

An Insider Tells How to Pick A Fantasy Team

Editor's Note: Richard Zitrin, a San Francisco attorney, has participated in Rotisserie baseball leagues for a decade and is ESPN's expert consultant on the subject.

BY RICHARD ZITRIN

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Half a million baseball fans will play fantasy ball this season, drafting their own major-leaguers, making trades and competing against friends through the actual day-to-day performance of their players.

A few basic strategies can help you pick a winning team. You may even avoid the mistakes that have ruined many a team in the "other" (never call them "real") major leagues. Here are some general principles to keep in mind:

■ First and foremost, look for consistency, not a quick fix. Remember, you're playing for this season's performance, not last season's.

Andy Hawkins (14-11, 3.35 ERA, 217 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings) and Dave LaPoint (14-13, 3.25, 213 $\frac{2}{3}$ innings) had almost identical seasons in '88, enough for George Steinbrenner to dig deep for both. But you won't make the same mistake if you check the record. After Hawkins went 18-8, 3.15 in '85, his next two years were awful: 13 total wins and a 4.57 ERA. And who can forget LaPoint as a Giant?

Grab Charlie Hough instead. In the last seven seasons, he's never won more than 18, never fewer than 14, he's never had an ERA under 3.00, but he's always under 4.00. Here's someone on whom you can count.

You can learn from Fred Claire. When Claire, the Los Angeles Dodgers' general manager, took a chance on off-injured Kirk Gibson last year, he actually snared one of the most consistent players in baseball. Gibson's Most Valuable Player season was exactly what we should

lyze how a player fits on his team.

Jay Howell had a great comeback in '88; 5-3, 2.08, 21 saves and 70 strikeouts in 65 innings, capped by the World Series. When healthy, he's a premier reliever. But remember, Howell plays for Lasorda, and Tommy's always been a "group bullpen" guy. The last time someone had saved 20 for Tommy was 1978.

■ Flashy phenoms are exciting, but experience wins. Kansas City's Tom Gordon has the best minor-league pitching stats since Doc Gooden. But for every Gooden, there are 14 Mike Bieleckis.

■ Don't spend for a catcher, unless he's named Bench. The best-hitting catcher over the last three years is Ernie Whitt. Enough said.

■ Don't draft for need; get the best player. If you need steals, but Mark McGwire's available, forget the steals and grab Mark.

OK, those are some general principles. Now let's toss it once around the diamond:

FIRST BASE: The strongest position on the field, with a dozen first-class hitters. A good place to bide your time and pick up a bargain. The best: Don Mattingly. Next: the Clarks, Will and Jack.

SECOND BASE: There's real talent here. You'll have to spend, though, or you could wind up with Jerry "Diminished Expectations" Browne. Julio Franco's expensive — and worth it. Or spend less and take Bill Doran.

SHORTSTOP: The weakest position in fair territory. Barry Larkin's new blood, and Trammell, Ripken and Tony Fernandez still shine, but beyond these, save your pennies.

THIRD BASE: George Brett's at first, Mike Schmidt's in decline and hot-corner talent is thin. Wade Boggs, though, is worth two Mike Pagliarulos and three Al Leiters.

BASEBALL '89

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SPECIAL SECTION

season was exactly what he should have expected.

This year, consistent Kirk is hurt again. Will it affect his performance? Does Tommy Lasorda pass the pasta?

■ Pay attention to position, and don't spend too early on dime-a-dozen outfielders.

Who's more valuable, a guy who hits .264 with 23 HRs and 81 RBIs, or one who goes .277-20-82? Just about even? Not on your life, when the first player is Cal Ripken, one of the best-hitting shortstops in the game, and the second is Mike Marshall, who in the pantheon of outfielders ranks about 40th. Pass on Ripken and you may get Felix Fermin. Miss Marshall and you'll get Kevin Bass or Tom Brunansky later, and at a better price.

■ Sure, trades can affect performance. Eddie Murray will play better for a good Dodgers team than he did for the woeful Orioles. And Nolan Ryan, who left the Astrodome to return to the American League, DHs and homerdomes, may start showing his age.

But look beyond trades. Ana-

OUTFIELD: The deepest position, and the only place you'll find triple threats who rate high in power, speed and average. Sorry, Jose, but this list's topped by Kirby Puckett, Eric Davis and the incomparable Rickey Henderson.

CATCHER: The current crop does little more than meet Casey Stengel's mandate: "You gotta have a catcher, or the ball rolls to the backstop." Terry Steinbach tops this woeful crew. Best chance plays, if they play: the St. Louis Cardinals' Todd Zeile and, yes, Giants fans, Bob Brenly.

STARTING PITCHING: Only Frank Viola, Roger Clemens and Gooden are year-in, year-out All-Stars. Beyond those three, watch the purse strings. A possible bargain: Jack Morris.

RELIEF PITCHING: With saves their private preserve and a few victories on the side, relievers are a fantasy league's most valuable commodity. If you don't want to be left at the gate, you need a big horse. Last season, there were a record eight with at least 30 saves, but Jeff Reardon, Steve Bedrosian and Todd Worrell lead the field.

BASEBALL LEADERS IN THE '80S

HITERS

■ HOME RUNS

1. Mike Schmidt, Philadelphia	307
2. Dale Murphy, Atlanta	288
3. Eddie Murray, Balt./L.A.	254
4. Dwight Evans, Boston	236
5. Andre Dawson, Chi.(N)/Mon.	229

■ RBI'S

1. Eddie Murray, Balt./L.A.	908
2. Mike Schmidt, Philadelphia	901
3. Dave Winfield, S.D./Yankees	899
4. Dale Murphy, Atlanta	845
5. Andre Dawson, Chi./Mon.	818

■ RUNS

1. Rickey Henderson, A's/Yankees	1,009
2. Robin Yount, Milwaukee	856
3. Mike Schmidt, Philadelphia	813
4. Dave Winfield, S.D./Yankees	804
5. Eddie Murray, Balt./L.A.	792

■ STOLEN BASES

1. Rickey Henderson, A's/Yankees	761
2. Tim Lincecum, Montreal	542
3. Willie Wilson, K.C.	427
4. Vince Coleman, St. Louis	407
5. Ozzie Smith, St. Louis	335

PITCHERS

■ WINS

1. Jack Morris, Detroit	156
2. Dave Stieb, Toronto	123
3. Bob Welch, L.A./A's	120
4. Fernando Valenzuela, L.A.	118
4. Charlie Hough, L.A./Texas	118

■ STRIKEOUTS

1. Nolan Ryan, Houston	1,866
2. Fernando Valenzuela, L.A.	1,528
3. Jack Morris, Detroit	1,515
4. Steve Carlton, Phi., Giants Chi (A), Cle., Min.	1,453
5. Mario Soto, Cincinnati	1,360

■ SAVES