

## Confessions of a Fantasy Football Expert

By Lenny Pappano, Draft Sharks

Here's an axiom (and confession) that might shock some folks: All fantasy owners are more often wrong than right when it comes to doing preseason player projections and rankings. From "experts" to novices, from league champions to cellar-dwellers, it is a demonstrable fact for any fantasy player willing to be honest with himself. Or to any fantasy writer who has his preseason rankings printed in magazines for hundreds of thousands of fantasy fanatics to read.

I've corresponded with hundreds of fantasy owners who insist on their brilliance. Every player projection is 100% right. Might as well take their projections in August and mail them to Stats Inc. with a note: "Don't bother waiting until the end of the year to see how it all turns out. Just print this!" From experts to rookies, we all need to take a reality check. Drop the facade, take your thorazine, and make this admission: "My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I'm a fantasy football junkie. And I'm more often wrong than right in my player rankings."

If you need some convincing, simply take a look at a few consensus rankings prior to the 2006 season. They are in order by position according to last year's Fantasy Football Pro Forecast Magazine Experts Poll: QBs Peyton Manning, Tom Brady, Matt Hasselbeck, Marc Bulger and Donovan McNabb... RBs Shaun Alexander, Larry Johnson, LaDainian Tomlinson, Tiki Barber and Clinton Portis... WRs Steve Smith, Terrell Owens, Chad Johnson, Torry Holt, and Larry Fitzgerald... TEs Antonio Gates, Jeremy Shockey, Tony Gonzalez, Todd Heap and Alge Crumpler... Do you realize 9 of those 20 players did not live up to their top-5 billing at their respective positions? And some were outright duds.

Now take heart, because there is a corollary to the axiom that you are more often wrong than right. That corollary is simply this: Championships are won by those who suck the least at making projections. It might not sound as inspiring as Draftsharks.com's tag line, "Championships are won on draft day!" but it is nonetheless true.

To draw a comparison, think of baseball hitters. What's the difference between a guy who gets a base hit only 32% of the time, and one who gets a base hit 28% of the time. The obvious answer is "4 percentage points." But look a little deeper. A guy who hits .320 every year will play in a whole bunch of All-Star games, and probably wind up with a bronze bust in Cooperstown, while the .280 hitter is destined for few accolades. Even though both hitters produce outs far more often than they produce hits (read: they are wrong more often than they are right) the player who performs only marginally better is a Hall-of-Famer! That is to say, "he sucks the least."



That marginal difference holds the key to winning in fantasy football, as well. Just think back to last summer for a moment. Everyone was wrong last year in predicting that Jake Delhomme would finish in the top-10 at his position. We missed on him badly too. And who would have thought that Reggie Bush, sharing the football, would crank out top-10 fantasy numbers (except Draft Sharks, he was one

of our feature Breakout picks) in his first year? Bush wasn't even in the Pro Forecast consensus top-20 RBs. Absolutely no one predicted that Chris Chambers - 2005's seventh-best fantasy WR - would barely crack the top-40. Or that the 33-year old journeyman QB Jon Kitna would vault into the top-5 QBs. RBs Corey Dillon, Julius Jones, DeShaun Foster, Edgerrin James, and Cadillac Williams never topped 122 yards in a single game - while Ladell Betts \*averaged\* 136 rushing yards over a 5-game stretch. WRs Chris Henry and Michael Jenkins had 15 TDs between them, one more than Michael Clayton, Randy Moss, Rod Smith, Drew Bennett & Chris Chambers had combined! Of course, injuries took an unusually big bite last year, but still a lot of fantasy experts and novices looked bad in their preseason projections. The list of examples could go on and on.

Frankly, we weren't much better than the consensus in overall prognosticating. We were high on guys like Javon Walker (our Co-Comeback pick), and named some big Sleepers in Jon Kitna, Marion Barber, Reggie Brown, and Jerricho Cotchery. Draft Sharks ranked the

Minnesota defense #5, higher than anyone, and they finished 3rd. We even continued to endorse Andre Johnson as a Breakout pick after he stunk it up in 2005. The explosive Lee Evans is always high on our list. But talk about flat choking, our #8 QB pick was Aaron Brooks. Gulp. And our contrarian views on Antonio Bryant (another Sleeper, what a loser), Derrick Mason (we overestimated the McNair signing) and Ben Watson (we were a year too early on his breakout) didn't pan out either. Marques Colston totally caught us flat-footed. However, the salient point is that we were marginally better than the consensus on a larger handful of players.

Clinton Portis was selected in our yearly "First Round Bust" article. We ranked him an astoundingly low #16 - drawing hundreds of flaming emails - when everybody else had him at #4 or #5. We warned our readers about Warrick Dunn coming off a career year and also Jason Witten, who fell to #11 from #5 the year before. We weren't afraid to endorse Santonio Holmes in the preseason and finished strong when he got a chance to play. Sticking our neck out on Tony Romo later in the season also paid off for DS customers. However, Corey Bradford (who?) was a top-30 WR on our list which could have got us arrested for fraud in some states. Leon Washington and Devery Henderson were nice calls on our part. The Miami defense was a nifty Sleeper pick. I don't want to make this an exhaustive list, but much like the .320 hitter vs. the .280 hitter, we did marginally better than the consensus. And that marginal advantage is, in practice, a huge advantage in this industry.

The same holds true for hundreds of thousands of fantasy league champions across America. The guy who busted his hump digging up information during the summer was probably only marginally better than the guy who ripped out a magazine cheat sheet the day before the draft. But that marginal difference probably won a championship for the guy who started thinking about his draft in early-May. Remember, football - especially fantasy football - is a game of inches.

Let me draw another comparison. Fantasy football drafting is like one of my favorite pastimes in its elements: It's like playing Texas Hold 'Em poker. In fact, it is almost exactly like poker in some respects. Poker is made up of 70% "luck" and 30% skill. What separates the winners from losers is that the consistent winners focus on getting better at the 30%, while the losers whine about the 70%. When our co-founder, Michael Hiban, and I played a lot of poker, we would

sniff out the tables where players asked the dealer for a "deck change" because the cards were "cold." Cards are neither hot nor cold. They are distributed randomly each hand. If you sit at a poker table long enough, you'll get your share of "bad" cards, and your share of "good" cards. Such is the nature of random distribution. When guys asked for a deck change, we knew we were playing with "fish" -- players who focused on the 70% luck, rather than the 30% skill.

It's much the same in fantasy football. Everybody will get their share of "bad" luck if they play long enough. Just look at last year. The entire fantasy community suffered when countless RBs caught the injury bug - Shaun Alexander, Ronnie Brown, Willis McGahee, Kevin Jones, Laurence Maroney and DeShaun Foster all had problems. In Kansas City Trent Green got hit by a truck in the season opener. Donovan McNabb blew out his knee. Kansas City, Seattle, Denver, and Arizona all



failed to crack the NFL's top-15 offenses. Larry Fitzgerald tore a hamstring and only managed 946 yards and 6 TDs. QBs Chris Weinke and Joey Harrington each had 400-yard games while Matt Hasselbeck never even managed a 300-yard game. Brian Westbrook had a great year but it was deceiving: his knee got him scratched in week #4 and many were pulling him in and out of the lineup due to weekly "questionable" and "game-time decision" warnings. Darrell

Jackson's toe blew up right when fantasy GMs needed him the most. Fred Taylor dragged down a lot of fantasy teams with his erratic production. TEs Dallas Clark and Randy McMichael failed to break out yet again. The cat-quick alien that inhabited Nate Burleson's body in 2004 (1,009 yards/10 TDs) flew back to another galaxy, leaving us with a very bad football player.

But you'll also get your share of "good" luck as evidenced by last year, as well. Marvin Harrison, often the 8th or 9th WR picked last year, caught 12 TDs in his last 12 games and pulled out the #1 WR ranking. One of the best value picks in recent memory, Deuce McAllister, fell to the 6th or 7th round and responded with 1,061 yards and 11 TDs. Frank Gore got the starting job when Kevan Barlow was cut and went off for 1,695 yards - the 30th best rushing total ever - with 61 catches and 9 TDS. T.J. Houshmandzadeh was a mid-round fantasy gem as usual, racking up bundles of catches and scores, sneaking his way up to the top-5 receivers. Joey Galloway cracked the 1,000-yard mark for the second straight year and finished as the 19th best fantasy wideout. The old guy cost you an 8th round pick at best. A lot of you picked up WR Mark Clayton on a mid-season waiver and he posted four

100-yard games down the stretch. In fact, Clayton's 7-108-1 performance in week #16 vs. Pittsburgh helped win a lot of fantasy championships! And of course, anyone who took Drew Brees on a late-round flyer cashed in like Chris Moneymaker. Brees threw for a career-high 4,418 yards and 26 TDs. It was the 18th-best passing yardage total in NFL history. Brees sprayed 300+ yards in 8 different games (6 of them on the road) and finished 2nd in the MVP voting.

These "luck" players are basically spread out randomly, just like those poker cards. And, for better or worse, they dominate (but do not decide) fantasy football championships every year. As I've said, fantasy football is 70% "luck." But the champions pull ahead on 30% skill. So what exactly constitutes skill?

Before I define "skill" at fantasy drafting, let's start with this historical premise: The turnover in the top-ten at each position is greater than 50% each year. That means that if historical trends hold up for 2006, the majority of the players at each position who were in the top-10 last year will be replaced by other players this year. In 2006, there were only 22 players out of a possible 40 at QB, RB, WR, and TE who repeated their top-10 performance from 2005. The year before, there were only 18 players out of a possible 40 that repeated top-10 numbers from 2004. Each year around 50% of the top-10 QBs, RBs, WRs and TEs stay at the top. Sometimes it's around 40%. I won't bore you by tracking the trend back through the decade, but I've done it -- and with very few exceptions, the turnover rate for top-10 performers is about 50% from year-to-year. Think about that...



Here comes the skill. Your job is to identify roughly 3, 4 or 5 players who will either slide out of the top-10 at their position, or climb into the top-10. Admittedly, this is a difficult task, both from an analytical point of view, as well as from an emotional point of view. But you should stay focused on the payoff. If you're close to being right on some of those players, you're going to have a championship season. This is going to take a lot of thinking, a lot of research, and a lot of guts. You're going to look at your rankings and start to think to yourself, "This just doesn't FEEL right." Don't back down.

Look at last year. Would it have felt right last year to drop Clinton Portis all the way out of the top-15 coming off a season with over 1,500 rushing yards and 11 TDs? It felt right to Draft Sharks. We had a theory combined with a gut feeling that he'd let you down in 2006. Last July we wrote: "Did you know Portis added 10-12 lbs back in '05 to adjust to Joe Gibbs' gap-plays?

Kudos to Portis, he held up pretty well in the regular season despite his carries going up for the 3rd straight season. But now he's going back to his lighter Broncos frame because Al Saunders wants more big play rushes out of his halfbacks... The injuries were worse when he was thinner: torn pectoral muscle, bruised heel, bruised ribs, hyper-extended knee, sprained ankles." A few weeks later Portis dislocated his shoulder trying to make a tackle after an interception. By the time he broke his hand in November his season was already a wash.

Would it have felt right to raise Reggie Wayne up to the top-8 WRs after his middling 2005 season (83 catches, 5 TDs) when he was outscored by Keenan McCardell, Rod Smith and Terry Glenn? In 2006 Wayne bounced back hard to tie Chad Johnson for 6th in the final WR rankings. Wayne tallied a career-high 1,310 yards with 9 TDs - and could have been a top-3 WR but he got knocked out of bounds inside the 3-yard line a whopping 5 times! The point is, Wayne's #18 ranking in 2005 didn't mean you automatically project him around 16th to 18th in 2006. He was a top-8 WR in 2004, why can't he jump back up there again? Be careful about regurgitating last year's rankings as this year's predictions.

Are you going to be wrong with some of your bolder picks? Absolutely. In fact, you'll be wrong with quite a few. But do NOT be afraid to fail. We're known for taking chances and taking aggressive views on players we like. We've hit big on some of them. I remember Eddie George was our "First Round Bust" guy in 2001, coming off a career-high 16 TDs and nearly 2,000 total yards? You should see some of the scathing e-mails we saved from that summer. "You guys are Draft Dorks" was my favorite... But we had a reason to rank him so low. George had averaged over 400 touches for three straight years and insiders told us early his toe was giving out. Jon Kitna on our 2006 Sleeper list? Going to Detroit this guy was a career 58% passer who was often bailed out by super-talented running backs like Ricky Watters, Corey Dillon and Rudi Johnson. Kitna played gutsy football for Mike Martz, throwing for 4,208 yards with 21 TD passes and 2 TD runs. Yes, his 22 INTs were a big liability in performance-scoring - but he was a useful addition to fantasy rosters for most of the year.

Of course, some of your bolder picks can get you smacked upside the head. Just four years ago we tagged Priest Holmes as our "Bust" due to his injury/contract issues. Thousands of our customers avoided him accordingly. It completely backfired because that was the one year Holmes put it all together. He flat steamrolled the NFL with over 2,000

total yards and 27 TDs. We were the goat. But are we fazed by that botched call? Remember, barely 50% of players will repeat top-10 performances.

Draft Sharks will remain a consistent prognosticator among the experts because of our willingness to accept change. In the annual fantasy magazine polls, we consistently have strong showings despite some unusually bold and dynamic projections. In the Fantasy Index Experts Poll we took 1st, 4th, 2nd, and 4th (out of 25) from '99-02, then fell to 10th in 2003 thanks in large part to that (gulp) Priest Holmes call. DS won the Draft Book Magazine Experts Poll three times from 2002-2006, but we also finished 6th once and stumbled in at 12th last season.

We're still not afraid to fail if the alternative is to run with the herd. You don't have to swing for the fences on every pick. You don't have to rank players perfectly either. You only have to do it better -- marginally better -- than everyone else. And in order to do that, you have to use educated-but-contrarian thinking. You know how all your buddies like to grade each guy's draft when it's over? "I like Frank's draft, he's stacked from top-to-bottom... good value picks at WR, I'd give him an A." Well, in my experience, those consensus "A" drafts often sit near the bottom of the standings by October. If the herd likes your draft, chances are you just played it safe and tight. I actually like it when they bag on my draft a little: "Lenny is OK at running back, but what's with Javon Walker in the 4th round, isn't he coming off a torn ACL?" Hee hee...

My principle complaint about many writers in the FF industry is that they tend to play "last-year's-stats-equal-this-year's-stats" when creating their rankings. In part, I understand why. There is a paradox in doing player projections that most experts do not bear in mind. On the one hand, players will roughly produce as they have in past years - unless factors (coaching changes, personnel moves, etc.) impact that production either upward or downward. On the other hand, we know that barely half the players who finish in the top-10 at each position will repeat their top-10 performance the following year. Remember?

Listen to fantasy expert Tony "The Prognosticator" Holmes, who offered the following observation in a column written six years ago: "A magazine, or on-line draft list, often times is nothing more than a politically correct public opinion poll. There are exceptions of course and some of the publishers/webmasters out here really do post what they think and do not give a

snot about what other people think. Be sure to scrutinize each list for players that look a little odd where they are placed. If you find one, you will have found yourself someone who truly thinks for themselves."

Amen! So why don't many experts follow the historical trends and really try to predict the major shifts in players instead of playing it safe? There are probably several reasons.

The first is that some guys just don't want to spend time digging. It takes a lot of research and a lot of thought to do projections, and most "experts" do not work at fantasy football as their full-time job. Secondly, nobody wants to really stand out from the crowd and be WRONG. It's one thing to slot Peyton Manning as your #3 QB. Not really a big deal because even if he's #1 again, there's four other QBs that will run with him point-for-point. It's quite another to say that Cadillac Williams, for example, will have a huge comeback year in 2007. And when you offer your opinions to thousands of people and you're WRONG, they will let you know that you were WRONG. It's human nature, or at least the law of the fantasy football jungle, to smack-talk like crazy when someone is WRONG, especially when it's a self-appointed fantasy expert...



Tony Holm offers a third reason, and I'm inclined to agree with him. Money. Tony says that he had a conversation with the owner of a major fantasy site a few years ago in which the owner admitted to following the herd because he didn't want to chase away customers. "I can't afford to look like an idiot because who will come to my site if I don't have LT at #1 like everyone else." Tony quotes the site owner as asking. "How can I call myself an expert if I don't have the consensus #1 pick on top of my draft board?" But it's true... offering an opinion that differs with the consensus of experts will indeed cost you money. I have absolutely no doubt of it.

This should be the part where I say all the other experts really suck, and you should cough up some cash to hear Draft Sharks' sage opinion and advice, and ignore everyone else. The truth is, we know fantasy and we cover it with a unique style like nobody else. But you should always look for a diversity of opinion. Search out fantasy football writers who are doing research and thinking for themselves (they still exist) -- even if you don't agree with their analysis. Ultimately, a diversity of viewpoints will help you sharpen your opinion of players.

I can make you one guarantee. If you follow the consensus of experts this year, you will not win a championship. No way. You're a lamb being led to the slaughter, not a shark in search of prey. As for me, I would rather have Draft Sharks go broke than bend our research and opinions to be more palatable to potential subscribers. Don't be forced in line by the fantasy thought police. Frankly, far too many experts are doing a disservice to our hobby by regurgitating "last-year's-stats-equal-this-year's-stats..."

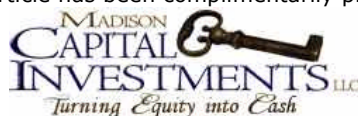
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