

# Fantasy Sports: Socialization and Gender Relations

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## Abstract

Fantasy sports are played by millions of people throughout the world. By 2017, it is predicted to be an industry with a turnover measured in billions of dollars. Recent scholarly attention has focused on the motivations for participating in fantasy sports leagues. In this article, we report on ongoing qualitative research being conducted with fantasy sports enthusiasts and their wives and partners in Australia. There has been little previous research into the attitudes of wives and partners toward the fantasy sports habits of enthusiasts. The enthusiasts studied here play in a long-running fantasy National Basketball Association (NBA) league that began in 1999 and continues in a relatively unchanged format. We argue that social factors are the primary motivation for participants in this league in terms of enhancing and maintaining existing friendships. How those social factors are practiced, however, has significant consequences for managing workplace and relationship demands.

## Keywords

fantasy sports, gender, motivations, masculinities, qualitative research

Fantasy sports have a long history that extends in some accounts to the early 1950s and fantasy golf games, but accounts of this differ (Esser, 1994; Hu, 2003; Shipman, 2001). Most attribute the birth of rotisserie fantasy sports to early-1980s fantasy guru Dan Okrent who, along with his dedicated league-mates, laboriously kept pen and paper accounts of baseball statistics to run fantasy leagues that dispelled boredom, provided a method for escapism, and satisfied his obsessive personality (Kurland & Jansen, 2010). In the digitally mediated 21st century, fantasy sports are played online. This has meant

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greater accessibility and created the potential for fantasy sports to be played across geographical and temporal boundaries with few limitations. In recent years, fantasy sports leagues have increased in popularity. Research conducted by the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (in Ruihley & Billings, 2012: 436) suggests that around 32 million people in America and Canada participate in fantasy sports. In the United Kingdom, an estimated 2 million people play fantasy English Premier League, and in Australia, the Australian Rules Football fantasy games *Dreamteam* and *Supercoach* attract more than half a million participants annually (Canning, 2009; Montague, 2010). This kind of popularity makes fantasy sports a lucrative industry, with recent predictions indicating that it will be a \$1.7 billion industry by 2017 (Van Riper, 2012).

In this article, we report on ongoing research being conducted with fantasy sports enthusiasts and their wives and partners (see Howie & Campbell, 2013, 2014). They are participants in a long-running fantasy National Basketball Association (NBA) league that began in 1999 on the *Yahoo!* fantasy NBA platform. The league has remained relatively unchanged in its 14-year history. It is a “9-cat,” “roisserie,” “non-keeper” league, which means that participants compete over nine statistical categories (9-cat) in an accumulative statistical format (roisserie) with a fresh team drafted by each player each year (non-keeper, as opposed to keeper leagues where participants retain players across seasons). The members in this league hold two annual live, offline events—a draft day in late October and a party to determine the draft order (that they call the “lottery”) in July.

The demographics of the average fantasy sports enthusiast has been consistently identified as a White man, aged in his early to mid-30s, who is married or in a relationship, college educated, and works in well-paying professions (Lee et al., 2013a; Ruihley & Hardin, 2010). The league members fit within the demographic picture of fantasy sports enthusiasts. The average age of the participants in this league is 33.9 years. All are men, nine of whom are White. All earn an income more than Aus\$50,000 per year, and many earn a great deal more. Six are married, three are in long-term, cohabitation relationships, and one is single. Three have children. Seven have college degrees, three of whom have graduate degrees. All have played competitive basketball, some to an advanced level. This article features data collected from seven in-depth interviews with people from this league—four conducted with fantasy sports enthusiasts and three with the wives of enthusiasts. The data collected are analyzed following a review of the recent literature exploring the motivations for participating in fantasy sports. We explore in this review the social and gendered aspects of fantasy sports participation. We suggest that women *participate* in fantasy sports leagues in particular ways—ways that are not always recognized in the fantasy sports literature. Our account of fantasy sports practices suggests that women are always present and always involved, often as gendered and heteronormative participants in hegemonically masculine sporting spectatorship.

## Motivations for Playing Fantasy Sports

Although there are many different motivating factors for playing fantasy sports, a number of motivational factors feature consistently in the growing literature exploring

the motivations for participating in fantasy sports. Spinda and Haridakis's (2008) research identified six primary motivations for participating in fantasy sports. These are a desire for ownership; a sense of achievement and to boost self-esteem; as escapism or to pass the time; to socialize; for bragging rights; and fun and amusement. They adopt a "use-and-gratifications" approach that is underscored by assumptions that media users select materials and media behaviors based on their perceived ability to satisfy particular needs. This approach assumes that an interest in fantasy sports is pursued if it is expected to provide better personal outcomes and satisfaction than other alternative pursuits or hobbies. One might describe this as an economically rational motivation that considers opportunity costs in deciding where and when—given the demographic picture we have outlined of the typical fantasy sports participant—one's precious free time should be spent (Ruihley & Hardin, 2011a; and see Roy & Goss, 2007).

Farquhar and Meeds (2007) similarly identified the motivations for participation in fantasy sports, also under a use-and-gratifications approach, via a quantitative study involving 42 respondents (38 men, 4 women) recruited from a Midwestern U.S. university. Five primary motivations were identified—arousal, surveillance, entertainment, escape, and social interaction. Surprisingly, "social interaction" in fantasy sports was deemed a lower ranking motivating factor (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007). The motivators "arousal" and "surveillance" were considered the primary motivating influences. They conclude that these findings suggest that social aspects may be less significant factors in fantasy sports leagues than previously thought. This conclusion appears to be supported by Lee et al.'s (2013) study of multiple respondent groups that completed questionnaires sent to them via online discussion forums. They argue that there are 12 key motivating factors. Three (bonding with friends and family, social interaction, and competition), or perhaps four ("love for the sport" may be a social variable because deep fandom is rarely an isolationist experience), factors relate to social aspects of fantasy sports participation, but their motivating influence was comparatively small and part of a complex motivational picture. It may be noteworthy that respondents were recruited via online forums. This may indicate that survey respondents were already socially active in the very process of participating in the research. Lee et al.'s (2013a) research also assumes that people become involved in fantasy sports as an extension of sporting fandom and that the primary motivations relate to a desire for a "vicarious" experience, glory, and lifestyle. Dwyer and Kim's (2011) account of use-and-gratifications theory to explain motivations for participation in fantasy football argues that socialization is still a significant motivating factor along with escape and competition (the latter of which is also in most conceptions a social factor).

Several studies by Ruihley, Billings, and colleagues have accounted for motives for participation in fantasy sports in a variety of related contexts. Using a methodology involving both qualitative and quantitative methods, Ruihley and Hardin (2011a) concluded that the primary motivating factors were fanship, competition, and social aspects whereas the three least motivating factors were "fan expression," ownership fantasy, and escapism (p. 232). Brown, Billings, and Ruihley (2012) examine changing fantasy sports motivations across the "Life Cycle" (p. 333). Their quantitative

study involving 529 participants focuses on age differences and found that younger enthusiasts (aged under 35 years) consumed 4.2 more hr of sports media than participants aged 35+. Younger enthusiasts were motivated primarily by entertainment, enjoyment, and surveillance whereas older enthusiasts were primarily motivated by *passing the time* despite actually spending less time on fantasy sports (Brown et al., 2012). Little mention is made of social aspects in this study.

Billings and Ruihley (2013b) explore the relationship between fantasy sports motivations and everyday fandom motivations. An important context for their study is Sandomir's (in Ruihley & Billings, 2013) claim that fantasy sports encourage sports fans to "root, root, root for no team" (p. 438). They identify a clear distinction between these types of fans—everyday sports fans follow sports to see their favorite teams win, fantasy sports fans follow to see the players who are members of their fictional team perform. Their findings show that of the 1,261 people surveyed, those who played fantasy sports experienced greater levels of "enjoyment, entertainment, passing time, social interaction" and desire for "surveillance." The motivational factor "arousal" was relatively constant between the two fan types, and escapism was more prevalent among traditional sports fans. As such, it could be suggested that fantasy sports participants are more engaged, involved, and tuned-in to their sporting fandom than traditional, more passive sports fans (as satirized in the FX Network's [2013], *The League*).

Overwhelmingly, men constitute the majority of fantasy sports participants (see Billings & Ruihley, 2013a). As such, these studies in not explicitly discussing gender and gender differences stand as accounts of men following men's sporting events. We suggest that women play important roles in fantasy sports leagues. However, there is a limited literature that explores the roles of women in fantasy sports. It is to this literature that we now turn.

## **Gender Differences in Fantasy Sports: Reproducing Masculine Privilege**

Hutchins and Rowe (2012) argue that sports have long been a "site of institutionalized discrimination against women" (p. 172). Digital sports media—particularly sporting computer games and fantasy sports—compound this dilemma by reinforcing stereotypes of masculine superiority and enhancing the gaze of men toward masculine sporting achievements. Although some progress has been made toward women's participation in sports and sporting fandom, it remains that men are the "overwhelming focus of adulation in the form and content of . . . elite sport" (see also Leonard, 2007; Messner & Sabo, 1990; Thompson, 1990).

The presence of sport in digital media has worked to reinforce myths of White masculine privilege (Leonard, 2013). Online sports media has reproduced male team sports for male audiences (Raney & Bryant, 2006). Fantasy sports have captured a large portion of these audiences. Research by Lee et al. (2013a) suggests that around 4% of fantasy sports participants are women, whereas a self-reporting style survey

conducted for the Fantasy Sports Trade Association (2012) suggests that somewhere between 5% and 8% of women aged above 12 report participating in fantasy sports. Women's low participation in fantasy sports may be a legacy of traditional gender roles in leisure activities more generally and sporting activities in particular (see G. Lee & Bhargava, 2004; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Ruihley and Billings (2013) argue that women in heterosexual relationships are heavily invested in the enjoyment of their partners. Whiteside and Hardin (2011) argue, for example, that women "watched traditional, mainstream sports because they offered the women a way to connect with the men in their lives; it was not the content driving the consumption, but the opportunity for relationship maintenance and quality time" (p. 136).

Ruihley and Billing's (2013) study into women's fantasy sports participation motivation purposively sampled 182 women. They argue that although men appear to play fantasy sports with a greater intensity, both men and women participate on the basis of similar motivating forces. They find that women's involvement in fantasy sports reflects their desire to enhance their personal relationships and "family obligations" (Whiteside & Hardin, 2011, p. 136). There is, at its heart, an emotional connection to loved ones' interests rather than a connection to fantasy sports or sporting fandom. So although motivating factors and their importance were similar between genders across seven categories—arousal, entertainment, enjoyment, escape, pass time, self-esteem, and surveillance—the underlying mechanisms through which these motivations *motivate* may be quite different.

Although scholars know little about "how and why" women become motivated to play fantasy sports (Ruihley & Billing, 2013, p. 437), we demonstrate with our data that women are very much part of fantasy sports leagues. This participation, however, takes the form of traditional sporting gender roles and may even work to reinforce hegemonic masculine behaviors and traditions. As Ruihley and Billings (2013) argue, fantasy sports may be no less hostile to women than other forms of sporting spectatorship and participation:

Indeed, for men who think mainstream sport has become less deviant and neutered, fantasy sport offers a new frontier in which hegemony is reinforced and boorish behavior is more likely to be tolerated . . . this creates a potentially hostile environment for women to participate in if less initiated/immersed in sport lore. (p. 438)

In the context of witnessing soccer hooliganism in televisual formats, Poulton (2007, 2008) argues that aggressive masculinity can be experienced vicariously. In living a life where "natural" masculine aggressive tendencies need to be suppressed, fantasy sports participation may be a way to practice hegemonic forms of masculinity in more socially acceptable ways (see Connell, 2005; Miller, 2001, p. 47). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that fantasy sports leagues can be particularly hostile toward women, acting as an ersatz "Old Boy's Club" where men can "act like men without fear of feminization" (Davis & Duncan, 2006, p. 261; see also Ruihley & Billings, 2013).

An important space for the practice of hegemonic masculine identities is the message boards that are central features of online fantasy sports leagues. Message boards are a primary mechanism through which debates and discussions of life and fantasy sports occur. Research exploring the role of message boards in fantasy sports participation by Ruihley and Hardin (2010) found that around 62% of their sample of 322 “fantasy sports users” use message boards to enhance their participatory experience (p. 233). Those who used message boards did so for four principal reasons—(a) socializing that includes “trash-talking and joking” about “fantasy sport and life”; (b) to have discussions about game content, tactics, league issues such as trades and free agency, dubbed “logistical conversations”; (c) surveillance through reducing the embodied performances of professional athletes into statistical representations that can be evaluated, judged, and traded as a commodity; and (d) to seek advice and opinions on management and player performances, and to tap into the collective literacy and expertise of the league participants (Ruihley & Hardin, 2010, pp. 245-246).

Davis and Duncan (2006) write of the “harsh, sexist vernacular used by participants” in message board interactions (p. 251). Message boards are a place for trash talking and an “opportunity to openly ostracize fellow fantasy leaguers” and to “harshly verbalize their dominance over other competitors” (Davis & Duncan, 2006, p. 255). Indeed, fantasy sports leagues rely on a particular version of what it is to be a man (Davis & Duncan, 2006). Fantasy sports certainly appear to be locations for the reproduction of behaviors reinforcing what it means to be hegemonically masculine (Connell, 2005; Hynes & Cook, 2013; Messner, 1988; Miller, 2001).

The masculine tendency toward competition was explored in Davis and Duncan’s (2006) study where fantasy sports leagues provided an opportunity to reinforce manliness in an otherwise employment- and family-oriented world that seeks to suppress masculinity. Elsewhere, we have analyzed the content of message boards in the league we researched here. We also found evidence of highly masculinized, sexist, and misogynistic language used in the day-to-day interactions between participants (see Howie & Campbell, 2013). Contrary to Davis and Duncan’s (2006) insistence on the heteronormative character of these message board interactions, we found evidence of homoerotic interaction where participants would discuss the muscular physiques of NBA athletes, their sexual prowess, and their attractiveness. At these times, the message boards became a place for double entendre, sexual inference, and all manner of homoerotic jokes (Howie & Campbell, 2013). We certainly share Ruihley and Hardin’s (2010) assessment of message boards as “vital” to the effectiveness of fantasy sports leagues (p. 245). Using message boards is associated with greater satisfaction in playing fantasy sports and a higher likelihood of playing again the next season compared with participants who do not use message boards (Ruihley & Hardin, 2010).

In the sections that follow, we provide an account of interviews that we have conducted with members of a long-running fantasy NBA league and wives of league members. In total, seven interviews have been conducted—four with male members of the league and three with the wives of members. Some interviews went for well over an hour, others were as short as 25 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were encouraged to speak freely about whatever aspects of fantasy sports they chose. Three broad themes emerged from interviews with the men and

women: (a) Women are significant participants in fantasy sports leagues, even when they do not play; (b) fantasy sport is a social activity; and (c) achieving a balance between one's job and effective participation in fantasy sports is challenging.

## Masculinity and Women's "Participation"

As Hartmann (2003) has argued in another context, a vital social function of sport is the space it provides for men to discuss "what it is to be a real man" (p. 19). For Stephen—a dedicated fantasy basketball enthusiast who, like all members of this league, has played since 1999—masculinity is linked to one's ability to find an adequate amount of time to commit to effectively participate in this highly competitive, 14-year deep, fantasy NBA league. He expresses frustration at those who are unwilling to take part in planning social events for draft day, do not regularly work on their team, or put in the appropriate preparation or effort for selecting their team. Stephen (enthusiast, personal interview, August 18, 2013) believes that citing commitments to wives, partners, and children is a poor, and inherently unbelievable, excuse:

I understand that people can't spend countless hours locked on their laptop trying to work out the next best free agent and all that sort of stuff. I understand people's amount of time dedicated to it will change. But in saying that though, I don't think that could prevent you from having an idea or thought on how we could improve the league or draft day or whatever it might be. I think it is a misconception. I think some of those guys assume that their wives would be like that or girlfriends will be like that. I don't necessarily think they are. Like anything, when your married and stuff, I can't spend four weekends in a row and go out on the booze all day Saturday and all night Saturday night, roll in at 3 o'clock. I can't do that because I've got other commitments but you can still do that to a degree.

For Stephen, this is an important moment for the practice of masculinity where calmly explaining to one's partner or wife the importance of fantasy sports in one's life should result in having more time to devote to making the league interesting, fun, and competitive. He understands that perhaps some people in his league have other interests that they wish to pursue at the expense of their involvement in fantasy sports, "but to use your wife or your partner as an excuse" undermines the enjoyment of the other men in the league.

The relationship between men and sport, and the associated exclusion of women, has received considerable scholarly attention (Connell, 1993; McKay, Messner, & Sabo, 2000; Messner, 1992; Pope, 2013; Stevenson, 2002). In fantasy sports leagues, this has become an important issue. A number of support groups for the wives of fantasy sports enthusiasts have emerged in recent years that purport to tell the stories of women who are effectively "widows" during the sports seasons (Ervin, 2012). Groups with names such as *Women Against Fantasy Sports*, *Wives Against Fantasy Football*, and the *Wives of Fantasy Football* shine a gendered light on yet another terrain of sporting spectatorship and participation that provides few active roles for women (Jefferson, 2011).

There is little evidence from our interviews that the wives of fantasy sports enthusiasts are simply "against" their husbands playing fantasy sports. However,

early in a joint interview (July 24, 2013) with married couple Chanel (fantasy sports wife) and longtime fantasy sports enthusiast Al conducted with the first author, Chanel puts the issue of masculinity in fantasy sports on the agenda. She wonders about the differences between playing sport and playing fantasy sports—“what’s the difference between the basketball court and the online forum?” Chanel sees similarities in the ways that both real basketball and fantasy basketball encourage manly competition, describing sports as a “surrogate for the gladiatorial” in pursuit of the sweetness of declaring “Yes, I beat you!” Chanel sees the display of masculinity as central to playing fantasy sports. Her husband offers a suggestion as to why this may be. He believes that playing basketball is a social, friendly, and personal activity where too much aggression may lead to physical injuries, sanctions, and consequences. In online, fantasy sports forums, however, “you get a lot of keyboard warriors. People who are tough guys when they are on the keyboard where on lots of internet forums you see lots of expressions of masculinity” (Al, enthusiast, joint interview, July 24, 2013).

For Stephen (enthusiast, personal interview, August 18, 2013), fantasy sports “fuels my competitive urges . . . Which is what I really like about it. Just talking crap and proving someone wrong. That’s great.” Chanel (fantasy sports wife, joint interview, July 24, 2013) describes this in satirical terms as “Machismo! I puff my chest out. I have bigger numbers than you!” Davis and Duncan (2006) described the fantasy sports participants in their study as engaging in “trash talking and crude, misogynistic, and heterosexist vernacular as a means of articulating supremacy” (p. 255).

Fantasy sports wife, Gabrielle (her husband is Carlos whom we introduce shortly), describes her husband’s involvement in fantasy sports as an incredibly important part of his life. Gabrielle describes longing for a similar common ground that she could share with her friendship group:

I get why you all do it . . . For one, its competition between you. You like beating each other. You like giving each other shit. But it gives you an outlet to talk to each other and keep involved. I know you care about NBA and it makes it more interesting. It makes you more involved in the game and you feel kind of a connection to it. I think that is kind of cool. Me and my girlfriends joke about the fact that all we do to socialise is get together and drink. That’s literally all we do. We don’t go out and have activities or hobbies or we don’t play golf together. We don’t have things like fantasy. All we do is get together and drink. I think that other than the shit you give each other, I think that it is mostly constructive. (Gabrielle, fantasy sports wife, personal interview, July 30, 2013)

We find little evidence of opposition among the fantasy sports wives who were interviewed. On the contrary, we found support and understanding. Although fantasy sports wife Linda (fantasy sports wife, personal interview, July 22, 2013) would sometimes be frustrated by her husband’s fantasy sports participation, she was also happy to let him do his own thing and have his own time—“you don’t need to be involved in everything that they are doing. They can have separate interests that take up a lot of time.”



## Socializing in Fantasy Sports Leagues: Communities of the Literate

Early on in each of the interviews, discussion centered on the social benefits of participating in fantasy sports. In particular, respondents were quick to describe this socializing as occurring in two principal ways: (a) Fantasy sports bring you closer to your closest friends, and (b) fantasy sports provide a way to maintain close friendships with people with whom otherwise an enduring friendship or association would be unlikely. As Stephen (enthusiast, personal interview, August 18, 2013) describes,

I guess for me, it's a good way to stay connected to people that you otherwise probably wouldn't normally [pause]. It's a common ground with people that you may not necessarily have a common ground with . . . It's a common ground for them, you know I don't have a lot to talk to Terrence about. Like I saw Terrence on the train the other week and we spoke for an hour purely about fantasy basketball . . . I don't really have much else in common with him.

Sentiments like Stephen's were expressed repeatedly. Al (enthusiast, joint interview, July 24, 2013) confesses that

There are probably four guys in this league that I am sure I wouldn't talk to anymore . . . I would probably only regularly talk to three or four people from the league, and those guys not nearly as much.

Gabrielle's husband Carlos (enthusiast, personal interview, July 30, 2013) similarly describes fantasy sports as a hobby that

enhances social situations. It enhances the relationship I have with existing friends . . . the extension of that is building on friendships . . . maintain that relationship from an otherwise [pause] I wouldn't even hang out with them to a point now where its camaraderie. We've been together in the league for 14 years. It's quite unique to be able to have a group that meets on an annual basis that continues to be in touch with one another through this particular avenue.

For Hakeem, who lives on the Gold Coast in Australia's Northeast, far away from the other league members who live in the Southeast in Melbourne and Sydney, fantasy sports ensure that he maintains close friendships with league members who would otherwise be little more than people he formerly knew from college. One of his closer friends from the league is Carlos, whom Hakeem only knows through other members of the league. If it were not for fantasy sports, he would probably not know Carlos at all.

The importance of friendships—their establishment and enhancement—in fantasy sports leagues was described by Slotnick (in Eckhoff, 2011) as a “tremendously enjoyable” way to keep “many of us in touch to a greater extent than if the league never existed.” Shipman (2001) adds that fantasy sports leagues are often the basis for “lasting relationships.” They become the backbone of what Schirato (2012) describes as a

“community of the literate”—communities where daily interactions with friends are often mediated by fantasy basketball discussions (p. 83). As Stephen (enthusiast, personal interview, August 18, 2013) says,

I probably wouldn't speak to Tom quite as much as what I would like. Jacob I certainly wouldn't speak to if we didn't play fantasy basketball together and you know it gets harder and harder now, the busier our lives get to have that connection with people. It's a direct source of contact, whether it be the message board or texting each other about this player or that player. I just like that it allows me to stay in contact with those guys. And especially someone like Fred who I consider myself to be pretty good mates with, we may not contact each other as much or be aware of each other as much, if we didn't have that *intimate group*. (emphasis added)

Fantasy basketball literacy becomes nothing short of *intimacy* for Stephen. It is the history and origins of this league that make the social elements of playing fantasy sports the primary motivating influence for these participants. For each of our respondents, the need for social interactions and maintaining friendships is the primary reason why they play.

This intimacy reaches a peak at the annual, offline, live draft day. It is a time when friendships are reinforced when all 10 league members meet to eat, drink, party, and, of course, select their teams for the coming year. Draft day is the most important day on the calendar for the members of this league. Al (enthusiast, joint interview, July 24, 2013) passionately describes the meaning of draft day to his wife Chanel (fantasy sports wife, joint interview, July 24, 2013):

Al: My heart is beating faster just thinking about it. It is Christmas, my birthday, Easter. It's *everything*, times 1,000.

Chanel: Everything?

Al: Except for my wife's birthday and our anniversary. It's the holiest of holies. I have many rituals about that day which I like to stick to. I like to get up early. Look at my spread sheets which I've compiled over the previous six months. Have a definite plan.

Al's draft day planning involves a ritual “fantasy day brunch” with league members where they drink coffee and eat “some kind of very indulgent dessert.” Soon after,

we get to the draft day itself and it plays out in many different ways. But I will say by the end of the draft day, and it's not even the end of the day, after about 5 hours I am *spent*.

But Al and the other league members often drink and celebrate into the early hours of the morning.

The social aspects of playing fantasy sports may be responsible for the dedication shown by the members of this fantasy sports league. This dedication involves significant demands on time, and managing one's fantasy sports interests while not neglecting paid work and family responsibilities can be a challenge.

## Work Snacking

Klimas (2013), writing for the online news site *The Blaze*, tells the story of one-time investment analyst Drew Dinkmeyer who is living a true “fantasy.” He has quit his job to become a full-time fantasy sports professional. It is, for Dinkmeyer, a simple matter of economics. One wins fantasy sports leagues by investing in players who are worth more than they cost, and by betting \$500 on each weekly game in multiple fantasy football leagues, he is able to make an apparently comfortable living. For the rest of the fantasy sports playing world, however, checking sports scores and managing an effective team need to fit with other life demands that include employment.

As Schirato (2012) argues, the “interactivity” of media for sports audiences “functions as both a lure and a way of transforming a viewer’s relation to a game” (p. 78). Importantly, it is the proliferation of various mobile media that has facilitated a continuing dedication from fantasy sports enthusiasts who do considerable sports score checking—sports “snacking” (Tussey, 2013, p. 43)—while at work. Al (enthusiast, joint interview, July 24, 2013) described a time when he believed that he would not be able to continue being dedicated to fantasy sports because it would steal too much work and personal time. He once believed that he would need to find a way to participate less, be less dedicated, and continue playing in reduced formats:

I probably don’t think that is a thing [anymore] . . . It is the change in technology. It is *that* much more accessible and available and now is enough to constantly be checking and to tap into that information. It is not so much of a burden in your daily life [playing fantasy NBA]. What we were doing with *the technology we had* . . . as you get older and reach other life stages and have other commitments you have to cut back on those games. I saw that happening to fantasy basketball. (emphasis added)

Al explains that when his league was around 8 years old (about 5 and a half years before the interview), participating in fantasy sports with dedication was a laborious experience. Typical days (Al was a graduate student at that time) would involve setting one’s team up in the morning before beginning the workday; experiencing media blackouts while driving or catching public transport; rushing into one’s office and quickly turning on the computer to see whether anything had been missed such as a key free agent signing, a trade or injury news (all this before games had even begun for the day at around 11 a.m. Australian Eastern Standard Time); the nervousness experienced when forced to leave one’s desk; the lunches that cannot be fully enjoyed; and the advisor meetings only partially followed. This all contributed to Al’s belief that *something had to give*. He was concerned for the life he may miss because of his dedication. The mobility of technology has changed this situation remarkably over a relatively short period of time. Now, fantasy NBA can be followed in cars, on public transport, during meetings, and lunches via smartphones and tablets. Websites such as *Rotoworld*, *Basketball Monster*, and *Yahoo! Sports* are only seconds away.

These technological developments are important for achieving the sort of work–fantasy sports balance desired by dedicated enthusiasts. As Stephen (enthusiast, personal interview, August 18, 2013) notes, these technologies can be consulted as

frequently as desired in any work or nonwork setting because it is expected by bosses that “we are all plugged in; it’s just a natural thing to check it through the day anyway.” This type of workspace “multitasking” or “snacking” (Tussey, 2013, pp. 37, 43) positions fantasy sports participation as an everyday routine that finds itself incorporated into the daily round of otherwise professional men with families. Sports score snacking during work may rejuvenate tiring employees and even enhance productivity by enabling the working mind to “rest itself, leading to a higher total net concentration for a day’s work” (Coker in Tussey, 2013, p. 43). As fantasy sports wife Gabrielle (personal interview, July 30, 2013) notes, fantasy sports are incredibly enjoyable and relaxing for her husband “As long as it doesn’t take up all the time from your day job!”

Carlos notes that media technologies for monitoring sports scores work as a double-edged sword. In one sense, they facilitate a better balance between work and score checking because mobile devices provide a way to multitask. However, mobile score checking adds an additional burden of limitless score availability. For Carlos (enthusiast, personal interview, July 30, 2013), achieving a balance is

Hard! And even harder that I have access 24 hours . . . It’s difficult to balance. It’s just magnified now because of the fact that I can access this with NBA League Pass with Yahoo fantasy on my phone, on my laptop. It’s accessible, so its difficulty. Very difficult.

Importantly, the performance of his fantasy team will determine his mood and attitude for the remainder of the workday:

I can whole heartedly, “hand on heart” say that the fantasy day that I have is a window of how my day will be . . . If I have 11 o’clock [a.m.] games, that will set the trend if I’m having a good day or I’m having a shit day. Altogether. In general. And that’s, like, whole heartedly. (Carlos, enthusiast, personal interview, July 30, 2013)

Carlos speaks with concern about how his emotions are controlled by sporting statistics while he is at work. Lee et al. (2013b) have demonstrated the significant emotional investments that are made by enthusiasts in their fantasy sports teams. Their research shows that this investment can often be greater than their investments in the professional teams that they support with 41% of respondents in their research preferring a win by their fantasy teams over a win by their favorite NFL (National Football League) football team (Lee et al., 2013b). These are intriguing findings because the literature exploring sporting fandom shows links between moods, attitudes, and behaviors, and the performances of favorite sporting teams (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Hirt et al., 1992; Lee et al., 2013b). There is now compelling evidence that these links extend to the temporary coming together of players from diverse teams through the subjectivities of one person’s fantasy sports team. Fantasy sports wife Linda (fantasy sports wife, personal interview, July 22, 2013) has become aware of this difference in her husband’s fandom, and where she would once regularly ask “What team are you going for?,” she now knows to ask “What players have you got on?”

When he’s watching the sports he breaks it down, it effects the way he watches it and he doesn’t just barrack for one sort of team, so there’s that individualization that’s caused by

the fantasy sports watching. The breaking down of loyalties to one team or another, it's about player loyalties. But then you trade them anyway so it doesn't matter. (Linda, fantasy sports wife, personal interview, July 22, 2013)

Where once enthusiastic sports fans would have to plan their working and social activities around a small number of key sporting events, now even seemingly insignificant sporting moments take on special significance when the fantasy sports enthusiast "owns" particular players. As such, one needs to balance, as Stephen describes, their "commitment" to fantasy sports in relation to work and family commitments.

## Conclusion: The Fantasy Sports Experience

In this article, we have analyzed the motivations for participation in a long-running, fantasy NBA league. Through data collected via interviews with four members of this league and three wives of league members, we have provided nuanced accounts of life and fantasy sport. The semi-structured interview style meant that respondents were mostly responsible for the directions that the interviews followed. Three key themes emerged—fantasy sports *participation* is something that is not reserved for people who play the game but extends to the wives and partners of fantasy sports enthusiasts, fantasy sports are definitively a social activity, and fantasy sports participation involves achieving a balance with work and relationship demands. We show that in this fantasy sports league, "participation" extended to the lives of wives of fantasy sports enthusiasts who find themselves also riding the waves of trial and tribulation that swell and break during every fantasy NBA season.

According to Davis and Duncan (2006), the demographic character of fantasy sports enthusiasts means they often "occupy the most privileged rung on the social ladder" (p. 247). Not only are fantasy sports leagues primarily a domain for men, they are a domain for *white masculine privilege*. The question of what role this leaves for those who do not fit this image—the degree to which factors such as poverty, lack of internet access, gender bias, institutional and employment discrimination, and the extent to which certain people have time to play games while working in high paying jobs in comfortable offices in front of computers—remain unknown. It is a subject in need of further research because someone always pays a price for the excesses of others. There are, as Davis and Duncan (2006) argue, a number of "social axes that enable a player to enter the fantasy sports world" (p. 248). The availability of access to computers remains something that distinguishes White privilege from other marked, raced, social, and cultural categories.

Most research that has explored the social nature of fantasy sports participation and other motivations among participants has been conducted with large-scale surveys and quantitative analysis. This has produced a growing literature that has helped us understand the involvement of increasing numbers of people in what has become a lucrative industry. These studies need to be increasingly supported with nuanced qualitative studies that examine fantasy sports participation motivations in different contexts and situations and from different perspectives (see Billings & Ruihley, 2013a). Recruiting research respondents from message boards and discussion forums may not attract the

sort of respondent studied here—participants who have played fantasy sports with the same group of people over a long period of time. Indeed, such people have yet to feature widely in the existing literature. We found that the primary concerns of these long-term players are to enhance social interaction, to achieve a balance between their participation and their working and personal lives, and that their ongoing participation may depend on the support of their wives and partners who have learned to appreciate the game that their loved ones love.

It is predicted that fantasy sports will soon be a 1.7-billion industry (Van Riper, 2012). It has quickly become a major part of the sports media industry. A *deep* engagement with sports gives life meaning and satisfies a masculine desire for competition that is not easily satisfied elsewhere (see Real & Mechikoff, 1992). Ongoing research promises to shed light on how people play, why they play, the benefits they enjoy, the consequences they endure, and who the excluded from the world of fantasy sports are. In this way, research into fantasy sports may offer unique insights into not only sporting fandom and spectatorship but also social behavior and organization in online, socially networked spaces.

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