

COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

Time to cut athletes' salaries



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I just read a pretty interesting interview. There's this guy, it seems, who does "hand-modeling" — you know, letting photographers take pictures of his hands to sell watches and stuff.

He said something like: "Yeah, I get paid well, but, hey, it's not like I'm really doing anything that important. We've got enough divas in the world already. The really important folks are teachers and firefighters and the guy who maintains an airplane."

So, whenever the major league baseballers threaten to strike, I think: What would happen if we just let them strike and then go watch the minor leaguers?

When you figure that the minimum salary for a major leaguer is \$250,000 — and that's for a guy who may only get one hit out of six at bats, if he even gets in the game at all — you have to wonder what, rationally speaking, is the real value of a pro athlete?

Of course, fans have been complaining for decades. But the owners keep shelling out \$5 million salaries. And the fans end up eating the better part of a C-note for a ballgame, a couple of weak beers and a hot dog.

What's even more outrageous is that the very stars who are pulling down \$200-plus mil contracts are also snagging mondo endorsement deals. They should be paying us for the opportunity to score a \$100 million endorsement from Nike.

The problem is that we have an economic death spiral here. Owners need butts in the bleachers and pay players royal sums to attract the butts' owners. Ticket prices go up. Fans complain ... but

they can't stop going to the games. (Except, of course, in the case of the cursed Cardinals.)

Now, let's pause to consider another form of entertainment that pays its stars some heavy green: movies.

I take a friend to a matinee, costs me maybe \$13 for the two of us, another \$4.50 for popcorn (if you bring your own water and gummy bears). Are the stars of the movie living less luxuriously than Bonds or "A-Rod"? Hardly. They're still making their \$25 million per pic.

And you know what? Movie prices don't really move that much from year to year — about 15 cents a year, in fact. I guess I can absorb an extra deuce for my ducats every 10-15 years.

OK ... here's the tough love part. Here's where we have to ... um ... play hardball with our athletes.

I propose that we make an immediate across-the-board cut in all pro athlete salaries of ... ready? ... 95 percent! Sort of like when a country re-values its money system to get it back into kilter.

How did I come up with this particular factor? I can assure you that I did a great deal of research using many abstruse scientific formulas that would simply give you a headache if I were to get into the details. Suffice it to say that a ballplayer making \$5 million would now take home a not-unprincipally

\$250,000. And ... he gets to keep all the commercial endorsements, autographs and TV commercials his agent can line up. As my mom would say, "such a deal!"

Could you live on 250 large ones? Governor Arnold seems to be happy to pull down \$175,000 for managing California. The average Arizona school psychologist watching after the mental health of our students gets about \$45,000. A flight inspector — the person who makes sure your airplane is safe — gets \$59,000. And a paramedic in Arizona — the person who may save your life some day — might make \$40,000.

Now, your average ... remember average ... NFL player scrapes by on about \$1.2 million. Yes, yes, I know, their careers are self-limiting by the nature of their gladiatorial tasks. But even if your friendly neighborhood linebacker plays only six years, it would still take your school shrink 160 years to catch up. That's like four careers.

And guess what? The linebacker got comped for his entire college education, including room and board.

So think about the Suns' payroll. About \$66 million, I hear. Deduct 95 percent. That gives about \$63 million that we could use to lower ticket prices, pay for an arena, or even pay teachers more.

After I get my new Jag, of course.

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