DEBATE IT!

Are Pro Athletes Overpaid?

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When basketball player Stephen Curry signed a new contract with the Golden State Warriors in 2017, jaws dropped at his new salary: a whopping $201 million over five years. That’s just over $40 million a year—one of the highest annual salaries in team sports history.

The National Basketball Association (NBA), the National Football League (NFL), and Major League Baseball (MLB) are the three biggest pro sports organizations in the U.S. They rake in billions of dollars a year in TV deals, merchandise sales, and ticket sales. But do the players deserve so much of the profits?

1 - Left to right: high-paid superstars Aaron Rodgers, Mike Trout, and Stephen Curry

Some people say paychecks like Curry’s and those of other top-level athletes are too big. Is it fair, for example, that Mike Trout, a center fielder for the Los Angeles Angels, gets about $34 million a year to hit a baseball when the average annual salary for a police officer is $54,000?

But other people say talented athletes deserve every penny. It takes many years of hard work and dedication for them to achieve such a high level of success. Besides, they argue, any money not paid to players would only fatten the pockets of already wealthy team owners.

Are pro athletes overpaid? Two sportswriters weigh in.

YES

There’s no question that professional athletes are paid too much. In 2018, the average annual salary for an MLB player was $4.1 million. In the NBA, it was $7.1 million. In the NFL, it was $2.7 million, but the highest-paid player, Green Bay Packers quarter-back Aaron Rodgers, gets an average of $33.5 million a year.

Compare those wages with the national average salary for a firefighter: about $45,000 a year. It’s about $56,000 for a schoolteacher and nearly $74,000 for an emergency room nurse.

Does it make any sense that someone who throws a football for a living is paid more than 700 times as much as someone who helps save people’s lives, or that swinging a bat gets you nearly 650 times as much as educating kids? In my opinion, no.

However, it’s not the athletes’ fault that their wages are so high. The main problem is the huge amount of money involved in professional sports. Team owners and the three big leagues rake in billions of dollars a year.

Some of it comes from fans who shell out big bucks for costly game tickets and hugely overpriced snacks at stadiums and arenas, and for hoodies and hats with their favorite team’s logo. But far more comes from the multibillion-dollar deals made with cable and TV networks to broadcast games.

With leagues and team owners making such massive sums, the athletes who put their bodies on the line for their sports deserve a large share of it. But they’re still earning way too much money.

Maybe all highly paid Americans—including athletes—should have to pay a special tax that would help fund better salaries for firefighters, teachers, and others who work for the greater public good.

*—Jesse Spector  
Sportswriter and radio host*

NO

When fans look at professional athletes’ salaries, it’s easy to say they make far too much money for playing a game. After all, athletes earn more money than teachers, first responders, and members of the military. Half the people in the United States make less than $47,000 a year.

But it’s important to remember that those athletes are an essential part of enormously profitable companies. Without the players, the leagues wouldn’t exist. Players’ salaries are simply their share of all the cash these hugely successful businesses bring in.

Plus, making it to the pros takes years of hard work. And the few athletes who get that far have relatively short careers—just 5 to 10 years to earn a living, compared with 40 or 50 years for other jobs.

Besides, not all athletes make millions of dollars. The lowest-paid NFL, MLB, and NBA players make about $500,000. (While that’s still a lot, it’s not nearly as much as their top-level teammates earn.) And pros in less popular sports make even less than that. For example, players in the National Women’s Soccer League make only $16,000 to $44,000 a season.

Also, think about who’d get the money if the athletes made less. Lower salaries wouldn’t necessarily lead to lower ticket and hot dog prices for fans who go to the games. The billionaire owners of the NFL, MLB, and NBA teams would likely pocket the difference.

The truth is, some professional athletes make huge salaries because millions of people are happy to pay money to see those players make the amazing catches and breathtaking plays we love to watch.

So if you think pro athletes make too much money, maybe you should stop watching them.

*—Fred Bowen  
Washington Post sportswriter and author*

**EVALUATING ARGUMENTS**

*Read the debate “Are Pro Athletes Overpaid?” then complete the activity below.*

1) Identify a central idea or argument of the “yes” side of the debate.

2) What facts does the author use to support this argument?

3) Identify a central idea of the “no” side of the debate.

4) What facts does the author use to support this argument?

5) List at least two facts and two opinions in this debate.

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| --- | --- |
| FACTS | OPINIONS |
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6) Overall, which side of the debate do you find more convincing? Explain.

7) Why is this an example of a debate instead of a dialogue or discussion?

8) If you were arguing for the “Yes” side, how might you rebut, or challenge, the argument that pro athletes should get paid millions of dollars because millions of people are happy to pay to watch them?

9) If you were arguing for the “No” side, how might you rebut, or challenge, the argument that an athlete shouldn’t earn 650+ times as much as a teacher or a nurse?