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FANTASY FOOTBALL LEAGUE KEEPS ALUMNI IN TOUCH

by Bob Riel

One of the challenges for most alumni when they leave Up With People is to sustain the far flung network of friends that they have formed. There are, of course, newsletters, reunions, and the occasional phone call, letter or email. But some alumni have managed to devise more unique means of staying in touch. Consider the case of 12 alumni in 8 states who for six years have maintained long distance contact through participation in a fantasy football league.

For those who are unacquainted with fantasy football (or other fantasy sports), the concept feeds into the dream of every sports fan - to be in charge of a professional sports franchise. Across the country today, legions of fans live out that dream in a small way by managing a fantasy sports team. Football and baseball are the most popular sports, although there are also leagues for basketball, hockey and even golf and auto racing.

Each fantasy sports league generally has 8 to 12 teams and each "owner" is in charge of everything from the team name to roster decisions. At the beginning of the season, the participants get together and conduct a draft of real-life athletes. For most owners, this is an annual highlight, as much for the camaraderie among fellow owners as for the player draft. It is also an event that will make or break many seasons because each owner's success is based on the actual performances of the players he or she has selected. Thus, guessing right as to which players are poised for a breakout season may be the key to attaining that long sought fantasy championship!

In fantasy football, each team typically has a roster of 14 offensive players (at quarterback, running back, wide receiver, tight end and kicker). From this roster, every owner submits a weekly starting lineup and competes head-to-head against another team in the league. Wins and losses are determined by the number of points scored by each team's players in the National Football League games that weekend. At the end of the season, the best teams compete in a fantasy league playoff.

The growth of the internet has fueled the rise of an entire fantasy sports industry and major sports publications now sponsor nationwide competitions. But it is always more enjoyable to compete in "local" leagues, as a fantasy league title gives you an entire year of bragging rights among friends.

This is how the Up With People fantasy football league got started. In 1988, when fantasy sports were first becoming popular nationwide, the league was formed in the Up With People offices in Tucson, Arizona, in order to provide some friendly competition among co-workers.

For six years, the league thrived in the Tucson headquarters. Then in 1993, with Up With People's move to Denver, a number of the league's participants moved on from the organization and scattered around the country. Rather than disband the league, the alumni decided to try maintaining it from a distance. At first, everything was managed through faxes and phone calls. Now, in an indication of how quickly technology has changed our lives in six years, the league is largely run via email and the internet. Even the annual player draft is done through an internet chat room.

After six years of long distance competition, the league has become much more than a fantasy sports rivalry. It is now a vehicle for maintaining contact and communication among alumni who have built their own lives in different parts of the country.

"I think the league affords us a wonderful way to keep in touch with old friends," says Hugh Reilly, who first organized the league in 1988. Although he stopped managing the league when he moved to Omaha to take a job at Boystown, Hugh has remained enthusiastically involved as a team owner. "I am sure that if it were not for the league, I would have lost touch with most of these people. They would have just become someone I heard about in passing every few years. Instead, they remain living, vibrant friends and we remain in each other's lives, if only in a peripheral way."

Chris DeGraff (75A) echoes a similar theme. "I absolutely love the fantasy football league and I enjoy it as much for the interaction with fellow alumni," says Chris, who happens to be the defending league champion. "I think I've been involved now for almost 10 years, which has seen me in 4 different jobs in 3 different states. This league has proven to be a common thread that I wouldn't trade for anything."