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QUALITIES OF LIFE

Every dreamer now manages a football team

By Chris McNamara
Special to the Tribune

For the last few years Julie Zogby has played Vanna White. Trade the ball gown and heels for jeans and a T-shirt, and switch the “Wheel of Fortune” board for a poster listing names of NFL players, and you can picture this fantasy football draft assistant.

Unlike Vanna, Zogby will criticize a contestant for a foolish decision.

“Ohhhh. That’s a bad pick you just made,” she’ll say to one of the 11 members of her brother’s fantasy football group—Z’s Auction League. Last week the group gathered on Chicago’s North Side to draft players for their fantasy teams, a growing tradition in which upward of 10 million Americans participate. And Zogby was there, recording all the picks, “out of brotherly love. That and the free beer.”

Many drafts resemble bachelor parties (minus the impending wedding). Grin and Bare It adult entertainment agency has sent strippers to more than 20 Chicago-area drafts this summer.

By the end of today, when most of Week 1’s games are complete and draft selections have excelled or had their limbs broken, 5 million will feel like genius GMs and 5 million will rearrange their rosters.

For example, ESPN.com ranks San Diego Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson as the top pick for 2003.

“Fantasy leagues have given fans a new way to experience the NFL,” says Chris Russo, the league’s senior vice president of new media. “They can analyze stats, make trades and use their knowledge of the game to compete against one another.”

The NFL loves fantasy football; a recent NFL study found that fantasy participants watch two to three more hours of NFL games per week than non-participants.

“The event nature of an NFL game contributes to fantasy football’s success,” Russo says. “Each team plays once a week, leaving plenty of time for analysis and discussion.”

And much of that analysis and discussion takes place in cyberspace. (A Google search of “fantasy football” yielded nearly 1.5 million links.) Armchair coaches can choose from myriad fantasy football league operators, which tabulate points, maintain injured reserve lists, provide message boards and, basically, make fantasy football a dream.

Most participants place real money on their fake teams, so winners in each league do profit dependent on the ante each member pays. A friendly office pool could be \$1, an intense frat house league could wipe out a tuition payment. But the allure has more to do with competition—proving to your co-workers or college buddies that you know football.

But that’s not to say that nobody is making money on fantasy football; a cottage industry has sprung up around it. Magazines offering tips, predictions and draft strategies clog newsstands at this time of year; their pages filled with advertisements for fantasy football dry-erase draft boards, fantasy championship trophies and fantasy Super Bowl rings.

Nick Zeka, who hosts Z’s Auction League, used to wear a ring—a wedding ring—but fantasy got in the way of reality.

“My ex-wife hated fantasy football,” he says. “Every Sunday all my slob friends would come over to watch the games.”


It’s a scene similar to the group’s draft night—beer and booze, chewing tobacco and smokes and debates about the wisdom of selecting LaMont Jordan ahead of Lamar Gordon. The presence of a woman instills some level of decorum, but Zogby’s got to run. She has her own fantasy draft to worry about.

NEW TURF: After a 40-year break, St. Ignatius relaunches its football program with a battle cry: “Pray for us!” **PAGE 3**

WEEKLY FANTASY ROUNDUP IN REDEYE: Each Thursday, RedEye fantasy football columnist Phillip Thompson picks his 10 best and worst players for the week’s matchups and goes one-on-one with Chicago NFL expert Steve Silverman.



ASK AMY



Your 3-year-old niece tells you to “shut up,” an admonishment that she has learned from her parents. Do you:

A. Mind your own business? **B.** Stage a shocked reaction to the phrase for her parents’ education? **C.** Buy the precocious tot “South Park” on DVD?

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STYLE

After a summer of bared midriiffs, fall’s focus shifts to legs, bracketed here by kicky boots and a mod mini-skirt.

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ON THE BLOCK

Shoppers stop by the Austin neighborhood for fresh fruits and vegetables.

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QURIOUS CONSUMER

Novelty cocktails offer drinks with a twist: health-conscious ingredients.

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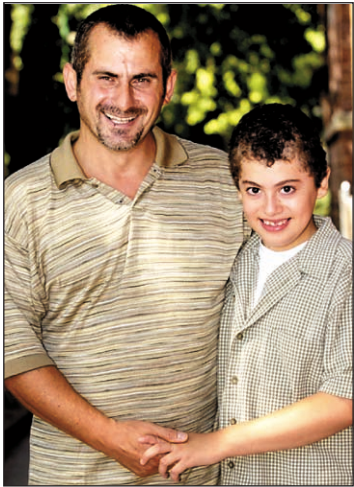


Tribune photos by David Klobucar

Figo Topal helps his son, Devrim, center his foot on his bike pedal. Topal refused to accept doctors’ gloomy prognoses for Devrim.

Ride of his life

Making miracles? For Devrim Topal, it’s just like riding a bike



“This is my son. Even if it’s gonna take a million dollars I wanna do it.”

— Figo Topal with his son, Devrim

By Barbara Mahany | Tribune staff reporter

Figo Topal has a dream. A simple dream. He wants his son to ride a bike. And so, on a sultry afternoon that made you sweat just standing still, he did what generations of fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, big brothers and sisters and just plain saints, have tirelessly, till-their-backs-ached done: He clutched the back of the bicycle seat, steadied it as it wobbled, and trotted along down the sidewalk. Over and over and over.

Only Topal’s son, Devrim, is 12½, weighs 102 pounds and is riding a silver-and-blue, six-speed bike with training wheels that had to be custom-rigged for a big kid at a total cost of about \$300.

“I say, ‘This is my son. Even if it’s gonna take a million dollars I wanna do it. I wanna make him happy. Money is another subject,’” says Topal, who immigrated from Turkey in 1987 and owns Devrim Cleaners, named for his son, at 3134 N. Southport Ave. in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood.

The day Devrim was born, Topal, who had been told before they rushed his wife into an emergency C-section that the baby had no

heartbeat, was beyond overjoyed when the doctor walked out and told him, “Congratulations, you have a son.”

It was months before Topal and his wife, Emine, figured out that something was wrong with the beautiful brown-eyed boy. By the time Devrim was 4, his father had been told in no uncertain terms that there was no hope that the boy would walk or talk. Ever.

“Cognitive delay” is the label they slap on the records at Devrim’s school. That’s clinical shorthand for the fact that when Devrim was born, with his umbilical cord wrapped taut

PLEASE SEE **BIKE**, PAGE 8

Should you swallow gaming supplements’ pitch?

By Patrick Kampert
Tribune staff reporter

Their hand-eye coordination is legendary, their concentration level intense. So if you buy the argument that video-game players are athletes in their own right just as much as Cubs pitcher Mark Prior or Bears linebacker Brian Urlacher, then you’re probably a perfect market for three new herbal supplements that MindFX, a California firm, is aiming at the PlayStation generation.

No, it’s not nachos and Mountain Dew in a convenient pill form—but two experts say it might as well be.

With the urgent-sounding names of Maxx Impulse, Neurocharge and Aftermath, the three products (available together via mail order for

about \$80 a month) promise to give gamers and people with demanding jobs “increased concentration, faster reaction time and complete relaxation.”

MindFX has touted the products as a caffeine alternative. (Phone calls to MindFX for comment were not returned.) Yet Monique Ryan, an Evanston nutritionist who works with the Chicago Fire soccer team and many triathletes, says Maxx Impulse in particular has caffeine in it via guarana seed extract.

Other ingredients in the products also raise red flags. Green orange extract, more

commonly known as bitter orange, has been compared to the now-banned ephedra.

“It has become the ephedra substitute in most weight-loss products,” said Tod Cooperman, president of ConsumerLab.com, who has studied the MindFX products.

Ryan says proper nutrition and rest can help gamers more than downing Neurocharge while playing Counter-Strike at midnight.

“When I think of poor mental concentration, I think of people who are not eating adequately or appropriately or at the right time,” she said. “That would have a more significant effect than supplements.”

