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THE MADDEN JINX

By Alyssa Roenigk

ONLY A SELECT few events make the off-season highlight reel of the serious NFL fan: the draft, start of training camp, Fred Taylor's annual knee surgery—and, for the past 13 years, EA Sports' release of its John Madden football game. Not even Ditka on draft day can touch the on-any-given-Sunday thrill of a Warner-Keyshawn connection leading the Lions to a SB win. Incredibly, though, Madden 2003—due in August—promises more juice than usual.

Gamers will get over the Summerall-for-Michaels-and-Stark virtual-broadcast-booth trade. They'll be too busy tracking the burgeoning "Madden Curse." This is the third edition of Madden to feature an NFLer on the box (Big John adorned the first 10 incarnations), and for each of the first two cover boys, video-game fame spelled gameday disaster. Pay attention: After fronting for Madden two summers ago, Titans RB Eddie George set career highs in carries, rushing yards, receptions and rushing TDs. But he banged up his toe in the winter—and his stats tanked in 2001. For Vikes QB Daunte Culpepper, who graced last year's box, it took less time for the bad mojo to hit. He struggled through the first 11 games, then a knee injury sidelined him for the rest of the year. Now if that's not a curse, we don't know what is. Suspiciously, neither Madden nor Michaels was willing to comment. But this year's cover boy—Rams RB Marshall Faulk—confronted the issue with the same fearlessness with which he stares down gap-filling safeties.

The Magazine: Are you nervous about the Madden Curse?

Faulk: No way. You're just trying to start something.

The Magazine: Come again?

Faulk: Have you ever heard of the last guy who wrote about this? No, you haven't, because he doesn't have a job anymore. There's the curse.

Thanks for the warning, Marshall. But we don't really believe in that kind of thing.