

THE GAFFER TAPES
PRESENTS

THE A-Z OF
FANTASY
FOOTBALL

A HILARIOUS GUIDE
FILLED WITH ANECDOTES
AND EXPERT ADVICE

-1 Points!

NO CLICK
WAAAAA

Pos names:
lets get Messi
Cech yourself!
show me the Mané



~~£700m~~
~~£34m~~
£0.0m
in the
bank

~~4-4-2~~
~~5-4-1~~
3-4-3

Manager of
the Month

TOM HOLMES, CRAIG HAZELL
AND ASH KERNSWORTH

**THE GAFFER TAPES
PRESENTS**

**THE A-Z OF
FANTASY
FOOTBALL**

**A HILARIOUS GUIDE
FILLED WITH ANECDOTES
AND EXPERT ADVICE**

**TOM HOLMES, CRAIG HAZELL
AND ASH KERNSWORTH**



Contents

Foreword.	6
Introduction.	8
A Brief History of Fantasy Football.	13
Life is What Happens When You're Busy Playing Fantasy Football.	25
What Are They On About?	43
How to Beat Your Friends at Fantasy Football.	61
I'm Just Unlucky	95
The Boot Room	135
What Are You Playing For?	161
Inside the Dressing Room	179
Real Fans vs Fantasy Fans	206
Death, Taxes and Fantasy Football	221

A Brief History of Fantasy Football

AS your average fantasy football boffin tinkers with his line-up on his app, scrolls through the research blogs on his Mac to the backdrop of one of 3,000 fantasy podcasts blaring through his Google Home device, it's hard to believe fantasy football even existed before the internet. He declined to comment but we're pretty sure Tim Berners Lee didn't have middle-aged men in their pants frantically hunting for West Bromwich Albion's injury list when he invented the World Wide Web. Then again, he didn't envisage ratemypoo.com either and that remains a classic. The fact remains, though, that there's a generation (or two) of football fans who don't remember the analogue version of the game we all love to hate.

Way back before the Premier League became the hook to hang your fantasy football on, there was a weird play-by-mail service that used to advertise in the back of football

magazines and therein lies my first encounter with the world's nerdiest hobby. Right between the penis pumps and the sex lines lay the tiny font asking if you wanted to become a football manager. It speaks to my depressing realism that even at 11 I knew my chances of becoming a football manager far outweighed any success I would have on a sex line, so I decided to take them up on their offer of your 'first week free'. Knowing I could never use my home phone, as it sat in the hallway and my dad could read an itemised bill like Johnny 5 in *Short Circuit*, I snuck into the headmaster's office at school and phoned the number, putting on a deep voice to give over my details. If this is how nervous I was to play postal fantasy football, Jesus knows how I'd have coped trying to order the penis pump. One week later I received a letter with about 73 unnecessary pieces of paper that included my squad (a random list of 20 players from around the world) and a match report from my first game. It then dawned on me: this was just some guy in his bedroom writing out 15-page match reports from a fictional football match, between fictional teams and fictional players. In fact, the only thing that was real was the wasted hours and the disappointment of his parents. To play a second game week, you had to send a cheque for £1.99 and to make transfers you needed to call other managers from the league and discuss it with them. The shame of it! Safe to say, I did not invest that two quid and the only purpose play-by-mail served me was that I went through a phase of signing up on my friends' dads' behalves because the confusion it would cause them amused me.

Like cutting off people's heads when taking a photo on a disposable camera, I never saw the punchline but I enjoyed it nonetheless. The fact that there was a subculture of people whose highlight of the week was reading football fan fiction proved that there was an appetite for creating a game within a game. After all, fantasy football was, and still is, a way for people to love the sport while being utterly useless at it. No different to looking at houses you can't afford on Zoopla, girls you can't date on Tinder or going to houses on Zoopla where that girl on Tinder lives. It's all escapism and another way to fanaticise about football, just like kids do now with Instagram and we did then with Panini stickers. Thankfully, someone had the bright idea to use actual football instead of some sort of cosplay hybrid, and the play-by-mail game died. But there isn't a day goes by when I don't think about it.

The factual answer to who is the man behind fantasy football, which you can regurgitate to your mates down the pub, is that Italian journalist Riccardo Albini is widely considered as the inventor of fantasy football outside America, or the 'Hand of Godfather' if you want to ensure your mates don't ask you this question again. Albini adopted the stats from baseball in the late 80s and worked out a way to accommodate 'soccer' in the already huge fantasy market in America, where they had been playing since the 1960s. And so, FantaCalcio was born. The first tournaments were played during the 1988 European Championships, and in 1990 Albini published *Serie A – Fantacalcio*, which basically acted as the server to the game. One can only

hope that the first-ever fantasy football team was called ‘The Albini Babies’. And if you want to be meta and post that Kermit drinking tea meme you’re so desperately keen to use, you should think about calling yours that too next season and wait for the opportunity to be smug when told it’s a shit name. Albini would spend his lunch breaks in Milan putting together the game and it seems only fitting that he has since vicariously occupied millions of lunch breaks ever since. It wasn’t until *La Gazzetta* approached the inventor in 1994 that it became a national game and the version we now know. The original game used an auction system where all league members would bid for their squad for the season, which obviously needed modifying in order to be played by millions. Talking of millions, you’d think Albini would be rolling in it right? Wrong. He never really found an effective way of monetising it (a bit like podcasting), and without the foresight of the scale of it now he never really made anything off the back of changing our Saturday mornings forever. As an interesting footnote, Riccardo Albini was also responsible for bringing Sudoku to Europe in 2005, and you have to wonder whether the guy was just intent on pissing us all off one way or another. Glad he’s not filthy rich now, aren’t you?

A guy called Andrew Wainstein brought the game to the UK with Fantasy League, who still run the data for various newspapers as well as the original auction version of the game that most non-fantasy playing folk aren’t au fait with. The game itself is actually a lot more enjoyable than the one we all know but can only be played with you and

about nine mates, which doesn't make anyone any money, and by anyone we mean Rupert Murdoch. Honourably, you can still find Wainstein hosting auctions down the pub for Fantasy League members who still choose the purest form of the game. It's part of his job. He isn't just walking round approaching groups halfway through a quiz, shouting at them that he used to be a contender. The way it works is quite simple. The guy running the league introduces the players and the league members bid on him just like they do on *Bargain Hunt* on the telly. Whether you spend £40m of your £100m on Harry Kane early doors is up to you, or you could sit tight and watch other people blow their load on unproven new signings. You've just spotted the flaw in the game, haven't you? To do it properly, you have to introduce every potential player to the auction. What starts as an adrenaline rush of throwing fictional money into the air ends up like the opening scenes in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. Phil Jones? Phil Jones? Anyone? Anyone? A science teacher at my school took the questionable decision to run an auction league during the 1993/94 season, and, while a group of schoolboys being auctioned by their teacher sounds more like the last scene in *Taken*, it really was all above board. Although, looking back I wonder if it was some form of community service. I entered a team with my best mate Baz Barrett (sounds fictional: isn't), and Mr Nagel-Smith (sounds utterly implausible: honestly isn't) acted as league commissioner. By 3pm every Friday you had to have your line-ups in his pigeon hole to ensure your scores counted. The problem was, and I imagine *is*, that the

auction remains the most fun part of it and the inability to tinker with your team is a huge downside to the game. It wasn't until Wainstein flogged the concept to national newspapers that it became something you could play on a grander scale and not just in your creepy science teacher's bedroom.

That's where this story starts for most of us as *The Telegraph* used Fantasy League to run their game in the mid-90s and, along with that week's episode of *Friends* and mad cow disease, it suddenly became water cooler chat in the office. I used to look forward to the first edition of the season, laying out the double-page spread from *The Telegraph*, calculator in hand, assembling a team of 11 heroes that would have to endure the entire season no matter what. *The Sun* did fantasy football too, but *their* double-page spreads didn't have the 13-year-old me reaching for my calculator. Back then, if Neil Ruddock broke his leg in a season opener then tough luck. Gutted, mate. He was yours for the season. Long before squad rotation, in a time when the word dogging innocently still involved Labradors, fantasy football still made up autumnal optimism and weekend regrets. Since then, it has evolved into a conundrum of wildcards and chips drizzled over a bed of double-game weeks and captaincy decisions. And if you still have Neil Ruddock's shattered fibula in your end-of-season team then you only have yourself to blame. Footnote, 'Neil Ruddock's Shattered Fibula' is an excellent fantasy football team name and in a way this book has already repaid itself in kind. For many, though,

those early days of running your fingers through the ink of *The Telegraph* sports pages really *were* fantasy football. While the intention was for you to pick your 11 and then use the premium phone line to check scores and replace players throughout the season, I don't know a single person who fell for that nonsense. Speaking from experience, as a guy who went into my parents' room at 8am to ask the bill payer's permission to enter a competition on *Live & Kicking* to win an NBA Jam arcade machine, it was not a conversation I wanted to have again. Better still, my dad scoffed at the idea of joining their league at all and insisted on running the work league manually. He would create a full database for every person's squad and insert the scores by hand into a spreadsheet that calculated scores for the whole league. I don't think I had an appreciation until right now for how much time that must have taken and for just how deeply unhappy he must have been. Plus, the last thing he needed after spending all week doing that was me waking him up at 8am on a Saturday with the house phone in one hand, a copy of *The Sun* in the other, in my Batman pyjamas.

Imagine having to wait a whole week just to read your players' scores in the newspaper. Now imagine that you can't even see how your mates did because you can't click on their team and have no idea who they have in their side. Then imagine that all this information comes in a fucking broadsheet newspaper. Do you know how hard it is to spend your lunch break reading a broadsheet newspaper as a 12-year-old kid without getting the shit kicked out of

you? You may as well wear a monocle and call your teacher Mum. Yet somehow, this game still gripped millions of people and we're still here 25 years later.

That is, of course, in no small part thanks to Messrs Baddiel and Skinner. Fantasy football became this zeitgeisty pop culture phenomenon and the BBC acted quickly to attach two football-loving comedians to become the face of it. Dominik Diamond of *GamesMaster* fame on Channel 4 had a cult hit radio show on 5 Live and it paved the way for Baddiel and Skinner to do their thing. *Fantasy Football League* became a show kids watched with their dads, understanding half the jokes and spawning a machine gun of catchphrases, all the while ruining Jason Lee's career. When you look at it now, it had absolutely nothing to do with fantasy football. Celebrities would come on and show you their team and then the other 59 minutes were filled with sketches and comedy and we bloody loved it. Any fantasy footy info came through the medium of 'Statto', aka Angus Loughran, who inexplicably wore pyjamas and a dressing gown as he gave useful tips. Although, in an age where assists weren't acknowledged, wildcard didn't exist and transfers cost you a phone call, it's hard to know exactly what insight Statto could actually give you. His real genius came in betting tips and an incredible memory for all things sport, so it often felt a bit unfair that his role was basically to get the piss ripped out of him by the hosts. Loughran's love of logistics and numbers did get him some karmic justice in the end though, as he was one of the original investors in OPTA, which sold for £47m in 2013.

That's better than constant royalties from the nation's best-loved football anthem right? RIGHT?! Well no, of course not. Statto was declared bankrupt in 2008, but come on, give the man a line in the song!

Fantasy Football League did leave us with a brilliantly awful piece of fantasy footy history as well as its iconic status as one of the best comedy programmes of the 90s, and that was with the official board game. Back in the 90s, everything had a board game. Some classics that are definitely worth tracking down were Noel's House Party, complete with a grab a grand box, Jim Davidson's Big Break, which was essentially a small snooker table, and The Crystal Maze, which was always going to struggle to successfully replicate the high-budget, physical game show we all knew and loved. It didn't even come with a sarcastic bald man or anything. Fantasy Manager was outrageously complicated and time-consuming to play, and as it was based entirely on the stats from the actual 93/94 season it could only really be played once. It came armed with a *Back to the Future*-style almanac full of statistics from the season and once players had all been auctioned you then learnt your fact 'week by week'. Despite all these obvious flaws, it still stands head and shoulders above the awful franchised versions of Monopoly that get trotted out every year. When will people learn that whether it's got *Game of Thrones* characters or Disney films on it, it's still the same bloody game! It's awful and boring and after three hours of no progress and even less fun, the only money you care about is the 30 quid you spent on it and the only

jail on your mind is the one where you will live once you murder your family for making you play it. Awful and boring. Where Fantasy Manager differs from other 90s board game aberrations like *The Neighbours Game* (also real) is that somehow, 25 years on, it has become a whole lot more playable. No one remembers the finer details of a football season from a quarter of a century ago and so we tracked down a copy of the game, bought it and played it for old time's sake. Well that, and because Monopoly is awful and boring. First things first: you will definitely find this game funny when you play it with your friends. It feels like a real-life version of the talking heads shows on digital TV like *I Remember Football in 1994*, except you don't have Nasty Nick from *Big Brother* or Gina Yashere telling you why something is funny. You'll also catch yourself forever finding it humorous to buy the likes of Gary Mabbut or Ian Dowie for £0.3m, and it doesn't take long before every fourth player you auction segways into some reminiscing and YouTube hunting to relive the glory days or settle an argument about a goal they scored or a hairstyle they may or may not have had. It's not just a board game, it's a time capsule – an excuse to relive an entire season you thought you'd forgotten about. A slight warning is that it makes you feel incredibly old. Everything from the match reports to the transfer fees makes you realise your own mortality that tiny bit more. Not to mention that many of the players you can buy have sadly passed away. Nothing like a deceased midfield four to really suck the fun out of a game. You are also reminded now and then that it is a board game and

you do have to eventually finish it. It has all the ‘chance’ cards trappings that come with a board game, where you might get an injury or a televised game generates £1.5m from the bank, but the truth is you just want to read old scores with your mates and remember how great Robbie Fowler was.

Bridging the gap between children learning how to auction via board games, premium phone lines and the game we now know was a whole lot of rival newspapers and websites offering very similar versions of the game. With the noughties bringing in next-generation consoles and overseeing the death of traditional games like Subbuteo, Fussball and Slap the Butcher, fantasy football became a free-for-all for anyone with a website as they all aimed to monopolise a captive audience. Talking of Monopoly, wasn’t it awful and boring?! Papers started offering a million quid to the overall winner and yet I still insisted on picking Neil Ruddock. It wasn’t until around 2012 that the Premier League’s own version of the game really became synonymous with fantasy football as a whole. The truth as to why that happened is likely because no one ever cared about the million quid on offer. The prize might as well have been a trip to Oz with a unicorn and Rihanna, it was that fictional to us. It wasn’t like you cared who won at the end. You paid attention until your own interest had waned, like the Olympics when the British athletes go out. The Premier League version mastered the mini-league element, where for the first time you got an opportunity to learn how to really hate your friends and play the game

at the same time. That is still truly the essence of any season of fantasy football, even with the modern draft or daily versions on offer. They also pioneered the now standard format of picking a captain for double points and a wildcard that allows unlimited transfers for a specific period of time. There's been some shit along the way, sure (All Out Attack chip anyone?), but the fact that it had all the pretty kit pictures that were fully licensed and it was free to play, not a penis pump phone number in sight, meant that it was and is the go-to website if you want to get a disciplinary at work. Fantasy football really has come a long way from broadsheet papers and premium phone lines to an easily accessible online phenomena played by millions and millions of people across the globe. Some of us have grown with the sport and been there in the early days to watch its evolution into the behemoth it has slowly become. Some have only known the game in its more recent incarnations and would never be able to fathom that there was a time when it wasn't played online – to be honest, those same people probably can't fathom that there was ever a time without the internet at all. And while, yes, we probably all want to punch those individuals in the face for being too young to know about VHS, Snake on the Nokia and Teletext, it's testament to the success of fantasy football that they, like us, can't imagine a world without it now. A world without the heartache, the elation, the regret, the mind games, the weeks of planning and the last-minute acts that ruin it all. Truly beautiful stuff. Long may it continue; here's to The Albini Babies.