

Simply Stated: The mind game of fantasy football

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The season has approached, and the sound of football and passionate yelling emerges from living rooms across neighborhoods and throughout restaurants. Fantasy sports, including fantasy football, are made up of leagues in which participants choose and “draft” their fantasy team, which competes against other users’ teams within the league.

Points are accumulated based on the real life statistics of each individual player on each fantasy team for a specific season, and the highest scoring team wins. According to [Statista, 29.2 million players](#) in the United States participated in fantasy football in the year 2022. Fantasy sports are on an upward trend of popularity, but what are the psychological motivations and effects of this new form of gambling that is now becoming an American pastime?

In 2012, researchers Brody Ruihley and Andrew Billings observed that fantasy sports participants [had elevated levels](#) of enjoyment, entertainment, passing time, social interaction and surveillance. The study involved comparing traditional sports fans rooting for their favorite team with fantasy sport fans, who have the additional incentive of wanting specific players to perform well so their personal fantasy team wins. Fantasy sports bring higher stakes to watching sports, as personal reward and losses are involved. Although fantasy sports leagues can bring about closer relationships, pleasure and passion, there are psychological implications that are being researched.

Fantasy sports participants are [more likely to practice other forms of gambling](#), based on research carried out by Heath McDonald and Adam Karg. According to [ScienceDirect](#), the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illnesses (DSM-5) uses nine criteria to diagnose gambling disorder, including preoccupation, inability to cut down or quit, withdrawal from chasing one’s losses and committing illegal acts to support gambling. Those who meet four of the nine criteria qualify for the gambling disorder. Due to the wide popularity of fantasy sports in the age range of college students, the population is [more vulnerable](#) to developing gambling-related issues. At the [University of Porto](#) in Portugal, excessive gambling and gambling-related issues were found to be associated with risky behavior such as binge drinking, depression, stress and illicit drug use.

Despite this research, the relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related issues is understudied. As the domain of online betting and fantasy sports evolve over time, there is increasing urgency to truly understand and evaluate the psychological impacts of participating in recreational gambling. This is especially important because, as teenagers and young adults participate in fantasy sports, their adolescent brains are more vulnerable to impulsivity and developing gambling disorders.

Fantasy football participants are filled with passion and anticipation for winning the cash pool, while also competing and bonding with friends, colleagues and family, but it is both healthy and important to be aware of the psychological effects and implications of this new form of recreational gambling.