Play ball — and be smarter than a fifth-grader — and have fun

Fortuna man turns fantasy sports into math-teaching phenomenon

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Secluded within his Fortuna home, having been completely immersed in his vision for the past nine months, a pale, mentally exhausted Dan Flockhart sat entranced in front of his computer screen, imagining the future and the boundless possibilities it held.

He smiled inwardly. What had he just created?

Putting it simply, Flockhart had created a concept using fantasy sports to revolutionize mathematics education. He has effectively erased any doubt that math can be fun.

Flockhart has been employing his fantasy sports method in his own classroom for years, with resounding success, and his presentation at the National Mathematics Teachers' Convention in St. Louis last year piqued the interest of a major academic publisher, Jossey-Bass.

ON THE WEB

www.fantasysportsmath.com

That triggered a dream-like wave of events that will culminate Friday morning, when his eight books (a teacher resource guide and student workbook devoted to baseball, football, soccer and basketball) hit the shelves nationwide.

Flockhart, who remains humbled by all the attention, will be at Borders on Friday evening from 6 to 8 p.m. to tell his Humboldt County neighbors what it's all about.

Are his methods conventional? No. Progressive? Yes. Effective? Absolutely.

So effective, in fact, that in the year prior to Flockhart's programs being introduced at a New Jersey middle school, only 9.9 percent of the students scored between 200 and 249 in the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA), meaning they were considered proficient in mathematics. The remaining 90 percent scored 199 or below (only partially proficient). But one fantasy year later, more than 50 percent of the students ascended to the proficient category.

MARK MCKENNA/THE TIMES-STANDARD

Fortuna resident Dan Flockhart holds up copies of his books that make math fun.

Still not convinced?

Skeptics who scan Flockhart's Web site at www.fantasysportsmath.com will find testimonials from credible sources attesting to the impact these programs have had on students. Also on the site is a link to view ESPN's "Outside the Lines" segment about the method.

But how can this work?

To understand the relevance that fantasy sports have to the presentation of 5th-grade-and-up math principles, one must first understand the rudimentary principles of fantasy sports.

Essentially, fantasy sports use a virtual team composed of actual players, drafted by the participant (which in this case is the student), to complete a roster that competes in one of the gazillion Internet leagues (or in this case, against fellow classmates).

The backbone of any fantasy sports league is the scoring structure, which assigns particular values to specific statistics. For instance, if your quarterback throws a touchdown, you get six points. Simple as that.

Points are awarded for every conceivable statistic, which in turn produces an aggregate total by which the students are measured against one another, creating a competitive dynamic that — although good-natured — serves as a strong motivator.

And these scoring structures are where Flockhart found his niche.

Basically, the point values were altered so as to require the knowledge of concepts consistent with

■ See BALL/A8

BALL

FROM A1

5th-grade-and-up math. Maybe a touchdown is worth one-eighth of a point, and a 100-yard rusher gets you two-fifths. Now, arriving at your point total necessitates become compulsory. And all the while, the kids are having a blast, regularly arriving to class early to check where they rank in the standings, examining box scores, talking a little trash with next week's opponent — unconsciously dedicating themselves to learning.

"I had kids running into the They felt empowered."

The response has been staggering. In addition to being featured on ESPN's "Outside the Lines," he is sought out by everyone from commissioners to college professors regarding everything from speeches to joint ventures. Flockhart has been told that he has who might otherwise be apathetic at best toward math. Which is the reason he implemented the method in the first place, to "narrow the gap between the haves and the have-nots."

With this goal in mind, Flockhart has targeted inner-city youths, a demographic that conurban areas are not proficient in mathematics. According to Time magazine, one out of three kids drops out of high school.

"This is a major problem. If these games can help kids to acquire a love of mathematics, a lot of research suggests that increased achievement in one sub-

adding fractions.

"These numbers mean something to them," said Flockhart. "It has to be relevant to their lives, and not just an abstract idea that has no real-life application. They're into sports, and they understand the data."

Soon, comprehension of decimals, exponents, absolute values, and other fundamental concepts

classroom yelling, 'Can we play fantasy football today!?' It was nuts," said Flockhart. "When you're seeing that kind of excitement at the middle school level, that's half the battle.

"And at first I thought it was going to exclude the girls, but when they started realizing that their teams were performing as well as the boys, they loved it.

erected what soon will become a "multi-million-dollar industry."

"Korea has already contacted me about acquiring the foreign rights," said Flockhart.

However, the monetary benefits remain an ancillary benefit in Flockhart's eyes. For him, the unlikely marriage of fantasy sports and formal education presents a real opportunity to inspire kids

sistently suffers from a lack of adequate resources and capable instructors, as the primary — although certainly not the only — beneficiaries of his programs.

"I think that every kid in the inner cities should be using my program," said Flockhart.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, 83 percent of eighth-graders in major

ject can spread to other subjects," said Flockhart. "This can help to stop that cycle of poverty. It's about social justice for me."

Given the phenomenon that fantasy sports has become, the stars seem to have aligned for Flockhart and his programs, not only to change the landscape of mathematics, but to change the world — one young mind at a time.