

September 17, 2007

With Famed Players, Game Takes on Madden's Turf

By **SETH SCHIESEL**

The San Francisco Cobras were down 14-10 in their season-opening gridiron showdown against the visiting Minutemen. Late in the fourth quarter, the Cobras' quarterback, Joe Montana, was marching his team down the field in a bid to win the game.

With barely a minute left on the clock, Montana took the snap around midfield and rolled right out of the pocket, looking for his favorite receiver, Irving Fryar, down the field. But with the pass rush closing in, Montana instead dumped the ball off to his running back, Marcus Allen, in the flat. Just steps from the first-down marker, Allen juked left and evaded one defender but was then flattened by a crushing blow from the Minutemen's leading tackler, Chuck Bednarik.

Now that's what you call fantasy football. Or, to Take-Two Interactive Software, the video game publisher, that's All-Pro Football.

In the autumn, a young man's fancy turns to pigskin. For guys who prefer to sit on the couch "playing" football rather than sit on the couch watching football, that usually means the juggernaut Madden video game franchise from Electronic Arts, which sells millions of copies every fall.

But this season, gamers have a choice. Madden has exclusive video game rights to the National Football League. But Take-Two has enlisted 249 retired stars for its new game, All-Pro Football.

"When we first had this idea to sign up all of these football legends, we just laughed because we thought it could never be done," said Jeff Thomas, vice president for sports development at 2K Sports, one of Take-Two's labels. "When Electronic Arts got the exclusive N.F.L. license it was really a big blow for us, and we had to regroup and figure out how we could get back in football. The key for us was we really wanted to show all of these legends at the height of their power, and that's something Madden doesn't offer."

The basic idea in All-Pro football is that the game player is able to construct a team based on great players from the past. To maintain some balance, on any team the gamer is allowed to use only two "gold" players (like Dan Marino, Johnny Unitas, John Elway or Jerry Rice), three "silver" players (Randall Cunningham, Roger Craig) and six "bronze" players (Dexter Manley, Mark Rypien). Rather than quantify players with a numerical rating as Madden does, in All-Pro players are defined by special qualities.

"We've eliminated the arguments of who's a 96 and who's a 97," Mr. Thomas said. "Instead, Elway has a cannon arm and can throw a long distance and Marino, for instance, has a quick release."

To sign up so many players, Take-Two enlisted IMG, the big sports marketing firm. Marc Reeves, an IMG vice president in San Francisco, would not disclose how much each athlete was paid, but allowed, "Obviously, Jan Stenerud is not in the same range as Joe Montana." Still, there are many who are not in the

game — including Bo Jackson, Terry Bradshaw, Jim Brown and Joe Namath. In some cases, they could not agree to financial terms; in others, the players just weren't interested.

But these days, many professional athletes have grown up playing sports video games. Players have even lobbied game companies to improve their digital representations.

"Video games are a very hot topic among N.F.L. players, definitely," said Mike Singletary, the former linebacker who is now an assistant head coach for the San Francisco 49ers and is in All-Pro Football. "For some of these guys, these video games are a part of their lives, and they come into the league and they say to me, 'I saw you in a video game.' "

Of course, in the video game business, as in football, it is never easy to knock off a champion, in this case the Madden franchise. In a conference call last month, Take-Two's chief executive, Ben Feder, said, "We're not terribly pleased and not disappointed" by sales of All-Pro Football, which was released in July.

Mark Goodrich, a 2K Sports marketing manager, said the company was not trying to supplant Madden, but instead was trying to persuade football fans to perhaps buy two games instead of just one.

"Madden is Madden, and we're realistic over here," Mr. Goodrich said. "We're focusing on the hard-core football fans, and we know they're going to buy Madden, but who doesn't also want the chance to play with Barry Sanders?"

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)