearly every fantasy player in the world depends on other people's opinions to make up his mind for him. Not me. I like to scout for myself. This is one of the biggest advantages I've had, and you should think about employing it too. It's really not that difficult.

This chapter discusses all of the benefits of attending spring training. Although it seems like an extreme thing to do for a game, it's beneficial to both your season and your psyche, so I highly recommend it. In addition to sharing some first-hand accounts and experiences I've had, I'll also fill you in on:

- ◆ Why you should go
- ◆ Where you should go
- ◆ When you should go
- ◆ What you should be looking for while you're there

Warming Up to the Season

Ever since I was in college about 100 years ago, I've tried to make a trip to spring training as often as I could. Of course, this was necessitated by the fact that since I was attending Syracuse University in central New York, where the winter lasts from October to April, temperatures regularly are double-digits below zero, and the snowfall is

always measured in feet, the coming of baseball always seemed like a good excuse to thaw out for a week. So every March my friends and I would pile in the car and make the 1,400-mile trek to south Florida to defrost for a week. While the beach, bars, and babes were the three Bs most everyone was there for, I added a fourth: baseball. For years the Yankees played their spring training games at Fort Lauderdale Stadium, less than a 15-minute drive from the bedlam of A1A, so I would always sneak away from all the debauchery and buy a bleacher ticket, perching myself in the right-field stands.

For three hours a day it was like I was transported to the middle of the season—the grass was green again, the sounds of the game were all there, and the players were on the field. There was a big difference from the regular season, however: Nearly every player was accessible, talking to fans, signing autographs, and generally enjoying the atmosphere.

The funny thing about spring training is that everyone's so happy to be there—the players, the fans, the coaches, the stadium staff. Even the generally sourpussed members of the media can't help but feel good during these spring days. As a journalist, there is no better place to talk to a baseball player than spring training. Everyone from the front office staff to the coaches to the players is relaxed. The time of the year is truly idyllic, and, although you probably don't have a press credential, there are ways for you to gather player information on your own that will be immensely helpful for you at the draft and throughout the season. (I actually rarely use my press credentials during the spring, and, when I do, I usually try to sit in the stands anyhow. Who wants to sit in a dark pressbox when you can bask in the sun watching baseball like it was meant to be played?)

What's in a Name?

If you're a good fantasy player, there should be few if any baseball player names that you don't recognize at all. You've been reading your *Baseball America* and *Sports Weekly*, skimming all of the baseball Web sites for moves and promotions, and reading about different teams in local papers. However, most of them are nothing more than names until you actually set eyes on them in person (or at least on

television) and establish in your mind whether or not that player is good. Consciously or not, you've already done it with every major league player you've ever seen. By showing up at spring training, you're able to put a face (and more importantly a bat and an arm) to many of those names.

Over the years I've had my personal favorite players in every fantasy sport who didn't necessarily produce the greatest numbers every year and whom some experts dismissed as bit players with major flaws, but I loved the way they played and tried to add them to my teams whenever possible. To me, second only to the desire to win is liking the players on my team, and many of my opinions have been formed under the spring sun.

Take pitcher Sidney Ponson, for example. The Aruban Knight (he's actually been anointed Sir Sidney Ponson by the government of Aruba) is an average pitcher, showing an occasional flash of brilliance from time to time, but is one of the most genuinely nice people in sports. My favorite Ponson story has nothing to do with his work on the mound, and he will forever be someone to pick up for me in my drafts because of it. During one spring game Ponson was sitting with his manager Mike Hargrove and pitching coach Mark Wiley in folding chairs outside the Orioles dugout. Seated directly behind him was a father and son. The boy couldn't have been older than eight years old. Much to the boy's surprise, Ponson, who didn't know either the father or son, glanced back at the kid (whose interest in the game had been waning for a few innings) and started making funny faces at him, cheering the kid up instantly. Between innings, Ponson retrieved a game ball, signed it, and quietly passed it to the kid, making both his and his dad's year. For that small and quiet act of kindness, Ponson will always have a place on my draft list.

Spring training provides you with a chance to see almost every player who will appear for a particular team that season. Top prospects are usually invited to camp to be seen not by the fantasy community but by major league managers and coaches who, like you, hear about a player's abilities but have to see for themselves what the player can do.

THEY'RE PLAYING YOUR TUNE

Think of baseball players as a music CD. Respected and knowledgeable critics can hear the same album and give it completely opposite reviews, depending on their personal opinions and tastes in music. Those judgments are understood as being purely subjective and accepted as such. The only way you can know whether you like the CD is by listening to it yourself. The same holds true for rating baseball players. For some reason, the way baseball players are judged is thought to be completely objective, but in fact the people doing the judging are really being subjective while hiding behind numbers that create a veil of objectivity. It's for that reason that it's best to see as many players as you can for yourself, because only you can decide whether you like them, and you can get a better feeling for the sources and writers who most closely share your same opinions. Those will be the writers you should rely most heavily upon during the season.

You Can Get There from Here

Most major league teams train in two general areas. In the Arizona Cactus League, all but a handful of teams are located within a half hour of each other in the Phoenix–Scottsdale metropolitan area. Almost every West Coast team (with the exception of the Dodgers), in addition to many from the central divisions, trains in Arizona. In Florida, if you want to be centrally located, find your way to Tampa Bay, where the Yankees, Devil Rays, Phillies, Blue Jays, Pirates, and Reds all train within an hour's drive of each other.

For those of you with families, the spring is a great time to schedule that trip to take the kids to Disney World. The Atlanta Braves train on Disney property at the Wide World of Sports complex, making it a great place to bring the kids with you for a taste of baseball. While they're splashing around in the pool or riding the teacups, you can sneak away for a few hours a day to see a few games and catch up on your fantasy draft preparation. The Houston Astros train in nearby Kissimmee, less than a 30-minute drive from the park (only about five minutes with no traffic), and Tampa Bay is about a two-hour drive to the west, with teams like the Tigers and Indians between the two. Off to the east, you can make a day out of going to Cape Canaveral in the morning and catching the former Expos who now call Washington home, in nearby Melbourne at Space Coast Stadium.

WHERE THE BOYS ARE

Are you planning a spring trip? Here are the training sites of major league teams as of the 2005 season. Those teams closest to each other are grouped together. Invest in a cheap flight and a motel room for a few days in the sun and you'll appreciate the effort when your team is on top in October.

CACTUS LEAGUE (ARIZONA)

Phoenix Area Teams

- Oakland A's (Phoenix)
- Milwaukee Brewers (Maryville)
- Chicago Cubs (Mesa)
- San Diego Padres, Seattle Mariners (Peoria)
- Anaheim Angels (Tempe)
- San Francisco Giants (Scottsdale)

Tucson, Ariz. Teams

- Arizona Diamondbacks
- Chicago White Sox
- Colorado Rockies
- Surprise, Ariz. Teams**
- Kansas City Royals
- Texas Rangers

GRAPEFRUIT LEAGUE (FLORIDA)

West Coast (North to South)

- Toronto Blue Jays (Dunedin)
- Philadelphia Phillies (Clearwater)
- New York Yankees (Tampa)
- Tampa Bay Devil Rays (St. Petersburg)
- Pittsburgh Pirates (Bradenton)
- Cincinnati Reds (Sarasota)

East Coast (North to South)

- Washington (Melbourne)
- Los Angeles Dodgers (Vero Beach)
- New York Mets (Port St. Lucie)
- Florida Marlins,
- St. Louis Cardinals (Jupiter)
- Baltimore Orioles (Fort Lauderdale)
- Boston Red Sox,
- Minnesota Twins (Fort Myers)

Central Florida (West to East)

- Detroit Tigers (Lakeland)
- Cleveland Indians (Winter Haven)
- Atlanta Braves (Lake Buena Vista; Disney World)
- Houston Astros (Kissimmee)

Scout the League, Not a Team

Being a good fan and rooting for your favorite team is terrific, but if you're serious enough to travel to scout for your fantasy draft, you should get the most out of your effort. While it's good to see your hometown team play in the spring, for fantasy purposes you might also want to look in another direction. You know that you'll follow your favorite club to death during the season and will know every in and out of their roster. Depending on your location in the spring and the kind of league you play in, plan to see other teams that can help you in your draft.

Remember that in fantasy circles, players from bad teams are just as valuable as those from good teams and sometimes more so. More players on the have-not teams have a chance to earn playing time and major league at-bats and innings by having good springs. You can be there to see them develop and earn major league jobs right in front of your very eyes. As an added bonus, players and coaches at a Pirates–Tigers game are a whole lot easier to talk to pre-game along the edges of the stands than those at, say, a Yankees–Red Sox game. And if you go to see the Devil Rays or Blue Jays or Brewers, you'll probably be able to buy the best seats you've ever had for a major league–caliber game.

A couple of years ago I was one of about 200 people in attendance for a Devil Rays–Blue Jays game at Al Lang Stadium in St. Petersburg (incidentally one of the truly great old spring training parks). I was at that game strictly for fantasy scouting purposes since I needed to see players to help me formulate the PVR for the upcoming *Sports Illustrated* Baseball Preview. One of the players I saw that day was a right-handed hitting outfielder named Rocco Baldelli, whom I had heard a few things about but had never really paid much attention to nor had I seen in person. After I watched him show his great range patrolling the outfield and rapping a couple of solid base hits with a nice level swing similar in style to Hall-of-Famer Joe DiMaggio, he quickly went on my list of prospects to watch. Just over a year later he was the starting centerfielder for the D-Rays and is one of the up and coming bright stars in baseball.

Timing Is Everything

Major league spring training lasts for nearly two months, with pitchers and catchers normally reporting to their respective camps during the second week of February and position players following suit a week later. There is little reason for you to go until the last few days of February or the beginning of March when the first games are played. Those first games are the most laid back and provide the biggest opportunity for folks to talk to players and get autographs. For fantasy, however, it's not the ideal time. Regular players usually get only brief appearances in games at the beginning of the spring since teams regularly have 50 to 70 players in camp, and there just aren't enough innings to go around. However, this is the only time you'll get to see very young players who are a few years away from joining the big club. If this is the only time you can go, it's not a waste of time, but it's just not ideal.

The second and third weeks of March is my favorite time because of the balance of that easy feeling and the realization that the players really are getting ready for the season. By this time you can see position battles taking shape, and you can determine who the favorite is to win the job. Those top prospects who will be counted on at some point during the season (not just necessarily at the start) are usually still around in camp then, too, and are given every chance to showcase their wares, both for the team and for you.



I had read the name Franklin Gutierrez in all of the usual places, and every time he was mentioned, the writer always talked about his five-tool talents. (If you don't know, the five tools everyone always talks about are the ability to hit for power, hit for average, run the bases, field your position, and throw well.) I was very excited when Franklin entered the Dodgers–Mets game at Port St. Lucie because I knew one day he would be an excellent major league player. He didn't fail me. In his first inning there was a ball hit down the right-field line and into the bullpen, seemingly for a double. Not so fast. Gutierrez fielded the ball cleanly on the bullpen mound and unleashed a bb to the shortstop to gun down the runner sliding into second. At that moment he looked like a Vladimir Guerrero clone. Based on both his minor league numbers and how he played in that game, I now follow him closely and can't wait to draft him as my minor leaguer next season. If he stays healthy, he's going to be huge.

The last week or two of spring training is the best when you're scouting solely for your major league talent. Pitchers begin to stretch out their outings for four, five, and six innings, and regulars play at least six innings per game. You also start getting a sense of which players will be the starters and how everyone else will be used. Managers tend to use the last weeks of spring as a dress rehearsal for the season. They'll start using their closer to pitch the ninth inning (as opposed to the fifth or sixth earlier in the spring in order to let him leave the park for the day after his pitching appearance). The bullpen hierarchy will begin to take shape. Utility jobs are being won and lost. The only players left in camp are the ones who will a) make the team, b) be sent to the high minors to be the first players recalled when the need arises, or c) not make that team but fill roles a) or b) for another franchise.

What You Should Look For

Fantasy players should be looking at every game, not only those in the spring, the same way that scouts do. While statistics tell you results, there's no way to tell how the player got to that end. You can take a lot from the cliché, "It looks like a line drive in the box score." A pitcher who gives up four runs on six broken-bat singles in a spring training game is a lot more appealing to me than someone who pitches three perfect innings, with all of the outs coming on long fly balls to the outfield or spectacular plays on the infield. Contrary to what most people believe, I'm much more of a "skills" guy than a "stats" guy. It might be hard to believe you just heard that from someone who pays the bills by being the Statistics Editor for *Sports Illustrated*, but that's the case. Stats can be deceiving as a measurement of talent. On the other hand, you either have skills or you don't, and you can't fake it. It's that simple.

If there's a particular pitcher I'm interested in, I try to sit right behind home plate as close to the front as possible. You'd be surprised at the number of spring training parks where you can get down right behind home plate for a spring game, especially early in the season and on weekdays. From there you can not only tell velocity but command, which is very hard to detect unless you can see the path of the ball. Why do catchers usually make the best pitching coaches? Because they see more pitches than anyone else and can tell from their perspective if a pitcher has good stuff or not. If you're somewhat

unfamiliar with a team pitcher, bring some research materials (like the Stats Inc. *Scouting Notebook*) so you can tell what pitches he normally throws. After a few innings you'll be able to tell which pitch is which, just like the batter.

Sitting Pretty

Those people you see sprinkled throughout the seats right behind home plate, each of whom is holding up a radar gun on every pitch, aren't state troopers trying to set up a speed trap. They're major league scouts doing pretty much what you're doing but on a much bigger scale. Millions of dollars ride on the reports that these scouts file, so you can be pretty sure that they know what they're doing.

While I'm not suggesting that you should bother a scout while he is working, if you see an opportunity to strike up a conversation either during a lull in the action or after the game, go right ahead and go for it. One thing that baseball people love doing is talking about baseball. While they may not give you the particulars on the player they were scouting, some questions like "Who have you been the most impressed by so far this spring?" and "Who's the biggest surprise?" will surely get them talking. Be sure to be respectful of the fact that the scout is working and you're not. (Think of him coming into your office and asking you lots of questions.)

In the same way pitching is best viewed behind home plate, the left field line is best for watching right-handed hitters, and the right field line is best for spying on left-handed hitters. It's the same principle as the appeal of a checked swing. Who has the best view of a batter's swing? The opposite field umpire. Sit right where the outfield and infield meet, and you'll be able to judge most hitters abilities.

I always like to work my way around the stadium to position myself in the best place to see whatever particular skill it is that I'm looking for. If I want to see a stolen base, I try to go behind the third base dugout to see the runner the entire way from first to second. By the fifth or sixth inning, I try to situate myself near one of the bullpens so I can watch pitchers warming up. Just like the seats behind home plate, you can tell a lot about the movement and velocity on a pitch. You'd never be able to have such access to so many different locations in a big league ballpark, so take advantage of it in the spring.



I was sitting in the second row right behind the plate for a spring game between the Devil Rays and Braves in 2004. The game was nearly a sellout, but I was able to snag a house seat to watch 2003 20-game winner Russ Ortiz take on fire-balling phenom Dewon Brazelton. The Devil Rays had a split squad and fielded none of their regulars, and I couldn't have been happier. I got to see B.J. Upton, the then 19-year-old shortstop and top draft pick, up close and personal. Boy, was it worth it. In one of the better at-bats I've ever seen, Upton fought off great pitch after great pitch to keep the count at 0-2. Finally, after about a dozen pitches, the rail-thin Upton got a pitch he could handle and hit a mammoth blow off of the scoreboard in left-center field. However, that wasn't the most memorable part. As Upton circled the bases, I was able to see the Devil Rays coaching staff all looking at each other as if they were kids on Christmas morning and for the first time had seen the potential of their new toy. As Upton approached the dugout, getting congratulations, he was taken aside by the usually gruff manager, Lou Piniella, who put his arm around Upton and quietly spoke to him for 30 seconds. You could tell from Upton's face that Piniella's comments were much more fulfilling for him than the massive home run. By August, Upton was a fixture in Tampa Bay's lineup. These are the kind of behind-the-scenes things you have to put yourself in position to witness.

After the Game

If it sounds like you'd be wasting your vacation by going to spring training, you couldn't be further from the truth. Most spring training games start at 1:00 p.m. and are over by 4:00, leaving you all night and the next morning to take full advantage of the area's other activities.

In Arizona there's plenty of time and opportunity to get in a round of golf in the morning before heading out to the park. Phoenix has a bunch of great restaurants and a vibrant nightlife for after the game. Tucson has some of the best hiking trails in the Southwest (check out the very cool Sabino Canyon, no relation).

Florida is America's vacation land. Besides all of the fun in Orlando, with Walt Disney World and Universal Studios leading the list of attractions, the Tampa area has excellent fishing and beaches, all of which you can take advantage of before you go to the park.

I try to go back to Fort Lauderdale every year for a few days at least. When the Orioles are home, I go to the park, poking around my childhood park as much as possible. When they're not home, there's always a game in either Jupiter or Fort Myers, neither of which is really that far away. After the games, the playground of the rich and famous that they call Miami is just a short ride down I-95.

Wake up early and go to the beach, an amusement park, or the golf course. Spend the afternoon at the ballpark and then enjoy the nightlife. It suddenly sound's more like a vacation, right? And one that will hopefully help you win enough to go on a "real" vacation with your winnings.

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PART III

THE DRAFT

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CHAPTER 7

DRAFT DAY

Now that your draft preparation is complete, it's time to really get down to business. This part of the book goes over all the ins and outs of what to do and what not to do on draft day. In addition to the later chapters that break down what to expect from each position, how to handle your budget, and the best kinds of players to aim toward at the end of your draft, I begin this section with the psychological aspects of the draft. The things that make you more comfortable and at ease on draft day are often terribly overlooked and can make a big difference for you in your drafting experience—as can your interaction with everyone at the draft table.

This chapter is intended to help make you feel at ease at your draft. The more comfortable you are, the more beneficial an experience it will be for you. It's human nature to feel a bit anxious before any competitive endeavor, so it's important for you to be as relaxed as possible while everyone else is going nuts, scrambling around on draft day. I'll share a whole checklist of things that will help make your draft day run smoothly, including:

- ◆ What to do before the draft
- ◆ Things to bring with you to make your life easier
- ◆ Surveying the draft room
- ◆ Psychological advantages
- ◆ Tips for head-to-head bidding

It's Time to Play

For many people, waking up on draft day is like waking up on Christmas morning. The anticipation is evident in everything they do. It's almost as if they can't wait to open the box containing their new toys for the upcoming season. Will Santa bring you the next big, shiny Mark McGwire, or will he stick you with a stocking full of Darnell Coles? Okay, maybe that analogy is going a bit overboard, but in good, competitive, established leagues, there's a palpable energy present when you enter the draft room, and to me that's one of the coolest parts of the whole fantasy baseball experience.

At the Last Minute

Before you go to the draft, there are a few things you should do at the last minute. Personally, I don't like studying right before the draft. The only thing I try to do in preparation for the actual draft itself is to look at the latest transactions and newswire reports to make sure there hasn't been a late trade or injury, and I get as fresh a list of rosters as I can. MLB.com usually has the most up-to-date information, including news of trades, demotions, and disabled players. The last thing you really want to do is waste any draft dollars on someone who is not going to be in your league.

After gathering rosters, I make sure to get together all of the other essentials I intend to bring with me. A calculator is always good to have. So is a league grid to keep track of everyone's selections and their money situation. As the draft winds down, it becomes apparent against whom you're directly drafting, and you can plan accordingly when you're working off a logical sheet. This individual competition occurs a lot with catchers, about whom I write extensively in Chapter 8, "Building the Perfect Roster." Most league secretaries or commissioners usually provide their own sheets at the draft, but I feel at ease with my own format. If you feel more comfortable using a particular draft sheet, feel no obligation to use the "official" league version.

Tote That Book

To have a good draft, you'll have to bring a couple of books with you: The most essential is the *Sporting News/Stats Inc. Baseball Register*, which lists every player's past stats. Sure, you've gone over everyone's numbers ad infinitum, but invariably, when you're faced with the prospect of choosing between Bobby Hill and Craig Counsell, you'll want some additional information to ponder.

The other book to consider bringing is either the *Green Book* or the *Red Book*, which are the official guides of the American and National Leagues, respectively. They contain every team's roster, including league-provided figures for major league playing service time. These are the best places to confirm a player's official rookie eligibility. Since they're published by Major League Baseball for media types, they aren't the easiest things to find in retail outlets, so you shouldn't feel compelled to get one—however, I like them because they're “official,” and no one else really provides definitive rookie information.

Who Do You Love?

The most important thing to have with you, of course, is your draft list. Mine is usually a position-by-position list of all of the players who I think will be drafted. In a 10-team, 25-player-per-team league, the list should contain somewhere between 250 and 300 players, ranked in order of your preferences. While it's easy to just take someone else's draft list, like those published in preview magazines or online fantasy manuals, you've done enough research and should feel confident enough to produce your own.

It should come as no surprise that I use the *Sports Illustrated* PVR (Player Value Ranking) as the basis of my draft lists. What may come as a surprise is that I don't follow it exactly to the letter, and neither should you. While the PVR honestly ranks the players I feel will be the best fantasy players for the upcoming season, there are some players I either don't like for any number of reasons or whom I would pass over in favor of gambling on players who aren't necessarily the best bets but who I feel are in the right situation to become productive.



If you did the research prescribed in Part II, you are more than qualified to put together your own draft list. When doing so, however, be sure to be realistic about the players you're planning on acquiring. While it would be great to be able to draft Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramirez, Curt Schilling, and Vladimir Guerrero plus three closers, it's not likely that you'll be able to afford all of them. Make sure that you identify players from the "lower" rungs of your ratings who will fit in with your game plan. For every superstar you acquire, you'll be forced to take a few average-appearing players, so make sure you have identified the one's you'd most like to snag.

Creature Comforts

Not everything you need to bring with you will be baseball related. Hopefully your draft is being held in a wonderful space like on a veranda in the Florida Keys or on a sailboat off the coast of Kauai. Unfortunately for most of us, our drafts are held in places that aren't ideal. Ask the draft organizer beforehand about the location and then make your decisions on what to bring accordingly.

It's important to be as comfortable as possible. I've been in a few drafts that were conducted in miserable places. The worst was a basketball draft that was held in a tight, windowless conference room at the offices of *Esquire* magazine. Not only was it completely cramped, it was oppressively hot too. Everyone was wearing sweaters and jackets but should have been in shorts and T-shirts in the sauna-like conditions.

Another awful drafting experience I've endured was a hockey draft held in the living room of a Manhattan apartment. For those of you who aren't familiar with New York real estate, the area we used was about 180 square feet, with about half the seating needed and no surface area to lean on for writing. People were covering nearly every inch of the floor, furniture, window sills, and so on. The only thing that made that experience at all bearable was that my friend Steve and I knew we had already won the league as we left that room because our team was so strong.

Both times, all I could think about was spending my money and getting out of there—not exactly the right mindset to have for a successful draft. So be sure that you know what you’re getting yourself into. Be prepared to make yourself comfortable no matter what the conditions. Bring a clipboard with you just in case there is no surface area on which to set up shop. Wear comfortable clothes and be able to adapt to varying temperatures. Take note pads, pens, a laptop, or anything else you feel will give you an edge.

Sustenance Is Important Too

There’s a traditional breakfast held each year prior to the RLBA draft, but I’ve never attended. I’m not a morning person and really have never liked breakfast, so whatever sleep I can get is more important to me than a slab of bacon or a griddle cake. Since the draft normally lasts four or five hours, I tend to get a bit hungry during the proceedings. I’m sure you’ve experienced this a bit in your draft too. Although refreshments are provided by the host at most drafts, it’s always good to bring stuff with you, just in case. Some gum, Altoids, a couple of bottles of Snapple, and a bag of pretzels keep me content while I fight the battle of attrition that is a fantasy draft.

THE PIZZA RULE

The SIBB instituted a rule a few years ago that solves two different problems facing nearly all fantasy leagues. One is how to prevent a team from dumping at the end of a season. The other is how to decide who will cater the draft. The solution was a pretty simple one and passed by unanimous vote. From that point on, the league agreed that the team that finishes in last place will be responsible for providing food and beverages for the rest of the league during the following season’s draft. With one rule we created a monetary penalty (usually about \$150) for tanking at the end of the season and incentive to try to win until the final outs of the year. Known on the inside as the “pizza rule,” teams have been known to pass up trades late in the season because they were afraid of having to “bring the pizza,” or in other words, provide the food. Of course no rule is perfect. We’ve had two last-place teams drop out over the years after they were on the hook for the following year’s draft.

So You Think You're Ready

A few hours (or days) before the draft, you should feel like you're completely ready to attack it. You've studied, scouted, and strategized enough to know exactly what you're going to do. No one at the draft will have more knowledge than you or be better prepared. So you have the chance to take it a bit easy as the draft time approaches.

I used to spend every waking hour leading up to my draft trying to gather last second information. At that point I was just cultivating anxiety by attempting to uncover new information about everyone. Before I figured out this whole fantasy baseball thing, I had a tendency to second-guess myself right before the draft based on 11th hour information that I just should have ignored. Now I know that because I go about my preparation in such a methodical manner, I don't have to stress out about the final few hours. So now before a draft it's much better for me to try to find a happy place in my mind by relaxing, listening to some soothing music (Bob Marley usually does the trick), and really clearing my head of baseball thoughts until I get to the draft itself.

The Draft Room

I try to treat the day of draft as leisurely as possible, and getting to the draft room is no exception. I like to arrive early to set up shop in the most advantageous spot. In auctions, you like to find a seat somewhere close to the auctioneer to assure that there is never a question of whether or not you bid on someone. There have been multiple occasions when the auctioneer couldn't hear a particular bid, and the player who either spoke too softly or was obscured by some other noise lost out on a player. It's been my experience that the auctioneer more often than not gives perceived ties to the team seated closer to him, and having asked one veteran auctioneer about this, he agreed that was the case.

I also like to sit near the teams who I know from past experience will be those that I'll be competing with for the same players. Every team has its own *modus operandi*, and after a few years they're rather easy to decipher. I like being close to them because if you're too far away, you can't get a good feel for their particular strategy that day.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

When you become a veteran in a league, you begin to figure out which owners like which players. It's no secret to players in the SIBB that I'm a big fan of Alfonso Soriano and would like to have him on my team every year. It's just tricky to know what my breaking point with him will be. Others have their preferred players as well. Every season a team known as the Kabel Kars signs Rafael Palmiero. Everyone knows that they're going to draft him, and you can usually bleed a couple of extra dollars out of them because of it. Of course now I'm going to get stuck with him because they're going to stop bidding when I enter the fray.

Gamesmanship and Poker Faces

As in any auction, whether its cars, artwork, or livestock, there's a lot of gamesmanship that comes into play in fantasy draft auctions. What does that mean? Well, much like in a poker game, players in a fantasy auction sometimes give away their intentions just by the way they place their bids. You can tell if they're bluffing by the way they act. If they take too much time between bids, you know they're not really sure they want a player and could be just trying to get you to spend too much money on him. If they are bold in their bid, chances are they're ready to go to the mat for them, and you need to decide right there on the spot whether that's the player you want or if you should look in another direction.

I like to gamble, so I try to get other owners to spend more on players than they intended. Much like the way I play poker, being erratic is to my advantage. No one can read what I'm trying to do because I consciously vary the way I make my bids, moving quickly on some players I don't want and slowly on others I do. It's a dangerous tactic, and you have to have the right attitude and reputation to be able to pull it off. The more intrigue at the draft, the better.

Know the Crowd

There are stark contrasts between leagues played among a group of friends or colleagues and those played with virtual strangers. Those comprised of a bunch of buddies tend to be very light hearted, and rarely do the people in them get angry or slighted or get their feelings hurt. Trash talking is accepted and even expected.

Leagues comprised mainly of second-tier friends or even total strangers tend to be a bit trickier to judge socially. Folks tend to become very serious and defensive and will not be able to take any perceived criticism, whether it's of their picks or anything else. As I said earlier, many people tend to be anxious at the draft and are nervous because they realize that they're not as well prepared as you are. Being on edge and not knowing you, they won't be able to tell the difference between being sarcastic or just being a jerk. So before you get too jovial with those you don't know in your crowd, get a feeling for who might be receptive. Your buddies know how happy-go-lucky you are. Strangers might not see it that way and could take it the wrong way.

Colleague Leagues

The work league provides another tricky group dynamic. Having to compete directly with your superior or underling can create a weird vibe both in the league and in the workplace. If you get the right mix of people together, it can also be a boon to you in that all members participating in the league compete as equals and create a peer bond that otherwise might not have been there before. You'll always have something to discuss with the boss if he is in the league.

Bringing Players Up for Bid

Unlike a straight draft, players are brought up at random for a fantasy auction. This can be a huge advantage if you know what you're doing and know when to bring up particular players. There are a few different methods folks use. I like to get as much money as possible off of the table as early as I can, so I try to bring up all of the big names, many of whom I don't want, at every opportunity.

THE FINE LINE BETWEEN WORK AND PLAY

The SIBB is made up of a wide range of folks mostly from different strata and departments at **Sports Illustrated** and, with a few exceptions, we've been able to operate relatively harmoniously for years. More often than not, we've been able to successfully separate the business of the fantasy league from our actual business, although in the business most of us are in, that line between the two isn't always as clear as it would be at an insurance agency, retail store, or bank.

However, you have to be careful not to deplete the population of available players at a certain position enough to adversely affect the price of the player you want. If I know I want a first baseman as the cornerstone of my squad, I'll try to get some expensive outfielders or pitchers off of the board. This strategy is double edged in that you're draining the budgets of other teams on players you don't want, and also you're helping to create a glut of players at the position of the player you do want, likely driving down their prices. You have to be alert enough to jump in if your guy is brought up by someone else.

Sometimes I also like to try to slip in a second-tier player early in the draft. Let's say I really wanted a player like Houston third-baseman Morgan Ensberg, who I predicted would have a huge season. By bringing him up early in the auction while the third base elite like Scott Rolen, Adrian Beltre, and Aramis Ramirez are all still available, the hope is that many players will let him go, thinking that they'll save their roster slot and cash for the bigger stars, not realizing that only three teams will get the top players, leaving seven others looking elsewhere.



Sleepers aren't only for the end of the draft. If you feel strongly about a player, you have little to lose by adding him to your team early in the draft. If many known options are still available, teams will be discouraged from spending their funds on a supposedly unknown quantity they think is too risky, meaning you could end up with the steal of the draft.

Going Toe-to-Toe

Some of the most memorable moments in drafts I've been part of revolved around interactions between competitors during the bidding process. Few things get fantasy folks more riled up than wanting the same player and having someone overtly standing between them and the object of their desire. I've seen more than my share of stare-downs when this happens, watching one team owner throw menacing glares at another, waiting for the other to blink as they square off for the likes of Travis Hafner or Derrek Lee. Calling a competitive draft "intense" is a major understatement. People take it very seriously, many times far too seriously.

I try to exude confidence in my head-to-head bidding, although hopefully never in a menacing manner. This is especially true in the SIBB, since I'm the commissioner, and the last impression I'd want to make is to appear to strong-arm anyone in the league. While I'm usually not one to trash talk unless I know that the target is a willing participant, I try to crack a joke or two to lighten the mood, which tends to get a bit intense at times.

Get Right to the Point

One of the things that bothers me most in fantasy drafts is when a spectacular player (say Barry Bonds) is brought up in the auction and the bids for him go ridiculously slowly. Knowing that someone like Bonds is going to sell for well over \$30 in an NL league, I'd bring him up at \$25, not \$1. I've seen bids on \$50 players go in \$1 increments starting at a dollar. That tactic does nothing but drag out an already long day, wasting everyone's valuable time.

When I'm sure I want a player, I'll always up the ante to the point at which I think I'll get the player. If someone bids \$20 for a player I want, I'll go up to \$22 or \$23. If my competition comes back with \$24, I'll bid \$28. If I've decided to get that player, I want to make it as costly as possible for the other team to try and take him away from me. Every team involved in the bidding process has a magical number that they're willing to spend on each player. By raising your bids by multiple dollars, you're more likely to get to those numbers sooner and weed out those teams who have little interest in the player and in essence do nothing but drive up the price with their early bids. With so much preparation, I feel like I can afford to overspend a buck or two for my core players because I'll be able to get a fair share of talented players at rock-bottom prices at the end of the draft.



BUILDING THE PERFECT ROSTER

Roll up your sleeves, stretch out your neck, and let's get to it. In this chapter, you'll get into the real nitty gritty of drafting. Here's where all that preparation finally pays off. The crux of the chapter is about dissecting the types of players you want to have at each position and how to create the proper balance between them. Spending philosophy also takes center stage as you learn the way to assemble a team that is tough to beat. The main ideas in this chapter are

- ◆ Spending until it hurts
- ◆ The importance of position eligibility
- ◆ Position-by-position analysis
- ◆ Choosing starting pitchers
- ◆ The closer quandary
- ◆ How to spell relief
- ◆ You can't teach speed

Spending Until It Hurts

As you sit there waiting for the draft to begin, you already have the basis of your team. Besides your freezes, you should have in your mind the players for which you're going to go all out. Budgets should be thrown out the window when it comes to the players whom you've identified as the most valuable. Don't worry about how much it's going to cost to assemble the cast of characters you want. Although being top

heavy isn't normally a good strategy to follow when putting together an organization, it's a good way to think about your fantasy team.

You'd think the logical way to approach the draft is to decide the number of players you need and divide the amount of money you have to spend by that figure. That quotient is the average dollar value of the players you can purchase in your auction draft. So if after accounting for your freezes you need 20 players and have \$240 to spend, your average player should cost \$12. That's true for the way I draft, too, but most people's average player salaries have a much smaller variance than mine. Over the years, in all of my fantasy leagues across all sports, I've discovered that you must go for the gusto and assemble an All Star team even if you're at a financial disadvantage at the end of the draft. While star-less teams can win in real baseball, you have to have multiple MVP or Cy Young-type performances to win fantasy baseball.

You cannot win unless you have the best players. It may sound like a simple concept, but rarely do I see drafters following this advice. They get comfortable with one or two stars on their roster and then get cold feet when they are suddenly faced with a depleted budget and a large numbers of players to acquire. I look at it from a completely different point of view. Using the old adage that you have to spend money to make money, I spend until it hurts because I truly believe that with my draft preparation and ability to assess talent better than nearly everyone else, I'll be picking up more valuable players for \$1 at the end of the draft than many teams who will be spending \$10 and \$20 earlier. It happens every year. By spending a large portion of my draft budget on "can't miss" players, I'm forcing myself into bargain basement players, some of whom will be busts, but many of whom will become incredibly valuable throughout the season.

WINNING THE ARMS RACE

During the 2003 season in the RLBA (an incredibly tough league), my pitching staff consisted of the top three finishers in the NL Cy Young Award voting—Eric Gagne, Mark Prior, and Jason Schmidt—along with 2002 Cy Young Award winner Randy Johnson. Did I break the bank for them? Absolutely not. But I did identify who I wanted and went out and either drafted or traded for them.

TRIPPING OUT YOUR TEAM

The principles you'd use when buying a used car also apply when you're assembling your fantasy team. Your cornerstone players are the engine, transmission, wheels, and body. If you have those things all in working order, your car will have value. Details like the rims, the sound system, and the paint job are nowhere near as important and much less costly to replace than the big-ticket items. The same thing holds true for your complementary players. It's a lot easier to acquire a middle infielder during the season than a top line starting pitcher or one of the home run leaders, so if you make sure the essentials are covered, you can be confident that your team will respond every time you turn the key.

Bargain Shopping

The whole concept of success in fantasy baseball boils down to your ability to separate the wheat from the chaff. Identifying the players who had great seasons is easy. Finding those that *will have* great seasons is the hard part. For me, draft day usually comes down to making a big splash early and then playing opossum until I can pounce on bargains at the end. One year in the RLBA I had eight dollars left for my final eight players. Three of them were great, three were serviceable, and two found themselves on the waiver wire within two weeks. And that's the beautiful thing about forcing yourself to take cheap players. Some are bound to be great, some are going to be solid, and there's no reason to hold onto the others.



In a draft that lasts four or five hours, don't worry about spending your money too early in the process. Two years ago in the RLBA draft I bought four of the first six players in the first 10 minutes and then didn't secure another one for more than two hours. Sure, there were players I wanted who went by, but none whom I wanted more than the four I had. So I bided my time, and when the pricing started to come back down to Earth, I started up again.

The League's Most Eligible Players

Among the nuances of the draft is the way you handle position eligibility. Each league has its own rules regarding which players have

played enough games at a certain position to qualify for that position in the draft. Players' values can be greatly enhanced, depending on where you'll be able to put him in your lineup. While drafting you should pay close attention not only to the spots each player is eligible to play, but also the positions he may become eligible to play during the season. One player in 2004 whose value skyrocketed solely through the position he became eligible for was Phil Nevin, the first baseman of the San Diego Padres. In many leagues, Nevin became eligible at catcher because he appeared in a game there late in the season. The same thing happened for Yankees outfielder Gary Sheffield, who played third base in a pinch, thus giving many of his owners added flexibility.

The rule of thumb is that a good offensive player's eligibility is enhanced if he gains eligibility at the following positions (in order):

- ◆ Catcher
- ◆ Second base or shortstop
- ◆ Third base
- ◆ First base
- ◆ Outfield



If one of your players gains an edge in eligibility, by all means take advantage of it. One of the most versatile players in the 2004 season was Pedro Feliz of the San Francisco Giants. He qualified at third base, first base, the outfield, and, best of all, shortstop. Having someone with 20 home runs and 80 runs batted in playing shortstop was a great advantage, so I couldn't believe that the owner who had him on his roster for much of the season didn't utilize him there. Feliz would have been a significant upgrade at shortstop, and there were strong options at third base available through free agency or even trades. Don't make that mistake.

Formulating Your Lineup

In fantasy leagues every position is made up of a wide range of players who provide a different set of skills for your team. Each position comes with different expectations. Those players who greatly exceed

the expectations at a spot, say a catcher who steals bases and bats .300 like Jason Kendall or Pudge Rodriguez or a second baseman who drives in 100 runs like Brett Boone, are more coveted than players with equal numbers but who play more traditional positions for those statistics. The question always arises: How much is position differentiation worth? Are you spending more to have a shortstop who hits 25 home runs than to have a first baseman who hits 40? Or would you be better off staying with cheaper players at traditionally thin positions and bucking up for those at the top of the big positions like first base and the outfield? Over the next few pages I'm going to give you my take on what to expect from each position.

Catching On

There's no position that conjures up more divergent opinions in fantasy drafts than that of catchers. Because those who don the tools of ignorance are a) less likely to play as much as their brethren at other positions, b) much more likely to get hurt or at least banged up enough *behind* the plate to be affected *at* the plate, and c) more likely to be given at-bats based on how well they handle a pitching staff or play defense than for their skill with the bat, two schools of thought prevail.

The first is that great offensive catchers are the most valuable players in fantasy baseball because there are so few of them. While most teams have backstops who struggle to hit .250 and 10 home runs, those with the Mike Piazzas of the world who hit .325 with 35 home runs and drive in 125 runs have an asset that can't be duplicated. They spend as much money as necessary to grab one of the handful of offensively proficient catchers.

The second way of looking at the catcher situation is instead of overpaying for someone at a position that with few exceptions will be a disappointment for you statistically, it's better to put that money toward someone at a safer spot who you know will play every day and produce big numbers and meanwhile settle for catchers worth \$1 or \$2 and hope that you get lucky with some production.

DREAM CATCHERS

Since 1980, when the fantasy baseball era officially began, only three catchers have hit .300 with 30 home runs and 100 runs batted in during a single season. Mike Piazza had six such seasons, while Pudge Rodriguez and Javy Lopez have one each. Lower the parameters to a very pedestrian .275 with only 20 home runs and 80 runs batted in, and in the last 24 years only 19 catchers have reached that number in at least one season, and only eight of them were active in the major leagues during the 2004 season.

**CATCHERS IN THE FANTASY BASEBALL ERA—
SEASONS WITH A MINIMUM .275 AVERAGE,
20 HOME RUNS, AND 80 RBIS**

| Catcher | Seasons |
|------------------|---------|
| Mike Piazza | 10 |
| Gary Carter | 3 |
| Javy Lopez | 3 |
| Jorge Posada | 3 |
| Pudge Rodriguez | 3 |
| Lance Parrish | 2 |
| Sandy Alomar Jr. | 1 |
| Bob Brenly | 1 |
| Carlton Fisk | 1 |
| Chris Hoiles | 1 |
| Charles Johnson | 1 |
| Terry Kennedy | 1 |
| Mike Lieberthal | 1 |
| Paul Lo Duca | 1 |
| Eddie Taubensee | 1 |
| Matt Nokes | 1 |
| Ted Simmons | 1 |
| Mike Stanley | 1 |



The last thing you need is a catcher who hurts your team. A .225 batting average with 30 runs batted in over 400-plus at-bats is a recipe for disaster, and fielding two such players can kill your whole season. Catcher is the only position where it's generally OK to have a non-regular on your roster. You must avoid starting catchers who completely stink at all costs. While your competitors are signing regulars who weigh more than their batting averages, you'd be much better off with the seldom-used backup who usually does something positive in his 125 at-bats a year (a longtime backup like Todd Pratt or John Flaherty, for example). The backup and regular could end up with similar aggregate statistics, but the averages of the quality backup generally will be considerably better than those of the bad starter.

I've been a proponent of both arguments throughout the years, and still I'm not 100% convinced that either way is best. Ideally I try to draft hot catcher prospects (like Victor Martinez) in the minor league draft or pick them up as free agents during the September call-up season to keep them at the cheap price while they develop into quality players. But most times you don't have that luxury. My best advice is to take one of the elite catchers if you feel that he's a bargain, but spending nearly as much for a catcher as you would for a 40-home run/40-steals guy is insane.

Who's On First?

For as long as baseball has been played, first base has been a major power position. From Lou Gehrig and Jimmie Foxx through Mark McGwire and now Albert Pujols, Todd Helton, and Carlos Delgado, there is no shortage of offensive talent at first base. This is a place where you have to spend at least 10% of your budget, while close to a half dozen are worth 15% to 20%. Getting anything less than a .270 average, 25 home runs, and 80 runs batted in from your first baseman would be a major disappointment. In the 2004 season, 15 first basemen hit at least 25 home runs. That's one for every two major league teams. Eighteen first sackers drove in 80 or more runs. Thirteen of them scored at least 80 runs, proving that there are enough to go around.

FIVE OF THE TOP 10 CAREER HOME RUN HITTERS ACTIVE IN 2004 PLAYED FIRST BASE

| Hitter | Home Runs | Position |
|---------------------|-----------|---------------|
| 1. Barry Bonds | 703 | Outfielder |
| 2. Sammy Sosa | 574 | Outfielder |
| 3. Rafael Palmeiro | 551 | First Baseman |
| 4. Ken Griffey, Jr. | 501 | Outfielder |
| 5. Fred McGriff | 493 | First Baseman |
| 6. Jeff Bagwell | 484 | First Baseman |
| 7. Frank Thomas | 436 | First Baseman |
| 8. Juan Gonzalez | 434 | Outfielder |
| 9. Jim Thome | 423 | First Baseman |
| 10. Gary Sheffield | 415 | Outfielder |

You must resist the urge to draft a first baseman who doesn't hit for power. Too many players at the position are titanic run producers, and for you to give away 25 or 30 home runs or 50 runs batted in to most of your opponents at a single slot won't cut it. While contact hitters like Doug Mientkiewicz, J.T. Snow, and Scott Hatteberg are great players on the field, they don't do enough at the plate to be worthy of a slot on your fantasy team. Three or four category players are the only ones you should accept.

Second Thoughts

Second base is one of the trickier positions to man on your fantasy team. Few if any players come up through the minor leagues as second basemen. Most were signed as shortstops or third basemen but were converted to second when they were judged to have good hands but neither the arm to play third nor the range to play short. On most teams the second baseman wins his job not for his hitting acumen but mainly for his glove and footwork around the bag.

While there are always three, four, or even five category players like Jeff Kent, Alfonso Soriano, and Brett Boone available for the top dollar, more often than not you're just trying to fill the slot with someone who will contribute something, whether it's a good batting average, some modest power, or a handful of stolen bases. In

2004, only four second basemen (the three mentioned above plus Juan Uribe) hit 20 or more home runs. What's more surprising is that only three (Brian Roberts, Tony Womack, and Luis Castillo) stole as many as 20 bases. This is a great place to take a chance on a very inexpensive young player or someone who is a utility player and provides a special skill like stolen bases or a high average.



When a position is in doubt in an NL league, it's never a bad idea to draft a Colorado Rockies position player. Playing half of their games a mile above sea level gives Rockies hitters have a fantastic advantage over those who play at lower elevations. Due to "thin air" and a lack of humidity, pitchers have problems throwing breaking balls, making Rockies hitters even more potent. If the choice is among no-name players, always look to the mountains.

Short Stories

For a few years prior to the 2004 season, shortstop was the glamour position in the majors. But now with Alex Rodriguez playing third base and Nomar Garciaparra suffering from major injuries, the position has thinned out a bit, although it is still pretty stacked. The days of being burdened by the good glove, no-hit shortstops have all but disappeared. The major league leader with 150 runs batted in, Miguel Tejada, played the position, as did six other players who slugged over .450. Shortstops and centerfielders have morphed into relatively interchangeable parts in terms of offensive production, both being the most likely to be manned by a five-tool player.

Shortstop pricing at the draft is difficult. While many shortstops are the most valuable players on their team because they serve as the "quarterback" of the defense, more often than not they are far superior players on the field than on the stat sheet. With a few exceptions (Tejada is the prime example), shortstops tend to be overpriced for their perceived value to their team as opposed to your team. There are enough great shortstops out there that you can find some good values if you're patient. So don't panic if there's a run on shortstops because there are enough of them available that you'll be able to find someone who will make a major contribution.

SINCE 1982, FIVE SHORTSTOPS HAVE WON LEAGUE MOST VALUABLE PLAYER AWARDS

| Shortstop | MVP Season |
|------------------|-------------------|
| Robin Yount | 1982 |
| Cal Ripken, Jr. | 1983 |
| Barry Larkin | 1995 |
| Miguel Tejada | 2002 |
| Alex Rodriguez | 2003 |

Third Degree

In 2004, the hottest position in the majors was the hot corner, and it's time for you to start loading up there too. Players like Adrian Beltre, Hank Blalock, Scott Rolen, Alex Rodriguez, Chipper Jones, Aubrey Huff, Mike Lowell, and Aramis Ramirez aren't only among the best players at the position, they're among the best at any position and are well worth your fantasy dollars. Up until a few years ago, third base wasn't the deepest position in the world, and there was little chance that you'd dedicate your corner infield position to someone who played third instead of first base, but lately there has been enough depth at third to allow you to choose either two first or third basemen without hurting your chances of winning. Placing \$50 on a pair of third basemen is no longer out of the question.

Not only was Beltre the major league home run leader with 48, he became the first third baseman to lead the majors in round-trippers since Matt Williams did it with 43 in 1994. In all, nearly as many third basemen hit 25 home runs (14) as first basemen (15) in 2004—a trend that is bound to continue with up and coming players like Atlanta's Andy Marte, Cincinnati's Edwin Encarnacion, New York Mets David Wright, and Anaheim's Dallas McPherson taking their rightful places over the next few seasons.

Dollars in the Outfield

Outfielders are the most important part of your offense. Players from every skill strata are available, and due to the sheer volume of great players, many huge values will trickle down, letting you

fill your roster with quality players. In NL leagues that require the standard five outfielders per team, it's easy to field a complete outfield of starters. In the AL, it's a bit trickier, and you should make a conscious effort to do so, even at the expense of another position. Just do the math and you'll see what I'm talking about.

In the American League there are 14 teams \times 3 regular outfielders = 42 starters available. In a 10-team league that requires five outfielders per team, 50 outfielders must be owned, meaning that there are only two teams that can field a full outfield of starters (not taking into account players from other positions with outfield eligibility). You should try to be one of those two teams, even if it requires a player that you're not that excited about drafting.

In the National League there are 16 teams \times 3 regular outfielders = 48 starters available. In a 10-team league that requires five outfielders per team, 50 outfielders must be owned, meaning that there are only two teams that can't field a full outfield of starters. With those odds and your savvy, there's no way you will end up lacking. In fact, it makes lots of sense to add an extra outfielder or two to your utility or bench slots so that you have tradable commodities down the road.



When I mentioned players that you're not all that excited about drafting, I meant those players who are considered boring. Many times they're outfielders, but they can be from any position. Boring players are those who aren't attractive fantasy players because what you see is what you get. For years, Rangers outfielder Rusty Greer was a boring player. Year in and year out he has hit around .300 with home runs in the teens and around 60 RBIs. Basically his numbers were nothing spectacular, and he didn't have much upside. So instead of taking guys like Greer, I'd always try for the guy with the biggest upside, even if the rest of my outfield was shaky. The last few years I realized that you need those solid, no-nonsense players who will contribute without hurting you to bolster the bottom of your outfield.

The Need for Speed

Just as saves are a necessary evil on the pitching side of the ledger, stolen bases are needed to win your league. Unfortunately, they cost way too much to acquire with a clear conscience. Fewer and fewer

players have been stealing bases since the home run took over the game's consciousness at the end of the 1994 players' strike. With fewer options providing a supply of steals, demand for them becomes more intense, and prices have gone up accordingly.

If you don't have a cheap stolen base option to save as a keeper, there are three basic ways to accumulate stolen bases during your draft, all of which are appealing in their own ways. The first is to spend big money on five-tool guys like Bob Abreu, Carlos Beltran, or Alex Rodriguez who will be assets in every category. I'm a big proponent of this strategy even though these are always the most expensive players in the draft. If you want quality, you have to pay for it. Keep an eye out for other players who combine speed and power, too. In 2004, there were nine players with at least 20 home runs and 20 stolen bases, most of whom would be rather cost effective to acquire.

PLAYERS WITH AT LEAST 20 HOME RUNS AND 20 STEALS IN 2004

| Player | Home Runs | Steals |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------|
| Bob Abreu, Phillies | 30 | 40 |
| Carlos Beltran, Royals–Astros | 38 | 40 |
| Mike Cameron, Mets | 20 | 23 |
| Torii Hunter, Twins | 23 | 21 |
| Derek Jeter, Yankees | 23 | 23 |
| Matt Lawton, Indians | 20 | 23 |
| Corey Patterson, Cubs | 24 | 32 |
| Alex Rodriguez, Yankees | 36 | 28 |
| Reggie Sanders, Cardinals | 22 | 21 |

The second strategy to secure sufficient speed for your squad is to draft a burner who can single-handedly earn you five or six points in the category. Carl Crawford, Juan Pierre, and Ichiro Suzuki are perfect examples of guys who will steal between 30 and 70 bases a year—enough to place you in the thick of the steals race, although in all three cases, they are purely two or three category players with little or no power. With guys like these on your team, you can afford to carry one or two plodders (like Frank Thomas or David Ortiz) who won't steal any bases at all, giving you an advantage.

The strategy of the game is changing in a way such that prolific base stealers have become much more difficult to find. In fact, since 2001 only four players have stolen as many as 50 bases in a year. By contrast, three teammates (Don Baylor, Bert Campanaris, and Billy North) each stole at least 50 bases for the 1976 Oakland A's, while five more A's had 20 or more steals.

50 STEALS IN A SEASON SINCE 2001

| Base Stealer | Stolen Bases | Season |
|-----------------|--------------|--------|
| Scott Podsednik | 70 | 2004 |
| Carl Crawford | 59 | 2004 |
| Ichiro Suzuki | 56 | 2002 |
| Carl Crawford | 55 | 2003 |
| Roger Cedeno | 55 | 2002 |

The third and hardest drafting technique to pull off successfully is to spread your stolen bases throughout your entire roster. Making sure that most of your players will steal between 10 and 20 bases is the most cost-effective way to get steals, but there are few players at certain positions (like catcher, first base, and third base) who run that much. Last year, one of the leading stolen-base teams in the SIBB, Chico's Bail Bonds, had no one steal 20 bases but had 10 players who stole between five and 20 each.

Of course, it's always a good idea to speculate a bit on cheap middle infielders or utility players who have a history of running. For years, Mark McLemore was a great stolen-base threat who served as a utility man for the Mariners. Chone Figgins serves the same role for the Angels, and Ryan Freel does the same for the Reds.

For Starters

As I mentioned earlier in the draft preparation section, starting pitching can be a crapshoot because most pitchers have a hard time staying healthy and consistent. Starters are the hardest players to judge, and therefore you should tread carefully around them in the draft. On a 10-man pitching staff, the conventional fantasy thinking is to mimic a major league staff by drafting five or six starters and two closers and

WHERE THE STATS ARE

Here's a breakdown of the offensive statistics per position during the 2004 season for the average major league team. As you can see, first base, third base, and the outfield are the safest investments on offense.

| Position | Batting Average | Home Runs | RBIs | Stolen Bases |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------|------|--------------|
| Catcher | .261 | 16.0 | 75.7 | 2.5 |
| First Base | .274 | 26.4 | 96.2 | 3.9 |
| Second Base | .270 | 15.5 | 71.5 | 12.1 |
| Shortstop | .271 | 13.5 | 72.2 | 13.5 |
| Third Base | .274 | 24.3 | 92.9 | 7.3 |
| Outfield | .274 | 23.1 | 85.3 | 13.9 |

two or three middle relievers, one or two of whom are “closers-in-waiting.” Whenever possible I like to go about it a bit differently. As I said before, I like to secure a couple of the very top starters to act as the basis of a staff. I also like to have three more very good starters. When I say “very good,” I mean either number-one starters from average or just below average teams or number-two or number-three starters on very good teams. I also like to speculate on at least two starting pitchers who I found to be impressive during my pre-season preparation, especially from my trips to spring training. I'll even throw out the statistics if I really liked the way someone I saw was throwing, because sometimes numbers really don't tell the whole story.

Just like in real baseball, you can never have enough quality starting pitchers, so don't feel content with four or five good starters. When I said to spend until it hurts, this is one of the instances I meant. Don't ignore pitchers you know are good buys as the draft progresses, even if you think you have a complete starting staff. At times during the end of the 2004 RLBA season, I carried up to eight very good starters at one time and cleaned up in wins, ERA, and WHIP.

On the flipside, nothing can kill your staff quicker than poor starting pitchers. I keep my speculative starters on a very short leash. One bad outing is a fluke, two bad outings set off a very loud alarm, and after three bad outings, out the door they go. As the season winds

STUFF OVER STATS

After being extremely impressive in his first two tastes of major league experience, Toronto's Roy Halladay was absolutely atrocious in 2000, his third big-league season. His record was 4-7, but the most alarming thing was his 10.64 ERA. Halladay had incredible stuff, including a fastball in the mid-90s. The Blue Jays sent him down to the low minors, tore down his mechanics completely, and rebuilt him step by step. When he came back to the majors the following season, I knew for sure that he had a fantastic arm and great stuff since I had seen it for myself. Everyone else was scared away by his putrid numbers from the previous season, so I was the only one who wanted him and was able to land him for a single dollar. Although he was great for me, and I knew he was getting better, I was able to package him in a 2002 trade for two frontline pitchers, Mark Buehrle and 2002 AL Cy Young Award winner Roger Clemens, who combined for 32 wins and led my team to a title. Halladay went on to win 19 and 22 games the next two years and capped off a great stretch with the 2003 AL Cy Young Award.

down, I have a much smaller tolerance for bad performances, and at the end I'll even cut players because I think they could have a bad outing, even if they've pitched well up to that point.

One more thing to beware of when you're investing big money on a pitcher is his workload. You should try to avoid most pitchers who have thrown a high number of innings (use 225 or more as a gauge) in three or more straight seasons because history has proven that these are the most likely candidates for arm problems. All but the very best pitchers will break down under a very heavy workload since they're not trained throughout their amateur and minor league careers for the way they're handled in the major leagues if they have success.



When it comes to starting pitchers, I like to look at one time through the rotation as a single cycle. In the RLBA, when my team had a starting pitching staff consisting of Roy Oswalt, Mark Prior, Randy Johnson, Javier Vazquez, Vicente Padilla, and Jason Schmidt, we'd regularly record five wins and a sub-2.00 ERA per cycle. Since you usually go through one-plus cycles per week, we racked up pitching points like mad. Although that staff looks impossible to assemble without breaking the bank, it wasn't. Oswalt, Padilla, and Prior were all \$2 or less because they blossomed during their contracts with us, and Vazquez and Schmidt were mid-range buys because they were middling pitchers for middling teams at the time. Only Johnson cost a big nut and was so dominant that he was worth every penny.

How Do You Spell Relief?

There are four basic types of relief pitchers for your fantasy team. The first are the closers, who are the most important on paper but also surprisingly come with the most risk. The second are the closers in waiting, biding time until they get a chance to be the man. The third are vultures who are middle relievers and setup men, who tend to get many relief victories because of the games situations they enter. The fourth are situational middle relievers, who aren't too flashy but can be an asset for your fantasy team.

Closing Time

Because of the disparity in the number of teams, closers in the AL are a bit harder to come by (14 full-time closers compared to 16 in the NL) and therefore tend to be a bit more expensive. I contend that there's no better freeze to have than a cheap closer because, except for saves, closers pitch so few innings that most of them really neither help or hurt you in the other pitching categories. It goes against my moral and financial fiber to spend so much on a one-category player.

Closers also tend to have a rather short lifespan in their role, making all but the very best of them a huge financial risk and potential burden. There's no worse feeling than when your \$40 closer loses his job due to ineffectiveness. It's happened to me too many times, and because I've been burned so much, I try to take a conservative route. Before I looked deeply into the closer question, I thought like many people do that a closer job is pretty safe. Not so. In fact, only 10 closers saved as many as 20 games per season from 2002 to 2004, and four of them changed teams along the way. To illustrate how few truly elite fantasy closers there are, only three pitchers—Eric Gagne, Troy Percival, and John Smoltz—had as many as 30 saves in each of those seasons.

CLOSERS WITH 20 OR MORE SAVES EACH SEASON FROM 2002 TO 2004

| Closer | 2002 Saves | 2003 Saves | 2004 Saves |
|--------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Armando Benitez | 33 | 21 | 47 |
| Eric Gagne | 52 | 55 | 45 |
| Jason Isringhausen | 32 | 22 | 47 |
| Jorge Julio | 25 | 36 | 22 |
| Jose Mesa | 45 | 24 | 43 |
| Troy Percival | 40 | 33 | 33 |
| Mariano Rivera | 28 | 40 | 53 |
| John Smoltz | 55 | 45 | 44 |
| Ugueth Urbina | 40 | 32 | 21 |
| Billy Wagner | 35 | 44 | 21 |

The Apprentice

Since there's such turnover among closers, it makes all the sense in the world to draft closers-in-waiting. Those are the young setup men who usually blow through the seventh or eighth inning unscathed and are generally more effective than the man they're setting up for. Most of the best single-digit-priced keepers are players who became top saves men for at least a season or two. It behooves you to buy at least one in every auction. If worse comes to worst and you get tired of waiting for him to develop, you can always convince someone that your guy is the next closer and trade him.

Over the last 10 years, many of the best closers first served in these roles. Closers have to be able to get a strikeout when they are brought into a game with a runner in scoring position and fewer than two outs, so most managers prefer the overpowering-type pitcher to one who lets the ball be put into play. Guys like Mariano Rivera, Troy Percival, Joe Nathan, and Brad Lidge were all quality setup men before becoming terminators themselves. The best way to identify the closers-in-waiting is to find the relievers with the best strikeout rate and one outstanding pitch. For Rivera, it's his cut fastball, which he throws 90% of the time. For Trevor Hoffman, it's his changeup that baffles hitters. With Percival, it's his high heat. All of them used those pitches to be successful setup men before they made it into the stopper slot.

10 RELIEVERS WHO WILL SOON BECOME MAJOR LEAGUE CLOSERS

| Pitcher | 2004 Team |
|---------------------|-----------|
| Mike Adams | Brewers |
| Rafael Betancourt | Indians |
| Yhency Brazoban | Dodgers |
| Juan Cruz | Braves |
| Kyle Farnsworth | Cubs |
| Mike Gonzalez | Pirates |
| Guillermo Mota | Marlins |
| J.J. Putz | Mariners |
| Francisco Rodriguez | Angels |
| B.J. Ryan | Orioles |

Flying with Vultures

Vultures are pitchers who have the uncanny ability to swoop in and “steal” wins from starters or other relievers by becoming the pitcher of record when his team takes the lead. This usually has nothing to do with effectiveness, but rather just timing and the manager’s habits. While it’s not all that easy to predict exactly who will get the most vulture wins among relievers, there has been a pattern established. Pitchers who generally pitch the sixth to eighth innings on teams with great offenses and average to poor pitching staffs are good candidates, as are those on teams that have good pitching and poor offenses.

The 2004 vulture of the year was Philadelphia Phillies reliever Ryan Madson, who was previously an unknown quantity throughout the majors but became a force as a rookie. He just happened to be the last Philly pitcher on the mound the most times when Phillies hitters rallied to win games in the middle innings after their starting pitchers faltered. Madson won nine games.

Juan Rincon of the Twins had 11 relief wins and was on the other side of the coin from Madson. Many of his relief wins came following solid outings by the starter but poor run production from Minnesota’s hitters. So if you think a team’s pitching and hitting are out of balance, it’s a good idea to grab one of their middlemen.

Depending on the Situation

When you get to the very end of your draft and there are very few appealing choices left, it won't hurt to take a chance on a situational reliever. These hurlers, many of whom are left handed, usually come into a game to match up against one tough batter. Rarely do they pitch more than one inning at a time, and they tend to be used by their managers in advantageous spots, increasing their chances of success. Much of the success of the St. Louis Cardinals can be attributed to pitchers like Ray King, Steve Kline, and Kiko Calero, who weren't asked to do much for the team except record a few outs a game, which they did quite effectively most of the time.

During the season, middle relievers are readily available on the waiver wire because they generally don't have good win or saves totals, but they do answer the question, "If I should avoid pitchers who hurt my team, who should I pick up instead?" While I don't discourage taking these pitchers, you'd probably be much better off taking a chance on a promising young starter or a potential closer.

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PLAYING THE ENDGAME

Just because all of the big-name players are off the draft board doesn't mean that your job is over. In fact, the end of the draft is when you should have the greatest advantage in adding players, since instead of just being names at the bottom of a list, you'll have a firm grasp on the potential contributions of the remaining available talent. It's still up to you, however, to choose the correct ones. As the final part of the draft section, this chapter will help you decide which types of players to target as your draft winds down. The way you play the final handful of picks can really set the tone for your season. This chapter covers the following aspects of your endgame:

- ◆ Strong finishes
- ◆ The young and the worthless
- ◆ Finding foreigners
- ◆ Putting the hurt on
- ◆ Sleeper sells
- ◆ For the love of the game

Strong Finishes

As hard as it may be to believe, it's been my experience that as the draft winds down, many people will lose interest. They've been sitting in a room for hours and believe that they've assembled the core of their team, so all they want to do is add whatever remaining players they can and go home. They grow impatient as money dwindles

and the few remaining teams with cash purchase the few remaining players with marquee value. Once the recognizable players are gone and most of the remaining names are considered has-beens, never-weres, or just plain nobodies, you have a terrific opportunity to separate yourself from the pack. As your opponents make mistakes left and right by taking players they're happy just to have heard someone talking about once, you'll be picking and choosing players whom you not only know, but whose values you also know exactly. By doing so much preparation for the draft, your breadth of knowledge of every player and team should go much deeper than everyone else's, and at the end those players should be jumping off your draft list like gold in a miner's pan.

Personally, I love the endgame of the draft. I say again, it doesn't take much special skill to pick among the best players. The best part of drafting is selecting players that no one else thinks will do well and watching them turn into both viable fantasy options and, in many cases, true stars. I usually get the same feeling as playing with the house money in a casino. I like to take chances with many of my final spots, going out on a limb for players I feel will have the absolute biggest upside for that season.

Of course, I sometimes fall into the same trap as everyone else, trying to fill spots on my roster that I feel are deficient with veteran players who are available because they too are deficient. But I've been making that mistake less and less in recent years and have become more exploratory for players either at the start of their careers or about to make their return to the big leagues after serious injuries. When those gambles pan out, they're huge assets. When they don't, I have no qualms about jettisoning them from my roster.

How Much Speculation Is Too Much Speculation?

While taking a few unproven players is a good strategy, especially if you're trying to build a franchise, there is a fine line between competing with young players and depending on them too much such that you're forced to look to the future far too soon during the season. It's been my experience in every league I've been a part of in all sports that some teams will always shy away from up and coming

SEIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY

I call it the Michael Tejera rule, and it proves that sometimes all you have to do is open your eyes to make the right choices. Since the RLBA holds its draft the first Saturday of the season, all stats for the first week are retroactive to the start of the season. I think it's a silly rule, too, but those are the rules (a perfect example of why it's important to know your rules before you draft). A couple of years ago I had \$1 remaining at the end of the draft and needed one pitcher. Michael Tejera, a situational left-handed reliever for the Marlins, had recorded a win and a save during the first week of the season for Florida. I knew I would get his retroactive stats if I took him (no one could outbid me at that point), but he wasn't going to have a large role for the year, so I chose one form of greediness over another. Instead of Tejera, I took Ryan Jensen, a starter with a chance to make the Giants rotation. Dumb. Dumb. Dumb. Saves and wins were the tightest categories all year, and I needed every last one I could get. All season as I sweated out those category races, I was kicking myself for not taking Tejera. The following season I was faced with exactly the same situation, except this time I had \$8 left for eight players. The Montreal Expos had no real closer at the time but Rocky Biddle, a former starting pitcher they acquired from the White Sox in the off-season, who had two saves. Thinking back to Tejera, I grabbed Biddle for \$1. He became Montreal's full-time closer, and later in the season I was able to trade him in a package for Randy Johnson. No matter what, if you can get something for free, take it. You may need it down the road.

players to rely solely on those who have shown in the past that they can perform. In a perfect world (namely one where you have very cheap cornerstone keepers), this is a fine strategy, but most times, in order to execute the strategy of amassing a rather expensive core of the best players, you have to search a bit off the beaten path to fill out your roster. While everyone at the draft is worried about every last dollar, you are faced with the challenge of speculating a bit on players who you believe will become diamonds in the rough. Try to be aware of this early on, so you don't walk out of the draft room feeling like your team is too young.

The best players to take a chance on are rookies or second-year players who have won everyday jobs. They have very little appeal to those drafters who shy away from taking risks, so your competition is automatically cut in half. The longer you wait to bring these types of players up for auction, the more likely your competition will have already spent more of their budget on better known quantities, leav-

ing you with a sub-\$10 regular who either will produce enough for you to keep or to trade or will not produce, allowing you to cut him with a clear conscience.

There are clear frontrunners for the Rookie of the Year Award entering every season, but they aren't always the top newcomers. Chances are the favorites will be valued as if they were veterans because of all of the preseason hype they will have received. For every one of them who has been identified by the mainstream press, you should be able to identify at least two more who have a chance to produce. Using 2004 as an example, everyone knew about the eventual winners: A's shortstop Bobby Crosby, who was given the task of replacing Miguel Tejada from day one of spring training, and Pirates left fielder Jason Bay, who barely qualified for the award in 2004 because he played so much in 2003, proving he was worthy of a regular spot in the lineup. However, most of the other players receiving Rookie of the Year votes were with their teams the entire season but didn't get preseason hype and were probably available at the end of your draft for a song.

In all, 215 players made their big-league debuts in either 2003 or 2004, and many of them had big impacts on those seasons and will play even bigger roles in years to come. So when choosing between players at the end of the draft, it's much more appealing to me to take a chance on someone at the beginning of his career than someone who has apparently either peaked or is on the decline.

Sophomore Surgers

Speaking of those who debuted in 2003, a group of players who typically fall to the end of the draft and are available at rock-bottom prices are those who I call *sophomore surgers*. The usual expectation is for players who have success as rookies to suffer from a sophomore slump in their second season, but sophomore surgers are players who get called up to the majors and fall flat on their faces after being given the opportunity to produce during their first season. Then after either being demoted or an off season of soul searching and hard work, they come back with a vengeance and produce in their second season in the way they were originally expected to as rookies.

2004 DRAFT VALUES OF TOP ROOKIE OF THE YEAR CANDIDATES

American League

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Bobby Crosby, A's | Was a solid regular shortstop and produced a bit more than most expected, although he was probably not much of a draft bargain. |
| Shingo Takatsu, White Sox | Japanese veteran reliever reprised his Far East role as a closer in Chicago. Was undoubtedly available with your last couple of bucks. |
| Zack Greinke, Royals | Midseason call-up. |
| Alexis Rios, Blue Jays | Midseason call-up. |
| David DeJesus, Royals | Made the Royals out of spring training and became a valuable regular once Carlos Beltran was traded. A great keeper who could have been yours for years for a song. |
| Ross Gload, White Sox | Another player who earned a job with a strong spring, and, although his long term value may be limited, I guarantee a minimum bid would have bought his .321 average and 44 runs batted in. |

National League

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| Jason Bay, Pirates | Future star was likely a keeper or a bargain in your draft because injuries sidelined him for much of 2003 and the first month of 2004. Those who took a chance had a star. |
| Khalil Greene, Padres | Those who got scared off because he was dueling for a job with Rey Ordonez in spring training felt foolish all season for missing out on a complete steal. Already at the top of the class with his glove, Greene will be one of the NL's best shortstops with the bat for the next decade, too. |
| Akinori Otsuka, Padres | Another Japanese import underrated in the draft, he baffled opposing hitters with his unconventional delivery. Another player who could have been yours in any league for a minimum investment. |
| Aaron Miles, Rockies | Highly touted second baseman was an early disappointment, even being demoted for a time during the season before reclaiming his job. Still, he was an adequate pickup for a buck or two. |
| Matt Holliday, Rockies | Midseason call-up. |
| Kazuhiro Matsui, Mets | One of the few supposed "sure things" among rookies, his transition to the major leagues was much rockier than expected, and he was probably one of the most overvalued players in the 2004 draft. |

The poster boy for sophomore surgers for the past few years is Texas Rangers third baseman Hank Blalock. In 2002, Blalock was expected to be one of the main candidates for AL Rookie of the Year after having a fantastic minor league career. Blalock proceeded to hit only .211 with three home runs and spent most of the season back in the minors trying to get straightened out. In the SIBB, Blalock was so highly regarded that he was purchased for \$17 in the 2002 draft and became one of the most overrated players that league has ever seen. In the 2003 draft, Blalock was overlooked as he was supposed to share time at third with Herbert Perry and Mike Lamb, two utility men. Not totally discouraged, the same team that had overspent for Blalock in 2002, Dem Hankees, took a chance again on him in 2003, this time for a single dollar. Blalock went on to hit .300 with 29 home runs and 90 runs batted in.

Identify the correct “sophomore surger” and you may be uncovering much more than you expect. Since 1970 no fewer than 10 eventual Most Valuable Players have made considerable improvements in their second seasons after struggling in their first extended taste of major league ball.

SOPHOMORE SURGERS

| Player | Rookie Season | | | Sophomore Season | | |
|-----------------|---------------|----|-------|------------------|----|-------|
| | Avg. | HR | RBI's | Avg. | HR | RBI's |
| Johnny Bench | .163 | 1 | 6 | .275 | 15 | 82 |
| Barry Bonds | .233 | 16 | 48 | .261 | 25 | 59 |
| George Brett | .282 | 2 | 47 | .308 | 11 | 89 |
| Jason Giambi | .256 | 6 | 25 | .291 | 20 | 79 |
| Reggie Jackson | .178 | 1 | 6 | .250 | 29 | 74 |
| Jeff Kent | .239 | 11 | 50 | .270 | 21 | 80 |
| Don Mattingly | .283 | 5 | 19 | .343 | 23 | 110 |
| Alex Rodriguez | .232 | 5 | 19 | .358 | 36 | 123 |
| Mike Schmidt | .196 | 18 | 52 | .282 | 36 | 116 |
| Willie Stargell | .243 | 11 | 47 | .273 | 21 | 78 |

Foreign Professionals

Since Hideo Nomo came to the major leagues in 1995, players from Japan have added a twist to fantasy drafts. Players like Kaz Sasaki, Ichiro Suzuki, and Hideki Matsui have all come to the major leagues with great fanfare and for the most part have been undervalued during their first seasons in fantasy circles, making them super bargains. Others, like Kaz Matsui and Hideki Irabu, fell far short of their expectations both as players and in the fantasy world. Finally, players like Akinori Otsuka, Shingo Takatsu, and Shigetoshi Hasegawa were generally overlooked early in their careers but were fantastic for those fantasy owners who finally caught up to them.

When considering drafting players from Japan, you should explore how they fared in their home country. With few exceptions, players who were stars in Japan become stars in the major leagues. Those who are average in Japan are a bit below average in the major leagues, mainly because of the cultural obstacles they have to overcome. After getting off to a slow start, I fully expect Kaz Matsui to have a quality career in the big leagues. Because he was such a star in Japan before struggling as a rookie in 2004 with the Mets, Matsui is a great candidate to be a sophomore surger in 2005.



For those of you not fluent in Japanese, information on Japanese baseball can be found at two very good Web sites: JapaneseBaseball.com and JapanBall.com. Both have stats, news, and general information on the sport Japanese folks call Yakyu.

Japan isn't the only country to be aware of when looking for players to acquire late in the draft. As long as Fidel Castro's revolutionary government is still in power in Cuba, there will continue to be a trickle of baseball players who will defect to Latin American countries and find their way to the major leagues. In the past decade, Cuban players like Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez, Livan Hernandez, Rey Ordonez, Danys Baez, and Alex Sanchez have made a big impact in the major leagues, although most of the best players still remain in the communist island nation. I can't wait for that first draft when Cuban players are finally able to play abroad and big league baseball experiences its biggest influx of talent since integration. And big league GMs can't wait either.

Putting the Hurt on Your Team

One of the things I also like to do at the end of the draft is to try and snag some players who will miss some time because they're hurt, but who I believe will be back in time during the season to make a contribution. Most people are afraid of taking players who were either injured at the end of the previous season or at the start of the current year. Depending on the severity of the injury, some of the best bargains not only for the current year but for keepers as well come from the ranks of the disabled. They can be classified in three basic categories.

The first and best group to look at are players who had either injury-abbreviated or just plain bad seasons because of injuries but have played in the preseason and shown that they've recovered from whatever maladies plagued them last year. As I said before, the people who don't do too well in fantasy leagues are the ones who look solely at the previous year's statistics, and this is one of the reasons they sometimes miss very good players. By relying solely on stats-based rating systems, fantasy players miss major leaguers who have been regulars in the past and will be again, but who just had a bad season because of injuries. Some of the greatest deals I've seen came following injuries, including a \$7 Mark McGwire, who had suffered from chronic wrist injuries until he shortened his swing and went on to his historic home run hitting tear.



Sometimes an injury can be a blessing in disguise for a player. While rehabilitating injuries, players often discover new fitness and training routines that totally change their careers and lives.

The introduction of new stretching and strengthening techniques can make them better overall players. When you hear that a baseball player has been working out all off-season with a personal trainer and has lost weight or reduced his body fat, that should be a loud and clear sign to you that he had rededicated himself to fitness and will probably have a very productive and relatively injury-free season. It happens all the time. Just look at seven-time Cy Young Award winner Roger Clemens as the poster boy for baseball success through fitness.

The next group of injured players to consider is those who were hurt, but not seriously, in the spring. Over the course of a season, you'd

be happy if each of your players appeared in 140 games, suffering bumps, bruises, strains, and slight sprains along the way. To me it doesn't really matter which games a player misses. In fact I'd much rather have a player who I know is injured for a finite number of games than the guy who gets severely injured later in the season and misses most of his team's games. Over the past few years I've drafted players of the caliber of Brian Giles and Jason Schmidt at far below their true market value because I was willing to take a chance that their injuries wouldn't be too severe. Both times the player missed just one week, and I ended up with great players at a great price at the beginning of a three-year contract.

Depending on your league's rules, you may also want to take some players in the draft from the third category. If you're allowed an unlimited number of players on your disabled list, then look into taking players who will undergo rehab during the season but are scheduled to return at some point. I'm a big proponent of asset acquisition—the more assets you have at your disposal, the better off you will be. The season is so long that, even if a player misses two or three months, he has enough time to make a big impact for your stretch drive.

Nearly as interesting as drafting the injured player is taking the one who will replace him. While you're doing your research on the disabled, you'll come across those who will take their place. As long as your league has liberal free agency rules, you have nothing to lose by taking a temporary player. In fact, if he plays well during his audition, he'll earn playing time even after the regular starter returns.

HURTS SO GOOD

In the RLBA you are allowed to replace injured players at the draft table using your free agency budget, so for every injured player taken in the draft, you're able to replace him right then and there. When I found out about that rule I was like a kid in a candy store. Now each year I go into the draft with a list of injured players who I'll be able to add at the very end of the draft for \$1 each. So instead of budgeting for a whole 25-man roster, I divide up most of my budget for 22 players, knowing I'll get three \$1 players to put on my DL and then replace as soon as the draft is over. Some of the players I've picked up as post-draft injury replacements have been regulars for me too, including Phillies regular third baseman David Bell and Dodgers starting pitcher Jose Lima in 2004. If your league has rules like these, by all means exploit them to your greatest benefit.

Sleeper Sells

Everyone goes into their draft with their list of sleepers, meaning players who they feel will go unnoticed by everyone else. A new problem that has arisen in the information age is that true sleepers have become fewer and further between. Every player that a fantasy preview magazine or Web site touts as a sleeper automatically loses his sleeper status. How can someone be a secret if everyone knows about him? The only true sleepers are those who really come out of nowhere or develop into a role that they weren't supposed to fill, which is another reason why doing your own independent research—using the mainstream media as a tool, not a crutch—is the best way to conduct your draft prep.

SOUND SLEEPERS

Gagne wasn't the only great sleeper in the last few seasons. Here are some of the best sleepers since 2000. Uncover someone like them, and your team can be set up for years.

Pitchers

| | | |
|------|---------------------------|---|
| 2000 | Rick Ankiel, Cardinals | Before he had arm troubles and off-the-field issues, Ankiel came out of nowhere to be one of the leading left-handed pitchers in the NL, with an 11-7 record, 3.50 ERA, and 194 strikeouts in 175 innings. |
| 2001 | Eric Gagne, Dodgers | A mediocre starter who became the most successful closer in baseball history, converting 84 consecutive saves from 2002 to 2004. |
| 2002 | Roy Halladay, Blue Jays | The top reclamation project of recent times, Halladay's comeback came full circle when he won 19 games and had a 2.93 ERA. |
| 2003 | Esteban Loaiza, White Sox | A journeyman by every definition of the word, Loaiza, never more than a \$1 pitcher in any fantasy league, found a home with the White Sox and won a career-high 21 games. |
| 2004 | Jason Marquis, Cardinals | For someone who won exactly zero games in 2003 for the Braves, Marquis finally proved why he was so highly regarded during his tenure in the Braves system by winning 15 games and helping lead St. Louis to the National League Championship and World Series. |

The best true sleeper of the last five years has to be Eric Gagne of the Dodgers. A mediocre starter for the Dodgers from 1999 to 2001 when he won 11 games and lost 14, Gagne went into the 2002 season looking for a role. He was getting squeezed out of the deep L.A. starting rotation and was either going to be relegated to the bullpen as a long reliever or possibly be sent back down to the minors. Closer Jeff Shaw had not been re-signed, leaving Los Angeles manager Jim Tracy in a lurch for a closer. The Dodgers grand plan had relievers Paul Quantrill and Matt Herges competing for the closer role, but Tracy decided to give Gagne, a hard throwing right-hander who had trouble getting past the fifth inning, a chance to close after he pitched well in the late innings of exhibition games. After 152 saves, Tracy looked like a genius, and so did the fantasy owners who saw Gagne's potential and grabbed him back then for a buck.

SOUND SLEEPERS (CONTINUED)

Hitters

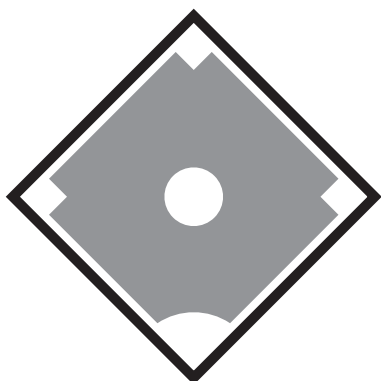
| | | |
|------|--------------------------|--|
| 2000 | Richard Hidalgo, Astros | Rode the see-saw going from highly touted prospect to a major disappointment before he finally realized his potential by raising his home runs from 15 to 44 and his batting average from .227 to .314. |
| 2001 | Albert Pujols, Cardinals | Originally ticketed for the minors, an injury to Bobby Bonilla opened the door for the rookie who had played just three games above Class A ball. He made the club straight from spring training and took full advantage of the chance by hitting .329 with 37 home runs and 130 runs batted in. |
| 2002 | Randy Winn, Devil Rays | Expected to be a fourth or fifth outfielder at best, the unheralded Winn hit .298, stole 27 bases, and even contributed 75 runs batted in. |
| 2003 | Scott Podsednik, Brewers | A nine-year journeyman minor leaguer finally got a shot and made the best of it, securing the leadoff and starting center-field spot for Milwaukee while finishing second in the league with 43 steals. |
| 2004 | Carlos Guillen, Tigers | Known more for his propensity to get injured than anything else on the field, Guillen became an early season MVP candidate and an AL All Star by hitting 20 home runs, driving in 97 runs, and hitting .318. |

Love This Game

When all else fails at the end of the draft, there's always a fall-back strategy that will make your season more enjoyable. With your final roster spot or two, take players who you really want to follow, no matter how they're viewed by the rest of the league. More than once, I've drafted players solely with my heart, ignoring all conventional wisdom, and it sometimes turned out well. Sometimes you get so involved in a fantasy league, and your team in particular, that you lose track of the fact that it's a game, and it's supposed to be fun. So there's no shame in drafting Pokey Reese if he's your daughter's favorite player or, if you grew up idolizing Barry Larkin, it's OK to have him on your team (even though his best days on the diamond are way behind him). You never know; sometimes your favorites become the best sleepers of them all.

FROM THE MOUTHS OF BABES

I'm getting to the age that in nearly every draft I attend, someone brings his kid along for the fun of making fantasy baseball (and all of the other sports) a family affair. I think this is great. Baseball is one of the ways that different generations have always been able to relate to each other, and the enthusiasm I see at these drafts from 8-, 9-, and 10-year-old kids for the game is awesome. You'd think that having the kids around the draft table would mean that those teams would be at a disadvantage, but that's far from the truth. In fact, some of the best teams in my leagues have had junior owners who assemble a collection of a) players they truly like, and b) young stars (those sound familiar to you?). The one drawback, however, is when you know a kid really wants a player with all his heart, but you do, too. This happened in the RLBA at the 2004 draft when the youngest members of the Cook Bookies and I got into a bidding war for Ken Griffey, Jr. As the bidding continued, I started to feel like the Grinch taking away the kids' toy on Christmas morning. Finally I relented and missed out on a pretty good early season for Junior, proving that even I have my limit in the cut-throat world of fantasy baseball.



PART IV

**MANAGING
YOUR
TEAM**

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CHAPTER 10

AFTER THE DRAFT

For all of the work you've done leading up to the draft, it's probably hard to believe that your task has really just begun. As challenging and important as drafting is, it's doubly challenging and important to maintain your team throughout all six months of the season. The paramount concept to keep in mind all year is that fantasy baseball is a marathon, not a sprint. Still, you have to keep moving at a good pace or you'll fall back in the pack and might not be able to recover in time to successfully kick to the finish line.

No matter how much work you put into your preparation, and no matter how hard you try to draft a great team, sometimes it just doesn't work out for you. Thankfully, most of the time things do work as planned. But fear not if you feel like you're on the short side of things. I've said before that drafting is important, but 99% of the time the draft isn't the end—all of the season. I've had bad drafts and still had fine seasons. It's a lot more work than having a dominant team coming out of the draft, but sometimes it's more satisfying. This chapter is dedicated to the days and weeks immediately following your draft. The key is keeping your cool and staying on an even keel in the face of both adversity and accomplishment. This chapter covers the following:

- ◆ Now the fun begins
- ◆ Don't panic, it's a long season
- ◆ How to assess the damage
- ◆ Quick and painless fixes

Now the Fun Begins

The minute your draft is over, you naturally begin assessing your team. All of that work that you did is in the past, and as the next phase of the season begins it's good to know how your team stacks up against everyone else's. With a few glances it's relatively easy to tell who had good drafts and who didn't. Hopefully you're in the former group.

After leaving the draft room and taking a good deep breath, I usually take a few minutes to study the draft results. The first thing I do is to examine my pitching staff against everyone else's because usually the key to winning is having good pitching. Part of my plan every year is to have the best possible pitching staff, and this is the first chance to discover if I've really achieved my goal. If I'm happy with my starters, I'm generally happy with my team. I also make sure to note where all of the closers ended up. Which are the teams with two closers, and did anyone land three? You can try to keep track of these things as the draft is going on, but it's tough. It's much easier to assess once removed from the draft scene.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Consider the fantasy baseball season as a heavyweight championship fight, and the draft as the first round of the bout. The combatants spend months preparing by sparring, doing road work, and dieting to get in as good a shape as they possibly can, spending every waking hour readying themselves for the big day. Then when fight day finally comes, they step inside the ropes, the bell rings, and every once in a while someone throws a combination of haymakers and wins with a knockout blow right then and there in the first round. Most times, however, fighters come out and try to test each other's defensive and offensive techniques and get a feel for what they can and can't get away with during later rounds when they finally want to make their move. Most often, both fighters get some good licks in at different times, but the bout goes all 12 rounds and ends up a very close decision. Everyone's fantasy baseball draft goal should be to get out of the first round of the contest with their wits about them, and some firepower and blocks to build upon. As the season draws on, the more rounds you win, the better chance there is for you to win the overall contest. I believe that by employing my drafting techniques you'll have as good a chance as anyone to sting your opponents enough at the draft to put yourself in position to throw haymakers all season, giving you the ultimate edge.

How Does It Look to You?

The first thing you should do when you finally get a good grasp of your team is decide whether you actually like every member. There's no way that you can have the necessary enthusiasm over six grueling months if you don't like the players on your roster. If you're not happy with any of your core characters, there's very little you can do immediately without having to give up a lot to get a little, so get used to having that player and maybe you'll grow to like him. However, if there are a few players on your team that you took because you felt you had to or got stuck with while trying to raise the bidding but now regret having for some reason, it's OK to admit that you made a mistake and replace them. Don't exacerbate a bad situation by waiting too long to fix an obvious problem.

Getting rid of bit players and replacing them with players of equal or greater value early in the season is relatively easy. For those players you drafted, try to remember whom you beat out to win their services in the auction. Chances are that if you suggest a small and fair trade offer to the owner who wanted a player at one dollar less than you did, they'll be happy to take your problem off your hands. However, don't let it be known that you're attempting to jettison the player in question; approach it as if you're very interested in the other team's player but since you know that your competitor had interest at the draft in your player, you want to find out if he'll make the swap. If you find that you're on the verge of cutting him instead, make it known that he's available and that you'd go as far as accepting a minor leaguer or player on the disabled list in his place. There's a very good chance that someone will bite on your bait. And you should conserve your resources because as the year rolls on, you'll find that you're going to need every asset you can get.



Never begin a trade proposal by offering one of your players without making it perfectly clear who you want in return. If you simply offer your player without a specific target in mind, you devalue your asset. Inexplicably, many teams do this both in fantasy and real baseball. Sometimes you hear of general managers who praise players who you know they want to deal. The praise is bestowed only to drive up their return value—a good lesson to the budding fantasy general manager. Always inquire about the other team's player and what it might take to get him first. Be sure not to limit return choices either, since your negotiating partner may prefer a player you'd much rather part with too.

Don't Panic, It's a Long Season

Nobody ever said playing fantasy baseball was going to be easy. Like every other endeavor, there will be plenty of ups and downs throughout the season, and if those downs come early, it's important to remain optimistic about your team. It's not out of the question for a team to be at the bottom of the standings for quite a while at the start of the year and still make some noise in the end. I know from first-hand experience. Every year I've been in the RLBA I've started the season near or at the bottom of the league in April and May, but by September or October, I always find my team at or near the top.

By following the draft strategy I spelled out in the previous Part, you're just as likely to have a sluggish start as you are to start out on fire, because some of the players you pick won't necessarily be regulars at the very beginning of the year. While those players have to wait their turn to make major contributions, you'll have a chance to sort out your relative strengths and weaknesses.

Don't Overreact

The most important thing to do when you start off the first week or two of the season near the bottom of the pack is to keep everything in perspective. As I said in the draft preparation section, the baseball season lasts forever, and things will ebb and flow throughout. Don't go out and make foolish trades or go cutting players left and right just because they got off to bad starts. If Jim Thome goes 0 for 30 for the first two weeks of the season and you think it's time to trade him, you might as well just throw in the towel right now because you won't have the stomach for the long haul. There is no game more cyclical than baseball, and because of this fact, fantasy baseball teams also go in cycles. Some folks believe that momentum is a myth when it comes to sports, but I believe in it wholeheartedly. I've seen it happen to my teams, some of which were left for dead. By cutting an ice-cold slumping player too early, you'll be missing his inevitable red-hot bounce-back period.

FAST AND SLOW

Some players get off to great starts; others have trouble getting out of the blocks, and both groups skew the early season fantasy standings. In 2004, some of the best players in the game had pretty weak starts, while many strong starters fizzled out pretty quickly. Here's a sample:

Hot Then Not

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Hee Seop Choi | Was second only to Barry Bonds with nine home runs through April and appeared to be a budding fantasy star. He lost the confidence of the Marlins (who traded him to L.A.) and his fantasy owners (who undoubtedly held onto him for too long) and hit only seven more homers over the season's last five months. |
| Charles Johnson | The renaissance of Johnson's career was short lived. By the end of April, the Colorado catcher was hitting .333 with seven home runs and appeared poised to have one of the best years of his career. Then reality hit more than he did. Johnson finished with 13 home runs and a .236 average. |
| Esteban Loaiza | Was 4-0 with a 3.71 ERA as the season entered May but lost it from that point on, winning only six more games and posting one of the AL's worst earned run averages. |
| Eric DuBose | It looked like the Orioles had finally found an ace when the tall lefty posted a 3-2 record and a 3.06 ERA in April. Unfortunately, he came crashing back to Earth, and when his year ended with arm trouble in June, DuBose's ERA had ballooned to 6.39 and he had added just one win and four losses to his early totals. |

Not Then Hot

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Ichiro Suzuki | At the end of April it didn't look like Ichiro would come close to the AL batting title, let alone set the major league record with 262 hits when he was hitting a very pedestrian .255 with only 26 hits, putting him in a tie for 40th place. |
| Derek Jeter | Fantasy owners panicked more than George Steinbrenner when they looked up at Derek Jeter's batting average at the start of play on May 1 and saw him hitting .168 with just one home run! Somehow the Yankees captain bounced back enough to finish the year with a more familiar .292 average and 23 home runs. |
| Johan Santana | Few people would argue with the fact that the hard throwing Minnesota lefty was the major league's best pitcher in the second half of the season, going 13-0 with a 1.31 ERA and 129 strikeouts in 104 innings. But few would even consider him good in the first month of the season when he went 1-0 with a 5.40 ERA in five April starts. |

Silver Linings

Believe it or not, there are actually some terrific advantages to starting off the season slowly. First and foremost is free-agent acquisition. In both my AL and NL leagues, the teams lower in the standings are given the tie breaker in free-agent acquisitions when two teams submit the same bid. This can be a great benefit when acquiring players on the lower end of the bidding spectrum. Teams tend to be quite frugal in the early days of the season, and a two- or three-dollar bid is all it usually takes to obtain the same players for which it would take \$20 if they were available later in the year. Knowing that, your \$2 bid from last place has the same effect as a \$3 bid from first.

Another way in which it's to your advantage starting off at or near the bottom of the standings early in the season is the psychological perception of everyone else. First, you're going to get more trade offers than anyone else because the most impatient and shortsighted owners in the league will assume that you'll be desperate to make a move because that's how they would be. This will let you know the cast of characters many teams are willing to part with, making the whole landscape of the league a bit more clear when you indeed finally decide to make some deals.

You'll also be perceived as much less of a threat from last place than you would be from first place. Teams have an inclination to be more willing to make trades with those below them because they believe that you'll be helped less than them, so you'll forever be stranded behind them. The last thing in the world they want to do is help a team that they're gunning for above them in the standings. Not only will opposing owners have fewer reservations about making deals with you, they'll be more willing to share their overall scheme as they try to persuade you to trade your swag for their rubbish. Trading from first place is always difficult; trading from the bottom is always easy.



I started off the 2004 RLBA season incredibly slowly due to injuries both planned and unexpected and an imbalanced roster. In the draft, the good deals all seemed to be on the mound, so I ended up spending more than my allotted share of money for starting pitching. That left me with a void in the power categories. Despite his goofy batting stance and perennial low batting average, Tony Batista is one of my all-time favorite hitters, ever since I picked him up for \$3 in the SIBB after his trade

from Arizona to Toronto in 1999. When he was off to a 2 for 25 start with no home runs, no RBIs, and no stolen bases, I figured his owner, one of the old league's new teams, would be impatient and I could get him for a song. I made a more than fair offer, and even though he was only \$3, the other team was willing to give him up. From that point on, Batista hit .248 with 32 home runs, 114 runs batted in, and 14 steals and was one of the main reasons I was able to make a huge run to the money.

Assessing the Damage

It becomes a lot easier to avoid overreacting if you feel confident that the team you've put together isn't entirely flawed. There are a bunch of early signs that you can decipher to determine if your team just needs a good break, a strong jumpstart, or a complete overhaul.

The first thing to do is assess the standings. If you're falling behind in any category, you have to find out why. The answers can be as simple as your stolen base leader (say Juan Pierre, for example) hasn't started running yet. Also figure out the degree that you're falling behind. Stats categories are all relative. You could be in last place in steals, but if the teams are all bunched up, in real numbers you could be only six or seven steals out of first place—a major pickup of points and what amounts to just a good week for a base stealer of Juan Pierre's stature. However, if you see that you're way behind the pack in a specific stat and you can't figure out the reason for it, you should make some sort of move to fix the problem.

Or maybe the problem isn't yours at all. Some players start out the season like gang busters, exceeding everyone's expectations. In 1994, Karl "Tuffy" Rhodes hit two home runs on opening day for the Cubs, putting him on pace for 324 for the year. OK, that's a total exaggeration, but it helps prove the point. Years later, Rhodes would go on to become the Japanese League's home run king, but he ended up that season with just eight homers. The same thing is true about fantasy teams. Who are the players ringing up the stats both for you and for your opposition? Are they flukes or are they the players who have the potential to keep it up? Put a couple of flukes on a single fantasy team and the standings can get knocked completely out of whack. A backup player like Henry Blanco can hit four home runs in a week and not hit another for the remainder of the season. Those who own

players like that have a habit of getting complacent, believing that the hot streak will last longer than everyone knows it will. Those teams eventually come crashing back to reality, and as they do, your solid team will inevitably rise.



Later in this book I'll talk about trades and the appropriate instances to punt a category. This is definitely not one of them.

Never give up a category early in the season. By doing so you'll seal your fate in the category by falling so far behind the pack that nothing you do can salvage even a single point later on, even if you manage to acquire the best base stealer, closer, home run hitter, and so on. Early in the year you should be able to utilize your free-agency budget to skim just about any skill you need from the pool of available players. As the season progresses, the free-agent pool gets comprehensively picked through, and you'll have trouble finding players capable of doing what you require. Be sure that your problems are major before you attempt to fix them, but when you come to that conclusion, don't wait too long.

Next, appraise the performances of your stars. Believe it or not, if your cornerstone players are performing well below expected and you're falling back in the standings, you're actually better off than if they're on fire because you can expect them to straighten themselves out and make their expected major contributions. Of course, if they're performing below their expected levels and you're either in the thick of the race or even ahead, it's a harbinger of great things to come.

However, if your best players are going like gang-busters and you still are having problems keeping up with the leaders, your team could be flawed, but it's probably a fixable problem. When the base of your team is strong, you'll have less to worry about in the long haul, but it's hard not to worry when your charges aren't performing well. Complementary players are relatively easy to replace through trades and free agency if you need to. The central figures of your team are not. Certain players are notoriously slow starters throughout their careers. If you have some of them, don't worry, they'll bounce back.



No matter how good your instincts or research, bad years happen. When your cornerstone players go into prolonged slumps, suffer debilitating injuries, and have overall disappointing seasons, then it's time to scramble all of your resources. Early season slumps and minor injuries are not reasons to panic. Prolonged problems are.

Next, take a deep look at your mid-level players and their production. Are all of them bringing something to the party? Unless you can detect some sort of arm problems or other health issues, you really can't make any rash decisions about those whom you consider your middle-of-the-rotation pitchers early in the season because even at the one-sixth point in the season they'll have only five or six starts under their belts—not quite a representative sample of their overall performance. The same goes for position players. Those with established jobs are best left alone for a period of time while they get into the groove of a new season. At about the six-week mark, take a deep look at how they've performed, especially searching for upward or downward trends and some explanations for them. When it comes to these players, hold on, stay the course, and be patient.

Roster Accessories

The filler players in your lineup are a completely different story. You have to aggressively manage the bottom of your roster starting on day one. In very deep leagues, players taken at the end of your draft and as

PATIENCE PAID OFF

In 2000 in the SIBB my team counted on stolen base production from Omar Vizquel, the Indians Gold Glove shortstop. For the most part Vizquel was a two category player, hitting for a high average and stealing many bases. He had hit .333 and stolen 42 bases in 1999 and was considered one of the top bargain middle infielders in our league. For some reason, however, Vizquel didn't run at all at the start of 2000. I couldn't figure it out and did as much snooping around as I could. I found out that he was suffering from a hand injury, and every time he slid into second base on a steal, he'd aggravate it. Once his hand recovered, Vizquel began running again and ended up with 22 steals. Had I panicked and traded or cut him, I would have been giving up on him way too early.

injury replacements are always a gamble—a 50/50 proposition at best, so it should come as no surprise that you might have to find early alternatives. As major league teams begin to sort out their rotations, bullpen roles, and starting lineups, the first few weeks of the season have become the best time to pick up free agents. There is still an unknown aura surrounding some teams early in the season, and you can take advantage of this uncertainty if you can figure out how the chips will fall.

Look at the available players in your free-agency pool. If you see some who you would have drafted but somehow you ran out of budget or just overlooked them, pick them up. If you see a player who is clearly better than someone on your roster, by all means make the swap. If you see a player who is having a breakout-type season yet is still available in your league, swoop in and scoop him up. And if you see a player on your roster who you wouldn't even trade for, then by all means replace him.

Early Free Agency

I mentioned in the draft preparation section that the research you did getting ready for your draft would eventually pay off during the season as well, and the first few weeks of the season help illustrate my point. Be proactive if players available on the waiver wire appeal to you. Since you still should have a feel for their roles, you should be in the best position to make decisions based on current circumstances. A few kinds of free agents are most valuable and often overlooked early in the season. Take a chance on one of these and you could uncover a stud.

PROBLEMS SHOULDN'T LEAD TO PANIC

Enduring a tumultuous start to your season compares favorably to riding ocean waves at the shoreline. If you get caught in a rip tide that pulls you out to the open ocean, the more you struggle to get back to shore, the further you get pulled out, and the more trouble you get into. Instead of struggling against currents that you have no power against, the way out of danger is to keep your wits about you, change your course, and calmly swim parallel to the shore. The same holds true for dire-appearing circumstances surrounding your fantasy team early in the season. The last thing you want to do is thrash around making rash trades and cutting players left and right. If you make minor adjustments to your team and wait until the seas settle down a bit, you'll be much better off.

QUICK CHANGE

The only hole in the Yankees lineup entering the 2004 season was at second base. Veteran Enrique Wilson, a .253 career hitter and Yankees utility infielder for just under three years, was competing with free-agent acquisition Miguel Cairo, a .259 career hitter who became a “super utility man,” playing every infield and outfield position with the Cardinals. Most prognosticators believed Wilson, a Joe Torre favorite, would get the job, and so did I. I also thought that Cairo was a superior player and wrote in my preview scouting report on SI.com that Torre would give the job to Wilson, but Cairo would not only have more fantasy value, he’d win the job outright. That’s exactly how things played out. It became clear early in the season that Wilson wasn’t going to be able to keep the job and that Cairo, whenever he would be given the chance, was going to make the spot his own. By the end of the year, Wilson was a forgotten man while Cairo finished the year tied with Derek Jeter for second on the team in batting (.292). Fantasy owners who picked him up got a solid contributor with universal position eligibility for next to nothing.

Having identified all of the position battles in your league, you were forced in the draft to guess who would win the fight. Now, with a couple of weeks out of the way, you can see for sure, and it’s not always the man in the lineup everyday whom you should be taking.

The Wally Pipp

Walter Clement Pipp was the Yankees regular first baseman from 1915 to 1925 who lost his job when he sat out one day with a headache and was replaced in the lineup by a young Lou Gehrig. I’m not saying that you’re going to uncover a Hall of Famer on the waiver wire, but sometimes players filling in for regulars acquit themselves well enough to earn the full-time job, despite the old football coach adage that says no one can lose his job because of an injury. Just ask Wally.

You should always be searching for players who are filling in for injured regulars and could be better than those whom they’re replacing. Most people know to sign the replacement for their own players, so I’m not talking about just replacements for your injured. What you have to do is go after those players given the at-bats of other teams’ incapacitated stars. Many times these fill-ins play well enough over a short time that they carve out a role for themselves even after the regular returns. In the instances when that happens, it’s an opportunity to field another stud stats collector.

One such player in 2004 who should have had a very limited role for the Oakland A's but ended up being one of the team's most valuable players was outfielder Eric Byrnes. Dubbed "Captain America" for his long flowing blonde hair and all-out effort while playing for years in the Dominican winter leagues, Byrnes entered the season as the backup behind regulars Jermaine Dye, Mark Kotsay, and Bobby Kielty. Suffering from sore ribs caused in an early-season collision, Kielty was supposed to be sidelined only a few weeks. When the injury took longer than expected to heal, and since Byrnes played so well in his absence, Byrnes kept the job even after Kielty was healthy. Byrnes, the backup, ended up with 20 home runs, a .283 average, 73 runs batted in, and 17 steals, while the starter, Kielty, hit just .214, with seven home runs, 31 RBIs, and one steal.

Rule V

As you've been able to figure out so far, I'm usually in favor of picking up young players over older ones, especially late in the draft or during the early part of the season when they are still relative unknowns. One group of young players to approach with great caution, however, are those deemed Rule V (five) selections. In a rule designed to prevent players from getting bogged down in a single organization throughout their career, Major League Baseball holds a draft each year in which veteran minor league players not on 40-man rosters are exposed to other teams in a draft for \$50,000. The catch is that if you take the player, you have to keep him on your 25-man roster for the whole season, or you must offer the player back to the team of origin for \$25,000. In essence, it's a \$25,000 gamble by teams to audition players for the major leagues.

The problem is that many of these players make absolutely no impact at all during their rookie season. They may appear as defensive replacements or as pinch runners from time to time, but for much of the year they're pretty useless fantasy players. The risks for fantasy owners comes early in the season when managers are most likely to give their new toys a look. Although every once in a while a player emerges from the Rule V draft (see the following table), more often than not they sit on the bench a lot and get sent back to the minors for seasoning the next season.

SELECTED RULE V DRAFT PICKS WHO ENJOYED EXTENDED MAJOR LEAGUE SUCCESS (IN ORDER OF PROMINENCE)

| Player | Year | Drafted From | Drafted By |
|------------------|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Roberto Clemente | 1954 | Dodgers | Pirates |
| Johan Santana | 1999 | Astros | Marlins |
| Bobby Bonilla | 1985 | Pirates | White Sox* |
| George Bell | 1980 | Phillies | Blue Jays |
| Matt Mantei | 1994 | Mariners | Marlins |
| Kelly Gruber | 1983 | Indians | Blue Jays |
| Jay Gibbons | 2000 | Blue Jays | Orioles |

*Traded back to Pittsburgh

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MANAGING YOUR TIME AND EFFORT

Before you get too far into the season, it's important to understand the balance between your team and the other facets of life. No, really, I'm not kidding. For much of the year, and especially as the season winds down, I and the rest of the hardcore fantasy players in contention have trouble thinking about other things. There's nothing anyone's going to say to dissuade me from being obsessive when big stakes are on the line, but it's OK during much of the rest of the season to let go for a little bit at a time. That's not to say it's OK for you to completely ignore your team for any extended period, but you don't have to be on your Blackberry looking at live score updates all night. Your team can function without you actually witnessing everything as it happens live. In this chapter, I'll provide insights into the following:

- ◆ If you snooze, you lose
- ◆ Gathering the right information
- ◆ Set up a routine
- ◆ Letting go (but not for too long)
- ◆ Howdy, partner

If You Snooze, You Lose

Outside of luck and preparation, there is nothing more important over the long haul than simply knowing what's going on in baseball and, more pointedly, with your team and players. The whole concept

behind playing fantasy baseball was to be able to find a way to follow the game in which you feel you have a stake in the game, but even professional general managers don't follow their teams as much as some of the victorious fantasy owners I know (oftentimes including me). As I said in the Introduction, fantasy baseball has become an obsession for those who play it and especially those who play it well, but there are ways to balance your enthusiasm and the attention you need to pay to the game with going about your daily business.

I'm not saying that you have to sit in your house and watch every baseball game for the next six months to have a chance to win your league. Quite the contrary. It's not how much you know, it's what you know. The quality of the data on which you base your decision-making processes is what matters, not the quantity. However, in the world of media proliferation it's very hard to sift through and decide what is helpful to you and what's just inane chatter.

Gathering the Right Information

The first thing you need to establish is where and when to find information regarding your league. You had a good head start in finding sources you like and trust while preparing for your draft (see Chapter 4, "Fact Finding"), but many of those are one-time, one-shot deals. Throughout the season you have to establish your go-to sources—places you know you'll be able to find the facts you need when you need them. It's very frustrating to discover important news about a player just after the transaction deadline for the week has passed.



Sometimes it's not the information that's to blame; it's the action. Around midseason 2003, the San Diego Padres called up five-tool outfielder Jason Bay from the minor leagues and gave him the team's starting centerfield job. The RLBA deadline for transactions is 6 p.m. on Sunday, so I made a very strong free-agency bid for him. Fifteen minutes after the deadline, a story came over the Associated Press wire that Bay had been hit on the wrist by a pitch and had left the game to have x-rays performed. Less than a half hour later it was announced that Bay had a broken wrist and would be out for six to eight weeks. Short of being in the Padres clubhouse myself, there was no quicker source of information than the AP wire. However, not only did I spend a good chunk of my FAAB budget for a player I wouldn't be able to use for two months, but I also had a dead spot in my lineup for seven full days. The true definition of frustration.

One of the tenets of journalism is that it's always best to get as close to the original source of any information as possible. The same rule applies when trying to make good decisions about your fantasy team. The hardest thing about interpreting breaking news and information is where exactly to find what you're looking for from sources you can believe. In the draft preparation section, I wrote about some good sources for you to use for your draft research on a national scale. In this chapter, you'll get some leads about places I go to find all sorts of news and insights about players throughout the year. Of course, continue to use your trusted sources as well. These are just a guideline that you may or may not choose to use.

The World Wide Web

You name the topic and you'll be able to find something about it on the World Wide Web. But as many people found out during the 2004 election, you can't always believe what you read on the Internet. Many providers are no more qualified to tell you about a subject than you are. Most of the time the "facts" shared with you on the Web are wrought with inaccuracies and opinions passed off as fact. The same is true about Internet sports coverage as well. From fan sites that pass off completely unsubstantiated rumors, to P.R.-driven releases that are more interested in conveying the company line than what is actually true—it's pretty difficult to separate truth from rumor or even fiction.

When you hear about items in any form of media that interests you about players' injury status, trade rumors, lineup, or role changes from a national source, take a couple of minutes to find the local take on the situation. In Appendix B, "Team-by-Team Online Research," at the back of this book, I spell out many trusted and reputable places to go to find pointed information about specific players on specific teams. Most local newspapers with any kind of circulation have their own Web sites, and although many will make you fill out a questionnaire to access their service, most are offered free of charge following your registration. Since local reporters have often spoken directly to all of those involved in a situation, it's much better to read direct first-person quotes than it is to believe one writer's translation of the situation.

The growth of fantasy sports can be attributed directly to the information revolution proliferated by the Internet. Someone living in

Butte, Montana, can stay as updated on his National League fantasy team by reading the online versions of newspapers like the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *New York Daily News*, and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* as someone in any of those cities. For the first 15 years of fantasy sports, people in non-major league cities depended mainly on their local newspapers, cable television, and radio to get information about teams and players. Now, with a few key strokes, everyone everywhere can be in touch with the local flavor of any city in the nation.

MLB.com

There are a bunch of very good founts of information on the Web that will help you immensely throughout the year. One of the best sites, not surprisingly, is MLB.com, Major League Baseball's own official site. I know in your draft preparation you went to this site often, but there are a couple of excellent features on the site that are at their best during the course of the regular season.

The first is MLB.com TV. Even if you're nowhere near a television, it's possible to watch your favorite team. All you need is a broadband Internet connection and a computer to use MLB.TV's subscription service. For a fee, you can watch live broadcasts of games, special highlight shows, and talk shows with baseball guests.

Another great feature is for the traditionalists who would rather listen to a radio broadcast of a game. The league office also lets you get live local radio broadcasts by bucking up for an MLB.com Radio season subscription. MLB Radio also produces its own programming, including hot stove reports, individual team coverage, and, yes, even fantasy-related shows.

Fantasy News Sites

While MLB.com actually provides useful fantasy baseball news, there are some independent sources dedicated solely to fantasy sports that do a great job. The best way to get a quick fix on baseball news every day, both actual and fantasy related, is to take a quick whirl through one of the myriad fantasy baseball sites on the Internet. They've pretty much become fantasy baseball cheat sheets and have become exceedingly popular in this time-crunched society we live in. Most of them comb through every possible media source and provide a

constant stream of notes in all of the major sports. The best feature of these sights is the ability to search through them by sport, team, or player. As I wrote in the draft prep portion of this book, the best that I have found are Rotoworld.com and Rototimes.com, although others like fanball.com, benmaller.com, letsplay2.com, and Rotowire.com are also solid. There are countless other baseball sources on the Web, but if you check out one or two of the aforementioned sites once a day, you should be able to stay up to date on injuries and the status of most of the important players in your league.

Real Sports News Sites

Because I write a column for SI.com I'll admit that I'm biased, so I won't spend much time talking about the great fantasy columnists and fantasy player rating systems you can find on the site. I'll trust you to check it out for yourself. One of the best features in SI.com's Scorecard Daily is "Truth and Rumors," which tells you what folks around the country are talking about, whether it be trade rumors, injuries, suspensions, or what have you.

ESPN.com has a more established version of "Truth and Rumors" for its monthly subscribers called "Rumor Central." Also, as part of a \$4.95 per month subscription (I've been a member for years), you get access to insider content and in-depth statistical analysis from some of ESPN.com's best writers.

One of the most basic sites and the largest provider of free fantasy games on the Web is Yahoo!. Most of the folks who play fantasy games purely for fun with no monetary stakes play Yahoo! games. You can be put in a league with people you know or with complete strangers. There are some good and bad features to Yahoo!'s games, but to access some of their analysis and stats services you have to maintain a team. Every year I try to get into a public Yahoo! league just to take advantage of their resources.

My leagues use two different Internet stats services. The SIBB, for which I'm commissioner, uses CBS.Sportsline, which is run by commissioner.com. They have an excellent interface that's easy to use, logical to maintain, completely customizable, and provides good player information, albeit a bit stale at times.

The official stats provider of the RLBA is a firm called USA Stats. They handle hundreds of leagues and have some cache because they do handle the “original” league and have for years. In addition to player stats provided on their site, they link each player to his respective pages on Rotowire, ESPN, and SI.com to provide further news and info. The USA Stats interface is a bit less user friendly and less attractive than many of the others, but unlike many of the large stats services, this is a relatively small firm, and there is usually a voice on the other side of the phone if you need to ask a question or fix a problem.

Print Media

While the Internet is the best way to keep in touch with every bit of information available, it’s understandable that some people are more comfortable turning to more traditional forms of media to cull their fantasy baseball information. The most traditional way to follow fantasy teams is by closely reading box scores found in the morning newspapers. If you commute by train or bus to your job, this is probably something that you do already. Back in the early days of fantasy baseball, this was the only way to keep track of all of your players. Locating any prose dedicated to players like Brian Downing or John Milner wasn’t the easiest thing to do if you didn’t live in the cities in which they played. Seeing a line like “4 3 4 5” from one of your hitters was an instant way to cheer up your day in the morning. Conversely, seeing a couple of “5 0 0 0” lines would dampen any owner’s moods.

Newspapers

Today the best source for daily box scores on a national scale continues to be *USA Today*. Depending on where you live, the *USA Today* Sports section has every box score every day (or close to it if you live on the East Coast and miss the late West Coast games). In addition, each weekday during the baseball season, *USA Today* prints a notes column with bits of news, updates, and insights written by local correspondents for each major league team.

Many local papers are also good sources of day-to-day baseball information, leaders, and boxes. If you live in the Boston area, I’m sure you swear by the tips provided by Peter Gammons in his columns

that appear in the *Boston Globe*. Each major league city has a well-respected local writer with an eye on both their local and national scenes. If you read their columns religiously, then you'll at least be up to speed with every important story during the season.

Going a bit further than just reading the daily paper that you're probably receiving already is buying a subscription to either *USA Today's Sports Weekly* or *Baseball America*. While subscriptions to both could prove to get a bit costly, the rewards are well worth the cost.

USA Today's Sports Weekly

Sports Weekly provides comprehensive weekly stats, news, features notes, fantasy tips, player ratings, opinions, and just about anything else you can ask for about baseball (and if you play fantasy football, their NFL coverage is just as well done). You should have become very familiar with *Sports Weekly* during the preseason, and their in-season coverage is just as good as their off-season content. The fantasy baseball section written by John Hunt is especially informative and shares many good tips for you to look into to improve your squad. One of the most useful features is the weekly rundown of players who have gained new position eligibility that week. Perhaps the most useful feature of *Sports Weekly* is a rundown of short biographies for each minor league player who made his major league debut during the previous week, giving you a clear picture of what he has done and the chances he has to make an impact in his first taste of the major leagues.

Baseball America

There's no better place to read about baseball from top to bottom than *Baseball America*. The most in-depth source for the national pastime on every level from high school through the major leagues and everywhere in between, *Baseball America's* take on major and minor league prospects is without parallel. Throughout the season there are franchise-by-franchise reports and stories about every level of the game. Truly a trade paper designed for the game's insiders and hardest-core baseball enthusiasts, *BA* is a must-read every week. By far the most enjoyable and beneficial service performed by the staff of *BA* is their prospects report, which furnishes a crystal ball look at the next crop of major leaguers, both from each team and from

individual minor leagues. The one-year subscription rate of \$76.95 (as of 2004) is a bit steep, but when looked upon as an investment toward your potential fantasy baseball winnings, it should more than pay for itself in the long run.

Sports Illustrated

While the feature stories crafted by *Sports Illustrated's* writers are the most entertaining parts of the venerable magazine's weekly baseball coverage, the true nuts-and-bolts articles useful for fantasy owners are found in the "Inside Baseball" column. Contributors like Tom Verducci and Albert Chen travel the country talking to players, managers, and front office personnel and empty their notebooks into this area every week. In addition to *SI* staffers, legions of stringers who cover each team locally provide further insights with more of a localized eye.



I put my money where my mouth is when it comes to trusting **Sports Illustrated's** baseball people. In the SIBB, I've been co-owners with Senior Baseball Editor Larry Burke for the last nine years and, although we had some tough breaks early on as a management team, together we developed many of the strategies that I employ across all of my fantasy teams and with which I have found great success of late. When I was invited to join the RLBA by Rob Fleder and Steve Wulf, the first person I had in mind to share the load with was Albert Chen. Although he wasn't yet on the baseball beat, Albert and I approached fantasy sports in the same way and made a very good fantasy team (we were two-time champions of the SI Football Association). Now that he's on the road covering baseball all season, he's the perfect co-owner and has great instincts for players' potential. I trust what he says, and so can you.

Broadcast Media

While you can take the print media with you to read wherever and whenever you have a free moment, it's also pretty easy to find time to spend a few minutes a day watching highlights. It's hard to find a sports fan who doesn't spend at least an hour a day in front of the TV set watching all of the day's highlights. Here are some of the best places to catch up on the day's baseball news.

ESPN

I praised ESPN's baseball coverage in the draft preparation section, and their nightly "Baseball Tonight" show is a must watch for those who don't have time to follow every game every night (in other words, everyone). Through 30, 60, or 90 minutes of highlights, insights, and stats, you can get caught up on an entire day's worth of games. And as an ESPN show, "Baseball Tonight" is re-broadcast multiple times throughout the night and following day, so if you miss it live you won't necessarily be missing it completely.

If you can't watch a whole episode of "Baseball Tonight," surely you can catch one of the gazillion re-broadcasts of "SportsCenter," many of which feature some of the same stories and highlights covered on the all-baseball broadcast.

Local Coverage

In the age of digital cable it's becoming much easier to find localized coverage of each baseball team without having to leave your couch. Depending on the channels made available to you by your cable provider, for a small monthly fee you can get nationwide Fox Sports Net coverage from the individual markets. For an extra \$3.95 per month on my Time Warner cable service I get Fox Sports Northeast, Mountain, Midwest, Central, and Pacific, which pretty much covers all of the local Fox baseball coverage. While you won't get live games, you will get a plethora of specialized magazine shows produced for the individual markets from coast to coast. Superstations like WGN (Cubs) and TBS (Braves) and other cable stations like YES (Yankees) and NESN (Red Sox) provide both specialized programming and live games for the teams they cover.

The Package

One of the greatest developments of the information age has been the proliferation of MLB Extra Innings, with which you can watch nearly every team, nearly every night throughout the whole baseball season. Short of attending a game in person, there's no better way to get a true feeling for your players, as well as others, than by watching them with your own eyes. Some of the best local broadcasters like Vin Scully (Dodgers), Mike Krukow and Duane Kuiper (Giants),

and Jim Kaat (Yankees) are knowledgeable baseball men who share their years of experience around the game in long, well thought out explanations that you won't get from a two-minute sound byte on one of the highlight shows. More often than not, I'll take a good broadcaster's opinion and apply it to my management strategy.

Set Up a Routine

There are two outcomes for the way you feel about your fantasy team. You're either going to love it and not be able to work on it enough or you're going to grow bored with it and forget about it most of the time. The sentiment you experience absolutely depends on your success or potential for it. I'm a centrist and try not to get too high when I'm winning or too low when I'm not. One great way to keep yourself from being overzealous about your team is to set up an everyday routine that you follow throughout the season. If you set up specific times that you will allow yourself to work on your fantasy teams, you can leave most of your day for "more important" things like your job and life in general. Creating a proper balance is something that you have to keep in mind. It's a pretty easy concept, and I wouldn't bring it up if I hadn't come across people who spend three, four, even five hours of their day researching fantasy-baseball related topics when they should have been doing other things (I'm guilty of this too sometimes, but the big difference is someone pays me a salary to be on top of the fantasy world, whereas many fantasy players just shirk other responsibilities). I'll say this again (and will repeat it again later): This is a game, and while it's important to do everything you can to win, it's not necessary to spend every waking hour on it.

JUST DO IT

Maintaining your fantasy baseball team is the same as going to the gym. Some days you're going to be all gung-ho about it, while other times you want nothing less than to go lift or run or swim or whatever it is you do to work out. In both situations you're improving yourself by doing it. If you spend a half hour on each, you'll feel good about yourself the rest of the day. You might even be able to combine your workout and baseball time by bringing your **Baseball America** with you to read while you're on the Stairmaster, or by watching "Baseball Tonight" while lifting weights.

Letting Go (But Not for Too Long)

It's not going to be the end of the world if you miss a week or even two of what's going on in baseball, but any more than that and you're asking for trouble. Although balls are commonly hit hundreds of feet, the old saying goes that baseball is a game of inches. The same holds true for the time aspect of the game itself. Added all together, there are only a few minutes of actual action in a three-hour game. The same can be said for the six-month season. There are key moves every season, and if you happen to be out of the fantasy baseball loop when any of these things happen, you could cost yourself a title. At the very least it's opportunity lost if there's a big inter-league trade or super rookie called up from the minors and you aren't in on the bidding. Even worse than possible chances squandered is when you have a major injury and leave your player in during the entire time you're neglecting your team. Time in a baseball season, while long, is finite, and it's nearly impossible to make up lost innings or at-bats. Once they're gone, they're gone. So what can you do if you really need to be away?

There are three easy ways to avoid potential disaster. The first is a tact employed by the 2004 SIBB champion Victor Nunez when he went on a long trip to Europe. He set up a contingency plan just in case certain players were called up from the minors (namely Fred McGriff) and arranged to have players put in his lineup if others were disabled. If you trust your commissioner enough to let him know your thinking ahead of time, then this is a very reasonable solution.

The next way to get away without leaving your team unmanned is to appoint a surrogate. Although he might not be a full-time member of your ownership team, you can have someone you trust take care of your team while you're away. It's been commonplace in every league I've been in to have someone draft a team for a league member who could not make it to the draft. The same principle works for vacations and other circumstances in which you can't think about your team. I've done this a few times for friends and on occasion made some moves to make their teams better. The easiest thing is to have a partner. By having a partner, you can trade off some of the responsibilities throughout the whole season.

THE WORLD OF BASEBALL

Rarely do I go somewhere during the baseball season where I'm not able to connect to my team, but it does happen. It's amazing, however, how easy it is to stay connected in places you think you'd have trouble. On a trip to Panama to attend the wedding of my good friend Roberto Duran (the golfer, not the boxer), I couldn't believe how tuned in to the U.S. sports scene they were. The first night in Panama City, we all went to watch a game on the big screen in the local TGI Friday's. Except for the fact that everyone was speaking Spanish, you could have easily told me we were in Kansas City. In 2002 I went to the Dominican Republic on Memorial Day weekend. Who knew that the resort we were staying at would have ESPN? I didn't miss a beat. One owner in the RLBA was even able to connect to the league and talk trades while trekking through the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil. The rule of thumb for traveling seems to be: If you stay in the Americas, Japan, or Australia, you should be fine; in Europe and Africa, you're on your own.

Howdy, Partner

I'm proud to have partners in nearly every league in which I participate. To run a team successfully you have to be able to bounce your opinions off of people you trust to make sure that you aren't crazy for making a move. It's also handy to have someone around who's willing to share responsibility for those times you can't be on top of things. I sometimes get a bit caught up in the wheeling and dealing aspect of this game and need someone with a little bit of authority to put the brakes on and suggest that I rethink some of the moves that I want to make. If I feel strongly about a move, by all means I will make it, but if I don't, it really keeps me from making too many mistakes by having to justify the move to someone. It's like a debate. If I can't formulate a good enough argument for the trade or pickup to convince someone whose opinion I trust, then I shouldn't make it at all.

Having a partner also takes lots of the pressure off of the draft since two heads really are better than one. With two of you at the draft table, there's much less of a chance that something will slip by you or be forgotten. Throughout the season it's good to share tasks as well. In the SIBB, Larry Burke began as the pitching guru on our teams while I handled offense and free-agent acquisitions.

While now I am the driving force behind all of my teams, it's nice to know that someone else is looking out for the boys too. Of course, it helps to have a partner who gets paid to travel from major league clubhouse to major league clubhouse talking about baseball with the same guys we're talking about. I highly recommend that too if you can pull it off. (I'm kidding.)

The funny thing about having your co-owner so close to the game is discovering he doesn't really know much more about fantasy production than anyone else. In fact, it is possible to know too much. A major league radio play-by-play man is a co-owner in the SIBB, and while his fantasy team is one of the league's more successful franchises, sometimes he drinks too much of the Kool-Aid of the big league team he covers and buys into some players whom I would never touch with a 10-foot pole. From his point of view, however, he sees these players every day and witnesses those rare flashes of the potential that the team's management hopes to see consistently too. Teams like that have time to be patient, but in trying to win a fantasy title, you don't. That's why I stress to you not to have blind faith in an expert but instead to use experts' opinions only as guides and leave the ultimate decisions up to the gut feelings of yourself and your co-owners.



One of my new favorite fantasy stories involves an exchange of e-mails Albert and I had toward the end of the 2004 season. Astros third baseman Morgan Ensberg was struggling and not getting much playing time, and our team was in the process of being caught from behind in home runs and RBIs. Albert was on the road covering the Giants, and I couldn't reach him to tell him that I had decided to cut Ensberg in favor of Rich Aurilia—a desperation move, yes, and not anything a sane general manager would do, but we were desperate, and at least Aurilia was playing. Even though Ensberg had been a team favorite for two years, I finally sent the message on Sunday telling him that we had to make the move later that day, asking for his final say. Ensberg played that day and had four hits and an RBI just in time for me to negate the move. Albert replied as soon as he received my message after setting up shop in the press box and thought I was still cutting Ensberg. I wrote back telling him I wasn't and he wrote back telling me how relieved he was. Why was he so relieved? "He's a really good guy," he wrote. "A few weeks ago he gave me a great book to read, and I'd hate to see him go." So for all of you who believe that fantasy sports success is solely due to cold, faceless stats, think again. It helps, however, when players you like do their part on the field too.

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CHAPTER 12

USING FREE AGENCY

Now that you know where to find every possible bit of data you can, it's time to use it to your advantage. As I've said before, you should expect your roster to experience a big turnover during the course of the season, and the most frequent transactions you're going to make are free-agent acquisitions. Adding the best un-owned players at the right time is a special knack, and you will find that when you do it correctly, you will feel great about your team's chances. Adding a free agent who is either the perfect complement to your team or who becomes someone you can count on to produce as a core player is like making a trade by giving up nothing. Being active in free agency also gives you the ammo you need to make trades throughout the year. Here are the ins and outs you need to know about free agency:

- ◆ FAAB-ulous
- ◆ The early bid gets the worm
- ◆ Is he good or just hot?
- ◆ Building depth
- ◆ Ouch! How to replace an injured player
- ◆ Pitching in
- ◆ Rotating closers

FAAB-ulous

As arcane as it may seem now, in the early days of fantasy baseball there was no free agency to speak of. The only way you could make player moves was by either making a trade or being forced to replace someone sent to the disabled list. Not only was this counter to the way real baseball teams are managed, it created some weird dynamics. Over the course of the year, dozens, if not hundreds, of undrafted players become potential fantasy contributors, and in the early days there was very little you could do about it unless a player on your team at that position came up lame. In the SIBB we even had the rule that you couldn't cut a player unless he was hurt. Wow, was that ridiculous.

One of the first things I did when I became commissioner was to create a free-agency system in the league. Other leagues had used free-agency budgets to allow owners to change their rosters at will, and it looked like something that would open up the league a bit and make it more realistic and most of all more fun. Instead of wishing that a pitcher would get hurt so I could rid my team of him, each owner had the opportunity to change his roster whenever he wished. I argued that the way it would work best was for every team to have an equal opportunity to acquire the players at the same time. So like other leagues we instituted a free-agent acquisition budget (or FAAB).

The FAAB is either an imaginary or actual budget that teams can use to acquire free agents throughout the year. In the RLBA, each team has 150 real dollars to spend on players. In the SIBB, the figure is 75 imaginary dollars, meaning that no real money changes hands because someone picks up a free agent. While one league has twice the amount you can spend, the execution is almost identical with the average bids being double in the RLBA. No matter what the amount, all FAAB budgets are relative.

Blind bids for free agents are submitted once a week to the league secretary or commissioner (some stats services provide this function as well), and a hierarchy of desired players is listed in each request.



As the commissioner, I'm the one who processes the bids for the SIBB. While everyone has his own way of submitting bids, I have a hard and fast rule. I will accept any bid, as long as I can understand it.

Therefore we allow conditional bidding. This enables an owner to make two

different bids on a single player, depending on the results of another bid. For example, say Javy Lopez and Eric Hinske are both free agents. I want Lopez more but would like to have Hinske if I can get him too. Our rules allow a bid of \$25 for Lopez and \$5 for Hinske, or if Lopez isn't available for that price, \$30 just for Hinske. Therefore, if someone outbids me for Lopez, I'll get Hinske, but I can get both if my two bids are the highest. The point is, be creative in your bidding. The worst thing that can happen is your secondary bids aren't accepted. If they are, you'll be ahead of the game.

There's another way to handle FAAB that we've adopted in my basketball roto league. Everyone starts out with a zero balance, and to add value to your account to purchase a player, you have to cut a player with value. If you want to bid \$10 on a player, you have to cut a player or players worth at least \$10 to fund your request. This basically makes FAAB a bottomless pit but also forces owners to cut some assets that they normally wouldn't, just to have sufficient funds in their FAAB accounts. I have yet to try this in a baseball league but hope to do so soon.

FAAB Management

FAAB mismanagement is one of the quickest ways to ruin your season. Timing is everything in using your free agency bucks. Some owners like to conserve as much as they can to acquire that big player who comes into the league via a midseason trade. I'm of the complete opposite opinion on how to use my cash. Instead of waiting to hit a home run that may never come (or even if it does, there's no guarantee that I will get the player anyhow), I figure, why not spend early and spend often?

FISHING FOR FREE AGENTS

Owners' attitudes when participating in free-agent acquisition follow the two philosophies employed by different types of fishermen. The owner who conserves his FAAB is like the sport fisherman who bobs in the waves hoping to catch the whopper using specific bait and a single rod. The owner who spends throughout the season is like the fisherman who fishes with a wide net, trying to catch as many keepers as he can. If a few bad ones get tangled in the net, he quickly throws them back. And every once in a while, the same whopper that the FAAB conserver is waiting for finds its way into the spender's net.

BALANCING YOUR BUDGET

When making a bid, it's very important to keep your league's salary cap in mind. Here's a cautionary tale. In the 2004 season, one of the rookie teams in the RLBA made a rookie mistake by spending \$89 (of their \$150) on Carlos Beltran when he was traded from the Royals to the Astros. While Beltran was worth as much as a team could spend on him, the team boxed themselves in by making such a high play for the five-tool star. The owners arrived at the \$89 figure by subtracting their roster value from the \$320 cap. The only problem was that two of their best pitchers, Kerry Wood and Josh Beckett, were disabled, and in that league the value of players on the DL doesn't count against the salary cap. So when Wood (\$33) and Beckett (\$23) were eligible to return, there was no room under the cap to fit them in. I actually benefited from that situation, offering them a trade to alleviate some of the salary-cap crunch they were experiencing. In essence, I received Chipper Jones for Scott Hairston (my minor leaguer) because they needed the cap room.

The Early Bid Gets the Worm

The way most people handle free agency drives me nuts, although it really shouldn't. It's because so many of my opposing owners are so conservative when it comes to picking up free agents, or making any roster moves for that matter, that it makes my techniques work so well.

I believe that it's better to try to be proactive and risk making a mistake than to sit back, hoping for the best, while opportunities continuously pass you by. The slogan for the New York Lottery is "You've got to be in it to win it," and no words ring truer when talking about fantasy free agency. Over the years, I've picked up some of the best players on my team through free agency, many of whom were complete unknowns at the time I picked them up. The only way that you're going to get the best players is by identifying them before everyone else does. So how can you tell?

Every week as the transaction deadline passes and the results come in for the week's adds and drops, take a quick look at the available players for the upcoming week. This way you keep a few of them in your consciousness and will pay attention to their performances throughout the week. It's not too much to do. Then as you look through the box scores or watch some games, you can see if they're

to your liking. From your preseason research you should know the players who are the top prospects and who are on the verge of getting jobs. If you like their makeup and the situation they're going to enter, make a strong bid for them as soon as they're available. In many leagues, you get to retain players who get sent back to the minor leagues, so it's a very low risk, high reward proposition. All you'll be losing is the worst player on your team at that position.

Potential megastars don't come along too often, so when they do you should do everything in your power to acquire them. What I like to do is put together a list of the top players coming up through the minor league system who are not reserved or on anyone's fantasy farm club. I break this list into two categories: the grab list and the watch list. Players on the grab list will automatically trigger a substantial bid from me as soon as they reach the majors, whether or not they are slated to play. The watch list is comprised of players whom I'd like to see perform for a few games in the majors before I'll make a move for them. That's not to say that if a player is called up on Tuesday that I won't see enough from him in a few days to pick him up on the next Sunday or Monday transaction day.

You really have to go with your gut when picking up young free agents because you have a huge advantage if you recognize their fantasy potential the week before everyone else in your league does. It becomes very dangerous and often times costly if you wait an extra week before bidding on the guy you think you want. More times than I care to remember, I've identified a player who I thought could have a big impact because of his individual situation, but instead of immediately picking him up for a buck or two, I decided to wait. More often than not, during the ensuing week (as you might expect) the player shows the great potential I detected, and everyone in the league bids on him. I'd rather waste a few dollars along the way and rely on my feeling about a player than regret not making a move when I read all of the signs correctly but just didn't act.



In keeping with my theme of "you can't teach speed," you must pick up any player who comes to the major leagues with the reputation of being a big base stealer. Stolen bases have become so rare in the majors that if you can lock up a big base stealer for a couple of

seasons at a bargain price, you can almost guarantee a finish in the top half of your league standings. Players who stole 20 or more bases last year, like Scott Podsednik, Dave Roberts, Ryan Freel, Coco Crisp, and Brian Roberts, were all likely available on your waiver wire in one of the last two seasons. If your rules allowed it and you picked them up, you're styling for speed. Look for speedsters like Nook Logan, Joey Gathright, Choo Freeman, and Chris Burke to be in the same position in 2005 and 2006.

THE WATCH LIST

These are 10 players from each league who have yet to make an impact on the major leagues and who should be on your list of those to snag during the 2005 season and beyond.

AMERICAN LEAGUE

NATIONAL LEAGUE

Player, Position, 2004 Organization

Player, Position, 2004 Organization

Michael Aubrey, first baseman,
Indians

Stephen Drew, shortstop,
Diamondbacks

Shin-Soo Choo, outfielder,
Mariners

Prince Fielder, first baseman,
Brewers

Franklin Gutierrez, outfielder,
Indians

Jeremy Hermida, outfielder,
Marlins

Felix Hernandez, pitcher,
Mariners

Ryan Howard, first baseman,
Phillies

Javier Herrera, outfielder,
A's

James Loney, first baseman,
Dodgers

Ian Kinsler, shortstop,
Rangers

Andy Marte, third baseman,
Braves

Guillermo Quiroz, catcher,
Blue Jays

Dan Meyer, pitcher,
Braves

Jeremy Reed, outfielder,
Mariners

Yusmiero Petit, pitcher,
Mets

Jared Weaver, pitcher,
Angels

Felix Pie, outfielder,
Cubs

Delmon Young, outfielder,
Devil Rays

Ian Stewart, third baseman,
Rockies

Charity Cases

“One man gathers what another man spills.”

—Robert Hunter

It’s safe to say that when he penned the more gracious take on the old maxim, “one man’s garbage is another man’s gold” for the Grateful Dead song “St. Stephen,” Robert Hunter did not have any concept about fantasy baseball. Most likely he still doesn’t, but his words ring as a great guide for your fantasy baseball free-agency strategy. For whatever their reasons, your competition will do as good a job of stocking your team as you will if you let them. Impatient owners have a knack for putting themselves in a position where they cut the wrong players. It’s up to you to make them pay for their mistakes by picking up their valuable discards whether or not you need them. If the player has a regular job and has some sort of track record of success, chances are that he will again. You should always pick up anyone available who

- ◆ You rated highly in the draft but didn’t quite get.
- ◆ Plays every day and has produced in the past.
- ◆ Has bad numbers but is being given the opportunity to play through a slump.

Ever since I entered the RLBA I’ve had a friendly rivalry with one of the original owners. We went toe-to-toe during my rookie year, battling down to the last out of the season, and I pulled out the narrowest of wins. I think he still holds a bit of a grudge, but that’s OK for me because I always appreciate a friendly yet somewhat heated rivalry. It makes playing these games more interesting.

At the end of the 2004 draft, one of the players I really wanted was Expos rookie outfielder Termel Sledge. After a fine year in 2003 in the Pacific Coast League, when he hit .324 with 22 home runs, 92 runs batted in, and 13 stolen bases, I believed that Sledge, who hits both for power and average, would be given a good chance at some playing time in Montreal. Unfortunately, when he came up in the draft, I was outbid for him. It was killing me because I really liked him. Sledge ended up getting one hit and one RBI in 41 April at-bats and, much to my surprise and delight, ended up in the free-agency

pool. I immediately put a modest \$3 bid on him (the same price for which he was purchased in the draft), and he joined my team the following Monday. Sledge proceeded to catch fire, hitting over .300 for the next two months, at the end of which I traded him back to the owner, who had originally drafted him with Khalil Greene for the more established and stronger producing Milton Bradley.

Is He Good or Just Hot?

When most owners need to pick up a free agent they simply look at the players who are eligible at the necessary position, find the player who has the highest stats output in the categories they want most, and place a bid. That's the extent of their research. By doing this they are assuming that the player they pick up will produce at a constant rate for the period of time they need him. That assumption is one of the mistakes that keep most of those owners wallowing in the depths of the fantasy standings. The major flaw in that logic is that once again, while trying to predict what will happen, they are only using what has happened as the guide.

Unclaimed players can have big weeks or months for many reasons. Before making a move for someone who's been on a hot streak, your task is to best predict if that streak will continue or whether it's just a fluke. Most of the time, players' increased output is in direct relation to an increase in playing time. It's pretty easy to figure out if that playing time will be a regular occurrence or is just temporary.

In one of my SI.com columns in 2004 I suggested picking up Cincinnati Reds outfielder Wily Mo Peña. Although he didn't have great numbers at the time, he had been on a pretty good hitting streak while replacing Cincy's regular right fielder, Austin Kearns, who was sidelined by an injury. The logic behind recommending my readers to pick up Peña was simple, knowing he was an up and coming player ready to bloom, and he finally was going to be given a chance to play. He was the Red's top contributor off the bench, and since the rest of the Red's outfield was comprised of the injury prone Ken Griffey, Jr., and Adam Dunn, it made lots of sense that Peña would get a good amount of at-bats throughout the remainder of the season. Those who paid attention and looked ahead were rewarded with Peña's completely unexpected 26 home runs and 66 RBIs.

It kills me when someone will pick up a player on the basis of a couple of good swings, ignoring the rest of his career up to that point. Career pinch hitters the likes of Lenny Harris, John Vander Wal, and Dave Hansen have no business making their way onto anyone's fantasy team. Those owners who use the "past week's stats as law" theory continually get duped into taking someone because he has two home runs in seven at-bats, or six runs batted in in a week, or even two wins in relief. Instead of just looking at the quantity of the stats, you should discover the quality of them. Your goal should be to have every player on your roster contributing on a consistent level. Adding a hot veteran pinch hitter or long reliever on your squad does nothing to advance your chances of winning. Chances are you've missed the best part of their seasons already.

Besides young unheard-of players, there are many gems to be mined from the ranks of the free agents. Useful players don't need to project to be megastars to be useful for your team. Look to see if there are any available players who are simply better than those currently on your roster. It's amazing to me to see some of the players that are retained while some with better stats, more talent, and in a better situation are available for a nominal bid.

Building Depth

If it seems that elite fantasy owners are making moves every week, it's because they are. The key to having a good squad is to pick up players whom you can eventually use to your advantage, either through their contributions to your stats or through trades. Those are the players you need to pick up whenever they become available, whether or not you need them at the time.

At the NBA and NFL drafts you always hear about the difference between drafting for need and drafting the best available players. The same holds true for you and free agency. There's a distinct difference between the two. Sometimes you don't need the best available player, but it would be foolish not to add him if you rated him that high and there was any way you could carve out a roster place for him. An example of this would be if a pitcher like Jeff Suppan of the Cardinals was available. While you might already have five or six starting pitchers and be high in the standings in wins, Suppan has a quality arm

and plays for a good team. He was reasonably highly rated in your preseason rankings, and you've done research and have found out that he's not injured, meaning he's just in a slump. No matter how he has pitched in his last few starts, over the long haul of the baseball season he will have value. Certainly he'll have more value than your tenth or eleventh pitcher. So even though you may not need what he brings to the party right at that point in the season, by creating some depth you give yourself some flexibility to trade either him or another one of your starters for a player you really do need.

Sometimes all of the planets align correctly and the player you need actually is the best available player. At the beginning of August 2004, the Colorado Rockies decided it was time to pull the plug on center-fielder Preston Wilson's season. The 2003 NL leader with 141 runs batted in was hobbled all season by a bad knee, and since the Rockies were out of the playoff chase, it was deemed that it would be best for Wilson to undergo treatment and not play. At the same time, Astro's shortstop Adam Everett broke his wrist after being hit by a pitch. That left my team in a very tight spot, losing two players who were depended upon for production. When I looked at the available players, I was thrilled to see that there were actually players to bid on at both spots. In a salary cap relief move, an owner had cut the slumping Astro's leftfielder Craig Biggio. Another owner had grown tired of Alex Gonzalez's poor batting average for the Marlins. Both players fit perfectly into our plans, which by then had us punting batting average in favor of as many home runs as we could get (Biggio finished with 24; Gonzalez with 23). I bid a combined \$35 for them in a move that saved the season. Again I say, sometimes it's better to be lucky than good.

Ouch! Replacing an Injured Player

While the Wilson and Everett solution was obviously a fluke, you can't get down in the dumps when you experience an injury. You have to treat it as an opportunity to try out a new player instead of looking at it as purely a downgrade. While you shouldn't expect the same level of production, you'll at least have a stop-gap fix. And you never know, you might be onto something with the new player you acquire, and the injury could be a blessing in disguise.

The first thing you should do is play with all of the different combinations of position eligibility to see how much flexibility you have in the players you can consider. Say your shortstop goes down. If you have a third baseman eligible at short and also a first baseman eligible at third, you don't have to add a light-hitting shortstop to your roster. Instead you can add another first base-eligible player to your team and possibly add to your offense. That is why productive players with the ability to play multiple positions are so important to maintaining a title-contending team.

Timing is also major factor in how successful you will be in finding an injury replacement. If one of your guys gets hurt early in the season, there are usually still enough stealthy players making contributions whom other owners have yet to take note of or take seriously. If your guy gets banged up later in the year, as in the Wilson–Everett scenario, players become obtainable because of other factors like players having to clear space for those returning from the disabled list or being called up from the minors, teams playing for next year by clearing some of their roster to sign potential keepers, or just by dumb luck.

This is one of the few instances in which it's not a bad idea just to play it safe, meaning it's best for you to simply attempt to either sign the player who will be getting the bulk of the opportunities that your player normally would have received or make some sort of trade to hold you over until your player returns. If those two fixes fail to materialize, however, take a chance on a player who might develop into someone you can trade by the time your main man returns.

Pitching In

The goal of every owner is to assemble a team that can hum on all cylinders without too many changes. While it's difficult to do with your position players, it's impossible to achieve on your pitching staff. I would estimate that two out of every three free-agency moves I make through the regular season are to acquire pitchers. Between injuries, demotions, slumps, and just plain inadequacies, your pitching staff will constantly be in flux.

Every major league general manager will tell you that you can never have enough pitching, especially starters. That's really true in April, when most teams are on short rotations due to multiple scheduled off-days. Therefore, for the first month of the season there are only 64 starters to go around in the NL (four of whom play for the Rockies) and 56 in the AL. That is one of the reasons it was so important to have a good pitching staff while coming out of the draft, because for the first few weeks of the season, available pitching is thin.

By the time major league teams switch to their five-man rotations, you will have had enough time to get a good feel for the pitchers on your staff whom you're comfortable with and the ones you want to replace. Coincidentally, major league bullpens are also starting to shape up at this time too. Not only will you identify some of the surprise starters you might be interested in, the vultures are usually rearing their heads and are a lot easier to pick out than they were in the draft.

Rotating Closers

More free-agency money is squandered while chasing potential closers than on any other position. The reason is simple. The stat they provide, saves, is the rarest in the majors, and when you find a cheap one, you can devote more resources to other more constructive positions. The most frustrating closer situations are those that use the dreaded "closer by committee." These so-called committees are made up of three or four pitchers, each of whom is allowed to close out games, depending on the matchup. These committees never really work out since most pitchers really can't handle the job of finishing games in pressure situations, which is why good closers are so rare in the first place. That still doesn't prevent fantasy owners from throwing their FAAB around like crazy, bidding like they're trying to purchase a lost Monet.

Here's why there's a constant stream of bad money being thrown at closers: During the 2004 season, 136 pitchers recorded at least one save. Fifty-four of them accounted for one save each. Of the 30 major league teams, 14 had to use at least one replacement closer at some point during the season in response to injury or ineptitude. The Indians, Blue Jays, and Diamondbacks were the biggest drains on the FAAB, changing their closers at least four times during the year.

I try not to spend much money on trying to acquire closers during the season, yet I still somehow seem to come up with cheap saves. What I try to do is take the third or fourth option in a bad bullpen, most likely the hardest thrower, who in time will be given a chance when the second option fails. If I'm lucky, I get a cheap closer. If not, then they go right back to the player heap and I try again.

POOR SERVICE

The worst use of FAAB I have ever seen was during the 2004 RLBA season. One owner read a report on one of the Internet sites that journeyman pitcher Scott Service was going to be given a chance to be the closer of the sad-sack Diamondbacks. Service had save nine games for Triple A Tucson but had never had much success in the majors. In parts of 11 seasons dating back to 1988, Service had a 4.89 ERA and 16 career saves. The Diamondbacks were a flat-out bad team, and wins were going to be few and far between anyway. That owner bought Service as soon as he was recalled for \$29, or a full 19.3% of the season's FAAB. To put it into more perspective, Service was the fifth most expensive free agent acquisition of the season after Carlos Beltran (89), Nomar Garciaparra (62), Victor Zambrano (33), and Craig Biggio (30). Look at Scott Service's \$29 statistics for Arizona in 2004:

SCOTT SERVICE, ARIZONA, 2004

| Games | Wins | Losses | Saves | Innings | ERA | WHIP | Opp. Avg. |
|-------|------|--------|-------|---------|------|------|-----------|
| 21 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 20-1/3 | 7.08 | 1.67 | .286 |

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CHAPTER 13

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

Free agency may be the best way to improve your team in driblets and drabs, but the sure-fire way to make dramatic strides is through trading. While most fantasy players think they know how to make trades, I've seen far too many who have no idea what they're doing. In this chapter, the last in the "Managing Your Team" section, the trade is the thing. Devoted to the art of the deal, the main points in this chapter include:

- ◆ Swapping ideas
- ◆ Caveat emptor
- ◆ Talk, talk, talk
- ◆ Trade etiquette, and your image to others
- ◆ The art of addition by subtraction
- ◆ The domino effect
- ◆ If not you, it'll be someone else

Swapping Ideas

There's nothing that gets a fantasy baseball owner more juiced up than when he's hot on the trail of a trade that could make his team a lot better. When I first started in the SIBB, before the introduction of free agency, the only way to make transactions was through trades. Over the years, I've developed quite a knack for getting deals done and, as a by-product, a reputation as someone always looking to deal. I often tell prospective trading partners that I will make any

deal that improves my chances of winning, and that is 100% true. It's as simple as that. Finding players to trade for who you're sure will make your team better is the tough part.

One of the things that I'm most proud of is that I have made at least one trade with every fantasy baseball owner with whom I've ever played. That's closing in on 30 different owners. When you consider the opposite philosophies of conservative and liberal traders and the myriad diverging opinions of players, you'll realize what a feat that is. I've been on both sides of dump deals and made mind-boggling multiplayer blockbusters, as well as one-for-one trades in which neither team gained a thing. On some occasions I've even initiated trades for trading's sake just to shake up the league a bit. I've traded for and traded away players in the midst of MVP, Cy Young, and Rookie of the Year seasons and others right on the verge of their breakout years. Every so often, I've even traded my favorite players because sometimes you have to throw caution to the wind and make a bold move to give yourself a chance to get to the top of the standings.

Shoulda, Woulda, Coulda

I firmly believe that the more cautious you are when it comes to making deals in fantasy sports, the more likely you are to let a good opportunity go by. Most people are the opposite of me, and if they're on the fence about the decision they'll choose the status quo. Most times I'll choose to make the deal in those situations. (Key phrase: If I'm on the fence...Because most times it's apparent right away whether a trade should be considered.) It's just been my experience that the trades I was close to making but didn't always seem to come back and haunt me as the season rolls on.

All Trades Are Not Equal

Everyone who takes a stab at making a trade in fantasy baseball wants to accomplish two things. First, they want to improve their team in the short term, long term, or both. Second, they want to achieve this by surrendering as little value as possible. The deftest traders have the skill to make deals at precisely the time when the value of the traded player is at its zenith and the value of the player they receive in return is at its nadir.

There are three basic types of trades that you'll contend with. The first (actually last chronologically during the season) and most common trade you'll come across is the dump deal, in which one team gets players who will help their team immediately in exchange for players who are more speculative and can be kept for the next season. Chapter 15, "The Art of the Dump Deal," in the next part of this book will give you a comprehensive look at the ins and outs of all sides of dump dealing.

Smallsville

The second group of trades is the small swap, in which two teams exchange players of similar skill levels. Little deals like this happen when it's obvious that two units are strong in one area and weak in others and find their perfect foil to barter with. However, it's sometimes dangerous to make these trades because

- ◆ You may not be as deep as you are in the categories you're giving up.
- ◆ You may not be getting sufficient support in the categories you assume you're improving in.
- ◆ The players you're trading away or receiving may not be what he appears on the surface.

It's very difficult to find the "perfect" match. But if it's clear that you can spare a player and will receive one in return who will help your team's title chances, you have to go for it.

In the 2004 RLBA season I was more inclined to make this kind of trade than in most years because my original squad was so pitching heavy and so power poor. In three separate trades over the course of the season, I was able to trade away three starting pitchers (Jose Acevedo, Matt Clement, and David Wells) and get three power hitters in return (Richard Hidalgo, Tony Batista, and Pat Burrell, respectively) each of whom took turns carrying my offense at different points of the season while my remaining pitching was good enough to finish first in wins and second in both ERA and WHIP (I punted saves).

THE BEST LAID PLANS

One of the worst trades I've ever been involved with seemed to be an even one-for-one swap that would propel both teams to the top of the pack. In the end, it actually turned out fair only because it hurt both teams equally.

1996 was a banner season for both Blue Jays reliever Mike Timlin and Brewers first baseman John Jaha. After spending five seasons as a setup man and secondary closer, right-hander Mike Timlin took over the reins of the Toronto Blue Jays bullpen, becoming the full-time closer and saving 31 games. He was drafted that season onto Steve Wulf's Beowulf squad for \$1. At the same draft, I landed Jaha, the injury-prone yet promising power-hitting first baseman of the Milwaukee Brewers, also for a single dollar. This proved to be a great move because he turned in one of the finer offensive seasons anyone had in 1996, batting an even .300 with 34 home runs and 118 runs batted in. Shortly after Jaha was a \$1 freeze for me at the 1997 draft, I was approached by Wulf, who felt he was a power hitter short and had a great closer to offer in return in Timlin. Although it was a tough choice, and I was counting on Jaha's power numbers, I felt that getting a player of Timlin's stature was worth it, so we made the deal. Oops, my bad! Timlin ended up saving only nine games that year before coughing up his closer job to rookie Kelvin Escobar (and then getting traded to the Mariners to serve as a middle innings man). Jaha fared little better, suffering a shoulder injury that limited him to 11 home runs, 26 runs batted in, and a .247 average. Both teams gave up what we considered plum players who both quickly turned into lemons, and both of us ended up at the bottom of the standings.

Had I received a different closer who had success that year, I would have been both pleased and disappointed. I'm not one of those owners who likes getting over on my trading partners. I actually like it when a deal works out for both parties. Hopefully you'll feel the same way about trading philosophy. To me, it's the difference between being underhanded and honest.

Mega-Trades

The third kind of trade is the most fun and complicated to pull off, especially in a league with a salary cap: the blockbuster. The concept that I find most owners fail to comprehend most of the time in proposing trades is that they have to actually give something worthy of having in order to get something of value in return. In successful midseason blockbuster trades, however, teams somehow manage to see eye-to-eye and can agree that exchanging valuable players can actually benefit both teams. That reason alone is why you don't see too many blockbusters made. Folks rate their players too highly and discount the value of others' possessions.

There's a rule of thumb that I recommend following whenever you participate in a blockbuster: Don't make a huge midseason trade if you're not receiving the best player in the deal. That strategy has been one to which I can attribute much of my great run of fantasy fortune. While some owners try to build depth through trades, I feel that I can always replace middle- and lower-level players through free agency and small trades because of the constant flow of information that I'm absorbing. Mid-level players are available all the time, but stars are nearly impossible to obtain. So when you have a chance, do what you can to collect as many as you can.

The most important things to be aware of when making a big blockbuster deal are the implications that it will have on your team and others. You don't want to overcompensate in one category while giving up too much in another. Know what each player you're getting and giving has contributed and, more importantly, what they will do for you the rest of the season.



A word of wisdom when you're making a big trade: Before you complete a complicated deal, be sure that it complies with all of the rules in your league—whether it's player eligibility, the size of the deal, or the salary cap. There have been a few trades in my leagues that have been made and later rescinded because they violated some league rules or, in one instance, got everyone up in arms because it was perceived to be completely one-sided. Be sure to stay within the spirit of the game when you're swapping players. Don't throw your buddy a bone if he's in contention and you're not. Double check all of the math involved in the trade to make sure all involved teams come out of the deal with legal rosters that comply with the cap. Most of all, know the rules governing trades so you can save a lot of time and grief involved with fixing a broken deal. Taking these steps will help you avoid unnecessary controversies and keep your league in a copasetic environment.

Caveat Emptor

Before you make any trade, make absolutely sure you know what you're getting. Thoroughly research the players you're receiving to find out if they have some sort of problem that you don't know about. The best places to find all of the scuttlebutt you can handle about possible trades, pending suspensions, hidden injuries, and so on, are

in local newspapers, fan blogs, and bulletin boards (see Appendix B). I'm not suggesting that anyone in any of my leagues would try to pull off something as underhanded as trying to trade a player to me who was out for the year, but I'm pretty certain that there are some very unscrupulous players out there somewhere who would like to hoodwink you into doing something completely foolish just to bail themselves out of a potentially bad situation.

Talk, Talk, Talk

I thank all of my league mates in both of my fantasy baseball leagues because I'm not really sure what I'd do with myself during the spring and summer if I didn't have a new trade offer to ponder each and every day. OK, maybe every day is a slight exaggeration, but it's really not that far from the truth. It's amazing how many people in every fantasy sport I participate in are so eager to deal, yet rarely are any of them willing to give up anything of value. That tactic leads to

DEALING DOTEL

After having seen him pitch in Kissimmee, Florida, during spring training, I was reasonably certain that Octavio Dotel would be a solid closer for the Astros. He had been the premier setup man in the NL for a couple of seasons while serving as the understudy for Billy Wagner, but with Wagner gone as a free agent to Philadelphia, the job was finally Dotel's, and he had no competition. So on draft day I paid \$29 for him in what I thought was a steal. Unfortunately, Dotel pitched pretty poorly during the first couple of months, and my team was buried in the standings in saves, so as a team we decided to punt the category. Helping the decision was a whirlwind of trade rumors surrounding Dotel, most of which would have landed him in the AL. One team had repeatedly inquired about him, and each time I was asked I used one of my favorite answers, "I'm not saying no." So finally we got down to brass tacks, and in a multiplayer deal we acquired Greg Maddux, who was struggling for the Cubs at the time, along with Moises Alou and Morgan Ensberg, for Dotel, David Bell, and Pedro Feliz. Four days later, Dotel was traded to the Oakland A's, making him useless in our league. Had I not made the trade when I did, I would've been caught holding the bag. Instead, that unfortunate team was the team I traded with (who not so coincidentally finished one slot behind me in the standings that season). I'm not sure if he knew about the trade rumors or if he did know but didn't believe them. All I know is, that trade helped me escape disaster and was actually the catalyst for my big late-season run.

much idle discussion and many quick dismissals. Through experience, however, I've found that no matter how outlandish an offer you receive, you should never simply dismiss it with a flat "No!" Instead, even if you have no intention of making the proposed trade, it's actually very beneficial to carry on some form of negotiations after being presented with any offer.

Although it sounds like a waste of time to negotiate without intent to deal, in reality it'll be time well spent. Although on the surface fantasy baseball looks like it's all about statistics and players, it's much more than that. It's about knowledge, and, more importantly, it's about relationships. Trade talks are an effective way to achieve both.

Knowledge Is Power

By making counter offers you discover players other than the ones originally offered to you, if any, that your potential trading counterpart is willing to surrender. If there's no one appealing to you at that time, you can take the information you gather and store it away for future trade negotiations. By taking stock of the rest of the league's rosters, you might find a scenario in which you'll be able to move the player being offered to a third team for an even better player. While every fantasy owner tries to escalate the value of his people, most try to do it in one step, making pie-in-the-sky offers that are rarely ever accepted. Top traders understand that it's much easier to make a series of small trades that incrementally improve their stock a little bit each time.

MIX UP YOUR GAME PLAN

Orchestrating a trade strategy is the same as running a football team's offense. If the only plays you call are fly patterns designed to go for 50-yard scores on each and every down, not only will you be unsuccessful, but after a while the defense will figure out exactly what you're doing and stack the secondary full of defenders, thus preventing you from ever making any headway. By running plays designed to pick up yardage in dribs and drabs, you wear down your competition and keep your offense moving steadily forward. Then every once in a while you can throw in a long bomb to keep everyone honest, and you just might score.

Those of you in the business world know that one of the basic axioms of negotiations in any endeavor is “The party with the most information is the one who will always come out ahead.” The more you know about the opposition, the better off you’ll fare when you get down to actually hammering out the details of a deal. And there’s no better way to get inside a team’s strategy than ascertaining what their goals and desires really are by hearing it directly from them. Through your trade talks, you won’t have to wonder what types of players your potential trading team is looking for and how the players will affect your squad—you’ll know for sure. Then you can determine if a potential trade will adversely affect you or if it might be beneficial to you below the surface.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

As crucial as knowing about what is going on in your league through trade negotiations is keeping the lines of communication open between you and all of the other teams. By simply dismissing a trade offer as ridiculous, you are jeopardizing any future possibility that you may have to make a trade with that team. Most league communication is exchanged via e-mail, and that can be source of many problems. Sarcasm, irony, and tongue-in-cheek comments don’t always come across that way through text, and it’s possible to tick off one of your current owners without even trying. One thing I try to do if I receive what I consider an absurd offer is counter with an absurd offer of my own. Say someone offers me Cesar Izturis for Miguel Cabrera. I’d counter with Cabrera for Todd Helton. They’ll get the message that you aren’t happy with the offer, but at least you did respond.

No matter how ridiculous a trade offer may be and no matter how much you want to rip into someone for making such a ludicrous pitch, you have to be careful not to burn any bridges. It’s a long season, and the standings often make strange trade-fellows.

The Untouchables

Let’s get one thing straight. No matter what the fantasy sport, no matter how good the player, no one should ever be considered untouchable in a trade if you’re serious about winning. Look at real sports. Alex Rodriguez was traded. So was Wayne Gretzky. And

Wilt Chamberlain. And don't forget about Babe Ruth. If they all were traded, you can part with Jim Edmonds, Roy Oswalt, or Eric Chavez, if presented with the right offer.

All too often someone will say that there was no way that they would trade a player, but that is absolutely false. Say you wanted Albert Pujols from someone who claims that he's untouchable. Would he be untouchable if you offered Barry Bonds and Eric Gagne for him? I didn't think so. Just like other aspects of life, anything is attainable for the right price. It is possible to tell someone that they don't have enough to give you in return at the time, but to say someone is untouchable is untrue.

Trade Etiquette

Before making a trade offer, ask yourself: "Why would the other person accept this?" If you can't find justification, then don't make the offer. Making absurd proposals will trivialize you in the eyes of those you're making them to. If you continually make bad offers, when you finally do have an idea that's worthwhile presenting, then there's a good chance that other owners won't even bother hearing you out because they'll just assume that you're trying to pull something. If you avoid making ludicrous trade proposals, it'll save lots of hard feelings all around, and at the very least, it'll make you look like you're serious about making a deal and not just in the market to fleece an unsuspecting victim.

Another approach that turns most people off is talking down the assets of the player you're attempting to acquire. It's common for owners to formulate a grand argument as to why you should make the trade they're proposing to you. Most of the time they cite the upward trend or potential in the player they're attempting to persuade you to accept while downplaying the contributions of the player they want from you. I don't know too many people imprudent enough to believe that you're really offering a far superior player than they expect in return. In your league, no one knows the strengths and weaknesses of his own players more than the owner who has been watching their every move during the season. So when you say that the player you're offering for trade is so much better than the one you're getting, you have to realize that the potential recipient isn't going to believe a thing you say, and you'll lose credibility.

If you feel you must analyze the trade in your offer, the correct strategy is to communicate the relative strengths of the players involved in the deal. Full disclosure is another good idea. If the player you're offering has any glaring weakness (like never steals a base or walks a lot of hitters) or an existing injury problem, let your counterpart know. When you acknowledge a problem, it puts you into much less of a shyster posture and therefore makes you much more attractive to deal with. Believe it or not, people don't like doing business with entities that make them feel like they're getting fleeced.

Can't We All Just Get Along?

Another thing that has really bothered me in recent years is a general lack of sportsmanship in many fantasy baseball circles. Far too often I have come across wise-ass owners who totally forget that the whole idea of being in a league is about having fun. They feel more inclined to antagonize their fellow owners than to actually field a good team. Multiple times this past season the thought, "Who the #%^& does that guy think he is?" passed through my head when fielding a trade offer, reading the response to one I made, or even in general league-wide communications. I don't know about you, but I deal with enough jerks in real life that I don't really have the time or desire to deal with them in the fantasy baseball arena. If you want to show that you're a mini-Trump, go right ahead, just do it in a league without me, or anyone who realizes that this is a hobby, not a test of manhood. And if you agree to join a league, abide by the rules and act within the accepted mode of conduct.

The last thing you want to do in these leagues is be considered an antagonist, especially if you're new to a league. Chances are that if you're abrasive and gain a reputation for being difficult to deal with, word will get around, and you'll deservedly become ostracized. One of the great by-products of these leagues is the camaraderie that develops over the years, and yes, there will be owners who don't get along with each other, but there's no excuse for anyone to engage in uncivil behavior.

Don't get me wrong. I'm as big a fan of trash talking as anyone, as long as it's in the proper spirit. But when someone becomes combative for no apparent reason and the machismo starts flowing, the game loses its appeal all around. I try to make myself someone with whom people want to trade. If you offer players of value and act in a friendly manner, then why wouldn't someone want to trade with you?



The electronic age and e-mail in particular have given people a sense that they can write just about anything to anyone at anytime with very little consequence. Before sending an electronic correspondence to anyone in your league dealing with a trade or any other subject, ask yourself this question: "Would I say this to the recipient if he were standing here?" Only you know what the answer truly is, but if the answer is "No, because I'd probably get slugged," then think twice before sending it. Think happy thoughts.

Reach Out and Touch Someone

Interpersonal skills are dying with the advent of the Internet and e-mail. The best way to explore trade possibilities or even actually hammer out the details of a trade is still either face to face or through phone conversations. I've seen trade negotiations drag on for days or even weeks via electronic means, but when the two parties just get on the phone for 10 minutes, everything gets worked out. The more personalized a league is, the better and the more fun. That's one of the reasons why the SIBB is such a great league. You see and talk to most everyone in the league on a daily, or at worst a weekly, basis. Another advantage the commissioner has is that he makes the most frequent contact with every team in the league. During some conversations about totally different topics, a trade idea might surface, and then talks get going.



World famous novelist and television writer Lorenzo Carcaterra is an owner in the RLBA and came into the league the same year I did. I really enjoy playing with Lorenzo because he really understands the spirit of the game. Although he hasn't had the same kind of success I have, I really respect the way he plays, going after players he likes, always looking to make fair trades, and always responding to trade offers in a cordial manner. One day two years ago while sitting in my apartment writing a story for **Sports Illustrated**, I was also exchanging e-mails with Lorenzo on a blockbuster deal involving Randy Johnson. He had been out of town for a while and hadn't seen an offer I had sent him a few days earlier. After five or six exchanges over the course of a few hours, my phone rang. "David? It's Lorenzo. Let's make this trade happen." Five minutes later the deal was done, just like that.

The Domino Effect

Enough about the people part of trading, and back to making your team better. When most fantasy owners are evaluating a trade, they look at the ramifications the potential deal would have on their team. This would be perfectly sufficient if the game were played in a vacuum, but it's not. Fantasy baseball standings are intricate instruments that have a life of their own. They can be knocked completely out of balance by the slightest of adjustments. There are multiple reactions for every action that you make with your team, and when talking about a trade, there are two teams being sent into a state of flux. You must determine the ramifications of a trade on the whole league before you pull it off.

So you're thinking, what the heck is this guy saying? Stay with me here. Let's say you're in second place in your standings, two points out of first. You know you can make up the two points in stolen bases if you trade a home-run hitter to your friend who is in third place for a steals guy. You're locked into your position in home runs and can't lose any points anywhere else, so why might that trade not be good for both of you? Logic tells you that at the end of the season you should be in the lead, one point up. That would be true if your friend's team didn't get passed in steals by the team you're chasing. By taking away your friend's steals, you cost yourself a chance to win, even though your points total increased, because you enabled your competitor to increase his points also.

Maximize Your Chance of Winning, Not Your Points

Most people in category leagues believe that the name of the game is to maximize the number of points in the standings. It's not. The object of the game is to have the *most* points in relation to all of the other competitors. It's like a baseball game. Would you rather score nine runs and lose 10-9 or would you like to score two runs and win 2-1? So before you make any trade, even if it looks like it makes your team much better, be careful because you could be inadvertently helping out your rivals even more than you're helping yourself.

This phenomenon works both ways, however. As the season winds down and starts to shake out, I like to see if I can make trades to

boost teams in categories in which they can pass the teams I'm battling in the overall standings. This is a bit tricky because you don't want to rob Peter to pay Paul, but if you have a commanding lead in a category or if you're completely out of one, it's not a bad idea to trade a useful player to a team who can capture a point or two from your competitor, even if you don't get anything of value in return.

If It's Not You, It'll Be Someone Else

When you're negotiating a trade, don't ever believe that you have exclusive rights to the players being discussed. I guarantee you that if a player is being dangled in front of you, others in your league have received the same enticement. I'm sure you do it too, sending out feelers to three or four teams at a time to see what you can get for a particular player. Professional general managers do it all the time, testing the market for their players to see if they can maximize the value they would receive in return for their asset.

One of the lessons I have taken from closely following the Red Sox–Yankees rivalry over the years is the idea of the preemptive trade to keep your rivals from improving themselves. New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner and general manager Brian Cashman had become experts of this technique over the years. However, they slipped in the winter of 2004 when they allowed Curt Schilling to be traded to Boston instead of the Bronx. Schilling was a main reason the Red Sox won the 2004 ALCS and World Series, ending 86 years of futility in Beantown.

I'm usually willing to make a trade even if I'm not 100% certain that my team will benefit because it's better that my team improves slightly or even gets just a little worse than for a team either just ahead of me or, even more frightening, just behind me in the standings makes the trade I rejected and it dramatically improves their position. Not only will I be upset that they got a player I could've had, I'd be kicking myself for not preventing them from getting him.

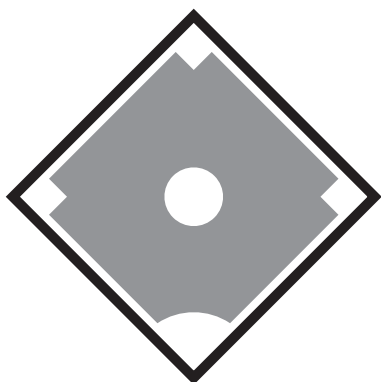
Sweetener

No word gets me more ticked off when thinking about trades I've made throughout the years than "sweetener." One team in the SIBB has a habit of negotiating a trade, and right when you think you have

made a fair offer and have a potential deal that will fly, they always ask for sweetener—in other words, another player just to give them more of an advantage in a deal.

The first year I was in the league, my partner Larry Burke and I were trying to acquire Andy Pettitte as a freeze from the defending champions, with whom we never before dealt. We offered a package of three really good players for Pettitte and two scrubs. We were dumping and knew that we were getting one of the game's best up and coming pitchers for two more years at a great price. Just as we were about to agree to the deal, the other team asked for sweetener in the form of Randy Myers, the closer for the Orioles who was in the middle of a 31-save season. We were young and inexperienced and didn't think we would be saving Myers at his price, so we agreed to throw him in—a move we still regret to this day. They ended up winning the league again and, to make matters worse, they kept Myers, who had 45 saves, along with the three other players we sent their way. We kept Pettitte and nothing else. We got our guy, but at what a price.

If you feel like you have to add something to a deal to sweeten it a bit, don't make it a player who you would possibly have a chance of keeping or who could be productive for you. Instead, offer a minor leaguer, someone on the disabled list, or even the last player on the end of your bench. Or even better, stick to your guns and make it a "take it or leave it" situation. There are plenty of trading partners to deal with.



PART V

**DOWN THE
STRETCH
THEY COME**

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CHAPTER 14

GOING FOR THE GOLD OR WAITING UNTIL NEXT YEAR

The final section of this book is dedicated to helping you finish the season as strongly as possible. Many seasons go right down to the wire, and no matter how far ahead or behind you are in the standings, if you have a shot at the title, you should make every possible maneuver to enhance your chances of becoming a champion. I've seen a title decided by a single earned run and another season that came down to three hits on over 7,000 at-bats to affect batting average. One of my leagues even concluded in an absolute dead heat and had to be decided by the league's third tiebreaker. So take heed of the old runner's charge: "Run through the finish line, not to it," because if you begin to coast, you will be caught from behind.

Two of the most complicated things for anyone to do are to a) properly assess a situation in which they are completely immersed, and b) decide afterwards that what they've found might be not good enough to reach their goals. After all of the work you put into your fantasy team over the course of six to eight months or more, choosing to concede a season shouldn't be something that you take lightly, although you ought to be cognizant of the possibility that by giving up the current season you will enhance your chances for a title next year. Of course, waiving the white flag should be your last choice once you've explored all other possible options. This chapter will try to help you to decide whether you have enough talent to win your league or if it's better to lick your wounds, regroup, and turn your

attention to next season's team. Some topics to help make sure your decision is the right one include:

- ◆ What you're playing for
- ◆ Build a franchise, not just a team
- ◆ Being realistic
- ◆ Assessing your chances
- ◆ Knowing the categories from top to bottom
- ◆ How has your team performed?
- ◆ Punting a category

What You're Playing For

Before you decide whether or not you have a good chance to win your league or finish in one of the prize spots, it's a good idea to look at the ramifications of that decision. Assuming your league uses the original prize breakdown of Rotisserie Baseball, then your first-place team gets 50% of the proceeds, the second-place team gets 25%, the third-place team gets 15%, and the fourth-place team gets 10% (or gets their entry fee back in a 10-team league). But I'd be willing to bet that you haven't taken much time to analyze the impact those percentages have on your team and your decision making.

Think of it this way: Each team pays \$3.00 to enter your league, and that money goes entirely to prizes. The winner in this case would get \$15.00 or, better put, five years' worth of entry. The second place team would get \$7.50, equal to two and a half years of entry. Third place gets \$4.50, or a half-year net free entry. Fourth place played for free.

Since first place finishes are rewarded so much more handsomely than others, you should do everything you can to eventually get to the top, even if that means sacrificing a season to do so. It's the same to finish out of the money once and finish first once [$(\$15.00 \text{ winnings}) - (2 \times \$3.00 \text{ cost})$] as it is to finish twice in second place. Both give you a two-season \$9.00 profit. Two straight thirds, while admirable, isn't quite as profitable [$(2 \times \$4.50) - (2 \times \$3.00 \text{ cost})$].

Build a Franchise, Not Just a Team

The goal of playing in fantasy baseball keeper leagues is to have continuity from one year to the next, just like in the major leagues. However, as in the major leagues, sometimes you have to sacrifice possible future production to win now. I like to think that I'm one of the owners who can acquire talent in the short run without sacrificing too much future talent for the long run, thus maintaining a high level of accomplishment for my squad. Instead of looking at my team from day to day, I look at it in a broader sense, seeing the potential for players not only for this year but for one, two, or even sometimes three years down the road. Sometimes, however, the correct move is to throw caution to the wind and do whatever you have to do to get to the promised land.

By selling out, you're giving yourself a chance to win the top prize. If you don't seize every opportunity to win, then you're setting yourself up to fail. I have seen too many owners be indecisive as the year comes down to crunch time. They say they're playing for the current year, but they don't make moves that would clearly improve their teams in the short run—instead trying to balance the present with the future. Did you ever hear the saying, you can't have your cake and eat it too? Well, no statement applies more in the sense that you have to be decisive in which way you're playing. You have a limited number of opportunities to win your league, mainly due to circumstances beyond your control, so you have to grab hold of each and every chance to win when it presents itself to you.

However, when you don't think you have a reasonable chance to win, sheer economics show that you're better off licking your wounds and preparing for tomorrow's battle. Playing for next year every once in a while isn't the worst fate a team can face and shouldn't be a source of embarrassment. The sooner you decide whether you're going to be in the thick of the race or whether you're playing for next season, the better. Sometimes it's apparent that you just don't have a good team. If in 2004 you invested heavily in players like Jason Giambi, Kevin Brown, Juan Gonzalez, and Brian Jordan, it became pretty clear that you weren't going anywhere that season, so the earlier you made up your mind to play for next season, the better off you were.

Being Realistic

The key to making good decisions is to be realistic. You have to make a conscious effort to stick to the sometimes harsh realities of life in the fantasy baseball world. All the time major league managers, coaches, and front-office personnel are guilty of being overly optimistic about players' abilities. They often let what they want to happen cloud their view of what is actually happening on the field. They want to see what they envisioned the player being, instead of noticing what he has really become or always has been. The same holds true of fantasy baseball owners.

I'm not talking only about the players whom you were speculating about. If you have a core player performing well below your expectations for him, you have to be decisive about whether you're going to stick out the slump or if you're going to make a change. Your difficult task is to separate wishful thinking from the reality of how your team is acting on the field and in the standings. Once you've established a goal for the remainder of the year, assessing your team's chances of competing is at least clear, if not easy.

Assessing Your Chances

After watching your team day-in and day-out, no one can blame you if you're looking at it through rose-colored glasses. Your roster is your baby that you nurtured for months, or in many cases years, so if you're not in the thick of the race for first place as your league's trade deadline approaches, it gets awfully difficult to make rational decisions about your chances to compete. I've been down this road dozens of times now and know exactly how it feels. You think to yourself, "If only this player can hit 15 home runs over the last few weeks" or "This pitcher has seven starts left, and if he wins six, I'll have a chance to compete." Being optimistic is fine and dandy, and being delusional is another thing altogether. Sure, your player can hit 15 home runs in the last few weeks, but has he ever done anything remotely like that in the past? Or has he shown that he can hit home runs in bunches at all this year? As for that pitcher, does he only have six wins through his first 27 starts? If so, what are the chances that he will win two of his final seven starts, let alone six?

If you look at the situation rationally, however, comprehending your team's condition gets a good deal easier. There are a few key indicators of whether you have enough firepower to compete the rest of the way. If you find that you've got the goods, then make a run for the title. If not, than it behooves you to start looking to the future.

Know Your Categories from Top to Bottom

No matter what shape your team is in as you hit the home stretch, you have to determine if you have a realistic chance to win before you make any dramatic late season moves. If you've been paying close attention to the statistics for the season (and I know you have), you should have a good take on how the standings move and where your team fits into them. Raw numbers aren't always a perfect indicator of your chances, either. I'd much rather be 20 points out of first place with a realistic chance to pick up 21 than five points out with no chance to move up anywhere.

When it comes to closing the gap in the standings, all categories aren't created equally. Ratio categories such as batting average, earned run average, and WHIP are usually more difficult to gain a significant number of category points in than some of the aggregate categories. The further along you get into the season, the more at-bats or innings pitched a team has accumulated, and therefore it becomes much more difficult to gain or lose significant ground.

RATIO RATIONALE

Say at the midway point in the season your team has a batting average of .250 with 750 hits in 3,000 cumulative at-bats. If during the next week you hit .400 with 40 hits in 100 at-bats, your average will rise to .2548—not bad for one week. Fast forward to later in the year when you have the same .250 average and have the same 40 for 100 week, but this time after you've accumulated 6,000 at bats. Your new average after the same fantastic week would be just .2524—better but not likely to catapult you over multiple teams. So the later you get in the season, your team must perform exponentially better than normal to make up any kind of ground in the standings.

Once you've calculated the degree to which your team has a chance of improving its standing, also look at how vulnerable the teams you're chasing are. Every action, whether it's a trade (in your league or in the majors), injury, suspension, call up, or altered role, can affect the standings greatly. Use the recent by-period standings to see if teams have any momentum, either positive or negative, in any category. If teams ahead of you are trending upward, you'll have your work cut out for you and will need to be more aggressive to have a chance to win your league. If they are trending downward, you might be able to stay the course and take the title.

Going All In

When I say to be aggressive, I mean that you do anything you have to do to win today. That includes trading away players with potential for those who will help you for the remainder of the season. This is a common practice in the majors, too, although it usually (but not always) works better in the fantasy world. One of the more infamous of those late-season deals occurred on August 30, 1990, when the Boston Red Sox acquired right-handed reliever Larry Andersen for the stretch drive in exchange for a 22-year-old Triple-A third baseman named Jeff Bagwell. Andersen pitched in a total of 15 regular season games for the Red Sox but helped them win the AL East title. He pitched three times for them in the American League Championship Series against the Oakland A's and suffered a loss in game 1. Bagwell went on to become the face of the Astros for a decade and a half, playing more than 2,000 games with nearly 450 home runs, over 1,500 runs batted in, and 1,500 runs scored.

Reasons to Quit (or Not)

Sometimes falling out of contention isn't your fault, and sometimes it is. Either way, you'll be faced with the tough decision of whether to pull the plug based not only on your team's standing but also on whether it has the ammunition to compete during the stretch run. It's a very empty feeling when you try for a money slot by selling out your future assets and then don't achieve the goal. You're left with nothing to show for this season and few prospects for the next. That is the situation you want to avoid at all costs.

PLAYING IN THE MOMENT

In 2003, the RLBA trade deadline was quickly approaching, and it was apparent that the team that would win the saves category would have the best chance to win the league. I was battling it out with two of the old-timers, the Wulf Gang and the Fleder Mice, both in the standings and in saves. Most available closers had already changed teams, and there was only one left, Mike Williams, who earlier in the year had saved 25 games for the Pirates but was at that time a setup man for the Phillies following a midseason trade. Knowing that everyone's efforts throughout the year could come down to a single save, I resolved to get Williams. The team that had him, the Abel Bakers, were on the fence about trading him despite the fact that his contract would be up at the end of the season (as it turns out, Williams signed in the off-season with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and failed to make their 2004 squad anyway). I had made a ton of trades throughout the season, and, despite having limited tradable resources remaining, I had one final ace up my sleeve. Catcher Johnny Estrada was in the minor leagues but was slated to become the Braves starting catcher in 2004 when Javy Lopez was expected to depart Atlanta as a free agent. I spent the better part of a week trying to convince the Bakers to take Estrada and, finally, at the last minute, he relented and made the deal. Looking back, it's easy to criticize that deal because Williams had only three saves, and Estrada became an All Star in 2004 as a .314 hitter with 76 runs batted in. However, to me it was a gamble well worth taking.

You may find yourself on the fence as to whether to make a strong run this year or to pack it in and concentrate on next year. Following are the reasons your team might not be as strong as you want it to be as the season comes to its climax and advice on which decision to make.

Injuries Strike when You're Near the Top

Nothing can take the wind out of the sails of a good fantasy team faster than a major injury to one of its core players. Losing a top power-hitter, base stealer, or closer can cause you to fall like a stone in the standings, and as the season gets to its latter stages, it gets harder and harder to find ways to recover from such a loss—but it's not impossible (see Chapter 15, "The Art of the Dump Deal").

There's no defense a fantasy owner can employ against injuries except staying away from those players who have a long track record of getting hurt. If you acquired players with chronic injury problems and they sustain injuries that force them to miss the most important part of the

season, then you deserve what you get. You should have realized that you were playing with fire and were asking to get burned just when you needed them most. The only thing you can do is be thankful for whatever production they provided and try to find a replacement.

INJURY PRONE PLAYERS

You shouldn't be surprised to find yourself scrambling to replace injured players because you probably draft too many of them in the first place. Players repeatedly spend time on the DL for many reasons, including being too aggressive and careless in their style of play. Others have chronic injuries such as a bad joint, muscle, or bone, which repeatedly act up on them. They are not of much use to their team unless they're on the field and producing. Those who are not the best at returning from such an injury, taking their time to recover 100% before they step back onto the field, are doubly useless to you since you can never tell when, and in many cases if, they will return. Scores of players have developed a reputation for being gamers—those who play no matter what ails them. Others have quite the opposite reputation, taking the field only when they feel that they're completely healthy. Take the gamers. Avoid the slackers. The following are players who missed an inordinate number of games over a recent four-year period due to various ailments that sapped their considerable fantasy value.

MAJOR LEAGUE GAMES MISSED 2001–2004

| Player | Games Missed |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Ken Griffey, Jr. | 493 |
| Juan Gonzalez | 485 |
| Dmitri Young | 455 |
| Frank Thomas | 415 |
| Brian Jordan | 408 |
| Nomar Garciaparra | 396 |
| Carl Everett | 374 |
| Phil Nevin | 348 |
| J.D. Drew | 321 |
| Cliff Floyd | 294 |

If you're in the thick of the battle for the league lead when injury strikes, you must pull out all of the stops to stay in contention. Chances are that if you were among your league leaders in the first place, you were getting contributions from your entire roster, which means that losing one or two players to injury, no matter how integral they are to your squad, shouldn't torpedo all of your hopes. Even if you don't finish in first place, most keeper leagues award prizes for the top few spots because the season is so grueling. You also may even out your luck a bit and catch your injury replacement on an upswing. Look at it this way: Being a division winner is still a major accomplishment in the major leagues, even if the team doesn't win it all. The same is true for your fantasy team. Many fantasy owners play for years without ever seeing first place at all, so if you have even the most remote chance of getting there, you have to give it an all-out effort.

If the trade deadline hasn't passed, try to get one of the teams out of contention to deal a few of their players to you for some of your promising players. If you're fortunate, your injured player might have some future value, and you can entice one of the bottom feeders to take him off of your hands for one of their expiring contracts.

Injuries Strike when You're in the Middle of the Pack

Most times when you're treading water in the netherworld of the standings it's because more than a handful of players you were counting on have been disappointments. Perhaps your pitching has been mediocre, you've endured some unexpectedly bad years out of a couple of players who you thought were money in the bank, or some of those prospects and projects you took a chance on didn't pan out. Usually when one or more of those factors is then compounded with a major injury, it's time to pack it in. Chances are, even if all of the stats aligned correctly, your team was going to be mediocre at best, and chances are also that if many of your players were having sub-par years, they wouldn't have the value necessary to acquire those players who could get you into contention.

A major injury occurring on a middling team should be the final straw that breaks that team's chances. Look at in the same way as you

would a car that you're having lots of problems with. You make small fixes that don't cost you too much just to keep it running, but the car never performs like it should. When the transmission ultimately goes on the fritz, there comes a time when it's better to stop putting good resources toward bad and sell it for whatever you can get for its parts, saving a few of the useful features like the radio, fuzzy dice, and floor mats. It's easier to admit defeat and work toward changing the face of your underachieving team than try to force success out of a squad that has no chance.

You're Stuck in the Middle but Have Players Returning

It's difficult for less-astute owners to fathom how a team can go from being dormant in the standings for a long period of time to roaring back from the dead and into contention. Most times the team once regarded as an also-ran can see it coming all along. Having spent months of different seasons waiting for players like Randy Johnson (twice), Vladimir Guerrero, David Cone, and Sammy Sosa to make their triumphant returns to the field and to my lineup, I know what a huge boost players of that magnitude can have on their team once they return.

As I wrote earlier, the farther along in a season you are, the harder it is to make up much ground in the standings. A pitcher like Johnson, who has a reputation when healthy for being virtually unhittable, leads to a microscopic WHIP and ERA. When someone like Johnson takes to the mound and throws a three-hit shutout with 14 strikeouts every time out, no matter what time of the season it is, your team will see results.

The same holds true for certain hitters. Very few players can have 10 home runs or 40 runs batted in during a single month, but if you have one of them on your DL and he is expected to make a return in late July, early August, or if you don't have too much ground to cover, even early September, then it's prudent to hold on and see how things shake out. Depending on the injury that sidelined him, he may not come back at full strength or full speed, but if you tear down your squad before he returns and then he makes a full recovery and contributes to a depleted team, you'll surely kick yourself, wondering what might have been.

Your Roster Is Full of Underachievers

Among the main tasks of major league coaches is to identify the root cause of problems when they arise with their charges and, once isolated, to fix whatever problems they uncover. While you can't help a player with a hitch in his swing or a pitcher who has a faulty release point, you can use these factors to help you decide whether to stay in the race. If you have players who've struggled during the season due to mechanics and still are struggling even after the flaw has been detected and addressed, it might be time to reassess your team's chances to compete. You're only going to be as good as the players you have on the field, and if they completely lose all value to you at some point, you have to look to the future.

Your Roster Is Full of Overachievers

Next to having a big lead, the second most enviable position to be in as your team enters the stretch run is to have a roster full of players producing way over their heads. In this scenario you have all the options in the world at your disposal, and if you play your cards correctly, you can take your team all the way. Those surprise contributors have helped lift you within striking distance of the top of the standings and more than likely come with very cheap price tags, making them attractive to potential trading partners. By all means, stay in the race if this is the case, but to complete the job correctly will take good decision making on your part. While you've developed a special relationship with many of your "discoveries" throughout the year, you have to be a realist and let logic rule.

DROP DEAD WEIGHT

Closers are most often the worst underachievers on your team. In 2004, Billy Koch went into the season as the White Sox bullpen stopper, and although he had a little competition from left-hander Damaso Marte, the job was his to lose. Koch was one of the AL's most dominant closers from 1999 until 2002 and saved 144 games over that span. He consistently threw his fastball in the mid to upper 90s, but starting in 2003 he all of a sudden lost velocity on the pitch and was not only struggling while trying to close out games but had difficulty getting anyone out at all. It became apparent that Koch wasn't the answer, but he had no fantasy trade value, and there were no closers to be had either by trade or free agency. The best thing to do was to punt saves, which in many cases meant you were also looking to the future.



If you have someone performing in the midst of a season well above his expectations, like outfielder Karim Garcia had for the Indians in 2002, it's easy to believe that it's going to continue for years to come, but better judgment and a simple rule of thumb should tell you better. As it gets later and later in the season, at least half of the teams in the league are planning for next season, or they should be. The strategy many of them employ is to acquire all of the potential keepers they can at whatever price of their non-keepers, meaning someone will be willing to part with a star who they're not planning on keeping the following season to take a chance on someone like Garcia, who that year hit 16 home runs and drove in 52 runs in just 51 games for the Indians. The rule of thumb is easy and is the same one I preached in the draft prep section: If you have a chance to get a cornerstone player, a producer with a great track record, then by all means do it even if he's having a bad stretch. If you can get a cold Carlos Delgado or Chipper Jones for a sizzling hot Karim Garcia, do it. You'll never regret it.

Punting a Category

One thing many fantasy owners have a problem comprehending is that you don't have to field a perfect team to win, and therefore you should not make that a top priority. Not every championship team is good at everything. In fact, more often than not, the teams that win fantasy titles have a serious Achilles heel that they overcome by being stronger than usual in a number of other categories.

Picture yourself in the middle of the season. Your strongest category is wins, in which you're in second place with 40. The first-place team has 44. The third-place team has 38. Your weakest category is saves. You're in ninth place with 15, two ahead of last, but 10 behind eighth. Nearly every owner I know would look to trade for a closer, sacrificing a starting pitcher in the deal since they're relatively strong in wins and feel that's the only part of the team considered a true strength. Until about five years ago, I would have been of that mindset too, but that's totally the wrong strategy to take.

Unless you have some kind of flawed rules that say you must have some sort of minimum standing in every category, then the idea is to accumulate as many points as you can. It doesn't matter where those points come from.

Instead of chasing a category in which you're already flawed and have little chance of making up significant points, do the opposite. Shore up your other stronger categories, especially the ones in which you can make up the most ground. In that scenario, instead of trading for a closer, you should put yours on the market. Sure, you'll lose that point in saves, but I'd bet you that you'd pick up a slew of points in other categories because when you put a closer on the market, fantasy owners become like sharks all clamoring for chum.

Saves isn't the only category that lends itself to punting. It's just as easy to give up stolen bases. Giving up home runs, runs batted in, or runs scored usually directly affects the others, so unless you're inordinately strong in the other categories, it's not wise to punt two areas. Unless, of course, you think the gains made in the others will offset any losses you incur.

PITCHING OVER POWER

In the 2004 SIBB season, the Bible Belters were a middling team early in the season but did a fantastic job of coming back into the lead pack and eventually pulled off a third-place finish. How'd they do it? They punted both home runs and runs batted in, trading power for pitching. They finished last in home runs and last in runs batted in, but swept first-place points in all four pitching categories. They correctly realized that even with the hitters they had, they weren't making great headway in offensive categories, so they went for broke in another direction. By trading away great power hitters like Vernon Wells, Eric Chavez, and Torii Hunter, they were able to acquire great pitchers like Pedro Martinez, Bronson Arroyo, and Shingo Takatsu and finished higher than they would have had they tried to have a "balanced" team. It was a gutsy decision, but one that paid off in the long run.

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THE ART OF THE DUMP DEAL

Now that you've passed through the crossroads of your season and have decided which way you're going to play the rest of the year, it's time to execute your plan. Up to this point I've preached about how you have to be aggressive and pull out all of the stops when the season gets down to crunch time. In this chapter I'll share with you some of the ways you can be aggressive through the deadline dump deal, including:

- ◆ Defining the dump deal
- ◆ Finding a trading partner
- ◆ Players to watch
- ◆ Making the correct decision between deals
- ◆ Acquiring the best players for your future
- ◆ Don't underestimate the value of the players you're giving up

Defining the Dump Deal

When someone refers to a dump deal, they're talking about a late-season trade in which a fantasy owner who is out of contention trades his useful players with limited or no value for the following season to a contending team who is looking to improve his team in the short term. In exchange, the selling team expects to receive players who will have great value in future seasons, and the buying team effectively gets to rent a great player for the final month or two of the year.

Dump deals are the most controversial transactions performed in every league. They're such a sore point that most league trading legislation is specifically aimed at keeping these maneuvers in check. Dump deals that are perceived to directly challenge the spirit of your league are those in which one team appears to deliberately help improve another team without getting much in return. This can be for any number of reasons, including the two team owners are friends, one team feels like they owe an owner a sweetheart deal for a previous move they made, or, in extreme cases of bad blood, one team trades with another to prevent a third team from winning. All of these scenarios are unacceptable in any league, and all trades should be above board with each team intending to improve their team.

PROTECTING LEAGUE INTEGRITY

Plato wrote that necessity is the mother of invention, and it's true, even in fantasy circles. A few years ago in the SIBB we were in the midst of a terrible controversy surrounding a dump trade between two teams spurring a radical change in the way trades were made. Since there is no salary cap in the league, a measure that has been repeatedly defeated over the years, trades were left to the discretion of the teams involved and were to be evaluated by the commissioner. As commissioner and a team owner, I was very reluctant to reject a trade, figuring that we were dealing in a free-market system, and if both sides agreed, I wasn't one to argue. But the one I should have immediately rejected got through, and the rest of the league, both contending teams and not, were up in arms and threatened to tear down the league.

While his partner was away, a junior team owner was trading six starting players to a veteran contending team for one freeze, for a combined salary difference of over \$75. In essence, he was handing another team the title. While I believe there was no malicious intent and that the thrill of the deal just got a bit out of control, there was so much clamoring from the league that the trade was lopsided I had to overturn it. Following a lot of yelling and screaming (unfortunately, including some coming from me), I came up with new trading rules that have not outlawed dump deals, but at least ensure that they're all somewhat fair. The rules state that no team can make a deal in which the difference in the combined salaries of the traded players is more than \$25. In addition, there can't be more than a difference of one in the number of players involved in a deal (for example, two-for-one is acceptable, but three-for-one is not), and no trade can involve more than eight total players. Since we instituted these statutes, there have been no more trade controversies outside of the normal sour grapes or simple differences of opinions.

Finding a Trading Partner

When you're a seller (that is, a non-contending team with useful assets), you should always attempt to maximize the value of the players you're willing to part with. The best way to do this is by negotiating with all of the teams who you believe are looking to add players for the stretch drive. Throughout the season I like to maintain a listing of the finest freezes in the league. If I'm out of the race, when it comes down to trading time I'll go straight to the teams with the top players on my wish list to gauge what it might take to pry away those players whom I desire.

Making a dump deal from the seller's point of view is easy. Making a good one is the hard part. Owners inherently try to make a trade in which they receive the best players all the time, so when you offer a pair of All Stars for one prospect, they'll almost always do it. In fact, knowingly or not, most owners attempt to make dump deals throughout the entire season. Those ridiculous trade offers from earlier in the season could have some validity later in the year when your team's chances are waning. As the seller you will have the limited supply of available established players who could make a difference in the season's final months and weeks, while the demand is great, created by the few teams that are vying for the top spots.

If you're in the position to be a buyer, hopefully you heeded my advice and were picking up appealing players with enormous upside throughout the season. This is where they have the most value of the season and, in many cases, the most value of their careers. By stocking your roster with cheap, young, promising players from May through July, you'll have enough talent to offer teams looking to rebuild for next year in July, August, and September.

Using Your Resources

This is also the time to peddle the draftees who you felt you got at a great price at the start of the season because in return you'll be able to obtain players who have vastly more short-term value than them, but with expiring contracts or high price tags.

While it's fine for either side to make the offer, the buyer has more to gain and therefore should be the more aggressive. Make it known to all of the teams who have fallen out of contention that you're willing

NO ONE IS UNTOUCHABLE

In the 2004 season, I was making a fierce comeback, and as the trade deadline approached I was entertaining offers for everyone on my roster, including Jason Schmidt who has been the best right-handed pitcher in the NL for the last two seasons combined. While I held onto Schmidt (who is one of my cornerstone players for 2005), I was prepared to trade him if the right offer came along. Unfortunately then, but fortunately now, it didn't.

to trade players. At this point in the season, no one on your team should be untouchable at all.

Players to Watch

So now that you know which side of the dump-deal fence you stand on, I'll give you some pointers on what types of players you should be looking to acquire for your stretch run. Of course, pricing is different in every league, and over time names and faces all will change, so these will be general rules.

Buyers

Do you remember all of the most expensive players taken in your draft? Some of them are the reason your team is as good as it is. Others are on teams that you know all too well because you're battling them in the race for the money spots, and you cringe every time you see that they've had a big game. But chances are that half of them or more remain on the teams they started the season with. While their owners were reluctant to trade them when they still had a shot at the title, they'll be more than willing to deal them as the trade deadline approaches.

Since these players are the cream of the crop and every team will want them, you should start with a strong offer. Don't make the mistake of offering your two worst players for the other team's best player. Most times that strategy will automatically put you out of contention for him. Make as strong an offer as you can, but keep in mind that you'll have a good chance of making a deal that's well in your favor. Chances are the owner who you're dealing with will be turned off by his team's poor showing and will have the attitude that he can finish last with or without the players in question. As long as you offer solid keepers in return, he'll most likely deal. An added

bonus: There's no guarantee that you'll decide to let that player go before next year's draft. If he finishes strong, you'll have the option of keeping him even if he's a bit costly.

The next group of available players to watch is those with expiring contracts in your league. They really are rent-a-players and therefore should be treated as such. One or two solid saveable players should be all it takes to get any of them. Since you're guaranteed to have only a few weeks of their service, you should make sure that they will have as much an impact on your team as you think they might. As I said previously, very few players can have a big impact in the final weeks of the season. Sometimes you're better off keeping who you have already. But always keep your competitors in mind too, as they could swoop in and grab the player you leave on the table and improve their chances while weakening yours.

The final group of good players to pry away from a struggling team is those whose major league contract is expiring or whose stability with their current team is in question. Most owners will be willing to trade a questionable player for the following season for what they believe to be a sure thing.

While you're keeping up with your team throughout the year, keep either a mental note or an actual log of players you come across who either are in the last year of their contracts or are being seriously pushed either by their backup or by a hot minor league prospect. I'm not 100% sure how long the site will be up, but a good unofficial source to use for players' contract statuses can be found at <http://dugoutdollars.blogspot.com/>. There you'll find every player on the major league roster, their year by year contracts for the length of their current contracts, and any player or team options that may apply.

RESIDUAL VALUE

Throughout the course of the 2004 RLBA season, I traded for pricey players like Jeromy Burnitz, Greg Maddux, and Chipper Jones, all of whom were huge contributors to my team and all of whom are eligible to be kept again. Chipper in particular is very attractive because he has flexibility in his positions, qualifying at both third base and the outfield. The residual value on all of the players is a huge bonus because at the time I traded for them I never thought of them as freezes at all.

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Throughout the 2004 season there were many veterans openly discussed as being pushed by the backups for jobs in 2005. Nearly all of those jobs will go to the newcomers for the 2005 season. Here are some of the most prominent:

| Team | Position | 2004 Player | 2005 Player |
|----------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Angels | third base | Troy Glaus | Dallas McPherson |
| Astros | second base | Jeff Kent | Chris Burke |
| Brewers | shortstop | Craig Counsell | J.J. Hardy |
| Indians | shortstop | Omar Vizquel | Jhonny Peralta |
| Mariners | center field | Randy Winn | Jeremy Reed |
| Phillies | second base | Placido Polanco | Chase Utley |
| Rockies | shortstop | Royce Clayton | Clint Barmes |
| Rockies | catcher | Charles Johnson | J.D. Closser |
| Rockies | third base | Vinny Castilla | Garrett Atkins |



You have to be aware that there could be underlying consequences to even the most lopsided appearing dump deals. Even if you're acquiring the best player in the game for the worst, you shouldn't always make the move because you don't want to hurt your chances of winning. How could that be? It's simple. You don't want to emasculate your trading partner so much that he will start to plummet in categories for which you need him to maintain his standing. While you could pick up a point in the home runs standings by acquiring a player like Sammy Sosa for a middle reliever, your trading partner could lose multiple points to your overall opponents because he no longer has a big gun in the lineup. Keep that in mind when making an offer. Sometimes it's better to make a fair deal than a thoroughly one-sided one.

Underestimating the Value of Traded Players

Sometimes the best trades are the ones you don't make. You spend most of the year beating the bushes trying to uncover and acquire all of the best emerging talent you can, and there are some players whom you should not trade under any circumstances. For a chance to gain an extra 5% of the prize pot, you might be giving up someone who

becomes one of greatest players in the game just a year or two down the line, thus jeopardizing your franchise's long-term success.

Prior to making a trade, do as much research as you can to find out the future plans of the prospects you're dealing. Major league teams, especially those who have fallen out of contention, undergo a metamorphosis past the midway point of the season as they too begin looking toward the next season. Most of the time that means that they make dump trades of their own, ditching expiring contracts and veteran players who no longer fit into their long-term plans. If the youngsters you're trading stand to benefit from those trades in the current season, you should hold onto them. There's always a bit of buyer's remorse after every trade you make, but if you traded away one of the game's best prospects just days or weeks before he claimed a starting job and regular at-bats or turns in the rotation, you sink into a deep case of seller's regret.

Sellers

Although being on the selling end of a dump deal means that you're declaring that you're officially out of the race, it's actually more stressful to be a seller than to be on the other side of a deal. Your trades will immediately be scrutinized for their fairness and validity, but soon afterward your end of the bargain will fade into the background, while your trading partner will be judged on that move for the rest of the season and possibly beyond.

I actually enjoy making trades from both sides. Of course I'd much rather be on the contending end of a deal, but since my roster usually skews toward youngsters, acquiring the best bargains is right up my alley. And hopefully, if you're following along, it'll be right up your alley too, when you begin forming your team for next season.

All season you've been salivating when you see the keepers that other teams possess. Now is the time to go get them. No player, no matter how valuable or cheap for next year, is untouchable if you're willing to give up enough players. If a contending owner has a player like Travis Hafner at a great price, I'm relatively sure that if you offered Alex Rodriguez or Vladimir Guerrero plus a middle range starter for him, a deal would get done. The key to unraveling your team to play for next year is getting the best available value on the market. Take

YOUTH SERVED WELL

In the SIBB, a team known as Dem Hankees had a fantastic two-year run, finishing first and second in 2003 and 2004, respectively, and followed the franchise-making blueprint to the letter. The way they did this was by assembling a fantastic nucleus of young players during their sub-par 2002 season, including Carl Crawford, Mark Teixeira, Hank Blalock, Rocco Baldelli, Francisco Rodriguez, and Dewon Brazelton, all for \$12 and under. They relied on big-time producers like Rodriguez, Teixeira, and Crawford throughout their successful stretch and traded the others for pennant race stars like Manny Ramirez, Magglio Ordonez, and Hideki Matsui.

note that the best values aren't always the cheapest. Just because a player's price isn't in single digits doesn't mean that he's not a good deal. You need to find bargains—players who will perform much above their draft cost.

Early-Bird Specials

While it's not a position you ever want to be in, if you feel that you really have no chance to compete, there are great advantages to getting into the dumping mode before everyone else does. First, you'll have a chance to trade with more teams, as eventual non-contenders will try to improve themselves before they realize that they are better off packing it in. You'll also have no competition out there for trades as everyone else will be worried about affecting their standing in their deals, while you'll have a nothing-to-lose attitude.

The most unexpected reason to unload your highest paid players early, however, is that you will actually have a chance to get back into the race by getting rid of them. The earlier in the season you dump, the more chance the players you acquire will develop during the year. Chances are that no one has an awful player on their roster, and also you won't trade for someone who's horrible. If they're in the major leagues, there's a chance they will someday become a regular, and depending on their performance, that day could be later in the current season.

WHO WAS DUMPING?

Two years ago in the SIBB, after wallowing anywhere from 7th to 10th for much of the first half of the season, the Bauery Bums decided to give up for the year and started dumping in early July. However, instead of falling in the standings, they actually started rising. The prospects they added through their dump deals were actually more valuable than the stars they traded away. In fact, when all was said and done at the end of the year, the Bums finished fourth and in the money, while a couple of the teams they dealt with didn't.

Recycling Is Allowed

Oftentimes owners become too enamored with players they acquire in trades, especially dump deals. They become reluctant to trade them again that season even though they could get better players if they made a creative offer to yet another team. Just because you traded for a player in a dump deal doesn't mean that you can't turn around and include him in yet another trade. The goal of your rebuilding phase should be to find the best quality players to take with you into next year's draft while minimizing the amount that will be charged to the next season's draft budget. So if you've obtained a player earlier in the trade but have an opportunity to include him in a deal for an even better player, do it.

While there are virtues to acquiring as many freezable players as possible, in the end you'll be limited to the number of keepers allowed by your league rules. However, you shouldn't short change yourself by limiting the number of freezes you have. During the season I've heard many owners say "We can only freeze eight players, and I already have my eight, so I've stopped dealing." That is a huge mistake. Every off-season, things happen that no one can predict.

Whether it's a trade, an injury, or even a tragedy, players don't always end up in the role, on the team, or even in the league you think they will. Always have a few spare players to freeze because you might have to use them. And if you're fortunate enough to have a glut of freezes when the following season's auction approaches, you can always package your excess together and make a pre-draft deal. At the very least, the more good freezes you have, the less there will be to go around to the other teams, giving you another advantage at the draft table.

THE BEST LAID PLANS

Some of the dump deals I was most proud of at the time they were made ended up yielding absolutely nothing by the time the draft came along. I've acquired Robin Ventura right before he shattered his leg sliding into home plate, Tom Gordon right before he had reconstructive elbow surgery, and most recently Jason Kubel, who tore the anterior cruciate ligament, posterior cruciate ligament, and lateral collateral ligament in his knee while playing in the 2004 Arizona Fall League. In the AL I've lost freezes like a young Mike Cameron who went from the White Sox to the Reds, and an old Roger Clemens who went from the Yankees to the Astros. (I've never been a seller in the RLBA, and hope never to be one.)

Diagramming Some Deals

Here are two examples of dump deals that took place in each of my leagues during the 2004 season.

The Trade: On July 5 I acquired outfielder Jeromy Burnitz (\$29 for 2005, with an unclear future with the Rockies), catcher A.J. Pierzynski (\$16 for 2005), and outfielder Preston Wilson (expiring contract and out with knee surgery for much of the first half of the season) in exchange for outfielder Moises Alou (\$14 for the following season but a free agent to be and not a lock to be in the NL), first baseman Nick Johnson (\$7 for one year, \$17 the second), rookie first baseman Adam LaRoche (\$9 for one year, \$19 the second), and catcher Brad Ausmus (\$1 to offset the loss of Pierzynski).

Explanation: This was one of the most fair trades of the year. Each team got exactly what it was looking for. I received a top hitting catcher to eliminate a soft spot in my lineup, and I also picked up two heavy hitting Colorado Rockies, although one of them, Preston, was a gamble who only paid dividends of five home runs, 19 runs batted in, and a .280 batting average. My trading partner, the Convicts, got two great freezes in Moises Alou (should he land in the NL in the 2004–05 off-season) and Adam LaRoche (who hit .301 with 11 home runs and 32 runs batted in for the rest of the year). He was then able to trade Johnson in a deal for Diamondbacks third baseman Chad Tracy and Ausmus as part of a package that included Marlins catcher Paul LoDuca, both better freezes than the players he gave up.

The Trade (American League): Oakland lefty starting pitcher Barry Zito (\$31 for one more year), another lefty starter Kenny Rogers (\$1 for two more years, but he's 40 years old), and his Texas teammate, reliever Carlos Almanzar (\$1 for two more years, but just a throw in) in exchange for promising outfielder Laynce Nix (\$5 for one year), power-hitting first baseman Justin Morneau (\$16 for two years), and infielder Geoff Blum (\$3 but another throw in).

Explanation: In this trade, one team wanted to add pitching for the stretch drive, and the other wanted hitters to freeze. They both accomplished their missions. The biggest name in the trade was Zito, the 2002 American League Cy Young Award winner, who had a rough start to the season but had turned the corner and had begun pitching well again. Rogers had found the fountain of youth in his return to Texas, with a record of 13-4 and a 4.20 ERA, but there was some question in everyone's mind whether he could keep up the great pace he started as the season wore on. The key to the deal was Morneau, who is expected to be a 30 to 40 home-run hitter with 100 to 120 runs batted in per year for the next two years as the Twins' first baseman. Then you throw in the five-tool yet injury-plagued potential of Nix, and it's clear that this was a fantastic job of dumping.

Players like Alou (well-priced veteran), Morneau (midseason call-up with promise), and Nix (who has yet to fully show all of his talent) in the example are the types of players who make for a perfect dump deal for the seller. Zito (very successful veteran player showing signs of settling back into form), Rogers (a player having a super season but with serious questions regarding his future), Pierzynski (a solid producer but simply overpriced), and Wilson (one of the league's best run producers with an expiring contract) exemplify the goals of the buyers' market.

Since You're Already Thinking About Next Year

The beauty of having a multitude of options going into the next season is the ability you'll have to make trades before the draft the following season. You should actually plan out some moves for the next season while the current season is still in full swing. Identify teams that will be in need of freezes after the season as well as the players

you'll have but will probably not keep. You should also make sure that you maximize your trading power for the following season.

It's a cardinal sin for any noncontender to end the year with an expiring contract on their roster. If you're in seventh place or worse as your league's trading deadline is approaching, do everything you can to get rid of the player who will have absolutely no value to you—even if you have to take a freezable injured player or a minor leaguer or even FAAB money if your league rules allow it. Having “too many keepers” already is no excuse. The name of the game is maximization of assets.

So what do you do if you have too many keepers? First off, don't feel compelled to keep everyone you trade for. As their situations change, you may no longer see the keeper candidates you once loved in that same light. Even if you traded your best player to get one potential keeper, you're in the business of doing what you feel gives you the best chance to compete for your league's title, so it's not a crime if others on your roster emerge during the off-season and pass that player on your team's depth chart. It happens all the time.

Late in the 2004 season, worried about his history of injuries and a good chance that he'd end up in the NL as a free agent during the off-season, I traded veteran A's outfielder Jermaine Dye (\$10 for two more years) for rookie Mariners shortstop Jose Lopez (\$5 for two more years), who projects to place in the top half of the league's shortstops offensively in the next two or three years. Should Dye land a full-time right field job with an American League team, he'll be considered one of the top freezes in our league.

Lopez, on the other hand, despite getting ample playing time under manager Bob Melvin at the end of the 2004 season, is not a lock to be the starter for the new managerial regime led by longtime major league manager Mike Hargrove. In fact, there's a better than 50-50 chance that Lopez will start the 2005 season playing in the minor leagues.

Am I upset about making the trade? Not at all. Just having the option to keep a player is valuable, and having Lopez's upside was a lot more attractive to me at the time than Dye's downside was, and honestly still is.

Should I feel compelled to keep Lopez if he's in the majors? Nope. If I have eight other freezes who I feel will be better than Lopez, then I'll be very happy.

Will I simply let Lopez go back into the draft? Heck no. I will make every effort to trade him before the draft and would package him and others, including players I would otherwise freeze, to get one much better player. Trading my third- and fourth-best freezes for someone who would be my best freeze is a deal I'd make every time.

WE ALL CAME OUT AHEAD

Dump deals don't always happen during the season. Sometimes you can make good things happen in that pre-draft period too. Before the 2003 RLBA season, my team was the defending champion and was settling on our freezes when I was approached by a veteran owner who was trying to unload all of his excess freezes for one of our players, third baseman David Bell, who was a \$1 player. The four we'd receive were pitchers Woody Williams (\$1), Kip Wells (\$1), third baseman Aramis Ramirez (\$2), and first baseman Hee Seop Choi (\$2). In hindsight it looks like a no-brainer, but Bell was coming off a great season with the Giants, and the four players we'd get all had relatively disappointing years in 2002. After deliberating for a while and weighing all of our other options, we decided to make the deal, knowing that a few of the other top teams from the previous season were keeper-poor and that we might be able to get one or two better freezes than we had for some of them. At the very least we'd keep Ramirez, who in our estimation was at least as good as Bell. After working the phone and e-mail a bit, the mother of all deals fell into our laps. We traded the exact same package we received for Bell, in exchange for one pitcher: Eric Gagne, who was also priced at \$1. In essence, we traded a \$1 David Bell for a \$1 Eric Gagne, with a whole bunch of stuff in between. The irony is that every team involved came out great. The team who got Bell finished first, despite losing him to a back injury. We finished second as Gagne was a perfect 55 for 55 in save opportunities, had a 1.20 earned run average, and 0.69 WHIP. The final team finished third, getting a combined 28 wins and 3.50 ERA from Williams and Wells and a breakout season from Ramirez with 27 home runs and 106 runs batted in (only Choi was a disappointment with eight home runs and a .218 batting average).

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CHAPTER 16

SEPTEMBER STRATEGIES

Your trade deadline has passed, football season has begun, basketball season is on the horizon, and you thought your maneuvering for the year was all but over. Think again. September is wacky time in the major leagues and in fantasy baseball alike, and it's your job to do everything in your power to make it to the finish line in first place. If you fell into the "Sellers" category in Chapters 14 and 15, there's little of value here for you during the current season, but if you were a "Buyer," you have a chance to win it all, so what you read in the next few pages could mean all the difference between being a winner and loser, including:

- ◆ Baseball's silly season
- ◆ Players rising, fortunes fading
- ◆ Rest is a four-letter word
- ◆ Season-ending injuries
- ◆ Going under the knife
- ◆ Keeping your eyes on the prize
- ◆ Addition by subtraction
- ◆ Managing until you can manage no more

Baseball's Silly Season

I'm willing to admit that every year, September baseball scares the living daylights out of me. If you don't stay on top of your team, you

can quickly fall out of contention. No player is immune from the wacky happenings of what I like to call baseball's "Silly Season." So what makes playing fantasy baseball in September so different from the other months?

What once were the norms during the first five months of the season get thrown out the door when major league rosters expand from 25 to up to 40 players per team as of September 1. With more players at their disposal, managers experiment much more than they would during the course of the year. Starting players on noncontending teams see their at-bats and innings shrivel up, sometimes becoming non-existent as young players audition for full-time gigs the next season. Depending on which teams your players come from, for the first time all season your fortunes will depend on pure luck of the draw. Will the manager rest your player for the playoffs? Will your player be shut down for the season because he has a nagging injury that requires surgery and his team has been mathematically eliminated from the pennant race? Will your starting pitchers be limited to strict pitch counts so as not to overwork them before the playoffs? These are problems that are extremely difficult to solve, but over the last few years, I've done everything in my power to do just that.

Players Rising, Fortunes Fading

An influx of minor league players means that established regulars will lose playing time and, for your purposes, precious at-bats and innings. If someone's opportunity to break into the majors comes at the expense of your team members, you'll be faced with very difficult decisions. Some of your team members who have the chance to be

WHAT'S SILLY ABOUT IT?

The Silly Season is a term that comes from both auto racing and golf. It describes the period toward the end of the season when drivers and players negotiate their alliances and deals for the upcoming season, most often shaking up the status quo. Some drivers look for new teams, crew chiefs, crew members, and most important, sponsors. In golf, sponsorships also change, but so do coaches and, in many cases, caddies. Fantasy baseball players don't change sponsors, but their players' roles change so dramatically in September that their status quo goes out the window, and the most unexpected things happen.

frozen will have little or no value at the end of the current season when you need them the most. If their jobs are given to youngsters in the final days of the season, you have to weigh the pros and cons of retaining them for next year or cutting them loose to add a contributing character to your lineup.

I faced this decision late in the 2004 season with Rockies catcher Charles Johnson. Although he was having a good season at the plate, as most Rockies players will do, the team was out of the pennant race in August and had very little interest in retaining Johnson for the 2005 season. In fact, Colorado had traded him to the Dodgers, but Johnson had a no-trade clause in his contract and vetoed the deal, citing a reluctance to move his family during the season. Colorado manager Clint Hurdle made it public that down the stretch he would give the regular catching duties to a promising player named J.D. Closser, who had been tabbed as the starter for 2005. After accruing 290 at-bats over the first five months of the season, Johnson got only 15 at-bats in the final month and drove in only one run in September and October.

At \$6, Johnson was a good freeze, but the RLBA rules provide no bench, and Johnson wasn't hurt. He was just useless and had to be replaced. So the only thing I could do was cut him and sign someone from the free agency heap. Luckily, the Arizona Diamondbacks were in a similar situation as Colorado, and I landed their prospect catcher, Chris Snyder, who received a bulk of the work behind the plate in the last few weeks of the campaign, during which he hit four home runs and drove in 12 runs.

Rest Is a Four-Letter Word

Only at the end of the season is it worrisome to have major contributors from pennant-winning clubs on your fantasy team. During the closing days of the season, premiere players rarely play every game, as their managers rest them for the upcoming playoffs, trying to avoid injuries and overwork. This is the most difficult situation to prepare for because most of the time these are the players who have your team in contention. However, when your whole season comes down to the final few games and your best players are seen on the bench half of the time, there's little more you can do than cross your fingers and hope your competitors are in the same situation.



If you're really lucky, your player who normally would have been rested at the end of the year will be attempting to reach a league or team record, is in contention to be a league leader, or is approaching some sort of important career milestone like 400 home runs or 20 career wins. Normally, managers aren't interested in individual statistics, but in most cases they will realize the opportunity their star player has and reward the season's performance by offering every opportunity to help set the mark, lead the league, or surpass the milestone.

Going Under the Knife

Another reason to avoid chronically injured players is that they rarely finish a season. As soon as their teams are eliminated from the playoffs and when they can easily be replaced by minor league call-ups, these wounded warriors reach the ends of their seasons earlier than the rest of their teammates. In many cases they head right to the operating room, going under the knife to fix their breaks, tears, and severe pulls. The earlier these players get the necessary treatment for what ails them, the better chance they'll have to be healed, rehabilitated, and ready to go when camps open in the spring, so teams out of the running have very little reluctance to let their players get an early start to the off-season.

Keeping Your Eyes on the Prize

Fantasy baseball is not the most popular form of fantasy sports—in fact, it's not even close. Fantasy football is the undisputed king of all fantasy sports, and there's a good chance that you play both. Your fantasy football team should not become a distraction, sidelining your attention from the end of your baseball season. Fantasy football can actually help you. With the baseball trade deadline behind you and football season in full swing, lower-rung owners will forget about baseball season, putting the bad feelings of a poor season behind them. That means that many times there will be less competition for you in the free-agency market.

If you're one of just a handful of teams still paying attention to your league, you can swoop in and grab some of the players who fill major

LOOPHOLE MANAGEMENT

In 2002, Brewers centerfielder Alex Sanchez was one of the major cogs on my RLBA team. Relatively unknown entering the season, Sanchez became one of the top base stealers in the National League and had 37 steals entering September. On his first stolen base attempt of the month, he suffered a grotesque ankle injury, breaking bones and tearing ligaments in the joint. Besides being horrific to look at, it caused a major problem for my team. Normally Sanchez would have immediately been placed on the disabled list, but with major league rosters expanded to include up to 40 players, Milwaukee didn't have to clear a roster spot to replace him. Instead, they just added a player and made no additional transaction with Sanchez.

According to the rules of the RLBA, I couldn't replace Sanchez on the roster without cutting him if he wasn't on the DL. He was expected to fully recover from the injury by spring training and was a leading base stealer for just \$4. Since he was clearly out for the remainder of the season, instead of cutting him, I petitioned the league rules committee to grant me a common-sense waiver stating that although he wasn't on the DL, I could reserve him. They allowed the change, and from that point on the September injury precedent has been league policy.

If your league hasn't addressed this possibility in its rules, do so as soon as you can. Although there's a slim chance that this will ever affect your title race, it's better to acknowledge the possibility of a loophole before it becomes an issue.

roles during the last month of the year. In 2004, some of the better hitters in the majors over the last month of the season weren't only the usual suspects like Ichiro Suzuki, Barry Bonds, and Vladimir Guerrero. They were joined by waiver-wire gems like Ross Gload, Jason Kubel, Jeff Keppinger, and Jason Michaels, who didn't have much appeal to you if you became a casual observer. Only those in the know saw that these players could have a positive impact on the season.

Addition by Subtraction

As important as continuing to add good players to your team is, it's equally if not more imperative to eliminate any players who will hurt your chances in the final days of the fantasy year. During the last three weeks of the 2004 RLBA season, as my team maxed out its points in the standings in most of the pitching categories, I tried to reduce the chances that I would have any poor outings by cutting

potentially flammable performers. The last thing I wanted to happen was to endure a 10-earned run, one-inning outing.

After having punted saves earlier in the season, I decided to pick up Phillies pitcher Cory Lidle, a potentially harmful pitcher, but one who could provide the wins I needed to move into the lead. Lidle went on a hot streak as soon as he joined my team. I had signed him for just \$1, so he appeared to be a great freeze candidate. I was in second place in both ERA and WHIP and couldn't gain any points in those ratio categories. I had an eight-win lead and had pitchers like Roy Oswalt, Jason Schmidt, and Mark Prior to keep the staff afloat. So instead of taking a chance on Lidle having a potentially disastrous turn in the rotation, I cut him, adding Julian Tavarez instead. Tavarez was serving an eight game suspension and would only pitch one inning for the remainder of the season. If he survived the inning, I would survive the year.

The plan worked, but not exactly how I drew it up. Lidle didn't implode and went on to allow only five earned runs in his final 20 innings over three starts. Tavarez pitched twice, but compiled two scoreless innings. In the final week I also replaced Pittsburgh's Salomon Torres with Brewers' rookie Ben Hendrickson, who was shut down for the year to avoid any trouble Torres would possibly cause. On offense I cut Milton Bradley (who was suspended for throwing a bottle back at a fan in Los Angeles) in favor of Adam Everett, who couldn't field or bat but could provide a stolen base or two in the final games of the season (which he didn't do). In aggregate categories, something is always better than nothing. With ratio statistics, that's not always the case.

Manage Until You Can Manage No More

The 2004 Red Sox–Yankees series taught everyone a lesson that applies perfectly to fantasy baseball. Never assume that you've won until the final out is made. As long as there is a chance to lose, you have to keep fighting, scratching, clawing, and doing everything humanly possible to come out on top, because winning is a great feeling, and losing after spending all that energy over such a long time is simply unacceptable.

You can't fully appreciate the sensation of sheer relief when the final out is made in the final game on the final day of the season until you

finally experience it for yourself. The feeling is no different no matter how big your lead is entering the final day of the season. When you know that the league is wrapped up, you'll have a feeling of utter euphoria, knowing you've outmaneuvered, outwitted and outmanaged your opponents and have emerged as the undisputed champ of a highly competitive league. When you realize that all that hard work you put in starting in February, March, and even earlier has finally paid off, it feels as if a huge weight has been lifted off your shoulders. You're able to take a deep breath for the first time in months.

I've never run a marathon, but I think I understand the feeling runners have when they cross that finish line. You can't believe that it's finally over when you break that tape. The feeling is so good that you can't wait to start all over again—and with baseball, you will start again soon enough.

It's ironic that the major league postseason—by far the most exciting time of the season—is the least stressful for fantasy players. There's more riding on a meaningless Brewers–Reds game on September 17 than there is on the seventh game of the World Series. But in the end, that's part of the purpose of fantasy sports—to make you care more about the games than you normally would.

As I wrote at the very beginning of this book, fantasy baseball is an obsession. Once it sinks its claws into you, you'll be hooked for a long time. Win one or more times, and it'll never let you go. I hope this book has helped you, and I wish you luck, unless of course you end up competing in a league with me.

Now go book your trip to spring training. Next year is almost here, and you have to start getting ready for next season's draft.

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GLOSSARY OF FANTASY AND OTHER BASEBALL TERMS

Fantasy baseball sometimes has a language of its own. In this section I'll define some of those terms and explain how they apply to the fantasy baseball player.

4 × 4 League

A Rotisserie-style league that features four offensive categories and four pitching categories that determine league standings. The traditional league uses batting average, home runs, runs batted in, and stolen bases for offense; and wins, saves, earned run average, and WHIP for pitching.

5 × 5 League

A Rotisserie-style league that features five offensive categories and five pitching categories that determine league standings. The traditional league uses batting average, home runs, runs batted in, runs scored, and stolen bases for offense; and wins, saves, strikeouts, earned run average, and WHIP for pitching.

Addition by Subtraction

The practice of removing players from a fantasy squad to keep them from hurting your ratio categories. You come to the conclusion that your team would be better off with an empty spot than it would be with that player in your lineup.

AFL

The Arizona Fall League. A developmental league in which promising players from each major league organization compete during a short season that lasts from early October until late November.

Aggregate Category

A statistic in which points are awarded based on the highest (or lowest) totals accrued by a team after a simple count. No mathematical formula is necessary.

At-Bats

Number of instances that a batter comes to home plate and either makes an out on a non-sacrifice hit, - or reaches base via error or hit

Auction Draft

A distribution process in which players are acquired via bidding. Each available player is brought to the floor by a participant, and the subsequent highest dollar value offered is accepted for the player's services.

Batting Average

Total hits divided by at-bats expressed in three decimal places.

Bench

Players who are able to be activated but are not currently in a team's lineup.

Bid

An incremental amount that drafters introduce in an effort to acquire a player. The owner who presents the highest amount gets the services of the player involved.

Blown Save

Surrendering the game-tying or go-ahead run after entering the game with a chance to record a save.

Catcher's ERA

The combined earned run average of pitchers on a team when a particular catcher is behind the plate.

Closer

A relief pitcher who is called upon in save situations to finish games in the late innings.

Closer by Committee

A technique used by managers who don't have faith in a single relief pitcher to close out games. Instead, he uses a combination of relievers in the role, depending on the opposition hitter and game situation.

Closer In Waiting

The pitcher who is the heir apparent to a team's ninth inning short reliever. He is usually, but not exclusively, the team's top setup man.

Commissioner

The chief administrator of a fantasy league, who is responsible for the day-to-day business of the league, including processing transactions, providing information about league business, and making rules clarifications.

Coors Effect

The effect that playing in Denver's Coors Field has on a player's production for the season. Because the stadium stands a mile above sea level, the ball travels farther than it normally would at zero elevation. The effect is universally negative for pitchers and generally positive for hitters.

Corner Infielder

A player eligible to play first base, third base, or both.

Designated Hitter

A player who under American League rules hits but doesn't play a fielding position. In most AL fantasy leagues, designated hitters must have acted in that capacity for a minimum number of games to qualify for the position.

Disabled List

A collection of injured players who are unable to play for their major league team due to injury. While on the disabled list (DL), they do not count toward a team's 25-man roster and can be replaced. In the major leagues, there are two lengths of mandatory periods that a disabled player must miss. The first is a 15-day period, and the second is a 60-day period. In the minor leagues, there is also a 7-day disabled list. Those on the 60-day disabled list do not count toward a team's 40-man roster.

The Draft

A preseason event in which team owners congregate to divvy up major league players for their teams in the upcoming season.

Draft Budget

The number of dollars or units that a team can spend to acquire players at the auction draft. In standard Rotisserie or category-style leagues, the total draft budget, including any keepers (or freezes), is \$260.

Draft List

An ordered listing of players who you would consider taking at your draft.

Draft Sheet

A grid on which you keep track of the destination of each player taken in the draft. The draft sheet should include a team-by-team listing of every position that teams must field before they leave the draft room.

Dump Deals

Trades in which one team trades valuable players with high salaries or expiring contracts for players with lower short-term value but greater long-term value.

Earned Run Average (ERA)

The number of earned runs that a pitcher allows per nine innings. ERA is calculated by dividing earned runs by innings pitched and multiplying by nine.

FAAB

Free Agent Acquisition Budget. The amount of money or points allotted to teams to acquire free-agent players throughout the season. The amount can be either in imaginary money or in actual dollars. Amounts vary, depending on each individual league's rules.

Farm System

Minor league players who are the property of a fantasy team but who do not count as part of that team's complement of roster players. In many leagues, to qualify for a farm team, the player must have major league rookie eligibility.

Fielding Percentage

The sum of put-outs plus assists divided by the sum of put-outs plus hits plus errors.

Flammable

Description of a pitcher who comes into the game and instead of getting batters out, generally exacerbates an already harrowing situation.

Free Agents

Players who are not part of a team and who are available to be acquired either by a draft order or by using FAAB.

Freezes

Players in fantasy leagues who are able to be retained by a team from one season to the next (synonymous with keeper).

Head-to-Head Fantasy League

Leagues in which teams are paired off for weekly “games” throughout the season. The team with better numbers in each category is awarded a run. At the end of the seven-day period, the team with the most runs is awarded a win. The league winner is then determined by the team with the most wins during the course of a season. Many head-to-head leagues also hold “play-offs” that take place during the regular season’s final weeks.

Hold

A middle reliever statistic that is awarded to a pitcher who enters a game in a save situation, records at least one out, and leaves the game while maintaining the lead.

Hot Corner

A synonym for third base.

Inherited Runner

A runner on base when a relief pitcher enters the game.

In the Money

Finishing in one of the top spots in a fantasy league’s standings, with which comes a prize payout.

Keeper League

A league in which players may be retained by teams for more than one season. The total number of seasons is determined by each individual league’s rules and regulations.

Keepers

Players in fantasy leagues who are able to be retained by a team from one season to the next (synonymous with freezes).

Keystone Duo

The double-play combination of the second baseman and shortstop.

League Constitution

A written listing of the mission statement and definitions of rules for each particular league that is agreed to, followed, and upheld by each individual league member.

Middle Infielder

A player eligible as a second baseman, shortstop, or both.

Middle Man

A relief pitcher who usually appears in the game's middle (fourth through seventh) innings.

Mixed League

A fantasy league that draws from both the American League and National League for its pool of available players.

Non-Roster Invitees

Players signed to minor league contracts but invited to participate in spring training with the major league parent club.

On-Base Percentage

The ratio of hits plus walks plus times hit by pitcher divided by walks plus times hit by pitcher plus sacrifice flies plus at-bats.

OPS

On base plus slugging percentage. The maximum OPS a player can have is 5.000.

“The Package”

The Major League Baseball Extra Innings television package that provides local coverage of many out-of-town games on digital cable and satellite television on a nightly basis.

“Pizza Rule”

Anti-dumping legislation that puts a penalty on the last place team in the league. In the SIBB, that penalty is the obligation to cater the next season's draft. Most often that catering consists of ordering pizza.

Playing 'Possum

Laying low during the bidding process on a player to disguise your interest in that player so as not to drive up the draft price.

Points-Based Fantasy League

A fantasy league in which every statistic accrued by a team is awarded a set number of points (for example, five points for a home run, three points for a stolen base, and so on). The team with the most points at the end of the season is declared the winner.

Position Eligibility

Depending on each individual league's rules, the number of games in which a player must appear at a particular position to be allowed to be placed at that position. In most cases a player can gain eligibility at a particular position by appearing in 1, 5, 10, or 20 games.

Position Scarcity

A condition that inflates the value of certain players because they are eligible at positions such as second base and catcher where there are relatively few offensive standouts when compared to other stations on the field.

Prospect

A player who is coming up through a major league farm system and who is highly regarded as a candidate to contribute regularly to a major league team in the future.

Punt

To completely give up trying to improve your standing in a specific statistical category in order to concentrate on the categories in which you can improve your standing.

PVR

The Player Value Ranking as printed in *Sports Illustrated* magazine, which is the relative fantasy value for major league players entering the upcoming season. There are two separate rankings—one for pitchers and one for position players.

Quality Start

When a starting pitcher throws at least six innings and allows no more than three earned runs.

Ratio Category

Scoring statistics based on the relationship of one or more category total to another. Examples are batting average, strikeouts-to-walk ratio, earned run average, WHIP, on-base percentage, slugging percentage, and OPS.

Rookie

A player who meets the following criteria: no more than 13 major league at-bats, no more than 50 major league innings pitched, or anyone with less than 45 days active on a major league roster.

Rotisserie Style Fantasy League

The first fantasy baseball scoring system for a league in which statistics are ranked within categories. The team with the best totals or averages is awarded the highest number of standings points, while the team with the worst total or average is awarded the fewest points. In a 10-team league, the first-place team gets 10 points and the last-place team receives one point in the overall standings. The sum of the total number of category points earned gives you the team's overall standings points.

Rules Committee

A panel set up by a fantasy league to decide any rules clarifications or to settle disputes that arise during the season.

Run Support

The number of runs on average that a team scores while a particular pitcher is in a ballgame.

Salary Cap

A ceiling placed on the total value that a fantasy team's roster may reach. In most cases, players on the disabled list do not count toward a team's salary cap.

Save

A statistic awarded to a pitcher who finishes a game for which he is not awarded a win. He must pitch at least one full inning with no more than a three-run lead—or, he must enter the game with the tying run in the on-deck circle—or, he must pitch well for the game's final three innings as determined by the official scorer.

Setup Man

A relief pitcher who normally pitches just prior to an appearance by a team's closer. Most times the setup man is the second choice to get saves (see Closer in Waiting).

Single Leagues

Fantasy leagues in which the pool of players comes from only one major league, not both. The two single leagues are American Fantasy Leagues and National Fantasy Leagues.

Single-Season League

A league in which the players on all teams are returned to a pool and redistributed each season. No players are retained from season to season.

Slugging Percentage

Total bases divided by at-bats.

Sophomore Surge

Players who failed in their first chance to earn a major league job but, after regrouping in the minor leagues or during the off-season, return to the major leagues and perform at or above expected levels.

Snake Draft Order

A straight draft order in which teams pick positions in reverse in consecutive rounds. Teams with the last pick in odd numbered rounds have the first pick in the even numbered rounds, and so on.

Straight Draft

A player acquisition process in which a selection order is determined, and participants may select any players not already taken or protected by another team in the league, in that order.

Strat-O-Matic Baseball

A popular baseball board game that was a precursor to fantasy baseball. It incorporates cards, dice, and major league baseball player tendencies to create simulated realistic baseball statistics. It can be played by a single person or in a league setting.

Sweetener

An added incentive offered by one team to entice another team to complete a trade that they would like to make.

Total Bases

The number of bases earned via hits. The formula for total bases is singles + (2 × doubles) + (3 × triples) + (4 × home runs). The perfect slugging percentage is 4.000.

Trade

When two or more teams exchange players, draft picks, or cash with the intent to improve their teams either in the short or long run.

Trade Deadline

The point in the season after which no trades can be made. In the major leagues there are different deadlines, including the non-waiver deadline of July 31 and the waiver deadline of August 30, after which any player acquired in a trade is declared ineligible for postseason play.

Transaction Deadline

The time before which all player moves for the scoring period are due, including player activations, free-agent acquisition trades, and minor league recalls. Any moves submitted after the deadline don't take effect until the next scoring period.

Up the Middle

A team's catcher, shortstop, second baseman, and centerfielder (as in "A team has to be strong up the middle to win").

Utility

A position that can be manned by a player with eligibility at any position.

Utility Man

A player who regularly appears at multiple positions and who can be seen multiple times on a team's depth chart.

Vulture

A relief pitcher who accrues one or more wins by being in the game at the right time, not necessarily because he pitched especially well. Many times the reliever enters a game with a one-run deficit or with the score tied—a scenario for which the starting pitcher cannot earn a victory—and his team's offense rallies to take the lead while he is the pitcher of record.

Waivers

A process in which released players may be claimed by other teams before they become free agents. Waiver order is usually determined by reverse order of the current standings.

Waiver Wire

The posting of all players available through waivers.

WHIP

Walks plus hits per inning. The ratio of base runners allowed per inning via hit or walk.

Winning Percentage

Wins divided by total pitching decisions (or wins divided by wins plus losses).

Yahoo! Leagues

Single-season mixed leagues that are run on Yahoo!'s Web site and are offered either for a fee or for free. The much more popular free leagues are useful to build up hits for Yahoo!'s site.

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TEAM-BY-TEAM ONLINE RESEARCH

If you're seeking information on a particular team or player, the best place to search for it is in their own backyard. Official team Web sites, fan sites, and local media coverage are all available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year—so look no further than these Web sites for team-based coverage provided by the people who care most about the team. I've also included top minor league teams so you can look further into some of tomorrow's stars for each major league franchise. Note that many of these sites require registration for you to use them, and a few may require a small fee.

American League

Anaheim Angels

Official Site: www.anaheim.angels.mlb.com

Local Media Coverage

Los Angeles Daily News: www.dailynews.com/angels

Los Angeles Times: www.latimes.com/sports/baseball/mlb/angels/

Orange County Register: www.ocregister.com/sports/angels

The Press-Enterprise: www.pe.com/sports/baseball

Fan Sites

Angels Booster Club: www.angelsboosterclub.org

Fan Stop: fanstop.net

Triple A Affiliate: Salt Lake City Stingers

Official Site: www.stingersbaseball.com

Salt Lake Tribune: www.sltrib.com/stingers

Baltimore Orioles

Official Site: www.theorioles.com

Local Media Coverage

Baltimore Sun: www.sunspot.net/sports/orioles

Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/sports/baltimoreorioles/

Washington Times: www.washingtontimes.com/sports/

York Daily Record: yorkdailyrecord.com/news/orioles/

Fan Sites

The Oriole Warehouse: www.oobleck.com/orioles/

Birds In The Belfry: www.birdsinthebelfry.com/

Orioles Hangout: www.orioleshangout.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Ottawa Lynx

Official Site: www.ottawalynx.com/

Slam: slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Baseball/Ottawa/home.html

Boston Red Sox

Official Site: www.redsox.com

Local Media Coverage

Boston Globe: www.boston.com/news/globe/sports/

Boston Herald: redsox.bostonherald.com/redSox.bg

Hartford Courant: www.ctnow.com/sports/baseball/redsox/

Providence Journal: www.projo.com/redsox/

Fan Sites

Boston Dirt Dogs: www.bostondirtdogs.com/

Red Sox Connection: www.redsoxconnection.com/

Red Sox Nation: www.redsoxnation.com

Red Sox Die Hard: www.redsoxdiehard.com/main.html

The Remy Report: www.theremyreport.com

Sons of Sam Horn: www.sonsofsamhorn.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Pawtucket Red Sox

Official Site: www.pawsox.com/

Providence Journal: www.projo.com/pawsox

Chicago White Sox

Official Site: www.chicago.whitesox.mlb.com/

Local Media Coverage

Arlington Heights Daily Herald: www.dailyherald.com/sports/sox.asp

Chicago Sun-Times: www.suntimes.com/index/sox.html

Chicago Tribune: chicagosports.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/whitesox

Daily Southtown: www.dailysouthtown.com/index/dspro.html

Fan Sites

White Sox Interactive: whitesoxinteractive.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Charlotte Knights

Official Site: www.aaaknights.com/

Charlotte Observer: www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/sports/baseball/minor_league/charlotte_knights/

Cleveland Indians

Official Site: www.cleveland.indians.mlb.com/

Local Media Coverage

Cleveland Plain Dealer: www.cleveland.com/tribe/

Akron Beacon Journal: www.ohio.com/mld/ohio/sports/baseball/mlb/cleveland_indians/

Columbus Dispatch: www.dispatch.com/indians/indians.php

Fan Sites

Cleveland Indians Report: cir.blogspot.com/

Tribe Scribe: tribescribe.blogspot.com/

Official Indians Booster Club: www.wahooclub.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Buffalo Bisons

Official Site: www.bisons.com

Buffalo News: www.buffalonews.com/sports/teamsleagues/bisons.asp

Detroit Tigers

Official Site: www.detroit.tigers.mlb.com/

Local Media Coverage

Detroit Free Press: www.freep.com/index/tigers.htm

Detroit News: www.detnews.com/tigers/index.htm

Grand Rapids Press: www.mlive.com/tigers/

Fan Sites

Tigers Central: www.tigerscentral.com/

The Detroit Tigers Weblog: detroittigersweblog.com.sc.sabren.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Toledo Mud Hens

Official Site: www.mudhens.com/

Toledo Blade: [www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?
Category=SPORTS07](http://www.toledoblade.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SPORTS07)

Kansas City Royals

Official Site: www.kcroyals.com

Local Media Coverage

Kansas City Star: [www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/sports/
baseball/mlb/kansas_city_royals/](http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/sports/baseball/mlb/kansas_city_royals/)

Topeka Capital-Journal: www.cjonline.com/royals/

Wichita Eagle: [www.kansas.com/mld/kansas/sports/baseball/
mlb/kansas_city_royals/](http://www.kansas.com/mld/kansas/sports/baseball/mlb/kansas_city_royals/)

Fan Site

Royal Board: www.royalboard.com

Triple A Affiliate: Omaha Royals

Official Site: www.oroyals.com/

Omaha World-Herald: www.omaha.com/

Minnesota Twins

Official Site: www.minnesotatwins.com

Local Media Coverage

Minneapolis Star-Tribune: www.startribune.com/twins/

St. Paul Pioneer Press: www.twincities.com/mld/twincities/sports/baseball/

Fan Sites

Just for Twins: sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/JustForTwins/

Save the Twins: [/www.savethetwins.info/](http://www.savethetwins.info/)

Twins Fans: www.twins-fans.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Rochester Red Wings

Official Site: www.redwingsbaseball.com/

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle: www.democratandchronicle.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SPORTS06

New York Yankees

Official Site: www.Yankees.com

Local Media Coverage

New York Daily News: www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/

New York Post: www.nypost.com/sports/yankees/yankees.htm

New York Times: www.nytimes.com/pages/sports/baseball/index.html

Newsday: www.newsday.com/sports/baseball/yankees/

Bergen Record: www.northjersey.com/

Newark Star-Ledger: www.nj.com/yankees/

Journal-News: www.thejournalnews.com/yanks/

YES Network: yesnetwork.com

Fan Sites

Behind the Bombers: www.allsports.com/mlb/yankees/

NYY Fans: www.nyfans.com/

Pinstripe Press: www.angelfire.com/ny5/pinstripepress/

Yankee Fans: www.ny-yankees-fans.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Columbus Clippers

Official Site: www.clippersbaseball.com/

Columbus Dispatch: www.dispatch.com/clippers/clippers.php

Oakland Athletics

Official Site: www.oakland.athletics.mlb.com/

Local Media Coverage

Contra Costa Times: www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/sports/baseball/mlb/oakland_athletics

Mercury News: www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/sports/baseball/mlb/oakland_athletics/

Oakland Tribune: www.oaklandtribune.com/athletics

San Francisco Chronicle: www.sfgate.com/sports/athletics/

Sacramento Bee: www.sacbee.com/content/sports/baseball/oak_athletics/

Santa Rosa Press Democrat: www1.pressdemocrat.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SPORTS0302&Profile=1013

Fan Sites

Athletic Supporters: athletics.mostvaluablenetwork.com/

Elephants In Oakland: elephantsinoakland.blogspot.com/

Oakland Athletics Fan Coalition: www.oaklandfans.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Sacramento River Cats

Official Site: www.rivercats.com/

Sacramento Bee: www.sacbee.com/content/sports/baseball/sac_rivercats/

Seattle Mariners

Official Site: www.mariners.mlb.com

Local Media Coverage

Seattle Post-Intelligencer: seattlepi.nwsourc.com/baseball/

Seattle Times: seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/mariners/

Tacoma News Tribune: www.thenewstribune.com/sports/mariners/

Everett Times: www.heraldnet.com/sports/

Fan Sites

Seattle Mariners Dugout: www.geocities.com/Colosseum/Field/3477

Mariner Musings: www.all-baseball.com/marinermusings/

U.S.S. Mariner: ussmariner.blogspot.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Tacoma Rainiers

Official Site: www.tacomarainiers.com/

Tacoma News Tribune: www.thenewstribune.com/sports/rainiers/

Tampa Bay Devil Rays

Official Site: www.devilrays.com

Local Media Coverage

St. Petersburg Times: www.sptimes.com/DevilRays/index.shtml

Tampa Tribune: rays.tbo.com

Fan Sites

Devil Rays Forum: www.forums.mlb.com/ml-devilrays

Triple A Affiliate: Durham Bulls

Official Site: dbulls.com

Durham Herald-Sun: www.herald-sun.com/sports/durhambulls/

Texas Rangers

Official Site: www.texasrangers.com

Local Media Coverage

Dallas Morning News: www.dallasnews.com/sports/baseball

Fort Worth Star-Telegram: www.dfw.com/mld/dfw/sports/baseball

Fan Sites

Ranger Fans: www.rangerfans.com/

The Newberg Report: www.newbergreport.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Oklahoma RedHawks

Official Site: www.oklahomaredhawks.com/

The Oklahoman: www.newsok.com/sports/hometeams/

Toronto Blue Jays

Official Site: www.bluejays.com

Local Media Coverage

Toronto Globe and Mail: www.theglobeandmail.com/sports/TPBaseball/

Toronto Star: www.thestar.com/sports/jays

Toronto Sun: slam.canoe.ca/Slam/Baseball/MLB/Toronto/home.html

Fan Sites

BlueJayFanNet: www.geocities.com/gm_kel

Blue Jay Way: www.bluejayway.ca/

Jays Nest: bluejays.mostvaluablenetwork.com

Triple A Affiliate: Syracuse SkyChiefs

Official Site: www.skychiefs.com

Syracuse Post-Standard: www.syracuse.com/skychiefs

National League

Arizona Diamondbacks

Official Site: www.arizonadiamondbacks.com

Local Media Coverage

Arizona Republic: www.azcentral.com/sports/diamondbacks/

Arizona Star: www.azstarnet.com/sn/diamondbacks/

Fan Sites

Dbacks Fans: www.dbackfans.com

Triple A Affiliate: Tucson Sidewinders

Official Site: www.tucsonsidewinders.com/

Arizona Star: www.azstarnet.com/sn/sidewinders/

Atlanta Braves

Official Site: www.atlantabraves.com

Local Media Coverage

Atlanta Journal-Constitution: www.ajc.com/sports/content/sports/braves/index.html

Augusta Chronicle: augustachronicle.com/sports/braves/

Macon Telegraph: www.macon.com/mld/macon/sports/baseball/mlb/atlanta_braves

Fan Sites

Braves Beat: www.bravesbeat.com

Tomahawk: braves.mostvaluablenetwork.com

Triple A Affiliate: Richmond Braves

Official Site: www.rbraves.com/

Richmond Times-Dispatch: www.timesdispatch.com/

Chicago Cubs

Official Site: www.cubs.com

Local Media Coverage

Arlington Heights Daily Herald: www.dailyherald.com/sports/cubs.asp

Chicago Sun-Times: www.suntimes.com/index/cubs.html

Chicago Tribune: chicagosports.chicagotribune.com/sports/baseball/cubs

Daily Southtown: www.dailysouthtown.com/index/dspro.html

Fan Sites

Between the Vines: cubsbetweenthevines.com/

Inside The Ivy: cubs.scout.com

The Cub Reporter: www.all-baseball.com/cubreporter/

Triple A Affiliate: Iowa Cubs

Official Site: www.iowacubs.com/

DesMoines Register: desmoinesregister.com

Cincinnati Reds

Official Site: www.cincinnatireds.com

Local Media Coverage

Cincinnati Enquirer: news.enquirer.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SPT04

Cincinnati Post: www.cincypost.com/reds/

Dayton Daily News: www.daytondailynews.com/sports/content/sports/reds/index.html

Fan Sites

The Big Red Machine: redlegjunior.proboards22.com/

Reds Zone: www.redszone.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Louisville Bats

Official Site: www.batsbaseball.com

Louisville Courier-Journal: www.courier-journal.com/cjsports/riverbats/index.html

Colorado Rockies

Official Site: www.coloradorockies.com

Local Media Coverage

Denver Post: www.denverpost.com/

Rocky Mountain News: www.rockymountainnews.com/drmn/rockies

Boulder Daily Camera: www1.dailycamera.com/bdc/rockies/0,1713,BDC_2451,00.html

Fan Sites

The Denver Baseball Observer: www.freshbaked.com/Rockies.html

Triple A Affiliate: Colorado Springs Sky Sox

Official Site: www.skysox.com/

Colorado Springs Gazette: www.gazette.com/

Florida Marlins

Official Site: www.flamarlins.com

Local Media Coverage

Miami Herald: www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/sports/baseball

South Florida Sun-Sentinel: www.sun-sentinel.com/sports/baseball/marlins

Palm Beach Post: www.palmbeachpost.com/marlins/content/sports/marlins

Fan Site

Marlins Baseball: www.marlinbaseball.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Albuquerque Isotopes

Official Site: albuquerquebaseball.com/

Albuquerque Journal: www.abqjournal.com/sports/ISOTOPES.htm

Houston Astros

Official Site: www.astros.com

Local Media Coverage

Houston Chronicle: www.chron.com/content/chronicle/sports/baseball/index.html

Fan Sites

Astros Daily: www.astrosdaily.com/

OrangeWhoopAss: www.orangewhoopass.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Round Rock Express

Official Site: www.roundrockexpress.com

Austin American-Statesman: www.statesman.com/sports/content/sports/express/index.html

Los Angeles Dodgers

Official Site: www.dodgers.com

Local Media Coverage

Los Angeles Daily News: www.dailynews.com/dodgers

Los Angeles Times: www.latimes.com/sports/baseball/mlb/dodgers/

The Press-Enterprise: www.pe.com/sports/baseball/

Fan Sites

Acme Dodgers: www.acmewebpages.com/dodgers/index.html

Dodger Blues: dodgerblues.com

Triple A Affiliate: Las Vegas 51s

Official Site: www.lv51.com/

Las Vegas Review-Journal: www.reviewjournal.com/sports/51s/

Milwaukee Brewers

Official Site: www.milwaukeebrewers.com

Local Media Coverage

Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel: www.jsonline.com/sports/brew/

Green Bay Press-Gazette: www.greenbaypressgazette.com/sports/baseball.shtml

Fan Site

Brewer Fan: www.brewerfan.net/

Triple A Affiliate: Nashville Sounds

Official Site: www.nashvillesounds.com/

The Tennessean: tennessean.com/sports/baseball/

New York Mets

Official Site: www.mets.com

Local Media Coverage

New York Daily News: www.nydailynews.com/sports/baseball/

New York Post: www.nypost.com/sports/mets/mets.htm

New York Times: www.nytimes.com/pages/sports/baseball/index.html

Newsday: www.newsday.com/sports/baseball/mets/

Bergen Record: www.northjersey.com

Newark Star-Ledger: www.nj.com/mets/

Journal-News: www.thejournalnews.com/mets/

Fan Sites

Amazinz: www.amazinz.com

Hate the Mets: hatethemets.com

Triple A Affiliate: Norfolk Tides

Official Site: www.norfolktides.com

The Virginian-Pilot: www.hamptonroads.com/pilotonline/sports/tides/

Philadelphia Phillies

Official Site: www.phillies.com

Local Media Coverage

Philadelphia Inquirer: www.philly.com/mld/philly/sports/baseball/mlb

Philadelphia Daily News: www.philly.com/mld/philly/sports/baseball/mlb

Bucks County Times: www.phillyburbs.com/pb-dyn/section.cfm?id=102&tmpl=phils

South Jersey Courier-Post: www.courierpostonline.com/prosports/phillies

TimesLeader: www.timesleader.com/mld/timesleader/sports/baseball/mlb/philadelphia_phillies

Trenton Times: www.pennlive.com/phillies

Fan Sites

Broad and Pattison Weekly Review: www.broadandpattison.com

The Phillies Fan Union: www.pfu.org/

Philafans: philaphans.com/phillies/

PhillieSportFanAddicts: www.baseballfans.net/phillies/index.php

Triple A Affiliate: Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons

Official Site: www.redbarons.com/

Times Leader: www.timesleader.com/mld/timesleader/sports/baseball/

Pittsburgh Pirates

Official Site: www.pittsburghpirates.com

Local Media Coverage

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: www.post-gazette.com/pirates/default.asp

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review: www.pittsburghlive.com/x/tribune-review/sports/pirateslive

Fan Sites

Only Bucs: www.baseballfans.net/pirates/index.php

Pirate Report: www.piratereport.com

Triple A Affiliate: Indianapolis Indians

Official Site: www.indyindians.com/

Indianapolis Star: www.indystar.com/sports/

St. Louis Cardinals

Official Site: www.stlcardinals.com

Local Media Coverage

St. Louis Post-Dispatch: www.stltoday.com/sports/cards

Fan Sites

Redbird Fever: redbirdfever.micklite.com

Redbird Nation: redbirdnation.blogspot.com

Redbird World: redbirds.deatheragecomputer.com

The Birdhouse: thestlcardinals.homestead.com

Triple A Affiliate: Memphis Redbirds

Official Site: www.memphisredbirds.com

Memphis Commercial Appeal: www.commercialappeal.com/mca/baseball

San Diego Padres

Official Site: www.padres.com

Local Media Coverage

San Diego Union-Tribune: www.signonsandiego.com/sports/padres/index.html

Fan Sites

Padres Nation: www.padresnation.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Portland Beavers

Official Site: www.pgepark.com/beavers/

The Oregonian: oregonlive.com/sports

San Francisco Giants

Official Site: www.sfgiants.com

Local Media Coverage

Contra Costa Times: www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/sports/baseball/mlb/san_francisco_giants/

Mercury News: www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/sports/baseball/mlb/san_francisco_giants/

Oakland Tribune: www.oaklandtribune.com/giants

San Francisco Chronicle: www.sfgate.com/sports/giants/

Sacramento Bee: www.sacbee.com/content/sports/baseball/sf_giants/

Santa Rosa Press Democrat: www1.pressdemocrat.com/apps/pbcs.dll/section?Category=SPORTS0301&Profile=1012

Fan Sites

Giants News: www.giantsnews.com

The Splash Landing: www.thesplashlanding.com/

Triple A Affiliate: Fresno Grizzlies

Official Site: www.fresnogrizzlies.com/

Fresno Bee: www.fresnobee.com/sports/grizzlies/

Washington Nationals (formerly the Montreal Expos)

Official Site: www.nationals.com

Local Media Coverage

Washington Post: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/sports/

Washington Times: www.washingtontimes.com/sports/

Triple A Affiliate: New Orleans Zephyrs

Official Site: www.zephyrsbaseball.com

New Orleans Times-Picayune: www.nola.com/zephyrs

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FINDING A LEAGUE

The basic assumption made early in this book was that 99% of the readers were going to be fantasy baseball veterans who play in existing leagues. However, if you're in that 1% who has never before played and now want to try it out, or if you're a veteran participant looking for a new league, you're probably wondering where you should turn. Look no further than this appendix. There are myriad businesses that provide fantasy baseball game services, both for a fee and for free. Some are large firms like ESPN.com, Yahoo.com, and CBS.Sportsline.com, while others are smaller businesses that specialize solely in fantasy sports administration. Most of them allow you to join a league either with a group of your friends or with a group of strangers. Most also let you choose between head-to-head, points-based, and Rotisserie-style leagues and all of the accompanying rules that go along with them.

The two leagues to which I belong use both a large corporate provider (CBS.Sportsline for the SIBB) and a small dedicated provider (USA Stats is the official statistics provider of the RLBA), and both have their virtues and drawbacks. I've used other providers too, and while they each have their individual strengths and weaknesses, all of them will help you satisfy your fantasy baseball fix, whether you're joining as part of a league or by yourself.

CBS Sportsline

www.sportsline.com/fantasy/baseball

The home of Baseball Commissioner, a fully customizable, easy-to-use service for pre-existing leagues. You provide the owners, you make the rules, you choose the options, you make your transactions, and they keep the stats. Up to the minute (and many times up to the second) live scoring is one of the top features of the choice of the SIBB, although Sportsline is not immune to the occasional small glitch. The biggest drawback is that when problems arise the only course of action is via e-mail and sometimes might take a few days to get a response.

ESPN Fantasy League Baseball

www.games.espn.go.com/cgi/flb/frontpage

The offering of ESPN.com, the most popular sport site on the Web. You can play four different games: Fantasy Baseball, Diamond Daily, Baseball Challenge, and Classic Fantasy Baseball, which enables you to play throughout the entire season using classic baseball statistics from past seasons.

Sports Illustrated.com Fantasy Baseball Commissioner

www.games.si.cnn.com

Administered by the nationally renowned sports information provider, Stats, Inc., SI.com's entry in the fantasy baseball world is adequate but unspectacular. The best part of the site, however, is ample and in-depth baseball insights by *Sports Illustrated's* respected baseball writing staff.

Sporting News Ultimate Fantasy Baseball

<http://fantasygames.sportingnews.com/baseball/home.html>

Buy a roster with *Sporting News* dollars, manage them throughout the season, and have a chance to win more than \$5,000 in prizes. TSN also provides other fantasy games in conjunction with foxsports.com.

Yahoo! Fantasy Baseball

Basic: www.baseball.fantasysports.yahoo.com/b1

Plus: www.baseball.fantasysports.yahoo.com/b2

The simple free offering from the largest provider of fantasy games. In the basic game, you play using Yahoo's standard rules, either against folks you know or with random strangers. Upgrade to the Plus service and you can customize any style of game you like and get insider information, including real-time scoring. Players in the same league can choose to participate for free or buck up for the added services. Different levels of original expert analysis, transaction reports, and injury updates are all provided by a dedicated staff, depending on how much you want to spend.

USA Today

www.cdmsports.com/baseball/index.html

With tens of thousands of dollars on the line, the fantasy challenge can be very lucrative for those who really know what they're doing around a roster and salary cap. You get a \$30 million cap to spend on 28 teams with 5 × 5 Rotisserie-style scoring.

Baseball Manager

www.baseballmanager.com

If you don't want to play a full season, Baseball Manager offers a 54-game lightning season in which you play head-to-head games over one-third of the season. Full-year and keeper leagues are also available.

Triple Play Fantasy Sports

www.tpfs.com/baseball.asp

If you feel you need to bounce your decisions off of someone and don't know who to trust, you might want to play a Triple Play Fantasy game. Trained consultants will help you with all of your decisions for free, almost around the clock, and they can also evaluate your trades for you. One big advantage is that you must be knowledgeable, serious, and respectful to be accepted in a league—a helpful policy for eliminating jerks from the league.

Scoresheet Baseball

www.scoresheetbaseball.com

This innovative service takes fantasy baseball one step further than the traditional interpretations. Not only do you draft and follow a team based on real activities during the week in the major leagues, you produce actual lineups and pitching rotations, assigning each player a role (base stealer, middle reliever, and so on). Join by yourself or with friends.

USA Stats

www.rotisserie.com

The choice of the founding fathers of fantasy, USA Stats (408 Allegheny Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21204) is the keeper of the original Rotisserie league. You too can gain entry into the RLBA (but not with the original players), which entitles you to stats and standings reports, player information, including links to rotowire.com player pages, personalized service, and a certificate for your league champion signed by Rotisserie legends Dan Okrent and Glen Waggoner. Come with your own league or use their matchmaker service.

All Star Stats

www.commissioner.rotoworld.com

Rotoworld, the popular player information and news site, joins with All Star Stats to provide a fantasy game in which you can set your own rules and play with your own league mates. Enjoy links to individual rotoworld player pages in every customized report.

Rototimes

www.tqstats.com/leagManager/baseball/

Another all-purpose site, Rototimes and TQ Stats can run your league and at the same time provide you with in-depth news, analysis, and opinions about all things baseball.

Other Stats Services on the Web

www.basfranchises.com (Big Apple Sports)

www.basfranchises.com.com

www.cfld.com (Center Field Software)

www.customstat.com

www.expressstats.com

www.fanball.com

www.fantasysports.com

www.fantasytimesports.com

www.fsru.com/baseball.php (Fantasy Sports R Us)

www.mhssports.com

www.rhinosoftware.com/baseball.htm

www.rotoplay.com

www.rotosharks.com

www.statomagic.com

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MOST VALUABLE FANTASY PLAYERS

Fantasy value doesn't always translate exactly into on-the-field value. The best players overall aren't necessarily the most prolific fantasy producers in any given season. Sometimes, however, their achievements are so spectacular that they transcend both worlds. In this book, I talk often about identifying the best players and going out and spending whatever you have to in order to get them. Well, the following tables list my year-by-year MVFPs, or Most Valuable Fantasy Players, and the FCY Award, or Fantasy Cy Young Award, since the beginning of the fantasy baseball era.

MOST VALUABLE FANTASY PLAYERS (MVFPs)

| National League | | | | | American League | | | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|----|-----|----|-----------------|-------------------|----|-----|-----|------|
| Year | Player | HR | RBI | SB | Avg. | Player | HR | RBI | SB | Avg. |
| 1980 | Mike Schmidt | 48 | 121 | 12 | .286 | Cecil Cooper | 25 | 122 | 17 | .352 |
| 1981 | Andre Dawson | 24 | 64 | 26 | .302 | Eddie Murray | 22 | 78 | 2 | .294 |
| 1982 | Dale Murphy | 36 | 109 | 23 | .281 | Rickey Henderson | 10 | 51 | 130 | .267 |
| 1983 | Dale Murphy | 36 | 121 | 30 | .302 | Jim Rice | 39 | 126 | 0 | .305 |
| 1984 | Dale Murphy | 36 | 100 | 19 | .290 | Kirk Gibson | 27 | 91 | 29 | .282 |
| 1985 | Ryne Sandberg | 26 | 83 | 54 | .305 | Rickey Henderson | 24 | 72 | 80 | .314 |
| 1986 | Eric Davis | 27 | 71 | 80 | .277 | Joe Carter | 29 | 121 | 29 | .302 |
| 1987 | Eric Davis | 37 | 100 | 50 | .293 | Joe Carter | 32 | 106 | 31 | .264 |
| 1988 | D. Strawberry | 39 | 101 | 29 | .269 | Jose Canseco | 42 | 124 | 40 | .307 |
| 1989 | Ho. Johnson | 36 | 101 | 41 | .287 | Bo Jackson | 32 | 105 | 26 | .256 |
| 1990 | Barry Bonds | 33 | 114 | 52 | .301 | Rickey Henderson | 28 | 61 | 65 | .325 |
| 1991 | Barry Bonds | 25 | 116 | 43 | .292 | Jose Canseco | 44 | 122 | 26 | .266 |
| 1992 | Barry Bonds | 34 | 103 | 39 | .311 | Ken Griffey, Jr. | 27 | 103 | 10 | .308 |
| 1993 | Barry Bonds | 46 | 123 | 29 | .336 | Ken Griffey, Jr. | 45 | 109 | 17 | .309 |
| 1994 | Jeff Bagwell | 39 | 116 | 15 | .368 | Albert Belle | 36 | 101 | 9 | .357 |
| 1995 | Sammy Sosa | 36 | 119 | 34 | .268 | Albert Belle | 50 | 126 | 5 | .317 |
| 1996 | Barry Bonds | 42 | 129 | 40 | .308 | Brady Anderson | 50 | 110 | 21 | .297 |
| 1997 | Larry Walker | 49 | 130 | 33 | .366 | Ken Griffey, Jr. | 56 | 147 | 15 | .304 |
| 1998 | Mark McGwire | 70 | 147 | 1 | .299 | Alex Rodriguez | 42 | 124 | 46 | .310 |
| 1999 | Sammy Sosa | 63 | 141 | 7 | .288 | Ken Griffey, Jr. | 48 | 134 | 24 | .285 |
| 2000 | Sammy Sosa | 50 | 138 | 7 | .320 | Alex Rodriguez | 52 | 135 | 18 | .318 |
| 2001 | Barry Bonds | 73 | 137 | 13 | .328 | Alex Rodriguez | 52 | 135 | 18 | .318 |
| 2002 | Vlad. Guerrero | 39 | 111 | 40 | .336 | Alfonso Soriano | 39 | 102 | 41 | .300 |
| 2003 | Albert Pujols | 43 | 124 | 5 | .359 | Alfonso Soriano | 38 | 91 | 35 | .290 |
| 2004 | Adrian Beltre | 48 | 121 | 7 | .334 | Vladimir Guerrero | 39 | 126 | 15 | .337 |

FANTASY CY YOUNG (FCY) AWARD

| National League | | | | | American League | | | |
|-----------------|----------------|-------|------|------|-------------------|-------|------|------|
| | Player | W-L | ERA | WHIP | Player | W-L | ERA | WHIP |
| 1980 | Steve Carlton | 24-9 | 2.34 | 1.10 | Mike Norris | 22-9 | 2.53 | 1.05 |
| 1981 | Tom Seaver | 14-2 | 2.54 | 1.12 | Steve McCatty | 14-7 | 2.33 | 1.08 |
| 1982 | Steve Rogers | 19-8 | 2.40 | 1.12 | Lamar Hoyt | 19-15 | 3.53 | 1.24 |
| 1983 | John Denny | 19-6 | 2.37 | 1.16 | Lamar Hoy | 24-10 | 3.66 | 1.02 |
| 1984 | Dwight Gooden | 17-9 | 2.60 | 1.07 | Mike Boddicker | 20-11 | 2.79 | 1.14 |
| 1985 | Dwight Gooden | 24-4 | 1.53 | 0.97 | Bret Saberhagen | 20-6 | 2.87 | 1.06 |
| 1986 | Mike Scott | 18-10 | 2.22 | 0.92 | Roger Clemens | 24-4 | 2.48 | 0.97 |
| 1987 | Mike Scott | 16-13 | 3.23 | 1.12 | Roger Clemens | 20-9 | 2.97 | 1.18 |
| 1988 | Orel Hershiser | 23-8 | 2.26 | 1.05 | Frank Viola | 24-7 | 2.64 | 1.14 |
| 1989 | Mike Scott | 20-10 | 3.10 | 1.06 | Bret Saberhagen | 23-6 | 2.16 | 0.96 |
| 1990 | Doug Drabek | 22-6 | 2.76 | 1.06 | Bob Welch | 27-6 | 2.95 | 1.22 |
| 1991 | Tom Glavine | 20-11 | 2.55 | 1.09 | Roger Clemens | 18-10 | 2.62 | 1.05 |
| 1992 | Greg Maddux | 20-11 | 2.18 | 1.01 | Dennis Eckersley* | 7-1 | 1.91 | 0.91 |
| 1993 | Greg Maddux | 20-10 | 2.36 | 1.05 | Kevin Appier | 18-8 | 2.56 | 1.11 |
| 1994 | Greg Maddux | 16-6 | 1.56 | 0.90 | David Cone | 16-5 | 2.94 | 1.07 |
| 1995 | Greg Maddux | 19-2 | 1.63 | 0.81 | Randy Johnson | 18-2 | 2.48 | 1.05 |
| 1996 | John Smoltz | 24-8 | 2.94 | 1.00 | Pat Hentgen | 20-10 | 3.22 | 1.25 |
| 1997 | Greg Maddux | 19-4 | 2.20 | 0.95 | Roger Clemens | 21-7 | 2.05 | 1.03 |
| 1998 | Greg Maddux | 18-9 | 2.22 | 0.98 | Roger Clemens | 20-6 | 2.65 | 1.10 |
| 1999 | Mike Hampton | 22-4 | 2.90 | 1.28 | Pedro Martinez | 23-4 | 2.07 | 0.92 |
| 2000 | Randy Johnson | 19-7 | 2.64 | 1.12 | Pedro Martinez | 18-6 | 1.74 | 0.74 |
| 2001 | Randy Johnson | 21-6 | 2.49 | 1.01 | Mark Mulder | 21-8 | 3.45 | 1.16 |
| 2002 | Randy Johnson | 24-5 | 2.32 | 1.03 | Pedro Martinez | 20-4 | 2.26 | 0.92 |
| 2003 | Eric Gagne** | 2-3 | 1.20 | 0.69 | Roy Halladay | 22-7 | 3.25 | 1.07 |
| 2004 | Roger Clemens | 18-4 | 2.98 | 1.16 | Johan Santana | 20-6 | 2.61 | 0.92 |

*Recorded 51 saves; **Recorded 55 saves

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