

Fantasy League

By Mike Lupica

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From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of HEAT, TRAVEL TEAM and MILLION-DOLLAR THROW comes a story of every football kid's dream come true.

12-year-old Charlie is a fantasy football guru. He may be just a bench warmer for his school's football team, but when it comes to knowing and loving the game, he's first-string. He even becomes a celebrity when his podcast gets noticed by a sports radio host, who plays Charlie's fantasy picks for all of Los Angeles to hear. Soon Charlie befriends the elderly owner of the L.A. Bulldogs -- a fictional NFL team -- and convinces him to take a chance on an aging quarterback. After that, watch out . . . it's press conferences and national fame as Charlie becomes a media curiosity and source of conflict for the Bulldogs general manager, whose job Charlie seems to have taken. It's all a bit much for a kid just trying to stay on top of his grades and maintain his friendship with his verbal sparring partner, Anna.

Like the best Disney film in book form, like *Moneyball* for kids, *Fantasy League* is every football kid's dream scenario.

"Lupica is the greatest sports writer for middle school readers." –*VOYA*

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for FANTASY LEAGUE:

* "This *Moneyball* story with kids is on the money."–Booklist, starred review

"*Fantasy League* . . . is the feel good book of the year."–*VOYA*

"This will be devoured by young football fans, who appreciate intricate game details and won't mind a touch of heartwarming sentiment."–School Library Journal

Mike Lupica has been named to 70 state awards lists, including multiple Texas Bluebonnet Award nominations.

About the Author
Mike Lupica is the #1 bestselling author of many popular books for young readers, including *QB 1*, *Heat*, *Travel Team*, *Million-Dollar Throw*, and *The Underdogs*. He has carved out a niche as the sporting world's finest storyteller. Mike lives in Connecticut with his wife and their four children. When not writing novels, **Mike Lupica** writes for New York's *Daily News*, appears on ESPN's *The Sports Reporters* and hosts *The Mike Lupica Show* on ESPN Radio. You can visit Mike Lupica at mikelupicabooks.com

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One

Here was Charlie Gaines, king of the pro football fantasy leagues even at the age of twelve, not just watching the second preseason game for the Bengals and Giants as much as studying it.

His mom had come in a few minutes ago and said, "I can't tell, are you watching the game or searching for clues?"

"Both."

As soon as she'd come in, he'd paused the screen, freezing on the Giants' rookie quarterback out of Ohio State, Rex Tuttle, as he dropped back into shotgun formation.

"I'm not distracting you, am I?" she'd said. Charlie had turned, saw her smiling at him, both of them knowing what his answer was going to be.

"Yes," he'd said.

“Talk to you after the Super Bowl in February,” she’d said, and left.

Charlie had the remote on one side of him on the bed, laptop on the other. He pointed the remote. The game came back to life, the announcers’ voices came back into his room.

All the company he needed when there was a game on, Charlie happy being alone with football. Good at it. He really preferred watching the games alone unless he was watching with his friend Anna, the only person he knew who loved football as much as he did.
But then Anna’s family actually owned a team.

It was different with Charlie Gaines; he felt as if the whole league belonged to him, the players and their stats and where they were in their careers and how much Charlie projected they had left in them. Sometimes his mom said that when he dropped his backpack on the table in the front hall, she expected decimal points to come spilling out.

“How many leagues are you in this season?” she’d said at dinner that night.

Meaning fantasy leagues.

“Just counting mine?” he’d said. “Or all the ones I help my friends with?”

She’d given him a long look. “You still have time for real life, right?”

Real life to his mom meant three things: friends and school. And his own football team in Pop Warner.

“Mom,” he said, “I know you think sometimes that I’ve turned into some kind of football geek, that it’s all I think about or talk about. But last year I had my best year ever at school. And you know I’ve got all the friends I could want from school.”

“I’m allowed to worry about my guy,” Karla Gaines said to her son. “It’s what moms do. If we didn’t have worrying, we’d have to do more yoga.”

“I’m fine,” he’d said. “And by the way? How can you worry about me and fantasy leagues when you’re the one working in what you call the world of make-believe?”

They lived in Culver City, California, where Sony Studios was located. His mom worked there as an executive assistant for one of the top production guys, still believing she was going to be a movie producer herself someday, constantly on the lookout for what she called the “right script.” He’d asked her once if she’d rather have the right script or the right man, having divorced Charlie’s dad a long time ago.

“Script," she'd answered. "If it’s the right one, it doesn’t leave.”

At dinner tonight she’d said, “I just want your life to be great, pal.”

“It is,” Charlie Gaines had told her. Grinning. “How can it not be great? It’s football season.”

Most football fans thought the preseason was a waste of time. You hardly got to see the best players, and coaches were afraid of getting their stars hurt before they ever got anywhere near September.

Charlie didn’t care, he loved it all.

It was football season again. From August all the way through the Super Bowl in February, it was when he was happiest, when his life felt great.

He didn’t have to watch tonight’s game alone. He could have invited Anna over, but he was going over to her house tomorrow night to watch her team—and his—the L.A. Bulldogs play the Bears in Chicago. Or he could have invited one of his boys, Kevin Fallon, to come over—Kevin lived only two blocks away. The only problem with that was Kevin loved doing his own play-by-play of the game; he hardly ever shut up.

It was better with Anna. She focused on games, especially Bulldogs games, the way he did. Maybe it was why she knew more about the sport than any guy Charlie knew, certainly any guy their age.

Any guy except for Charlie.

Charlie Gaines knew real games the way his friends knew video games. And wished that Anna’s uncle, the general manager of the Bulldogs, knew the league that well. Or at least better than he did.

The Bulldogs were an expansion team still playing like one four years after they’d brought pro football back to Los Angeles. They were so bad, still not managing to have won more than four games in a season, that the sportswriters and the bloggers and the radio hosts and the fans on Twitter liked to say that pro football still hadn’t come back to L.A.

But as pathetic as they were, Charlie loved them. Not because he had to the way Anna did, but for the only reason that mattered in sports, or had ever mattered: They were his first team. And they were going to stay his team, even though they weren’t getting any better -- looked like they might never get better. There would be Sundays barely a month into the season when Bulldogs stadium would be half-full.

If that.

One of Charlie’s football fantasies? That someday Bulldogs Stadium would be totally full, of noise and excitement, for a big game at the end of the season, instead of just playing out the string.

The other day Charlie had read a review by one of the sports columnists in the Los Angeles Times, read it because he read everything about the Bulldogs no matter how bad it was. And it was bad, the columnist writing about Joe Warren, Anna’s grandfather, the owner of the team. And her uncle Matt, the team’s general manager. They were about as popular in L.A. heading into another season as traffic.
The Bulldogs were named after an old independent team out of the city’s football past, the L.A. Bulldogs of the 1930s. Charlie had read up on them and everything else that had ever happened in pro football in L.A. until the Rams left for St. Louis.

So he knew that the NFL had thought about bringing the league to the city when the first Bulldogs were playing, but found out that teams from the east and the Midwest didn’t want to take trains all the way across country to play a game, even if they were only coming from Chicago, which Charlie knew used to have two teams and not just one. And cross-country flights were still sketchy in those days. So the city didn’t get a team until the Rams in 1946, and then didn’t have one for nearly twenty years after the Rams left in 1994.

Now they had the brand-spanking-new L.A. Bulldogs. Except that wasn’t what most people called them now.

People had taken to calling them the L.A. Dogs.

They either drafted or traded for the wrong players, or signed the wrong free agents. They did this as consistently as Charlie Gaines would pick the right players in his fantasy leagues.

That column in the Times said that one of the reasons fantasy football was so wildly popular in Los Angeles is because any kind of fantasy ball was better than the grim reality of the L.A. Dogs.

Charlie Gaines still loved both.

He'd read somewhere that fantasy football was at least seventy-five percent luck, people comparing it to playing blackjack, saying that you could have your system all you wanted, but the game still came down to what cards the dealer turned over. Maybe that was true. Charlie was fine with the element of luck—what happened on the field after you'd made your calls on which players you drafted and which ones you might slot in on a given Sunday or Monday.

He'd take his chances with the twenty-five percent that wasn't luck. Then it did feel like a video game to him, like he was playing Madden not just against a friend, but against a whole fantasy league.

And he was the one with the controller in his hands. Controlling it like a champ.

Then it was all about brains and study and hard work. About searching for clues, even if you had to go back into the past looking for them. And maybe something else, too, what Charlie's buddy Kevin Fallon called Charlie's "gift." When Kevin would say that, Charlie would tell him it sounded like something he'd unwrap on Christmas or on his birthday.

Kevin would come back at him: "You know what I mean. It's why I call you Brain."

Charlie and Kevin went to Culver City Middle School—getting ready to start the seventh grade in a few weeks—and played football together for the Culver City Cardinals in Pop Warner. Kevin was the team's star running back, already talking about being in the backfield for USC or UCLA or Stanford someday. Charlie? As much as he loved football, Charlie pretty much thought of himself as a scrub. Backup linebacker last season, probably a backup linebacker this season. Special teams player, which he told Kevin was misleading, since there was nothing special about his game.

One time Kevin, being serious, asked Charlie what he thought his best position was and Charlie had said, "Blocked." This was when they were playing sixth grade football. Charlie spent a lot of time on the sideline standing next to their coaches. Occasionally he'd have the nerve to point out something he thought they'd missed. But mostly he was there to study them. See what they were seeing. And what he might be missing.

Trying to learn.

"Information is power," his mom always told him, explaining that was why she spent so much time reading what she called "the trades," newspapers like The Hollywood Reporter and Variety that covered the movie business.

"You're in a fantasy league, too!" he'd tell her.

When he was playing fantasy football, and winning at it, and being called Brain by his friends, he wasn't the

boy without a dad. And he wasn't the boy who wasn't good enough to be a star playing football.

He felt like he was the one in the movies. A superhero.

The rest of the world didn't always make sense to Charlie Gaines. Football did. Who to pick and who not to pick and who to dump and who to keep. Who was on the rise and who was fading away. Which numbers meant something and which didn't and how they changed from season to season and what it all meant.

He laughed sometimes at the idea that this was all a fantasy, because other than his love for his mom and his friends, nothing was more real to him.

Maybe his biggest fantasy of all? Actually having a dad to watch football games with.

Richard Gaines had left a few months before Charlie's fourth birthday. He never came back. And had finally stopped calling. It was why Charlie's memories of him were sketchy at best. His mom would ask if he remembered the time they did this, or the time when he was three when they all went to Disneyland, and he'd shake his head. He did remember the time when his dad drove him down to San Diego to see a Chargers game, remembered where they sat and how cool he thought the Chargers' uniforms were and how big everything looked to him. But not much else. Sometimes he felt like he really shouldn't be missing something—a relationship with his dad—that he'd never had in the first place.

One time he heard his mom on the phone, talking to one of her friends, saying, "As far as I know, he's still out there trying to find his fortune. But I fully expect they'll find life on Mars before that happens."

Alone in his room now with football, his mom downstairs on her own computer, Charlie closed his eyes and shook his head, telling himself to focus on what he had in his life and not on what he didn't.

The game in front of him.

Not as interested in a Giants' rookie on this night as he was a thirty-eight-year-old backup quarterback for the Bengals, lighting it up in the second quarter now that the Cincinnati starter was done for the night. It was no secret that everybody who followed pro football thought that Tom Pinkett was washed up, even though he'd been the number one pick in the draft when he'd come out of Arizona and was runner-up for the Heisman his senior year. That Tom Pinkett had no more value in real football than he did in fantasy.

Charlie wasn't so sure. He wasn't thinking about taking him in the draft. But stuff happened during the season, guys got hurt, especially quarterbacks, despite all the rules the league had passed trying to keep them safe, to make the NFL even more of a passers' league. It's why you had to keep paying attention, even in the preseason—especially in the preseason—because there might be information you could use down the road.

You never knew who might turn out to be your difference maker.

He turned up the volume a little, wanting to hear what the announcers were saying about Tom Pinkett, one of them saying his arm looked stronger than it had in a few years. It made things less quiet in his room.

Charlie told himself the announcers were all the company he needed. The Fantasy King, trying as always to keep it real.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jessica Bradsher:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have far more or little spare time? Yes, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their particular spare time to take a move, shopping, or went to the actual Mall. How about open as well as read a book eligible Fantasy League? Maybe it is being best activity for you. You understand beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can more intelligent than before. Do you agree with it is opinion or you have different opinion?

Charles Lemaster:

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