



The Power of the NFL Draft

The Power of Sports

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The NFL Draft, [which is being held in Philadelphia](#) this year, is a dream come true for a few lucky young football players. Each lucky player makes a transformational rite of passage from youth to adulthood, gets his first job, and ultimately signs a lucrative employment contract. The Draft showcases their personal rite as a kind of reality TV show, too, which must be extremely exciting, especially for those who find themselves at the top of the draft board and in the media spotlight.

The Draft may be just as exciting for those who call themselves a “[fantasy football team manager](#),” as I do. As a new breed of intellectually and economically-interested sports fan, such

managers often view the Draft as a chance to learn about tomorrow's sports stars up close and personal, in part to help them decide which athlete's bodies are worth putting a bet on.

If we step back from all this excitement, and take a closer look at the Draft's place in our broader sports culture, we can see that it has become a highly mediated commercial spectacle. The Draft, as such a spectacle, also underscores the NFL's unmatched power in our sports culture, shaping not just what we think about particular football prospects, but also of the role of money in our lives, how we think about humans as commodities to be bought and sold, and how we conceptualize human potential. In fact, the reality TV that is the NFL Draft shows us a lot about our current sports culture, and where it might be heading.

In the process fantasy football fans—including myself—are complicit in treating NFL hopefuls like commodities, just as the NFL and its associate sports media outlets do before, during, and after the Draft.

Since 2010, the NFL and its associate media have marketed the Draft as a prime time television event. Televising the draft makes the NFL *product* a near-yearlong spectacle: even though NFL games are played in the fall and winter, fans are encouraged to pay attention to year-round player scouting by leading “draft experts,” hundreds of “mock drafts” that attempt to predict the ultimate Draft outcome, and then the Draft itself. The saga will continue to unfold after the Draft, too, as young players navigate summer training camps and jockey for permanent employment with the teams that have acquired their rights. These post-Draft professional journeys may even unfold on TV shows like HBO's “Hard Knocks,” which follows one NFL team through pre-season training camp, or on “John Gruden's QB Camp” on ESPN, which simulates the NFL experience for young wannabe pro quarterbacks.

For NFL hopefuls, the odds of making an NFL roster aren't particularly favorable; only a small number of college football players ever “go pro.” An even smaller number enjoy a career there beyond a few years. The most promising gridiron grinders will face intense public scrutiny leading up to the Draft, much like a desirable piece of blue fin tuna will attract the most discerning customers at the Tokyo Fish Market auction. Expectations are highest and scrutiny most intense for young quarterbacks, who are expected to be the handsome and intelligent face men of each NFL franchise. In order to determine which quarterbacks will most likely succeed in the pros, NFL teams administer the obscure Wonderlic test, and many sports media outlets share the test results with the sports world as if they conclusively indicate how “intelligent” these young men are. Quarterbacks deemed to have the most “upside” potential—potential to be even better than what

conventional wisdom would predict—may have a slightly better chance of making an NFL roster because NFL general managers want to build their own careers on making the “right” picks. Thus the glitz and glamour—but above all profit-seeking—of the Draft spectacle shapes our perceptions of these young athletes: in this world what matters most is a brawny body that can be built into a successful pro, not brains, unless of course you play quarterback, in which case you must be strong, smart AND handsome!



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For NFL fans who play fantasy football (i.e., “fantasy football managers”), especially high-stakes **“daily fantasy football managers,”** **the odds of winning money may be as poor as the odds of making an NFL roster.** Yet the cultural impact of the actions of these managers is no less significant than the actions of the NFL and its associate media partners. Online fantasy football pits fantasy football managers against each other in virtual competitions of who can pick the player who will perform best each game day. The manager who has selected team members that score the most “fantasy points” will emerge victorious, and (often) earn a financial reward as a result. The potential profit that daily fantasy football managers can “earn” if they predict the draftees who will be most successful in their rookie year is **alluring**, but **rarely achieved**. Still, many fantasy football managers believe they can get an edge up by paying close attention to the potential impact of the rookie class. They believe that predicting the best rookies requires gluing one’s eyes to the Draft and the media frenzy that surrounds it. In short, they believe they must do their homework in order to know which bodies are worth betting on.

It's an exciting pursuit of personal entertainment and profit, but in the process fantasy football fans —**including myself**—are complicit in treating NFL hopefuls like commodities, just as the NFL and its associate sports media outlets do before, during, and after the Draft. After all, it is our behavior as fans that creates a demand for advertising revenue that would not otherwise exist. This is the case for NFL games of course, but also for the Draft. And this is why the transformation of the NFL Draft into a reality TV event, while attracting millions of eyeballs and generating millions, perhaps billions of dollars, tells us so much about the power of this most powerful American sport. Reality TV—it its production but also in its consumption—may hold great potential for real profit, but it can also distort real priorities. Wouldn't it be better if our popular sports culture provided “fantasy football team managers” with real, healthier outlets for their intelligence, creativity, and determination to win, outlets that do not depend on treating other human beings as commodities to be bought and sold? Wouldn't that be a real dream come true, and not just for those lucky enough to be drafted in Philadelphia?

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Shannon Telenko says:

May 8, 2017 at 11:52 am

So by participating in this you are perpetuating it then; is that what you're saying? I don't understand the point of this analysis if you're not willing to address how you will discontinue or change your complicity. What would you recommend to other fans like yourself?

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