

FANTASY FOOTBALL

To have your questions answered by the Fantasy Doctor, send your inquiries to Fantasydoctor@pfwmedia.com.

FANTASY DOCTOR William Del Pilar

The evolution of high-stakes fantasy football leagues

Some years back, I received a phone call from an industry pioneer. He wanted to know if I thought a big fantasy draft event in a city like Las Vegas would work. I told him I didn't think so, as our industry wasn't large enough to support it and this hobby is 97 percent male-dominated. I didn't think many wives would allow their husbands free reign for a full weekend in Vegas.

I was never happier to be wrong as I watched another segment of our industry created. Pioneering fantasy high-stakes leagues was Emil Kadlec. Kadlec, the owner of Fantasy Sports Publications, Inc., publishes four fantasy draft magazines, with *Fantasy Football Pro Forecast* entering its 22nd year. It's the oldest fantasy football magazine in existence today. Some of us owe a lot to Emil, as he helped many organizations gain exposure.

The cost for the first high-stakes event was \$1,550 plus a \$300 events fee for a kickoff party at the ESPN Sports Zone at the New York-New York Hotel & Casino. On Friday night, Sept. 6, 2002, Emil and Lenny Pappano of Draftsharks.com changed the fantasy landscape forever with the kickoff party. In an experts' draft, I was part of the entertainment, and it was one of the best evenings I've ever had working. The next day, at noon, the first World Championship of Fantasy Football (WCOFF) took place at the MGM Grand Casino and Hotel.

The event was magnificent with all the tables, and the mass of owners drafting and talking fantasy football with individuals they had only communicated with on the Internet. There was merchandise to sell and a huge spread as we took a break to eat. During the season, the message boards for the league were active and the league

became its own social network with friendships, rivalries and bickering. It was the opportunity for companies to compete against one another, showcasing themselves while trying to finish as the highest. These were diehard players, which made it a great marketing and branding opportunity. I was doing what I loved and building my company's reputation. If not for Priest Holmes missing the last two games with an injury, I would have had a shot at winning it all but settled for an overall top-10 finish — the highest finish for any industry expert competing.

Most other high-stakes ventures have failed, but one is thriving, growing and I believe, the current king of the high-stakes segment.

In 2004, the National Fantasy Football Championship (NFFC) began with 14-team leagues, not the typical 12. There were 16 main event leagues (playing for the big jackpot), three auction leagues and two draft champions' leagues, and the industry's first multicity event. I was lucky enough to take part in the Las Vegas event. This one didn't end well for me, but I finished in the top 30 overall in a tough league. Despite my point total, I didn't make it into the playoff round. That didn't take away from the great memories of that first season as I continued to watch our industry grow.

The NFFC was the brainchild of Greg Ambrosius, who, like Emil, was at the forefront of the industry, working for Krause Publications when they launched *Fantasy Sports Magazine* in 1989. Elected to the Fantasy Sports Trade Association's (FSTA.org) Hall of Fame, he currently works for STATS LLC. Before launching the NFFC, Greg spent time with Emil and the WCOFF and eventually went on

to do the NFFC. I had the chance to speak to Tom Kes- senich, manager of High Stakes Fantasy Games, at STATS LLC, and I have known Tom since this industry began. As Ambrosius' right-hand man, he's polite, yet honest and upfront; he was kind enough to talk about the NFFC.

Greg wanted to make his game unique and introduced 3RR/KDS, which means at the start of the third round the draft order reverses. KDS allows owners to rank where they would like to draft. In 2008, they teamed up with NBC Sports, fueling great growth and more cities to hold the event, which made me wonder why large conglomerates like NBC don't do their own event. Tom explained that one reason is financial numbers. If you're not talking the dollars that organizations of that scale expect, it's simply not worth their effort.

That's one reason that small start-ups still can find a place in the industry. However, some have used entry fees to subsidize payouts, which never works, creating failure after failure and giving the industry a black eye. That concerns us all because of the damage it's doing to the industry in making players distrustful of game operators. Be careful, and know who you're spending your money with. Dig around and check out sites like the FSTA.org to see if they have any information. Contact the operators, and do your homework.

In 2007, Emil and Lenny sold the WCOFF. And you didn't have to be part of the industry to see an immediate escalation in costs. It appears new ownership over-extended itself and, in 2011, the WCOFF was canceled, bringing an end to the granddaddy fantasy sports event in our industry.

GET OUR AWARD-WINNING FANTASY RANKINGS

If you're looking for consistently reliable fantasy player rankings, you need to check out ProFootballWeekly.com.