Fantasy Hockey Site Review: ESPN

Note: This is the second in a series of reviews of the most popular online fantasy hockey league websites. All the sites have their strengths. The intention of these reviews is not to favour one site over another, but to provide a resource for league commissioners to determine which site will best meet the needs of their league. All sites are evaluated on the same criteria to provide for easy comparison, with a letter grade assigned to each factor. The opinions of the reviewer do not necessarily reflect those of Dobber Hockey.

Other site reviews:

Yahoo

ESPN Site Review By: Vince Suglio (Note: the official site name is TSN Fantasy Hockey

powered by ESPN)

User-Friendliness: A+

For the commissioner, handling league setup using ESPN is quite user friendly. Everything is arranged in a tabbed format. Under the “rosters” tab, the commissioner has the options of: forwards, centers, left wing, right wing, defensemen, goalies, utility players, bench spots, and IR spots. I would like to see ESPN add a general “wing” roster spot in the future. Once the positions have been chosen, you can further edit the rosters by setting how many starters you would like to allow at each position on a nightly basis, as well as restrictions on the max allowed at each roster position at any given point in the season. Even further, you can set games played maximums for each roster position per matchup.

Scoring and Stats: A-

The “scoring” tab is where you can customize your league’s scoring settings. You can use a default ESPN generated system or you can customize your own settings. Most reading this article will probably customize the settings. The first editable item is stat qualifiers. This feature allows you to set the minimum number of goalie games required to be eligible to win any goaltending stat category. The list of the available stat categories on ESPN is actually surprising. The following categories are all selectable:

SKATERS: G, A, +/-, PTS, PIM, PPG, PPA SHG, SHA, STP (SPECIAL TEAM PTS), GWG, FOW, FOL, SHIFTS, TOI, AVGTOI, HAT-TRICKS, SOG, HIT, BLK, DEF PTS, STG (SPECIAL TEAM GOALS), STA, PPP, SHP

GOALIES: GS (GAMES STARTED), W, L, SA, GA, EGA (EMPTY NET GA), SV, SO, MIN, OTL, GAA, SV%, GWIN%

I would love to see a couple of stat categories added related to shootouts. This has become such an integral part of the game (for better or worse), it would be fantastic to cheer for players to score shootout goals and goalies to save shootout opportunities. It would also come into play

when drafting, researching the best shootout players and goalies.

When it comes to user friendliness for the other GMs, ESPN works just as smoothly as it does for commissioners. As with most other sites, each manager can create their own team name and logo. In addition to this, pictures can be uploaded directly from a URL and set as a team logo, which is a cool feature.

For roster editing, ESPN does not employ a drag and drop system. Alternatively, there are “move” and “here” buttons to set your roster. Managing the IR is also something unique to ESPN. When using this for your roster, you are redirected to a different page, where you can see all eligible IR players on your roster and move them around as you see fit. Something I like about ESPN is that when a player is confirmed to be out for a game or two, regardless of their actual NHL IR status, they can be sent to your IR. This is a nice feature that does away with the infamous DTD status, screwing owners as they wait for the NHL team to place them on the IR.

The Draft: A-

A commissioner can also edit the “draft setting”. You can choose from offline, snake, autopick or auction draft type. As with most sites, you can set the draft date, time, location and any extra notes the commissioner may want to add. One very cool feature of ESPN is their offline draft application. For those of us that may be using the free capabilities of ESPN to host a more complex dynasty league, you’re probably going to choose an offline draft. ESPN’s application uploads your league settings and launches a draft board type application (you can set the draft order manually as well). If your league allows the trading of draft picks, this app allows you to maneuver flawlessly from pick to pick. You simply click on the box under each team at each round, type in a player’s name and draft away. Once your draft is complete, you save the results and upload them to ESPN. Gone are the days of entering rosters manually!

While this is quite advantageous, there are some disadvantages. For some reason, if you use the keeper function, there appears to be a glitch in that ESPN does not upload the keepers when you launch the app. This isn’t a huge deal, since you can just look up the keepers and make them the first ‘x’ amount of picks, but still not perfect. Also, your league managers cannot login and draft or see the draft board live. However, for those of us who hold our drafts live at our home or at a bar, this is a neat way to broadcast the draft. All you need is a laptop, power source, TV/Projector, HDMI/DVI cable etc. and a wall to project on, and presto! You now instantly have a drafting table, where guys can walk up and type in their draft picks, while at the

same time allowing everyone in the room to scan through and see the draft board.

Keeper League Compatibility: D

This is where ESPN really lacks, as it does not support farm system or draft pick trading. Really only allows leagues to have keepers and set a keeper deadline. And editable feature under one of the tabs are keeper rules. You can set it to use keepers or not, for up to two seasons in advance. If you choose to use keepers, you can set a keeper submission deadline and time, which is very convenient for keeper leagues. There is also an open text box for commissioners to enter any text and/or rules the league may have. Maybe something like: “goalies cannot be kept” or “1 forward, 1 defenseman and at least 1 goalie must be kept”…you get the idea.

All League results are tracked and kept from year to year, with each manager having the ability to jump to any year’s history. From there, the manager can see the entire league, not just limited features, such as final standings and rosters, which are all that some other sites allow you to view.

Farm Teams: F

Unsupported.

Salary Cap Leagues: F

Unsupported.

Playoff Pools: D-

ESPN does not offer any significant separate playoff formats per say. They do have a prize

eligible league, but I will not say anything more than that, as it is not available to Canadians. TSN does run a “hockey playoff challenge” which is somewhat unique, powered by ESPN for Canadians. You are assigned a salary cap of 100 million and you need to draft 2 goalies, 4 D and 6 forwards. The salary values are arbitrarily assigned based on projected market value, but can change based on what the public does (i.e. how often they are taken or not taken). You re-pick your roster at the end of each round, with the exception that the final roster change lasts the semi-finals and Stanley cup finals, for obvious reasons. Forwards and D are assigned 1 pt for a goal and assist; D are additionally assigned 1 pt for a team shutout, and goalies are assigned 2 pts for a win and 1 for a shutout. You can create your own private “group” or join a public group and the highest number of points wins! One thing I would like to see change in this pool format is new player values beginning each round. The values do not change from round to round, which does not make sense to me, as all player values should go up, as the player pool is halved each round.

Generally speaking, ESPN’s scoreboard is neatly laid out, as is their playoff bracket page. The standings are also nice to look at, however it is worth mentioning that they are based on winning pct, rather than team pts, which is not editable. I will leave it up to you to research the statistical validity of each system, and dare you to find significant and overwhelming evidence that either is better than the other.

But bottom line – you cannot put in your own playoff pools.

Customization: A+

Another customizable feature is under the “transactions and keepers” tab. This is where you can set whether to observe ESPN’s undroppable Players List. It is worth noting here that ESPN does update this list throughout the season, meaning that if a player started the league as undroppable but ends up having a terrible first three months to the season, he may be taken off the undroppable list. From my experience, it appears easier to be removed from the list than added to the list throughout the year. You can also select the player universe you wish to use: NHL, EAST or WEST only.

Commissioners do not have the ability to edit the player list. This may come into play if you are running a more complex league outside some of the parameters of ESPN (see more limitations below) and tracking them manually. For instance, let’s say you have a farm system that you are manually tracking; it would be nice to remove these players from the player universe, that way

other managers do not make mistakes and add them by “accident”.

When it comes to lineup changes, you have three options: in H2H leagues, you can set it so rosters lock at the beginning of the week; if you use a daily league, you can have the rosters lock at the first game played that day, or lock individually at their scheduled game time. I prefer the latter, especially for those matchups that come down to the final Sunday and maybe you no longer need that goalie start or you cannot afford any more “minuses” to your skaters, you have the option to bench them.

There are three options for player acquisition: no waivers, waivers or free agent auction. You can submit season acquisition limits as well as matchup acquisition limits for each roster. The waiver period (if used) can be fully customized from a 0-day wait up to a 4-day wait. The waiver order is something that is fixed by ESPN, however they note that this is something they are looking to be customizable in the future. For now you have to settle for “move to last after claim, never reset order”.

With respect to trading, the options are “no trading, unlimited trading or limited trading”. If your league prefers the latter, the range of trades can be set from 1-40. You don’t have to set a trade deadline, but if you choose to, it is worth pointing out a couple of limitations, the first of which is, ESPN only allows trade deadlines to be set on a Wednesday at noon. Relative to other sites, this can be viewed as a negative in that the commissioner does not have the ability to set the date and time of the deadline. If your league allows trades, you can set to have no trade review, or a 1, 2, or 3 day review. Tied closely to this is the process by which trades are executed. If you have a trade review period, you can choose between a veto process, where you can set the number of votes required to veto a trade, or the League Manager only can veto.

Fun Features: A-

Arguably one of the better features available on ESPN is found via the tab “schedule”. They have the standard customizable settings: start of the regular season, weeks per matchup (H2H leagues), number of weeks in the regular season, and category tie breaker. Furthermore you can set the number of playoff teams (yes greater than 6 teams), the number of weeks per playoff matchup, and the playoff seeding tie breaker. The best thing about ESPN, when it comes to the schedule, is the capability of the commissioner to set the schedule. That’s right; the commissioner can set each team’s matchup each week. Granted, this may be a time consuming process, but the option exists. Want to set up rivalry weeks? Go ahead! Want to set

it up so you play your division three times and everyone else once? Piece of cake! Want to have it so divisional matchups dominate the beginning and ending to each season? You bet! Furthermore, ESPN has it fixed so that a playoff matchup if tied goes to the higher seed (note: this does not make any sense to me). Don't like this? Does your league want to use a different playoff tiebreaker? Similar to the league schedule, the commissioner can set each individual playoff matchup. This also means you can re-seed manually through the playoffs with no problem, as opposed to winning through a pre-determined bracket.

While on the topic of playoffs, you may recall how some sites only allow the top 12 teams to play some sort of meaningful playoff matchup, whether it is in the winners or losers bracket? Do you have a 16 team league? 20 team league? With ESPN, every team plays post season fantasy hockey regardless of the bracket they may be in!

Some other cool options for commissioners: there is a transaction counter and tracker that can be edited at any time, including setting a price per transaction; the commissioner can quite easily manually make trades and add/drops to anyone roster, with the option of not including it as user transaction (beneficial for leagues that have a max); individualized trophies can be created and awarded every year; and finally, the commissioner's message can have YouTube vids and pictures embedded.

ESPN does support live chat on the league page, as well as within each individual matchup. However it isn't as smooth as I would like. In addition, it would be advantageous to have a system in place that notifies you that there has been a message posted or smack posted, as opposed to just happening to notice that it is there. Overall, the smack talk aspect and chat could use some work.

The free stat tracker is awesome! I will leave it at that, and let you find out on your own. One thing that needs to be added to the stat tracker is live updated standings. Other than that, it is everything and more you could want in a free stat tracker.

Something else worth mentioning is ESPN's compatibility with smart phones and mobile devices. In my experience, managing your roster is seamless and easy from a BB smartphone or PlayBook, which in my opinion is a huge bonus.

Resources: B-

Prior to the season starting, they launch what is called a draft kit. Here is where you can find all the pre-draft information you need (over and above Dobber's, of course). On top of it all, if you are an ESPN insider, then you have access to even more data and insight.

Responsiveness: **A**

The site's moderators are relatively responsive to feedback and issues regarding league problems. However, given the size and money with ESPN, I haven't encountered too many issues with fantasy sports.

Cost: A+

Free

Overall Rating (1-Year Leagues): B+

Overall Rating (Keeper Leagues): D+