

MASTERSBALL

HEAD TO HEAD LEAGUES – A Survey of Strategies

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Largely because of the influx of fantasy football players crossing over into baseball, the head to head league is a format increasing in popularity. As implied by the name, the scoring is not cumulative over the course of the 26-week baseball marathon season, but rather teams square off against an opponent, sometimes multiple, and a victor is determined. Instead of using cumulative rotisserie points or fantasy points to generate the standings, each team has a won-loss record. In most instances, the league culminates with fantasy playoffs, pitting the teams with the best records against each other.

There are two primary means of scoring, fantasy points and rotisserie-style. In fantasy points, designated hitting and pitching statistics are assigned points. Negative points can be assigned for such stats as strikeouts for hitters and runs allowed for pitchers. Each team totals up the fantasy points accrued over the scoring period and the team with the highest total wins. In roto-style, the totals for each individual category are compared and a point is awarded to the team winning each category. In some setups, the team with the most points is the winner, in others, each point is added onto their record. If you win 7 out of 10 categories in a scoring period, your record is 7-3. If you take 6 the following week, your record is now 13-7.

Like any format, there is no single best strategy, as there are infinite rules permutations. Thus, your attack should be formulated based upon your league's unique structure. Some of these factors are frequency of lineup changes, at bats and innings pitched limits, use of reserve and disabled lists, depth of the player pool and ability to acquire free agents. In addition, the roto-style format lends itself to the possibility of ignoring certain categories to bolster your chances of winning several others.

Debunking the Myths

Before looking at specific strategies, one common philosophy with respect to achieving success in a head to head league is to focus on consistent performers as opposed to perceived streaky players. This is a concept carried over from fantasy football, but quite frankly, I personally do not feel it is a worthwhile endeavor for several reasons. Ultimately, you are sacrificing potential for perceived consistency; the key is the perception that some players are more consistent than others. Our site research has demonstrated that there really is no such thing as a consistent player, or at minimum, if there is a degree of consistency, it is not predictable. An active lineup in fantasy football is composed of fewer players than in baseball, and the performance range in a given week for a football player is more defined than in baseball, so the idea of consistency is a bit more apropos. Most baseball lineups consist of over 20 players. Chances are if one has a rough week, another will have a strong one to compensate. It seems to me with so many contributors, the best plan is to maximize your points potential and let the probability of having an entire team struggle one week be mitigated by the sheer number of active players. Bottom line, all 23 of your active players will not struggle. It is not worth giving up potential points to roster players that are in theory less likely to have super or horrible weeks. Those super and horrible weeks will even out over a 23-man roster.

Another flawed approach to head to head play is to avoid the so-called second half busts as they supposedly let you down when you need them the most, in your playoffs. Are there players that really do perform better in the first half and fade in the second half? Perhaps, but the fact is, they are reliably identifiable and you should not bank upon the perception that certain players struggle after the break, therefore avoid drafting them in lieu of a weaker talent. More often than not, the difference in first and second half performance is luck-based. If 16 people flip a coin, probability dictates one will get 4 heads and another 4 tails. If heads represents a better first half and tails a better second half, then solely due to randomness, 1 of 16 players will have better luck in the first half, hence better numbers pre-break while another will have a better second half. That is about 45 players apiece based on a 25-man roster. Those that like to rattle off the so-called first and second half players never offer 45 names. In other words, even if a few players had 4 consecutive poor second halves, that still falls within the statistical probability expected from pure randomness, so counting on it to happen in anything greater than 50/50 odds is not a sound play. This example used a sample of 4 years.

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Reduce the sample to 2 years and 1 out of 4 players will naturally have a better first or second half. Do you really think 25% of all players ALWAYS have better first or second halves?

Points League Strategies

Let us now focus on some possible strategies for points leagues. Soon there will be an essay discussing the means to properly value players in points leagues. The chief principle is making sure you only consider useful points. A useful point is a point no one else has. For example, if there are 12 teams and each is required to carry 2 catchers, the projected points for the 24th catcher are useless, because everyone has those points. Because this baseline differs by position, you need to make sure you do the adjustment versus the baseline player and not solely consider raw points when ranking players. A common mistake is to assume a scoring system favors drafting hitters or pitchers based on the fact the raw points for the top hitters exceeds those of the top pitchers and vice-versa. If the top pitchers are projected for 500 points and the top hitters expected to get about 400, the assumption is pitchers are more valuable. But what if the baseline hitters should score 50 points while the baseline pitchers usually get about 200? The useful points now total 350 for hitters and 300 for pitchers, rendering the top hitters more valuable than the top pitchers.

Perhaps the most integral element to consider in points leagues is the ability to stream players, both hitters and pitchers. Streaming is the tactic whereby you have the freedom to move players into your active roster on a frequent basis. The extent of streaming is controlled by such factors as size of your bench, daily or weekly moves, the mechanism to acquire free agents and at bats/innings pitched limits. In general, you want to design a strategy to maximize your points within your league structure. If your league allows for significant streaming, the best manner to take advantage is with pitching. The reason for this is two-fold: you can target available starting pitchers with two-starts in a weekly league or with favorable matchups in terms of opponents or parks and more useful pitching emanates from the free agent pool than hitting over the course of the season. From a roster perspective, this means you do not have to focus on building a top-pitching staff, as you will be able to stream in useful pitching from your reserve or free agency/waivers. Not having to worry about strong pitching allows you to obtain a top-notch offense. It is a much more effective strategy to find a pitcher with a favorable week than trying to decide which of 2 hitters will excel that week. The sole exception to this is in leagues that award a disproportionate number of points for complete games and shutouts. CC Sabathia and Roy Halladay's value jumps way up though I am not so sure Sabathia will complete as many games as the Yankees will likely prefer he is fresh in October and have the bullpen to protect leads.

The ploy of streaming starting pitchers is best utilized in leagues with no innings pitched maximum. Ideally you have a reserve list to place decent pitchers with poor matchups, but if not, take heed; no one has a reserve so there will be available starters in the free agent pool. In leagues with innings limits, it is still possible to spend less on pitching and deploy solid middle relievers in lieu of high-priced starters, then float in starters with favorable match-ups to reach your innings cap. The relievers play the role of a decent starter. Most of the time, streaming is thought to be a pitching strategy. But in leagues with daily transactions, it is a good idea to make sure you have as many active hitters as possible on Mondays and Thursdays, which are travel days for a lot of teams, hence off days. Here is where having some players with multiple eligibility comes in handy. Something to keep in mind is that if several owners are streaming hitters or pitchers, you need to stay a step ahead of them and have the desired players on your roster before others pick them up. This requires being proactive and looking at the schedule a few days in advance and stashing the players you will use down the road a few days before you actually need them. This works best in a daily league with daily pickups.

Rotisserie-Style League Strategies

Let us now discuss rotisserie-style leagues as they are a bit more interesting. As suggested earlier, a viable strategy in head-to-head roto is to purposely lose a category while fortifying several others, sacrificing that point in the hopes of improving your chances to win the other categories. The best categories to punt are those more singular in nature, such as steals or saves. If you do not care about steals, every steal your team

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accrues is wasted, so the idea is to draft players projected to only steal a handful of bases. The “value” you would have put into steals goes into something like home runs, which should also help bolster categories such as RBI, R and SLP. If you have an empty bench spot, you can stash a Michael Bourn type in the event you play a team that is also deficient in steals, as Bourn alone may win you the category. You just have to make sure you can still compete in the other categories without the usual power hitter that Bourn replaced in the lineup. Another category some ignore is batting average if their league undervalues players such as Adam Dunn and Dan Uggla. One advantage of dumping batting average as opposed to steals is you will occasionally get lucky and win the category, due to the fickle nature of the stat.

The downside to ignoring a category is your margin of error is reduced. You really need to take advantage of the added value you add to the other categories, as you are basically beginning the week in a hole. You really have to know your league and its tendencies to be able to successfully ignore a category and be sure to have ample players to enact your strategy. If more than one owner is employing the same strategy, pickings for the viable players become thin. You might be forced to roster players that get more than a few steals if a couple of owners are concentrating on the slow-footed sluggers. And again, every steal you pick up goes to waste. As such, the recommended strategy is to seek a balanced attack, capable of winning each category. Then, during the season, based upon how your squad is faring, you might opt to deal all your stolen base players if you find that you rarely win the category.

An offshoot of punting a category goes hand in hand with the streaming of pitchers described above. The repercussion of employing a streaming scheme is the shifting of focus to top hitters, which should help you win all the hitting stats. If you sweep the hitting categories, all you need to do is win a single pitching category to gain a victory for the week, especially in leagues that award a single win or loss to the team that wins the most categories. By loading up on starting pitchers, you increase your chance of taking the wins and strikeouts categories in lieu of competing in ERA, WHIP and saves. But a sweep of hitting renders you 6-4 or 7-3, thus victorious. If there is no innings minimum, you can take the opposite tact and deploy only relievers, giving you a great shot at ERA, WHIP and saves. As before, the key is your margin of error is small, as you simply must dominate hitting. That said, it is a much safer plan to really focus on hitting in an effort to control the categories then manage your staff to the necessary pitching points as opposed to punting something like steals to help the build up the other stats.

In summary, the most important aspect of points based head to head league play is to know your rules with respect to transactions and deploy a strategy to best take advantage to amass as many points as possible. In roto-style, it is probably best to focus more of your assets on hitting, aiming for a balanced attack. In both formats, do not get hung up on the idea of consistency, as it is more myth than real.