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Fantasy Baseball: A Distortion of the Game

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I have a confession to make. I vowed I would never do it. It was just too twisted, too much of a perversion of a sacred American institution. But I did it, and I have been doing it for several years.

The day before the baseball season began I spend four hours with fifteen other adolescents between the ages of thirtysomething and fiftysomething. The reason for the gathering was to draft players for our baseball fantasy league.

The atmosphere was tense and full of anticipation as the draft began. First, the random drawing to establish the drafting order, then the decisions about who should be retained from last years team. Rules in this league allow retention of one pitcher and one hitter. Probably the most interesting choice in this phase was the decision by the owner of the Darth Faders to keep Greg Maddox and let Dennis Eckersly go. And then the draft began. First came the outfielders and catchers which went seven rounds, then infielders, and finally pitchers. The clock ground on, the delays were numerous, each decision studied with the care of a broker on the futures market.

Each owner had their own approach. Everyone had charts and lists, some more elaborate than others. Some owners have gone high tech: Computers, data bases, rating systems at each position. I'm not making this up.

The conversation, or banter, flows along in predictable fashion. "I can't believe you picked that guy, he's a stiff." "Didn't you know that he went on the DL last night at 3:11 a.m. EDT. Hey, I heard it on ESPN this morning." "I just knew he was going to pick that guy, he loves Dodgers." Then as the day lengthend it got a bit testier. "Make your pick, it's getting late, you've been preparing for months, come on." An occasional expletive shoots across the room in reply. The junk food consumption continues, smoke fills the room, the trail to the bathroom is worn thin. Its a real pressure cooker. The day ends when Allan Mills of Baltimore becomes the last pitcher taken.

Now the fun really begins. You spend the next six months watching how each of your players is doing, and more important watching the dreaded Grim Reaper, the injury list, which will take its toll over the season. Standings arrive every three to

four weeks, and your skills as an owner are put on public display.

The way in which you watch baseball will never be the same, as you now watch players rather than teams. What happens when a Twins fan who owns Jose Canseco is watching Canseco batting with the bases loaded against the Twins? Who do you cheer for? Such is one dilemma of being a fantasy league owner.

This really is a sickness that has swept America. It goes back to the winter of 1979-80 when a group of New Yorkers gathered at LaRotisserie Francaise a restaurant on the East Side to begin discussions of creating a baseball league in which ordinary folk could become team owners of real major league players. A few months later rules were formalized and the first Rotisserie League was formed.

Since its invention Rotisserie League Baseball has spread like a cancer on sport, to paraphrase John Dean. It has spawned all sorts of variations. The rules for trades, the use of an injured list, and the categories of statistics, vary widely. The stakes vary too, from a few dollars to thousands, and no doubt in some places even hundreds of thousands of dollars. Major league switchboards are flooded with calls from desperate owners seeking inside information on injuries, or with complaints that some player is not seeing enough action.

Rotisserie or Fantasy Leagues are everywhere, and they have spread into several other sports. There are NBA leagues, NHL leagues, NFL leagues, and most mind boggling of all, fantasy PGA golf. Can bowling be far behind?

Leagues have become commercial enterprises. Newspapers run leagues, there are any number of leagues advertised in sports publications, and of course you can play in the computer age. Last season the computer service Prodigy offered a franchise for \$119.95 for a 162 game season, or the lightning season of 54 games for \$59.95. Rock Star Meat Loaf was running 8 teams on Prodigy last season. Talk about your Field of Mega Bytes.

A gaggle of service companies have been spawned by Rotisserie Leagues. All the major sports publications offer fantasy league supplements, Baseball Weekly has a fantasy section, and the computer software and statistics services are booming. Two weeks ago Baseball Weekly ran nearly 5 full pages of advertising for Fantasy Leagues and services. And this is only baseball.

Where will it all end? Here is one senario: Tom Glavine is pitching for Atlanta on the last day of the season. He is facing Will Clark in the last of the 9th inning, and Clark is the pennant winning run for the Giants who will then overtake the Braves. But wait. Tom Glavine is also a fantasy league fanatic. He owns Will Clark in his league and he knows that he needs the RBI's and a home run to win the league title. He dishes up a fat one to Will who drills it deep into the fog beyond Candlestick Park. The Giants win the pennant, the Giants win the pennant, but more important than that, Tom Glavine wins his fantasy baseball league.

Say it isn't so, Tommy! Say it isn't so!

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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