

MASTERSBALL

Debunking the Myths

Mixed Leagues versus Auction Leagues and Auctions versus Drafts

By Todd Zola

And in the beginning, the Founding Fathers created the single league rotisserie auction...

Some things start simple and evolve into something more advanced. Other things, like the game born out of La Rotisserie in New York City also mutate, but into what most perceive as a more facile form: auctions have been increasingly replaced by snake drafts and mixed universe leagues are rapidly taking the place of the AL and NL only formats.

Largely fueled by the bias of those weaned on the style, deep auction leagues are conventionally considered to be the most demanding, difficult format. This perception is perpetuated by veterans both in and out of the industry.

As an industry veteran who has made a point to actively compete in all different formats at the highest level, I sport what might be considered a contrarian, if not slightly controversial view. To me, each format has its own unique set of challenges. I prefer not to rate the difficulty of said challenges. Instead, I prefer to recognize the respective challenges and strive to conquer them. A challenge is only a challenge until one becomes experienced and comfortable, dare I say expert, enough to overcome it more often than not. It takes people different amounts of time to accomplish this, with varying degrees of effort necessary. For some, perfecting the nuances of a mixed league is more challenging than those of a single league. Similarly for others, mastering draft dynamics is a more daunting endeavor than auction dynamics. I not-so-humbly contend there is no unequivocal ranking of the challenges, auction greater than draft or single greater than mixed. Unfortunately, there are many in and out of the industry either naive to these challenges or too obstinate to admit they exist, continuing to myopically insist the deep auction format is the be-all-end-all way to play the game and everything else is inferior.

Let us begin by comparing and contrasting the single versus mixed league formats, often referred to as deep versus shallow. While there is no textbook definition of a deep or shallow league, in a shallow league, only Bengie is on a roster. In a deep league, EVERY Molina is on a roster. The difference is in the penetration of the player pool. In a 12-team mixed league with 14 hitters and 9 pitchers active, there are 168 hitters and 108 pitchers that are draft-worthy. Most MLB teams carry 13 or 14 position players, so we will split the difference and estimate on average, each roster is composed of 13.5 hitters and 11.5 pitchers, yielding an available player pool of 405 batters and 345 hurlers. That makes the hitting penetration 168/405 or 41%, with the pitching penetration 31%. Conducting a similar exercise for 12-team AL only renders 89% hitting penetration and 67% pitching, with 84% and 71% as the corresponding numbers for 13-team NL only. As an aside, the discrepancies in these hitting and pitching penetrations is a major reason for the idiom "bully hitting and manage pitching," since there is more available pitching left over to help manage your staff... but I digress. The major point to realize here, is in the shallower format, less than half of the overall player pool is draft-worthy; whereas well over 75% of the available players are rostered in the deep formats.

The conventional "wisdom" resulting from this penetration illustration is that deep leagues are "harder" because you need to know every player on each team, down to the 5th outfielder, 3rd catcher, utility infielder and lefty specialist. I am not sure I buy into this argument. Using 12-team AL only and mixed as examples, both require 168 hitters and 108 pitchers – the same number. In fact, due to the nature of the undrafted, free agent pools, I might argue you need to familiarize yourself with MORE players in the mixed format. There is a larger pool of potential draft-worthy players, whose value is contextual and depends on the construction of your roster and your needs. A valid counter argument is, if you play in both an AL and NL only league as opposed to two shallow mixed leagues, now you do need to know the entire major league population, while

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the other guy only needs to know maybe a little over half. I will concede this point if multiple leagues are considered, but in a one-on-one scenario, you need to know the same amount of players to compete in a single league versus a mixed league. It is just that the overall quality of the players is different.

Another cited difference between the formats is that rosters are composed of mostly starting players in mixed formats, while players of all talent levels comprise deep leagues. The perception is that it is easier to construct a mixed league roster since all the players are "good." But here is the deal – value is relative. The last hitter in a mixed league may have better raw stats than the last hitter in AL or NL only, but they are both worth the exact same thing to their respective teams. The key is understanding how to properly value players using the concept of useful statistics.

The quality of the respective non-drafted player pools is a major sticking point for the deep league proponents. The claim is that since there are so many good players still left for free agent and waiver pickup, you can readily replace the back-end players as there will be ample players performing better available for acquisition. And they are right. But the catch is, that means you have some under-performing players and chances are several other owners do not, putting you behind the eight-ball. Sure, you can upgrade, but you are doing so because you are behind. And the non-struggling owners can also upgrade from the same available player pool. Bringing the discussion back to challenges, I believe the challenge when dealing with deep league pools is primarily predicting the playing time of the back-end of the player pool, as opposed to which players are a candidate for a skills spike and which are trending downward. However, the challenge with a shallow league is two-fold: you also have to have a handle on playing time, but more importantly, the successful mixed league enthusiast is ahead of the curve when it comes to end-game players; they do not employ the spaghetti method, throwing stuff against the wall to see what sticks. No, they use some of the more advanced analytical means to identify the players whose performance will exceed mainstream expectations. While I still prefer not to grade the so-called difficulty of these challenges, I am comfortable in arguing that dealing with them is equally challenging.

Now let us shift our attention to auction and draft leagues, with the focus being on the different, but equally challenging dynamics. For the purpose of this discussion, draft refers to a snake or serpentine draft, where the order of picks reverses in the even rounds.

Auction veterans believe the bidding nature of player acquisition is a more serious challenge than selecting the best player from a group of available players when you are on the clock in a draft. They point to the pressure of having to be aware of your situation as well as everyone else's in terms of tracking rosters, money and needs. They claim you need to pay attention the entire time, not taking time off between picks, really only concentrating at your pick. They cite the avoidance of leaving money on the table as a major challenge, one not present in the draft style.

On the whole, they are right. But they are overlooking a couple of things. First, most long-time auction players gain experience in the format. The more auctions in which one participates, the more comfortable they become and the more seamless it is to do. Second, it is a fallacy that draft players can take it easy between picks, simply crossing off drafted players until it is their turn to pick. It is this time between picks that the majority of planning and contemplation should be done. It is bad practice to wait until your selection to identify the group of players in play at your turn, waiting to decide specifically which one is most beneficial to your squad. It is also not optimal to 'know who you want to pick' before your turn, only to have to scramble for a replacement as that player is drafted by an opponent. It is best to spend the time between picks developing an ample array of players to consider, and then when it is your selection, decide on the ideal one.

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Personally, I feel the most important element of an auction is money management. There is a fine line between accruing the most value and gathering the necessary stats to win. Perhaps my perspective is a little muddled as I have become a bit NFBC-centric (where there is no trading) so a balanced lineup is key. The old credo was “draft for value, trade for balance.” This is still very much the call in the vast majority of leagues since most permit trading. You still need to be wary of acquiring too much of any asset, as they will no longer be an asset and will switch to becoming a liability; once you have such an excess, you will not be able to deal the stats for an equal return. Regardless of whether the league allows trading or not, the key is knowing the player pool in enough detail to be confident you can efficiently spend your remaining budget without overpaying or leaving money on the table. This is the real challenge of the auction, being keenly aware of your monetary situation with respect to everyone else. There may be enough players available for you to spend all your budget, but you need to be cognizant of others needs and tendencies as well. You may have two spots in which you intend to spend \$20 a player, and there may be four players available in that range. But if three other teams are also looking to pick up a \$20 player, one of you will be left out in the game of musical \$20 players. The challenge is not to be left out, or shift your money to more plush spots. This dynamic is strictly inherent to auctions and not drafts. And while the process does get a little easier with experience, at the heart is having an in-depth knowledge of the player pool, which changes from year to year.

Auction proponents may feel this puts the check mark in their column, making the auction process more challenging than the draft process. But alas, I respectfully disagree, as there is an element to draft dynamics that again balances the ledger. In a draft, you are left at the whim of your fellow competitors. In an auction, you are able, at minimum, to bid on everyone. In an auction, everyone is in play. In a draft, that is not the case. This may rub some of my industry brethren the wrong way, but having been there and done that in many auctions and drafts--which is the key, as I have played in as many serious draft leagues as ANYONE in the industry--the repercussion of this is you need to know the player pool in GREATER depth than you do in auctions. Really, you do – and this is the factor that evens out the challenges. You have to be able to adjust on the fly, based on the series of picks before your turn and what you expect to happen before your next turn. This is the strategic equivalent of money management in auctions and is more of a challenge than inexperienced, naïve, or even stubborn auction veterans realize. I won't belabor the point here as we will be providing some specific essays discussing the way to overcome this challenge, but I not so humbly believe this is the aspect of drafts under-appreciated by those that favor auctions. They do not have a thorough grasp of the intricacies involved in constructing a championship draft team, as it involves more than simply taking whom they perceive as the best available player at their pick, or even using an ADP (average draft position) to help guide their picks.

There is one final compelling argument as to why draft leagues are equally challenging to auction leagues. In auction leagues, not only is every player available to you, so is every strategy. You can elect to build your squad in an infinite number of ways, and since the entire player pool is there for you, you can mix and match to your heart's content. Stars and scrubs, spread the risk, the \$9 pitching staff, the Sweeney Plan, bagging steals, bagging saves; whatever the strategy, it is significantly easier to pull it off in an auction than it is in a draft. Since you are picking players round-wise with descending value, employing stars and scrubs or spread the risk is not an option in a draft. While the equivalent of the Labadini Plan (\$9 staff) in drafts is to fill up your hitting before taking a pitcher, you are forced to draft more than \$9 of pitching value, lessening the strength of the hitting. And any strategy that involves ignoring a category like Sweeney, or bagging saves or steals is harder in a draft, as acquiring ANY stat that you are trying to ignore is a waste of assets. In an auction, you can target every player that is projected for minimal steals and not bid on any player expected to get more than a handful. In a draft, you are taking a huge leap of faith that there will be a suitable player for you every time it is your turn. Sure, you can bypass several more “valuable” players and select someone with no steals, but you are sacrificing potential value at that pick. The bottom line is you are more restricted in a draft, which actually further necessitates knowing the player pool better in a draft than in an auction.

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In summary, the point of this essay was not to convince non-believers that drafts and mixed leagues are the Rodney Dangerfields of the fantasy world, but rather, to point out there are varying challenges to each and every format. What IS important is recognizing these nuances and exploiting them, especially if there are others in the league naïve to the intricacies associated with the specific format. What works in one style may not work in another; this is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. The key is being open-minded enough to appreciate the unique challenges of each format and being clever enough to overcome them.