

The fantasy pastime

Preparation tips for the coming season

By Kyle Stack
Special to amNewYork

As the spring season draws closer, so does America's true national pastime.

Since the advent of Rotisserie League Baseball, pioneered in New York City in

1980, fantasy baseball has held its place as the most genuine reflection of fantasy-playing ability.

Many different kinds of sports fans enjoy fantasy football for its low-maintenance roster management, short season and recognizable star players. The same goes for basketball and hockey.

In contrast, fantasy baseball involves fans in a larger roster and longer season, requiring a deeper knowledge of players, more roster maintenance and, in general, an increased reliance on skill — and less on luck.

With so much to keep track of, preparation is paramount in fantasy baseball. Here are some tips to help you get ahead of your competition.

1. Know your league's scoring system

You need to know the scoring system in order to know how best to construct your team.

For instance, if OPS (on-base percentage plus slugging percentage) is a heavily weighted category, you should value hitters of doubles and home runs, such as Seattle's Richie Sexson, and devalue singles hitters, such as the Los Angeles Angels' Chone Figgins, since doubles and home runs accumulate higher slugging percentages.

However, if your league prioritizes batting average or on-base percentage, players who get lots of hits and draw walks, such as Colorado's Todd Helton, are the wiser choices.

2. Pay attention to the news each day

Staying apprised of daily roster adjustments and injuries will give you a well-informed base of knowledge. Peruse sites like ESPN.com, MLB.com and Sportingnews.com to stay updated.

Daily reads through the headlines will familiarize you with the roles players have on their teams.

Mariners slugger Richie Sexson will get you extra-base hits.

In keeper leagues, Johan Santana is one of a handful of pitchers worth protecting.



3. Befriend quantitative analysis

Math nerds across the country have derived successful formulas for predicting MLB players' statistics.

This is a great complement to whatever qualitative analysis you have.

Visit free Web sites like baseballthinkfactory.org and beyondtheboxscore.com, or fee-based sites such as baseballprospectus.com, baseballhq.com and ESPN.com's invaluable fantasy baseball section.

Feel free to search for more fantasy baseball Web sites, but settle on a couple of favorites and stick to them.

4. Protect hitters in keeper leagues

Start picking the players around which you want to build your team.

In general, value hitters over pitchers. Because they play every day, hitters have larger statistical samples on

which to base predictions. They're also less likely to have their performances affected by injuries.

It might be reasonable to keep aces like the Mets' Johan Santana, Boston's Josh Beckett or San Diego's Jake Peavy, but don't keep second-rate starters or relievers. A better approach would be to load up on good hitters at all positions.

After stockpiling all that talent, you can use your depth to trade for pitching if the need arises.

5. Talk to your fantasy mates

It is not like you're performing brain surgery.

Fantasy sports are games, and you're supposed to have fun playing games. Get to know the guys and girls in your league or rag on some of your buddies.

Tell a Britney Spears joke. Go to a sports bar with people in your league for some food, booze and MLB Extra Innings.

Make a drunken handshake trade if you have to. Just have fun with it.



The Angels' Chone Figgins is an ideal singles hitter; he belted 113 last season.

(Photos Getty Images)



Briefs

NASCAR

■ Champion Johnson gets No. 1 at Daytona

Reigning NASCAR champion Jimmie

Johnson won the second Daytona 500 pole of his career in Daytona Beach, Fla. yesterday.

Johnson, hoping to join Cale Yarborough as the stock car sport's only drivers to win three consecutive Cup titles, won the pole here in 2002 and won the race in 2006.

OLYMPICS

■ Russia's Soboleva bests own 1,500 mark

Yelena Soboleva broke her own indoor world record in the 1,500 meters yesterday at the Russian indoor championships in Moscow. Soboleva finished in 3 minutes, 58.05 seconds at the CSKA indoor arena, shaving 0.23 seconds off the mark she set at the Russian nationals on Feb. 12, 2006.

OLYMPICS

■ Swede sets hurdling standard in 60 meters

Susanna Kallur broke an 18-year-old world record in the women's 60-meter indoor hurdles yesterday in Karlsruhe, Germany, clocking 7.68 seconds to lower the mark by 0.01 seconds. The Swede broke the record set by Russia's Ludmila Narozhilenko — who later became a Swedish citizen — on Feb. 4, 1990.

OLYMPICS

■ UK athletes' speech restricted at Games

British athletes at the Olympics must sign a new clause in their contracts that prohibits making politically sensitive remarks or gestures during the Beijing Games. "The reality is, given the level of political scrutiny of these games and the way China will handle them, the BOA felt it was sensible and proper to flag that rule to our athletes," British Olympic Association spokesman Graham Mewson said yesterday.

GOLF

■ Hoch get 2nd title on Champions Tour

Trailing by three shots with eight holes to play, Scott Hoch birdied five of the final eight holes for a one-shot victory in the Allianz Championship yesterday in Boca Raton, Fla. It was Hoch's second win since joining the Champions Tour in 2006. (AP)

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