SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

# THE REAL ORIGINS OF FANTASY GAMES

By Pasko Varnica

Character of the original material

The monk looks up. He is getting ready to copy another book. Having taken the vow of silence in the scriptorium, he will use a hand signal to get the attention of his superior. The monk puts two slightly open fingers in his mouth. He is pretending to gag himself. That sign is immediately understood. The monk wants one the worst possible books, a book about the deprived pagans.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A bunch of scrolls that for centuries has collected dust in the monastery library is dropped on his desk later that day. For the next several months using his exquisite handwriting, the monk will transfer them to a codex.

He opens the old scrolls very carefully. His first task is to put them in order. He immediately realizes that there are missing scrolls. He sighs. It has happened time after time.

He had hoped for an easy task of simply transcribing letter for letter. Instead, in order to sequence the scrolls properly, he is compelled to read their content. He will do his best to understand the meaning to preserve the original intent. It may be necessary to resort to conjecture. The final narrative will be a result of his limited knowledge of the practices of those despicable and sinful pagans combined with his personal prejudices.

Occasionally he has received only fragments. On several occasions, the text was damaged. Such is the nature of original source material; most have not survived the ravages of time.

The fourth scroll begins with two Romans arguing about the charioteers they own. To own charioteers, the two Romans must be rich, our monk assumes, but he is puzzled. Everything he has read up to now indicates that the two Romans are plebeians. How can they possess a team of charioteers? Then, it dawns on him that the argument is not about actually owning chariot drivers. The two Romans must be fighting about a bet gone badly. He is well aware that the Romans had a passion for gambling. The scroll about their gambling must be missing.

The monk has received strict orders to copy faithfully, but he also must provide continuity to the narrative. His codex will have a few paragraphs slightly modified from the original. He will apply his most educated guesswork. The monk will introduce gambling into the text.

What our monk does not know is that his codex will not reach modern times. His manuscript will be copied again and, perhaps again over centuries to come. Manuscript transmission over a long period, that is, copying one manuscript from another has a tendency for errors and omissions.

This is just but one example of the character of the surviving evidence. There are countless others. Stephen Greenblatt said, “Corruption has seeped into books” (see footnote 1).

Censorship by the pious monks so eloquently presented by Umberto Eco in his book **The Name of the Rose** has also played a major role in the preservation of classical works.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Gambling

Those who do not play any fantasy games assume that it is mere gambling and that we are in it for the money. Not too many years ago in a futile attempt to explain fantasy football to those who do not know the difference between a field goal and a home run I was put in a position to exclaim exasperated that I am not gambling. I am sure that you have found yourselves in similar situations. Up to recently fantasy football was forbidden from many workplaces even when played at lunch-time because it was considered gambling. People who are not into any of the many fantasy sports do not get it. But then, hey, I am preaching to the choir.

Unfortunately, the recent popularity of daily fantasy gaming is not helping my cause.

While enjoying the eye-witness accounts from the ancient world, can a 7th century monk, an 18th century professional archeologist or a modern day academic comprehend the meaning intended to describe fantasy games played by fictitious players in a virtual world? The historians have documented the past in a way that sustained their view of history. It seems appropriate to bring up now a well-known dictum: one cannot have an objective grasp of history without having a sure footing on the present.

Has evidence of the Romans playing fantasy games been deleted or, even worse, transcribed as gambling? In my honest opinion, that is very likely. Not surprisingly, classical works are full of references of people betting while sitting in the stands of the race arenas. According to the extant material gladiatorial games and chariot races were an orgy of gambling. I am sure that plenty of gambling went on, but could have the Romans been playing fantasy games at the same time?

When I allude to the Romans, I mean everyone in the Empire and not exclusively people from the city of Rome. I am talking about people from the Empire’s many provinces like Spain, Gaul, North Africa, Bithynia, Cilicia; you name it, everyone but the Greeks. The Greeks depleted their imagination by inventing democracy and spent time writing philosophy. To think that they had plenty of opportunities to play fantasy sports having Olympic Games and all, what a waste.

Evidence

If you search Wikipedia for the keyword “fantasy sport history”, you will find an article that accurately describes the modern aspect of the game. It correctly asserts that baseball’s ROTO rules were invented in the early 80’s, that Strat-o-Matic was already played by the mid 60’s and that an embryonic form of fantasy football was in place by the early 60’s.

Wikipedia states in a section that it calls “early history” of the game that the concept of fantasy sport was born right after the Second World War.

Every statement posted on Wikipedia must to be referenced by a reliable source. While I respect such a requirement, as the well-known assertion goes, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Up to now, I have proved that the body of extant material from antiquity is untrustworthy and have provided a theory that explains why eyewitness accounts do not contain tales of fantasy games.

I am not in possession of any archeological or historical evidence that would allow me to irrefutably assert that fantasy games were played over 20 centuries ago. I cannot prove it; I can only theorize about it.

To corroborate my theory, let us first examine who is playing fantasy games in modern times. Following that, let us examine the rules governing gladiatorial events and chariot racing to see if they are conducive to being fictionally transformed and played as fantasy games with imaginary owners and players.

Today fantasy sport is a multi-billion dollar business. Nevertheless, a large number of people play for no monetary gains. They play because they are sports fans and do it for the fun of it. Sports fandom is in their DNA. To paraphrase a wise Englishman, “Sports is not a matter of life and death, it is more, much more important than that”. Fantasy games belong to the realm of sports.

Do you think that our shared human character can shift in the bat of an eye, say, in 2000 years? I reject the notion that human interests, desires and passions have changed drastically since the antiquities, a term I must use with caution. Cicero would be appalled if he knew that we consider him living in the antiquity. Certain aspects of our human tendencies have changed, perhaps for better thanks to more respect for law and order and a heightened sense of empathy towards other living beings; the pleasure of getting immersed in sports is not one of them.

Nevertheless, we are talking about events that happened a long time ago. In order to play the game the participants must be literate. Were people able to read and write then? The evidence for the very widespread use of literacy and, in particular, for its trivial use, is a striking feature of Roman times.[[3]](#footnote-3)

That settled, let us take a glimpse at the gladiatorial events and chariot races to see if everything that is required to enjoy fantasy games fully was available to the Romans.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Guide to playing fantasy gladiatorial games

Pre-draft phase: Schedule of the events

Without a program published before the game, no player draft can take place. It is essential to know in advance the name of the players that are engaged in the upcoming event. Without a draft, fantasy teams cannot be built ahead of time. Having a game program is of paramount importance.

Advertisements known as *programmata* were placed or inscribed on the walls throughout the town a day or two before the gladiatorial events. In these advertisements the number and names of the gladiators and mode of their fighting were announced.

I can imagine a Roman snatching one of this *programmata* off the wall or copying it to a parchment to bring it to a nearby tavern for an evening of wine while drafting a fictitious team of gladiators with his friends.

Draft phase: Teams

Today we are owners/general managers of a fantasy team. An equivalent concept existed in the antiquities. Fantasy players were owners of gladiatorial schools, pretending to act as *lanistae.* A *lanistae* wasthe owner of a gladiatorial school known as *ludus*. There were several schools in Italy. Rome had four. Campania was particularly rich with several important schools. Spartacus escaped from a school in Capua, the de-facto capital of Campania.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In fantasy football today, one of the rules calls for drafting a football team and adding (or subtracting) its defensive performance to our team’s weekly point total. A *ludus* could be similarly drafted. The combined performance of the gladiators that belong to that school could be one of the fantasy team’s point producers.

Draft phase: Players

The underlying concept of a fantasy team is to draft players having different roles in order to end up with a team composition similar to that of the real teams. This is valid for both football and baseball. In football, we must have one or more quarterbacks, a few running backs and wide receivers, a tight end and a place kicker. Baseball teams, likewise, must have a set of players for each position, from infielders to outfielders, catchers and, very likely, pitchers. A draft is not over until everyone has selected a complete team with the required number of players for each position plus, maybe, a few flexible spots.

The characteristics of gladiatorial events lent themselves well to satisfy this basic rule. There were several classes of gladiators, each with their own distinguishing weapons and mode of combat. Here is a partial list: *Samnites, Secutores, Retiarii, Laquearii, Myrmillo, Thraces, Hoplomachi* and *Andabatae.*

A potential requirement for a fantasy gladiatorial team is to have at least one from each of the above classes.

I can only imagine the Romans pouring over the *programmata* while deciding which draft strategy to employ. With only a few reliable *Samnites*, is scarcity the winning strategy? Or, perhaps, the stars & scrubs method? Maybe it is time to blow the load on one of a never-failing *Thraces*?

Game time: Rules and points assignment

The popular impression is that every gladiatorial fight ended in the death of one of the combatants. That is not the case. A *lanistae* spent considerable fortune to house and train gladiators. He does not want to lose half of his school in a single day. True, if a fighter has behaved in a cowardly manner, the emperor or the people may decide not to be merciful. However, when both gladiators fought bravely, the loser’s life was generally spared.

The points then may be added or subtracted from the fantasy team based on whether the gladiator is a victor, a brave looser or a dead looser.

Keeper Leagues

In keeper leagues players are kept from season to season. While they are popular in modern times, it is unlikely that the Romans had any gladiator keeper teams. You can figure out the reason yourself. An injured player today is placed on DL. An injured gladiator was placed through PL. Today a player remains on DL until his return. But, alas, once a gladiator was carried through *Porta Libitineses* (PL) to the *spoliarium[[6]](#footnote-6)* he never came back. A new team was most likely drafted prior to each gladiatorial event.

Guide to playing fantasy chariot racing

Pre-draft phase: Schedule of the events

A race-day program inscribed on a wooden tablet was available. This program was so detailed that it even reported names of horses. Yes, people were familiar with race horses, their past performances and their pedigrees!

Draft phase: Teams

Only four factions were in existence, the Reds, the Blues, the Greens and the Whites. Domitian introduced the Gold and the Purple factions as his legacy, but they folded soon after his death. Had that limited number of factions restricted the number of owners in a league? It is quite possible.

Draft phase: Players

Each faction had primary, secondary and tertiary charioteers, plus a large number of additional replacement drivers. Although I have not found any material referencing the exact or maximum number of drivers a faction owned, I imagine that it would have been easy to draft a well-rounded team.

Game time: Rules and points assignment

This section was developed and formulated from inscriptions found on memorials of famous charioteers. Entire careers and lifetime triumphs were inscribed on gravestones. In addition to finding the number of victories and how much money a charioteer has earned, a considerable care was placed in reporting how many races were won in a particular manner. One must conclude that the fans and the public in general must have valued how a victory was achieved, see below. It is likely then that each particular win can be translated into different points won by a fantasy team owning the winning driver. There are several ways or win combinations to accumulate points (think of TDs, passing or receiving yards, RBIs, Runs, Wins and so forth):

* Winning with a *biga* orwith a *quadriga* in a single race, that is, a race when only one chariot per faction raced. A *quadriga*, being a four-horse drawn chariot and as such more spectacular than a biga, may be worth more points.
* Winning with a *biga* or with a *quadriga* as a primary driver in a double or a triple race, that is, when two or three chariots from each faction raced, one driver being primary, the others secondary and tertiary.
* Winning a race as a secondary or tertiary driver in a double or a triple race, which was probably frown upon, but technically possible.
* Winning a) at the finishing line (by a nose horse?), b) from the *pompa* (the first race of the day), c) when leading from the start and d) when coming from behind in the last lap.

A team also receives points for second or third finish. Points are subtracted when a charioteer is involved in an accident, when one of his horses dies in a crash or, the worst of misfortune for the owner of a fantasy team, when a charioteer from his fictitious team is killed in an accident during a race.

Keeper Leagues

Gladiator’s games were rare. No more than three or four events were scheduled yearly at the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*. Chariot races held at Circus Maximum were much more frequent. It is conceivable that leagues that kept their drivers from one race day to the next existed. There is another good reason for keeper leagues. Charioteers were well known and were as popular as the movie stars are in modern times. A team manager may have wanted to keep his drivers on his team for sentimental reasons.

Dropping a driver and then acquiring free agents, a key requirement in keeper leagues, was an easy task since each faction owned a large number of charioteers.

Wait to hear about other Roman games and passions. Then, if you could, you would choose to have lived in Rome 2,000 years ago. Romans were the last people who knew how to have fun.

1. This and other references to the 7th century monks and how they saved the classical works was obtained from **The Swerve, How the World Became Modern**, by Stephen Greenblatt, published by W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011, a wonderful book I truly recommend. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Umberto Eco, **The Name of the Rose**, published by Harcourt Brace & Company, English translation 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bryan Ward-Perkins, **The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization**, Oxford University Press, 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Most of the information for this section was obtained from **Everyday life of the Greeks and Romans** by E. Guhl and W. Koner, a book I am proud to own. First published mid-19th century, it was translated into English and published by D. Appleton and Company, NY in 1896. It is currently available from Crescent Books, NY. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. **Spartacus and the Slave Wars-A Brief History with Documents**, Translated, Edited and with an Introduction by Brent D. Shaw, University of Pennsylvania, St Martin Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Spoliarium* = death chamber [↑](#footnote-ref-6)