

# The real-life health effects of fantasy sports

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Fantasy sports are full of contrasts. They use stats from real athletes to build make-believe teams. They fuel both casual fun with friends and a seriously lucrative industry.

And while nobody is saying that sitting and staring at screens is great for you, experts who know both [brain science](#) and the importance of starting the right wide receiver say [fantasy sports](#) might affect players' health in several ways, some of them good.

How you play—and who you play with—matters, these experts say.

Although fantasy sports have many ancestors, what many people recognize as the modern version was born in 1980, when a group of 11 friends formed what they called rotisserie league baseball. It's grown a bit since then. According to the Fantasy Sports and Gaming Association, more than 50 million U.S. adults played fantasy sports in 2022. With many adults paying for hosting services or advice, or wagering on daily online games where they are legal, the industry is forecast to top \$38 billion in revenue by 2025.

Research about the health implications of fantasy games is about as common as finding a quality running back in the sixth round. But Arlen Moller, an associate professor in the psychology department at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, said it's important to distinguish between types of fantasy sports.

"Some are more oriented towards gambling and playing with strangers," said Moller, who studies the motivations behind healthy behavior and has examined using fantasy sports to promote health. "But the foundational versions of the season-long game are usually played between friends and family." Seasons might last months, and leagues can last years.

The U.S. surgeon general has declared loneliness and [social isolation](#) a national epidemic, but Moller said friend-based leagues can provide a regular source of healthy social interaction, the way an Elks Club or a bowling league might have a generation ago.

Moller has more than an academic expertise on this. He's been playing in one fantasy football league since the end of his undergraduate days more than two decades ago. His friends are spread around the world, but fantasy football keeps them together. He's also in a second league made up of professional colleagues.

"Having a way to engage with a positive force like fantasy sports can really add to one's [social circle](#)," said Renee Miller, a professor in the department of brain and cognitive science at the University of Rochester in New York. High levels of social satisfaction, she said, "are one of the best correlates with longevity and mental health."

Miller is a neuroscientist who also has more than a passing knowledge of fantasy sports. A player since 2005, she writes for national outlets about fantasy sports strategies and plays in multiple leagues—some with family, some with students, some with other industry experts.

Research on the brain chemistry of gambling might explain why some people find fantasy sports so appealing, Miller said. The excitement of waiting to see how a team performs can trigger a release of dopamine, which is associated with pleasure.

"It's not about winning or losing," she said. "It's about that moment of potential, of unknown possibilities."

Meanwhile, positive social interactions lead to the release of chemicals such as serotonin, which stabilizes mood, and oxytocin, which among other things protects the brain from stress.

A relaxing leisure activity can be good for your mood and lower stress levels, research has found. The hard work of putting together a winning fantasy team also could have benefits, Miller said.

Although a healthy diet and exercise are considered key to protecting the brain, so is pursuing cognitively stimulating activities. "I think playing fantasy sports can be really good for your brain health," Miller said.

She likens fantasy sports to puzzles. Playing "really forces your brain to work in creative ways," requiring you to use different data sources while monitoring the players and their stats amid ever-shifting circumstances. All that requires mental flexibility, cognitive flexibility and logical reasoning, she said, "and those are all skills that we practice less and less as we get older."

Moller noted that research suggests both social and mental stimulation reduces the risk of dementia and cognitive decline.

But not every aspect of fantasy sports induces healthy cheers.

Daily games, a big source of revenue for the industry, are more like gambling than a gathering of friends, Moller said. "You're competing against people that you don't know and you don't really have any basis to build relationships with," he said.

Some research has linked daily fantasy sports to higher levels of sports betting and online gambling.

Miller, who said she has provided analysis to help in legal arguments assisting fantasy sports, said "there's no doubt that people can become addicted to anything and become dangerously obsessed with it," to the point of financial and relationship ruin. "But that would be extreme."

A survey of nearly 2,000 fantasy soccer players published in the journal *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* in 2021 found that while most did not express mental health concerns about the game, those who spent the most time had significantly worse [mental health](#) scores than

those who engaged less. However, people who were more experienced players reported fewer such problems.

Fantasy sports can be stressful, Miller said, especially at draft time. For most people, this is not a problem. A little bit of stress can help you focus. "It's like taking a test, right?"

But if the stress becomes chronic or severe, it's another story, she said. If your heart is racing or you're breaking out in a sweat, it's probably time to back away.

Similarly, she said, one of the signs of addiction is that you're replacing activities you once enjoyed or you need to do.

"I think fantasy should be something that maybe occupies 5 to 10% of your leisure brain," she said. Assuming you're not an analyst, "you don't want it to be constantly dominating your thoughts and distracting you at work or from spending time with your family."

Even at the supposedly friendly level, some people can take the competition too seriously. Last year, two professional baseball players got into a fight on the field over their fantasy football teams.

"Friendships have certainly been made and lost over fantasy sports," Miller said. But she's met many players over the years and says most people "treat it as a casual source of fun and social engagement" that increases their enjoyment of the game.

Of course, uninterrupted sitting—the kind that comes with poring over stats or watching a lot of games—is a risk factor for a wide range of chronic health conditions, including heart disease, Moller said. But there may be ways to mitigate that.

Miller has a fantasy sports friend who researches players while walking on a treadmill or climbing stairs. "He's unusual in that," she said.

Moller has helped design versions of fantasy sports to try and make that habit more common by rewarding fantasy players for being more physically active. He's working with Robert Newton Jr., an expert on African American men's health at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, on a grant proposal to study whether adapted fantasy sports games can help deliver health information, social support and physical activity incentives for that audience.

Meanwhile, the experiences of Scott Anglemeyer of Shawnee, Kansas, highlight many of the experts' points.

Anglemeyer, policy director for an association of health clinics, started playing fantasy sports when rotisserie league was new in the 1980s.

Now almost 60, he's played the past several years in a 12-team fantasy football league (11 men, one woman) dubbed the League of Sorry Teams, or LOST, which began among a group of co-workers two decades ago. Players ante up \$100, and the top two finishers claim prize money and bragging rights.

Most of the action happens online. In the past, live drafts often were done at a party room in a sports bar or something similar. Now, they gather at a member's home. "It's a nice, relaxed atmosphere," akin to a Super Bowl party, he said.

Managing his team, the Obtuse Angles, is a fun challenge, he said. "You have to have a little bit of understanding about economics, a little bit of understanding about personal finance, as well having enough knowledge to know how a player is likely to do throughout the course of the

season."

Just watching everyone's strategies can be fun, he said. "Or I guess it would be if you weren't dealing with the stress of, 'Am I going to get the best team?'" If you're not careful, he said, managing a team can become more of an obligation than a fun pursuit. "Depending on what your makeup is, it can extract a psychological toll."

Riding the ups and downs of his teams makes it a lot like being a fan of a real sports team, he said. "I've always tried to keep in mind, 'Hey, this is fun. But it's not going to consume my life.'"

Whether it's a good year or bad, [fantasy](#) sports definitely have helped Anglemyer forge bonds with people. "It really becomes another shared experience that allows you to better develop relationships with other people even who aren't in your league," he said.

Such as his new son-in-law. "During football season, when we see each other, even though we're in different leagues, the first question is, 'How's your team doing?'"

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