SPORTS WITHOUT WINNERS

IN A GOOD SOCIETY, people derive great pleasure both from the work they do and the games they play. In troubled societies, where work brings little pleasure, we flee to our games. Indeed, the less pleasure we take from our work, the more we seem to sink our psyches in the games we play — and watch.

In modern America, many millions of our lives now revolve, almost exclusively, around the games we call sports. We awake to the radio and listen for the latest scores. We troop down to the den, or out to a gym, and pedal away on a stationary bike to game highlights flashing on the twenty-four-hour sports network of our choice. At breakfast, we pore over the sports pages. In the car, on the way to work, we tune in our favorite sports-talk show. On the job, we talk sports at the water cooler — and rue the upset that cost us a big win in the weekly office football pool. On weekends, we could, if we wanted, watch ballgames from noon to midnight. In modern America, "SportsWorld" never ends.[1]

Our sports-obsessed lives have become easy to mock. But we cannot deny the pleasure that sports can bring. We delight in the drama of never knowing how a game will end. We marvel at athletic artistry honed over years of practice. And we learn. We learn, through watching and participating in sports, lessons worth treasuring, lessons about loyalty and trust, about diligence and courage, about the bonds that link people, about the barriers that keep people apart. Sports can even nurture democratic values. In sports bars, everyone is entitled to an opinion. In short pants, at the starting line of a 10K run, everybody's equal.

The ancient Greeks knew the pleasures that sports can bring. So did our grandparents. But sports played a considerably different role in their social orders. Sports rumbled along at the margins of their societies, an economically inconsequential enterprise. Sports offered escape and little more. Now sports offer fortunes. Sports have become a driving economic force, a high-stakes business, an essential corporate sector.

How essential? The games we play and watch have become a $213 billion annual operation.[2] How corporate? Of the 116 major league franchises in baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, publicly traded corporations control 84, either wholly or partly.[3] Pro sports teams no longer muddle along as economic small-fry. The single most lucrative franchise in American sports, the New York Yankees, pulled in $800 million in revenues from 1996 through 2000.[4]

Sports fans, at century's end, didn't need to be told that sports had become big business. Sports pages seemed, at times, to carry more about the money athletes were making than the games they were playing. The numbers, year after year, would escalate ever higher. Baseball's highest salary in 1988: $2.4 million for catcher Gary Carter. In 1993, $6.2 million for outfielder-first baseman Bobby Bonilla. In 1998, $10 million for outfielder Albert Belle. In 2003, $22 million for shortstop Alex Rodriguez.[5]

Owners of franchises, for their part, could receive even more impressive rewards. Sports could pay, from an ownership perspective, in any number of ways. Owners could reward themselves, or their family, with multiple-digit salaries and consulting agreements. Yankees owner George Steinbrenner once paid himself $25 million for negotiating a cable television deal.[6] In 2001, one pro football owner paid himself $7.5 million.[7] Such sums counted as "business expenses." They could be deducted from a franchise's tax bill.

Owners enjoyed an assortment of other fortune-enhancing tax breaks as well. They could "depreciate" much of what they paid their players.[8] They could also play back-scratching games between their teams and their other properties. Owners with both a team and a television outlet in their portfolios could, for instance, have the rights to telecast their team's games sold dirt-cheap to the TV outlet. The TV property would then have cheap programming, the sports team a convenient year-end operating "loss" for tax purposes.[9]

But the real windfalls in American sports would not come from operating teams. The real windfalls would come from selling them. Pro sports leagues operate as cartels. As such, they limit supply, in this case, the number of teams. These limits make pro franchises scarce, and incredibly valuable, commodities. In the boom years, franchise values jumped even more rapidly than stock values. In 1997, according to *Forbes*, the nation's football, basketball, baseball and hockey franchises were worth an average $146 million. The next year, *Forbes* tabbed their average value at $196 million.[10] By 1999, for just one fabled franchise, the Washington Redskins, bidders were offering $800 million.[11]

The buyers and sellers of sports franchises, and the athletes who play for them, seemed to inhabit, by century's end, their own special world. Owners had always been well-to-do. Now players appeared to be living at levels of luxury equally distant from the everyday lives of everyday fans. In 1956, baseball's flashiest star, Jackie Robinson, earned $42,500, a salary nine times the income of the average household. Just over four decades later, baseball's flashiest star, Ken Griffey Jr., would make over $8.5 million. Griffey's 1997 earnings would top average household incomes by about two hundred times.[12]

Fans, by Griffey's era, had begun seeing players and owners as members of the same exclusive club, multimillionaires all. And the frequent squabbles between players and owners would leave fans, even the nation's number one fan, totally mystified.

"It's just a few hundred folks trying to figure out how to divide nearly $2 billion," President Bill Clinton would complain during the 1995 baseball lockout. "They ought to be able to figure that out."[13]

But they couldn't, and that didn't make any sense, not to fans. With all that money flowing about, why couldn't players and owners get along? And why weren't owners and players, with all that money they were getting, giving fans their money's worth and more? Why weren't they treating fans to a new golden age of sports?

For fans, at the start of the twenty-first century, the sports experience had come to feel anything but golden. Average fans, in fact, seemed to be taking less pleasure from the games they followed, not more. Most fans couldn't articulate exactly *why* sports so often left them disappointed, not in so many words, but they had their suspicions. Money, too much money, many suspected, had made a real mess out of sports. They suspected right. America's workplaces couldn't escape the poisons that spread whenever too much money collects in too few pockets. Neither could America's pastimes.

In sports, down through the generations, wealthy people and average working people have always coexisted rather uneasily. Wealthy people owned the teams, working people rooted for them. This relationship could sometimes sour. A tightwad owner might dump a popular player. Tempers would flare. Hearts would be broken. Storm clouds would circle.

The storms would usually pass. Owners and fans would forgive and forget. But not always. A particularly upset owner might, in a huff, yank his team out of one city and plop it into another. But owners, however unhappy they may have become with one city, always realized they needed average working people. If they couldn't win the hearts of average fans in one town, they would just have to find another town where they could. Rich people might *own* the nation's sports franchises, the movers and shakers in sports understood, but their teams, to be successful, had to *belong* to average people. A sports franchise simply could not flourish, assumed the conventional wisdom in mid twentieth century America, without the support of fans from average working families.

America would change over the last half of the twentieth century. So would the assumptions of America's sports franchise ownership. In the new America that emerged in the 1980s, the economy would no longer revolve around average, middle class households. In the new America, income and wealth would tilt toward the top, and owners would tilt that way, too. Owners would no longer covet the average fan. The average fan spent only average money. The real money, in a much more unequal America, now rested in affluent pockets. Franchise owners, in the 1980s and 1990s, would move heaven and earth to get these pockets picked.

A great deal of earth. Bulldozers and backhoes would redefine American sports in the late twentieth century. Across the United States, wherever professional sports were played, deluxe new ballparks and arenas, veritable sports palaces, would rise up to host the nation's favorite games. This unprecedented "stadia mania" added fifty-one new facilities to America's urban landscape in the 1990s alone, at a cost of nearly $11 billion. By 2005, experts estimated at the turn of the century, twenty-five additional new ballparks and arenas, costing another $7 billion, were likely to open.[14]

These new sports palaces replaced, in most cases, stadiums built in the 1960s and 1970s, facilities that still had years of useful life ahead. But these older facilities had been built for a different America. They lacked what owners now craved and demanded: luxury accommodations for America's affluent.

Ballparks, of course, had always offered special seating for fans with deeper pockets. Patrons who wanted to sit up close to the action would pay a few dollars extra per ticket for a "box seat." Anybody could buy one. Almost anybody, by saving up a little, could afford one. These box seats would remain the ultimate in ballpark luxury until 1965, the year the Houston Astros introduced a new twist on the premium seat notion.[15] The Astrodome, the world's first domed ballpark, that year began offering "luxury suite" seating. These first "luxury suites" sat far from the field, high up along the Astrodome's upper rim. They amounted, essentially, to an afterthought, a maneuver to make money off an otherwise undesirable section of the stadium.

Three decades later, luxury suites would no longer be an afterthought. They would become the main motive for billions of dollars of new stadium construction. Any ballpark or arena that couldn't be reconfigured to prominently position luxury suites would now be considered obsolete. The new facilities that replaced these "obsolete" stadiums would be designed, from top to bottom, to maximize luxury seating opportunities.

In the nation's capital, the new MCI Center would open in 1997 with over one hundred luxury suites, available from $100,000 to $175,000 a year, and three thousand "club seats," each costing $7,500 on an annual basis.[16] Two years later, the new American Airlines Arena in Miami would raise the luxury seating bar. Miami's twenty special suites would feature dining rooms, lounge areas, plasma-screen TVs, computers, DVD players, and outside terraces with views of the city's downtown and harbor.[17]

In Washington, Miami, and the rest of America's pro basketball world, deep pockets more interested in watching than dining could also cheer from special courtside seating. In 1997, these front-row seats at New York's Madison Square Garden went for $1,000.[18] These same courtside seats, for the 2002-2003 season, ran $1,500 each.[19]

Pro football teams, in their vast stadiums, couldn't offer intimate "courtside" seats. They would make do with luxury suites and club seating sections. By the 2003 season, all but three teams in the National Football League would boast facilities that enabled them to offer some sort of "premium-level tickets."[20] Football fans, of course, didn't *have* to pay "premium" prices for their seats. All the new stadiums had plenty of standard seating options available. But these new standard seats would often come with a catch. In many of the new facilities, fans actually had to pay for the right to buy a seat. Owners called these rights "personal seat licenses." In Charlotte's new football stadium, the "right to buy a season ticket" cost $2,500.[21]

Not all standard seats in the new America would require seat licenses. But all standard seats would require, almost without exception, thick wallets. In the 1990s, analysts at the Team Marketing Report started tracking a "Fan Cost Index" that calculated, for a family of four, the cost of a day or a night out at a game. Included in the calculation: four average-price tickets, four small sodas, two small beers, four hot dogs, two game programs, two souvenir caps, and parking. In the 2002 season, the analysts found, families of four paid, on average, $145.21 to watch a Major League Baseball game in person. Attending a National Basketball Association game, in the winter of 2002, would set an average family back $277.19. The following fall, on the gridiron, a family of four paid, on average, $290.41 per game to see NFL football.[22] This "average," researchers noted, did not take into account the cost of "premium-level" tickets.[23] Overall, the prices on *regular* tickets for NFL games rose 77 percent between 1992 and 2002.[24]

In baseball, virtually the same ticket story played out. Prices for all seats catapulted over the closing decades of the twentieth century. In 1967, a field-level box seat to a Baltimore Orioles game cost a mere $3.25. A seat in the bleachers could be had for 75 cents.[25] For the 2003 Orioles season, a bleacher seat cost $13. Baltimore's bleacher seats, between 1967 and 2003, jumped in price four times faster than the inflation rate. Baltimore's field level box seats cost $35 each in 2003, more than twice as much as they would have cost if seat prices had just matched inflation.

In an economically top-heavy America, pro sports teams could always find enough fans to pay the new prices. And those willing to pay the highest going rates could look forward to royal treatment. At Washington's MCI Center, the high rollers in luxury seating enjoyed their own separate parking, their own separate entrance, their own separate restaurants, and even their own separate concourse, all "barred to the arena's 15,680 ordinary ticket holders."[26]

These "ordinary ticket holders" would not include many ordinary people. In the new America, sports arenas would essentially be off-limits to average people, even the workers who built them. The Washington Wizards charged an average $51 per ticket when the MCI Center opened. "At those prices," Percell Spinner, a carpenter who worked on the arena, told a reporter, "only the rich people can afford that."[27]

Even players would have problems paying for seat space. In Oakland, strong safety Lorenzo Lynch walked into the ticket office for his team's new football stadium and asked about buying eight seat licenses for his father and family. Lynch walked out empty handed. "Even with his $375,000 annual income," the San Jose *Mercury News* would later report, "he decided he couldn't swing the tickets."[28]

Going to ballgames, in mid twentieth century America, had been a basic rite of middle class passage. By the 1990s, few average families would be making that passage.

In America's new sports environment, rabid but unwealthy fans could occasionally still get a chance to go to a ballgame. Someone at work might know someone down in accounting with two extra tickets in the corporate box. Two buddies might score a good ticket deal on eBay. And if you waited until the second inning, a scalper might give you a break. But none of that helped parents who wanted to share with their kids the same memorable ballpark experiences their parents had shared with them. For working families, opportunities to enjoy an outing at the ballpark essentially no longer existed.

"So far," *Washington Post* sportswriter Thomas Boswell would note in 1996, "nobody has the first hint of a solution of how to get the average fan, and his family, back into the ballpark in the next century."[29]

SO WHAT'S THE BIG TRAGEDY? Fans can't afford to see a game in person? All they have to do, if they care that much about sports, is turn on the television. Every game worth seeing, by the 1990s, could be found somewhere on TV. And television coverage, all fans would have to agree, had gone ballistic! More cameras on the action, more stats on the screen. Add in remotes and picture-in-picture and fans could spend a Sunday on the couch and never miss a single important play. Throw your feet up, grab a beer. Sheer rapture!

Television executives would pay dearly to bring these rapturous moments to American fandom. In 1997, the Fox television network agreed to pay the NFL $17.6 billion to broadcast pro football games through 2004. The deal more than doubled each NFL team's TV income.[30]

For owners and star athletes, these TV dollars translated into enormous income gains. For fans, the high-priced TV rights meant more commercials. Many more commercials. Television executives, to make an adequate return on their investments, stuffed all the games they televised with as many ad minutes as they could possibly squeeze in. Football and basketball timeouts, from time immemorial, had lasted only a minute. Baseball players took about the same sixty seconds to change sides between innings. Now TV stretched these one-minute breaks to two minutes and more.

Even worse, TV producers, not coaches, started dictating the flow of game action. In football and basketball, TV now called most timeouts. "Commercial timeout" became as familiar a phrase to fans as "first down!" Games sputtered. The multiple commercial timeouts threw game rhythms out of kilter. Teams in football, before commercials totally took over, would line up quickly after a momentum-shifting interception, eager to run a play while they still held the psychological edge. TV now dulled that edge.

Longer commercial breaks also meant longer games. NFL games once fit nicely into three-hour time slots. By the late 1990s, the league was setting aside three hours and a quarter for each game telecast. To make sure games didn't spill over this expanded time frame, the NFL and the TV networks would have to take other steps as well. They would shorten halftimes — and also keep game clocks running in situations that had previously stopped the clock. The running game clocks made for fewer plays, on average, in NFL games. Better fewer plays, the networks figured, than fewer commercials.

Did fans have any right to expect anything better? The televised games were still free, weren't they? And what right did fans have to complain about a free product? Actually, by the 1990s, "free" games would be disappearing from America's TV screens. By 1997, for the first time ever, teams were streaming more games over paid cable than "free," over-the-air TV. This cable trend, observers agreed, only figured to increase. They pointed to the growing numbers of franchise ownership groups scrambling to create their own premium cable networks. Yankees principal owner George Steinbrenner started the stampede, in a 1999 deal that merged his club with the basketball New Jersey Nets and the hockey New Jersey Devils. The move created a year-round package of cable programming — and cleared Steinbrenner an estimated $200 million.[31] Other owners quickly figured out that they didn't really need to start their own cable network to boost their telecast earnings. They could extort higher rights fees out of the TV outlets currently carrying their games just by threatening to start up a new network.

All these ownership maneuvers — the new stadiums, the premium-priced seating, the television wheeling and dealing — would help baseball owners double their revenues between 1996 and 2001.[32] But the record revenues came at a price. The game was turning off fans. In Baltimore, Denver, Milwaukee, and Cleveland, all cities with sparkling new stadiums, attendance in 2002 hit new-ballpark record lows.[33] Baseball's "fall classic" the same year ended with the worst TV ratings of any seven-game World Series ever. Between 1991 and 2002, baseball's World Series ratings fell an amazing 50 percent.[34]

Other sports faced similar ratings woes.

"Broadcast television ratings for the four major professional sports — baseball, basketball, football and hockey — have been generally decreasing for more than a decade," a *New York Times* survey would note in 2001.[35]

Industry analysts groped for explanations. Pro sports, some suggested, had become too black for white audiences. Video games were distracting kids. Too many sports on too many channels were confusing viewers. Other analysts saw a more profound transformation at work. Owners, they argued, had turned sports into just another commodity. Owners and their minions no longer saw *fans*. They saw *consumers*.

"Teams aren't in cities anymore," explained the *Baltimore Sun*'s Michael Hill, "they're in markets."[36]

Consumers, the most astute sports observers began pointing out, simply do not see sports through the same emotional lens as *fans*.

"Instead of hoping that your team wins, you begin to demand it," notes NBC sportscaster Bob Costas. "It's like you bought a car and if it doesn't work, you want to know why. When a team doesn't win, instead of disappointment or heartbreak, you now have anger and resentment."[37]

In 1999, one careful observer, sports columnist Thomas Boswell, inventoried a month's worth of that anger. He noted a variety of incidents that had recently taken place in stadiums across America. Fans heaving ice chunks in Denver. Ten fans arrested and twenty ejected in Minneapolis. A mini-riot in Boston.

"Once, we went to games to let off steam. Now, we get steamed," Boswell lamented. "Whatever level of raw rage you think is circulating in our sports arenas, I promise you, it's higher."[38]

Why did the rage run so deep? Why did fans resent athletes so and not movie stars, one reporter asked a spectator at an NBA playoff game?

"Because," the fan shot back, "we don't have to pay $113 to get into a movie."[39]

WHAT IF MOVIE-GOERS DID HAVE TO PAY $113 to get into a movie? And what if, on top of paying that $113, they also had to pay, with their own tax dollars, the cost of building the theater they saw the movie in? How resentful might movie-goers get then?

Average American families, both those that follow sports and those that do not, have actually subsidized the transformation of professional sports into a luxury commodity. The tax dollars of working families, directly and indirectly, have bankrolled America's "stadia mania" — and shifted hundreds of millions of dollars into the pockets of some of America's richest people.

In 1997, for instance, billionaire Paul Allen asked Washington State to underwrite three-quarters of the cost of the new $425 million stadium he wanted built for his Seattle Seahawks football team. If the money weren't forthcoming, Allen noted, the Seahawks just might have to move elsewhere. The money came.[40]

Overall, between the mid 1980s and the end of the 1990s, governments at the state and local level expended some $7 billion on "new homes" for forty-one professional teams.[41] In the early 2000s, in Houston and also in Philadelphia, the tabs for new sports palace projects topped $1 billion, with much of that coming from public purses.[42]

Tax dollars from public purses did give government agencies of various stripes ownership rights over most of America's new sports stadiums. But the profits from these palaces flowed, almost exclusively, to team owners. In Maryland, state officials coaxed Art Modell, the owner of the Cleveland Browns, to move his team to Baltimore by building, to Modell's specifications, a new stadium that would eventually cost over $200 million. Under the terms of the deal, Modell gained the right to all profits from game concessions, parking, tickets, and advertising, plus half the gate receipts from any nonfootball event held in the new stadium. Modell paid no rent to use the stadium, only operating expenses, and also walked off with permission "to keep up to $75 million" from the sale of the new facility's "personal seat licenses."[43]

Meanwhile, over in Cleveland, public officials cut a desperate deal of their own. They agreed to replace Modell's operation by subsidizing a new stadium for a "new" Cleveland Browns franchise. The reborn Browns, in this stadium's opening year, would score a $36.5 million profit — for the team's private owners, not Cleveland.[44]

In some cities, angry taxpayers somehow found the backbone to stop schemes that would finance new ballparks at their expense. Franchise owners, in several instances, then went ahead and built their own stadiums, or at least that's what the public thought was happening. In fact, public tax dollars were pouring into these "privately" funded projects, through "government funded highways, off-ramps, rail connections, and parking lots."[45]

By 2001, with most of the construction dust settled, observers could finally get a clear look at what had transpired. No professional team, urban analyst Neal Peirce would note, "has failed to snare, ultimately, a subsidized stadium it wants."[46] And all these subsidies, other observers added, had diverted public tax dollars from more pressing public needs.

"How did government get in the business of entertaining its citizens," asked one Maryland lawmaker, "as opposed to educating them, providing roads and building bridges?"[47]

Most public officials did their best to ignore such questions. In Cleveland, exactly one day before the City Council voted to bankroll a ballpark for the "new" Browns, officials of the city's underfunded school system announced plans to eliminate interscholastic sports and lay off 160 teachers.[48]

The owner of the "old" Browns, Art Modell, most likely found nothing amiss in the priorities of his former city's top officials. How could anyone, after all, possibly doubt the value of a big-time sports franchise?

"The pride and the presence of a professional football team," as Modell had once proclaimed, "is far more important than 30 libraries."[49]

Libraries would have to do without, in more ways than librarians might immediately realize. Those luxury suites that meant so much to patrons of fine football like Art Modell would be rented, by and large, by large corporations. These corporations would write off, as tax deductions, half of whatever they paid for their suites. By the 1990s, according to one estimate, luxury suite deductions were cutting corporate tax bills by about $80 million a year.[50] That "savings" meant $80 million less for libraries — and playgrounds and schools and every other ill-funded public service.

A small price to pay, as Art Modell might say, for "pride and presence."

AND WHAT ABOUT THE PLAYERS? How have they actually fared in a more unequal America?

Avid sports fans hardly ever agree on anything about players. They argue, and relish arguing, about which players "have game" and which players don't, about which young players will grow up to become stars, about which star players rate Hall of Fame honors. Fan arguments about players never end. Except on one topic. Money. Modern big-time sports stars, all fans seem to agree, have life incredibly sweet. Even ordinary athletes, fans now assume as a given, can and do become multimillionaires.

Who could argue the point? Did not all Major League Baseball player salaries average, in 2001, over $2 million? They most certainly did.

But numbers, as sports fans know better than most, can sometimes mislead. In an unequal America, players have not been the incredibly big winners they seem. Athletes who play professionally are, in fact, more likely to end their careers in pain than in mansions. And the superstars of sports, as many millions as they may have accumulated, have yet to crack the topmost sanctums of American income and wealth.

Consider Sammy Sosa, the Chicago Cubs slugger. In 1999, the year after Sosa's homerun duel with Mark McGwire made baseball history, Sosa earned $9 million.[51] That same year, fifteen Chicagoland CEOs pulled in pay packages that totaled at least $10 million.[52]

On the annual *Forbes* listings of the four hundred richest Americans, not one professional athlete has ever appeared. Not even Michael Jordan, the planet's most famous athlete throughout the 1990s. To match the fortune of media mogul Rupert Murdoch, one analyst calculated at decade's end, Jordan would have to match his own peak annual athletic and endorsement earnings for 140 consecutive years.[53]

Jordan's actual professional playing career spanned about two decades. Few big league professional athletes now have careers that span much more than two or three years.

In pro football, for instance, rookies quickly learn that "NFL" stands for "Not For Long."[54] NFL player careers, notes one study, typically last 3.3 years. Running backs can look forward, on average, to 2.57 years in the league. Only 6 percent of players who make an NFL roster can count on lasting ten years.[55] Major League Baseball careers, as of 2002, averaged four years, NBA basketball careers four and a half.[56]

Pro athletes did not always come and go so quickly. In the 1950s and 1960s, players, once established, returned year after year. Fans who followed football in those years could name, thirty years later, their favorite team's entire defensive line. Today, only the most compulsive fans can name more than a lineman or two on their favorite team. Players simply cycle in and out too hurriedly to make an impression.

Many players these days exit as casualties of pro football's "salary cap." The cap keeps each team's total payroll at a certain prescribed limit. With the cap in place, teams cannot retain on their rosters both a handful of marquee star players *and* a significant core of veterans. The veterans cost too much. They can be replaced by inexperienced rookies at prices far less expensive. And so they are. Every preseason, around Labor Day, NFL teams now routinely ax from their rosters a steady stream of skilled, seasoned veterans.

These axed veterans often hold "long-term" contracts worth multiple millions, contracts that made headlines when the veterans originally signed them. But insiders knew, at the time, that the headlines distorted the dollars the players would actually be receiving.

"Teams call news conferences to announce long-term, multi-million-dollar deals," sportswriter Leonard Shapiro explained in 2002. "A player does get a large signing bonus — his guaranteed money — but most don't get to the final few years of the contract when they're due to be paid the big money."[57]

Football's revolving door keeps most players virtually anonymous to average fans. Only stars get to hang around long enough for fans to feel they know them. Stars, of course, have always grabbed the lion's share of fan attention. But by the 1990s, in the new world of American sports, they would get almost all of it. Everybody's eyes would now fix upon stars — and their fortunes. And the bigger the fortunes, the more unrelenting the pressure on stars to prove their "worth" whenever they took the field or rink or court.

Tennis star Andre Agassi and his equally famous tennis star partner, Steffi Graf, once found themselves giving a lesson to a fan who had bid, at a charity auction, $125,000 for an hour's worth of the two stars' time. The pair delivered an hour's lesson, but then, feeling "sheepish," kept going. They spent all day with the bidder.

"You try to be worth $125,000," Agassi explained later, "and you realize you can't be."[58]

Most all stars felt this same pressure and strained constantly, on the field, to demonstrate their multi-million dollar "worth." Their performance, all too often, would slip as they strained. One study of baseball free agency, published in 2001, compared star player performance before and after stars signed big new contracts. In every offensive category, the researchers found, player numbers tailed off. Newly minted baseball millionaires banged out fewer homers, drove in fewer runners, and hit for significantly lower averages.[59]

At century's end, each big new contract megadeal would up the compensation strain, and not just for the stars who signed the big new contracts. Other stars, particularly those who had inked long-term contracts two or three years earlier, would feel underpaid — and underappreciated — as they watched players of no greater ability or accomplishment sign contracts that put their own salary to shame. In 2001, superstars throughout baseball grumbled about how "disrespected" they felt after Alex Rodriguez cut a ten-year deal for $252 million. Frank Thomas, a stellar player who had been among baseball's high-salary elite, suddenly found himself making only a third of the salary earned by the game's top-paid player. He demanded that his contract be renegotiated and refused, in the meantime, to check in at spring training. Thomas insisted he wasn't "asking to be the richest man in baseball." All he wanted, he explained, was to be "at least in the top 20."[60]

Thomas would eventually rejoin his team, but he never really recovered from the slight. His career would nosedive.

Some superstars, like Chicago's Sammy Sosa, would be able to get the new deals they wanted. But their struggles for the big money would isolate them from fellow players and fans alike. "Any day now, Sosa is expected to sign a contract extension that will make him wealthier than he ever could have imagined," *Chicago Tribune* sportswriter Rick Morrissey observed just before the 2001 season. "But he looks so very alone, him and his money."[61] Sosa's stormy, distracting contract battles the summer before had alienated "half of the Cubs' fan base." Was that battle, Morrissey wondered, worth it? Would Sosa even "notice the thick layer of permafrost between himself and some of his teammates, upset at how the Sosa contract watch helped send the Cubs into a free fall last year."[62]

The richer the contracts sports stars signed, the greater their isolation. Superstars, by century's end, would live and travel and party in their own universes. They could sometimes be spotted, sportswriter Steve Rushin would note, in one of "the nightclubs that so many stars inhabit, with the inevitable glassed-off VIP room, inside of which is a smaller roped-off VVIP section, and so on, until the biggest star in attendance can be found standing alone in a kind of VVVVIP phone booth, dolefully sipping a mai tai."[63]

The biggest stars trusted themselves and hardly anyone else. And that made sense. The people they met, after all, didn't want them. They wanted a piece of their fortune. Up-and-coming stars would learn this lesson quickly.

"The way I handle it is really simple," Eddy Curry, a young Chicago Bulls basketball pheenom, explained. "I don't make any new friends."[64]

The superstars would have their wealth and little else. Out in the playgrounds and the sandlots, youngsters with little saw only the wealth. And that wealth seemed to be within their reach. Just a quicker cross-over dribble away. But that wealth was a mirage, as anyone who studied the odds would quickly see. Only 1 percent of high school athletes could expect to play big-time college ball. Only 1 percent of college ballplayers could expect to become pros. Only 1 percent of pros could expect to reach stardom.[65]

Athletes would, at times, become rich in the late twentieth century. But America's new Gilded Age would bring gold — and fulfillment — for precious few of them.

SPORTS, SOME COMMENTATORS LIKE TO SAY, MIRROR LIFE. In the boom years, the sports scene most definitely did mirror American life — in the depth of its inequality.

During the boom years, in America at large, gaps in income and wealth between affluent Americans and everyone else reached modern records. In sports, these same gaps also widened, between owners and players, between players and fans, and, in some sports, between teams themselves. Indeed, within baseball, the financial gaps between teams extended so wide that the game's high priests sometimes seemed unable to pronounce on anything else.

"Fans in a number of markets have been forced to watch their teams become chronically uncompetitive," baseball commissioner Bud Selig told Congress after the 2000 season. "During my 32 years in baseball, I have never witnessed the type of despair that competitive imbalance is causing so many of our clubs."[66]

In baseball, as in America, "markets" ruled supreme. And that, for baseball, created a real problem. Teams in the nation's biggest urban markets were cutting for themselves far more lucrative local TV and radio deals than teams in smaller cities could ever hope to cut. At the start of the 1990s, richer baseball franchises were collecting four times more revenue than the poorest. By decade's end, revenues for richer teams were outpacing revenues for poorer teams by twenty-to-one.

Amid inequalities this striking, baseball's traditional approaches to ensuring "competitive balance" no longer worked. The amateur player draft, for instance, had originally been designed to give losing clubs first dibs on the most promising stars of tomorrow. The teams with the worst records would choose first, the powerhouses last. But poorer teams, in the boom years, found they couldn't afford the bonuses the top blue-chip players were demanding — so they simply stopped drafting them.[67] Poorer teams that did stumble onto young talent soon lost it. Emerging stars on poor clubs would almost invariably jump to rich clubs as soon as they had played enough years to qualify as "free agents."[68]

Baseball teams with the highest revenues, most notably the New York Yankees, would dominate the 1990s. Poorer teams would struggle. In 1999, only one of the ten lowest-payroll teams in baseball ended the season with more wins than losses. Of the ten highest-payroll teams, eight had winning records.[69] In April that year, fans in Kansas City, one of the bottom clubs, actually organized to demonstrate their displeasure. During a game against the Yankees, some two thousand Royals fans marched out of the ballpark, carrying banners and chanting, to protest baseball's "staggering salary gap."[70]

But most fans in the poorer "markets" didn't stage protests. They just lost interest. In 1998, attendance dropped for half the teams in baseball. Most teams, conservative columnist and rabid baseball fan George Will noted the next year, "have no realistic hope of contending, ever." Eventually, Will warned, the fans of these teams would catch on and "baseball's spell will be broken."[71]

Pro football, interestingly, did not share baseball's competitive imbalance woes. Teams in the vast majority of NFL cities *did* have a "realistic hope of contending." Throughout the boom years, one year's losers in the NFL would become the next year's winners. The reason? Football's owners rejected the pure "market" approach. They shared, *equally among themselves*, all the revenues from their immense network TV contracts.

"Without that socialistic, communistic approach to business that we have," the ever clever Art Modell, owner of the Baltimore Ravens, proclaimed in 2001 at the Super Bowl, the biggest annual spectacle in sports, "we wouldn't have this colossal event."[72]

The football hierarchy's commitment to "socialist equality" would only go so far. Among themselves, club owners would share and share alike. But within their individual teams owners would remain firmly wedded to the corporate assumptions that had, in America at large, done so much to concentrate wealth and widen inequality. The owners assumed that teams, like corporations, absolutely must have top talent to succeed. The owners would pay a premium for that top talent, even if that meant compensating some players at rates far, far higher than others. These basic assumptions, in football and every other major sport, would keep player salaries soaring — at the top end of the income scale.

"Average" salaries, amid this soaring, would rise substantially, too, pulled up by the megasalaries at the top. But *median* salary figures, the numbers that show what typical players are actually making, would increase at far less rapid rates. Teams, in other words, were becoming far more unequal internally, and nowhere more so than in baseball.

Early in the 1980s, before the income explosions at the top, *average* and *median* salaries in baseball would vary only modestly. In 1983, the "average" baseball salary stood at $289,000. The median ballplayer that year made $207,500. By 2000, over a million dollars would separate baseball's "average" and "median" salaries. Ballplayers, thanks to giant megadeals at the top, "averaged" $1,789,556 in 2000. But the typical ballplayer took home $550,000.[73] The gap would continue growing in the new century. In 2002, Alex Rodriguez would take home $22 million, but a third of baseball's Major Leaguers would earn $300,000 or less. How wide had the baseball gap become? In 1988, ballplayers at the exact middle of baseball's income distribution had earned $10 for every $100 earned by baseball's top-paid players. In 2002, baseball's "middle class" made $4 for every $100 top players made.[74]

What impact did this gap have? Not the impact owners hoped. Throwing megamillions at stars did not create winning ballclubs. In fact, the more dollars owners threw at top players, at the expense of their teammates, the poorer their teams performed. Matt Bloom, a management expert at the University of Notre Dame, would document this reality at the end of the 1990s. He had set out, a few years before, to use baseball to test whether "unequal rewards induce greater individual effort and performance." Bloom would subject nine years' worth of baseball salary and performance data to close analysis. His research would draw one clear conclusion.

"The bigger the pay difference between a team's stars and scrubs," as the *Wall Street Journal* summed up Bloom's findings, "the worse its record."[75]

The 1998 season would prove typical. In that season, three of the five major league teams with the most unequal payrolls finished last in their divisions, three of the five most equal teams finished first.[76] On the field, equality seemed to work.

But baseball would pay Bloom's research no heed whatsoever. Owners would continue to lust after superstar saviors. The Texas Rangers would ink Alex Rodriguez to ten years and $252 million — and promptly finish last the next three years. The team that lost Rodriquez, the Seattle Mariners, would promptly tie the Major League record for wins in a season.[77]

NEAR THE END OF THE 1990S, ESPN, America's top all-sports television network, began running weekly documentaries about the twentieth century's greatest sports heroes. The series caught on. Sports fans young and old found these profiles fascinating, perhaps because every episode reminded viewers just how much sports in America had changed. Once upon a time, the profiles helped viewers remember, money didn't dictate *everything* in sports. But now money did.

"Money makes those who pay it resentful and impatient and makes those who receive it feel guilty or inadequate," laments sportswriter Thomas Boswell. "Money makes fans cranky, the media sarcastic. Money warps judgment and sours dispositions, in the locker room and the stands."[78]

What could end the dollar's dominion over sports? Boswell would speculate, at times, about the difference a better order of owners could make. Owners, he understood, could do great harm to the games they controlled. The worst of them, men like video rental mogul Wayne Huizenga, could ruin sports for an entire city.

Huizenga had come into baseball, as the owner of the Florida Marlins, eager to show off how a "real" businessman makes money. Huizenga moved quickly. He convinced, in the mid 1990s, "all the weak-spined owners to get tough with the union, bring salary costs down and, then, make serious money."[79] The owners' subsequent showdown with the players union, a showdown Huizenga helped incite, ended up canceling a World Series but changing, from the owners' perspective, relatively nothing in baseball labor relations.

Huizenga then changed course. He would now seek to make his "serious money" by trying to "monopolize the market" for good players. Huizenga flung open his checkbook and signed up an assortment of accomplished veteran players. He would shell out, before his checkbook spree ended, $89 million on multi-year contracts. Huizenga's solid new players, none of them huge superstars, would make an immediate impact. The Marlins would actually go all the way in 1997, winning the World Series.

Attendance at Marlins games would rise too, from 1.7 to 2.3 million. But that leap would not be large enough to offset the cost of Huizenga's free agent splurge.[80] That would frustrate Huizenga no end. He soon started whining that his team's "2.3 million patrons weren't buying enough luxury boxes."[81] He demanded a fix: a new stadium.

South Florida would not go along. Something about building another stadium for a billionaire apparently didn't appeal to the locals. An angry Huizenga would now retaliate. He unloaded, one by one, the players who had thrilled Miami with their World Series heroics. In 1997, the World Series year, the annual Miami payroll had run $53 million. By the next summer, the payroll would be down to $24 million, with about $10 million more in cuts planned for 1999.[82]

On the playing field, the new bargain-basement Marlins would tank. Their veterans gone, the team sank to last place. Miami, a city that should have been a baseball hotbed, would become a baseball graveyard. Fan attendance dropped, in 1998, to baseball's second-worst total.[83] Few individuals, sportswriter Thomas Boswell would note, had ever "done the game more harm" than Wayne Huizenga.

"Maybe, someday," Boswell mused, "baseball will attract a core of owners with a sense of balance in their expectations."[84]

To prosper and bring pleasure at the same time, in other words, sports would seem to need a better class of super rich. Maybe. But another alternative does exist. Imagine how good sports could be if we had a society with no super rich at all.