Most of us look for an edge in our hockey pools by actively seeking out experts' advice. We read their articles and we ponder their recommended draft lists (side note: Yahoo has now released their ranking of the 100 top players for the 2009-10 season).

But no matter how many lists you agonize over and bring to your draft, it's likely that at some point events will overtake your careful planning and you'll be forced to make some decisions on your own. And often, it's the stickiest of situations where all we are left with is what our gut is telling us.

It's part of the fun though, really. Fantasy hockey is an opportunity to take risks, build something of your own, and then hope for the chance to say, "I *told* ya so."

And, as it turns out, listening to your inner, “amateur” voice instead of just mechanically following an expert plan, might actually help you on draft day.

But you have to know how to do it right.

Deciding with Your Gut

There is some solid science behind our gut feelings. They’re not just emotional responses, and they certainly aren’t some sort of cosmic connection to a higher plane. So neither taking Dan Cleary because your girlfriend is also a Newfoundlander, nor selecting Matt Stajan because your horoscope seemed to suggest that this is his big break-out year represents a gut feeling.

A real gut feeling is experiencing an intuition about a decision – without knowing exactly why.

Gut feelings often occur because our brains have made an important connection without fully letting our conscious minds in on the process. Many people who rely on making decisions under intense conditions, where mistakes can be catastrophic (whether on Bay street or in Afghanistan), have been trained to trust these feelings because when used properly, they lead to success.

So how can you take advantage of your gut feelings, too?

Research is now showing that often these gut-inspired "lucky guesses" are actually memories that aren't being consciously accessed, and the good news is that thanks to the internet, there is no shortage of fantasy hockey information out there to immerse yourself in. The bad news is that there is no possible way to memorize all the data out there. And if you try, you might find that your passionate pastime just became a frustrating job.

Even worse, by becoming overloaded with information, you can destroy your perspective and handicap your decision-making by focusing on retaining as many bits of information as possible, instead of thinking about how they relate to one another, or how they might relate to any number of possible situations that you will find yourself stuck in on draft day. You become that guy who is frantically rifling through paper, paralyzed until finally forced into a bad decision.

Instead of working harder, you need to work smarter. Read however much fantasy hockey material you feel like, but make sure you take the time to think about what you just read, and then give your brain time to mull it over without letting your conscious mind reduce the information down to a bunch of lists.

Some experts (including Malcolm Gladwell in his book Blink), have argued that often our first best "guess" will out-perform slower and more rational approaches, like listing pros and cons for a particular decision. It seems counter-intuitive, but trying harder can actually lead to performing worse.

Just don't leave your fantasy hockey reading until the last moment, give it time to sink in. With weeks to go before the regular season starts, you've still got time to stock your brain full of all kinds of fantasy tidbits.

Your Fantasy Hockey Take-Aways

1. Read fantasy hockey material. If you do no prep work, you're leaving your brain without anything to work with. The old saying of, "garbage in, garbage out", holds true for gut feelings.

2. Relax on draft day. If you find yourself shifting through reams of paper, or desperately trying to recall what an expert said in an article two weeks ago, you're not helping yourself. Don't over-think the problem.

3. Trust yourself. Science has proven some amazing things about our sub-conscious brain. If you have a strong gut feeling on draft day, go with it. The real GMs do.

At some point, you will need to rely on your gut feelings on draft day. So why not give yourself

the advantage of being well-prepared? Do some quality reading beforehand, focus on *thinking* instead of
memorizing,
and give your gut a fighting chance when the big day arrives.