

Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution

By Matthew Futterman

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“Provocative…terrific stories” (*The New Yorker*) of the people who transformed sports—in the span of a single generation—from a job that required even top athletes to work in the off-season to make ends meet into a massive global business.

It started, as most business deals do, with a handshake. In 1960, a Cleveland lawyer named Mark McCormack convinced a golfer named Arnold Palmer to sign with him. McCormack simply believed that the best athletes had more commercial value than they were being paid for—and he was right. Within a few years, he raised Palmer’s annual income from $5,000 to $500,000, and forever changed the landscape of the sports industry, transforming it from a form of entertainment to a profitable and fully functioning system of its own.

“A remarkable saga…filled with insights not only into sports, but also into human nature” (*The Dallas Morning News*), *Players* features landmark moments, including the multiyear battle to free Palmer from a bad deal with the Wilson Sporting Goods Company; the 1973 Wimbledon boycott, when eighty-one of the top tennis players in the world protested the suspension of Nikola Pilic; baseball pitcher Catfish Hunter’s battle to become MLB’s first free agent; and how NFL executives transformed pro football from a commercial dud to the greatest show on earth.

“An entertaining, illuminating read” (*New York Journal of Books*), *Players* is a riveting, fly-on-the-wall account of the rise and creation of the modern sports world, and the people who made it happen. “No part of the media and entertainment industry has seen a more substantial economic transformation than sports….A half-century tour spanning a variety of widely recognized and lesser-known sports figures and competitions that have played roles in the industry’s development….*Players* could not be more timely” (*The New York Times*).

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Editorial Review

Review
“Masterful . . . A remarkable saga . . . Filled with insights not only into sports, but also into human nature . . . Downright thrilling.”
—Dallas Morning News

“Provocative . . . There are also terrific stories.”
—Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*

“Could not be more timely . . . No part of the media and entertainment industry has seen a more substantial economic transformation than sports. . . . Mr. Futterman, a sportswriter for *The Wall Street Journal*, takes us on a half-century tour spanning a variety of widely recognized and lesser-known sports figures and competitions that have played roles in the industry’s development.”
—New York Times

“A complex tale, compellingly told . . . *Players* might be the best book about the business of sports since *Moneyball*.”
—Grace Lichtenstein, *The Millions*

“*Players* is an entertaining, illuminating read. . . . Futterman’s investigative research reveals insights and insider perspectives that even those highly knowledgeable in the sports featured will find informative, even intriguing.”
—New York Journal of Books

“The business of sports has been completely transformed over the course of my lifetime, and *Players* is a riveting behind-the-scenes look at the beginnings of that revolution. I couldn’t put it down.”
—Billy Beane

“Finally we have the full story of business and sports, told with a mastery that only a writer of Matthew Futterman’s years of experience in both fields could bring to the table. As I read *Players* I was reminded of Michael Lewis’s *Moneyball* because it’s one of those great stories that’s been hiding in plain sight, and it also shows us how the games themselves were changed by the action off the field. Anybody with an interest in money or sports will devour this book.”
—Jim Nantz

“Sports is big business. We all know that today, but how and why did football, baseball, basketball, and the Olympics become so big? And what does that mean to athletes and fans? Matthew Futterman provides the answers in this revealing and wonderfully readable book. *Players* is a winner.”
—David Maraniss, author of *When Pride Still Mattered, Clemente*, and *Rome 1960*

“The magnitude by which athletes have become bigger, faster, and stronger is dwarfed by the degree to which they have become *richer. Players* is a deeply reported expose of the forces that have so often morphed sports from pure fun into pure business. It’s a fascinating read whether you’re interested in big time sports, big time business, or the intersection of the two.”
—David Epstein, author of *The Sports Gene*

"A smart, rollicking read about the business of sports, with fresh insight into the breathtaking financial boom that has revolutionized every sport we love and every game we watch. Populated with the boldest pioneers, from Mark McCormack and Arnold Palmer to George Steinbrenner and Marvin Miller, *Players* is a landmark book that will be consulted, and cherished, for years."
—Don Van Natta Jr., ESPN investigative reporter, Pulitzer Prize winner, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *First Off the Tee, Wonder Girl* and coauthor of *Her Way*

"Fascinating . . . Insightful . . . Despite the multiple sports explored and the large cast of characters, Futterman develops his theme seamlessly in a book that will appeal to casual fans as well as those who live and die according to the accomplishments of athletes."
—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"An indispensable volume . . . Smart, insightful, and pleasantly opinionated."
—Publishers Weekly

"An insightful, reader-friendly study of the economic transformation of pro sports in America and beyond."
—Booklist

About the Author
Matthew Futterman is a senior special writer for sports with *The Wall Street Journal*. He has previously worked for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Star-Ledger of New Jersey*, where he was a part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News in 2005. He lives in New York with his wife and children. *Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution* is his first book.

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Players

Introduction

After graduating from the US Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, where he won the Heisman Trophy, Roger Staubach served the four years in the Navy that came with a diploma from the academy. Then, in 1969, the man who had been college football's best player joined the Dallas Cowboys. He took over as the starting quarterback in 1971, but Staubach may have made his smartest move in 1970, when he began selling commercial real estate in the off-season for the firm of Henry S. Miller. He continued to spend his off-seasons hawking office space throughout his career. In 1977, two years before he retired, he launched his own commercial real estate firm.

Staubach didn't begin showing Dallas-area office and warehouse space in the early 1970s because he loved the business or planned eventually to become a property mogul and launch his own company. He did it because he had a young family and he needed the money. In 1971 his job as the starting quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys paid him a whopping $25,000, about the same salary as a mid-level lawyer in the US Department of State at the time. I know this because my father was an assistant legal advisor in the State Department in 1971, and he was being paid slightly more than the starting quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys. Today the assistant legal counsel in the State Department makes about $80,000 a year. Tony Romo, the Dallas Cowboys' starting quarterback, is currently playing under a six-year contract worth $108 million.

Roger Staubach bears no bitterness. In 2008 he sold his eponymous real estate company for $613 million. Still, comparing his football existence and Tony Romo's leads to one very simple conclusion: in the span of a generation, everything about the sports business changed. And the changes touched even the people who connected with sports in the most innocent ways. This book is about the people behind the series of events—many of which began as happy accidents—that created the modern world of sports. In this world money determines everything from who plays for what teams, to how dynasties are created. It determines how the stars of tomorrow are made. It shapes the star-centric style of play that dominates many of the world's top sports leagues. It even determines how big a commitment children and their families are expected to give to their travel soccer team. This world is about the business of creating champions in societies conditioned to worship them, and to reward the most sought after of them with annual compensation of more than $100 million a year.

The cliché about the modern sports industry is that television created it. Not surprisingly, television executives repeat this often. It's only partly true, though. While the impact of television and the money it infused are important, it might never have been felt had sports not made for "good television." For that to happen, athletes had to demand to be paid enough money to dedicate themselves fully to their pursuits, which vastly improved the quality of the competition to the point where people wanted to watch sports, both in person and from their living rooms, in unprecedented numbers.

An essential shift occurred in the sports industry in 1960, before anyone would have ever thought to have called sports an "industry" or believed its biggest stars might one day be on equal footing with the people who ran it. No one, that is, besides Mark McCormack.

The story of professional sports in the United States for the first eight decades of the twentieth century is largely one of exploitation. It's a story of one-sided contracts and lopsided deals in which teams, leagues, national and international sports federations, and countless other moneyed interests who had put themselves into positions of power took advantage of athletes who were some combination of too young, too uninformed, or too uneducated to realize just how they were being used, and too unrepresented and unorganized to do anything about it. If there is a single turning point in the transformation of sports, then Mark McCormack's arrival on the scene is undoubtedly it. Before McCormack—who began a revolution when, in 1960, he convinced Arnold Palmer to hire him as his exclusive agent—the grand old men who ran pro sports believed the sports industry was about them. These were the blue blazers at the Royal and Ancient Golf Club of St. Andrews (known as the R&A), the green jackets at Augusta National, the bureaucrats at the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and the plutocrats who owned teams in the NFL or Major League Baseball. As far as they were concerned, the inefficiencies of sports were whatever prevented the maximum amount of money and power from flowing their way.

This was the way the world had always existed for them, no matter how they had come to their positions of power. Those paths were as different as the sports themselves. New York Giants owner Tim Mara, a well-known bookie, bought his franchise for $500 in 1925 when the NFL was first taking shape. The team has been the lone source of income for his family ever since. For William Wrigley Jr., the chewing gum and real estate industrialist, acquiring the Chicago Cubs baseball team in 1921 was like picking up a toy, as it was for so many owners who would come after him. Avery Brundage, who ran the IOC from 1952 to 1972, was an amateur athlete who competed with Jim Thorpe in the 1912 Summer Olympics, then climbed the ladder of the sports federations for the next forty years before becoming the supreme leader of the modern Olympic Games. Yet no matter how these men—almost all of them were male—rose to power, invariably they and their peers shared that fundamental misunderstanding of the sports industry and its purpose. Mark McCormack, a Cleveland lawyer who cultivated a very good golfer named Arnold Palmer as his star client and essentially created the modern sports business, taught them and a generation of athletes otherwise.

At the heart of McCormack's ideas was a simple theory: sports were about the athletes, and especially the stars. The stars were the gasoline that made the engine of any sport go. People wanted to connect with them, however they could. They were a salable commodity that was being undervalued, and by undervaluing the athletes, the industry was preventing these athletes and the sports themselves from being as good as they could be.

McCormack didn't stop there. His philosophy wasn't just about demanding higher salaries and finding ways to enrich the clients he represented. It was about creating an environment where television networks could give fans the convenience of watching competitions from all over the world in the comfort of their homes; where sporting events offered those fans an opportunity to get a decent meal instead of a greasy hot dog and a flat beer or soda; where a company could delight in associating with a superstar athlete or the world's grandest competitions. McCormack understood that sport was far more complicated than a zero-sum power struggle between labor and management. Yes, the more control and freedom the athletes had, the better off they would be, but he preached that everyone else would be better off, too. With more money and freedom, the athletes could train more, which would improve the quality of the competition, which in turn would make sports more valuable as a form of live and televised entertainment. That would provide more money for leagues and event organizers to invest in the experience for fans at stadiums, arenas, golf courses, and ballparks. Then they could charge higher prices, with some portion of the money flowing back to the players, which would make their jobs even more desirable, stoking competition and raising the quality of play all the way down to the youth level, allowing the whole process to snowball. McCormack was determined to make life better for the athletes, but in doing so he could make it better for everyone—leagues, team owners, athletic federations, and fans. That was his plan.

Few of those who were in power wanted to listen to that message at first, whether it was coming from McCormack, or, later, a union organizer like Marvin Miller, or a star pitcher like Catfish Hunter, or an Olympic gold medalist like Edwin Moses, or Wimbledon champion Stan Smith, or any of the other stalwarts of the sports revolution this book explores. The powers that be liked things just the way they were, with their athletes scrounging for crumbs at the bottom of the pyramid. The battles the men in charge waged against the athletes, the fallout from those battles, and how that revolution created the behemoth that sports have become is the arc of this story. It's an attempt to understand how we got to a place where sport is simultaneously a highly produced, often overcommercialized extravaganza but also a thrilling Darwinian narrative filled with surprise and intrigue.

It's particularly telling that two of the most important events in this revolution, Arnold Palmer's termination of his exploitative relationship with Wilson Sporting Goods and Catfish Hunter's happenstance journey to becoming baseball's first free agent, turned on their employers' refusal to follow through on promises to buy the athletes cheap life insurance policies. Today a superstar can earn enough in a season to ensure that his grandchildren won't have to work a day in their lives. Forty and fifty years ago, a life insurance policy that might cost $1,000 a year played such an essential role for an athlete who wanted to guarantee the security of his family that it had enough power to transform jocks into sophisticated businessmen and businesswomen. Of course, for most women who play professional sports—other than those fortunate few stars of individual sports—there is still much progress to be made. That battle continues to unfold, and its story will eventually deserve its own book.

Nostalgia is an inevitable emotion for sports fans. Each generation yearns for sports to remain just as they were when they fell in love with games and their heroes. A corollary of such nostalgia is the sense that sports were better when there was less money involved—that not very long ago they were simpler and somehow more pure. As inevitable as these emotions might be, they are worth resisting. There isn't much purity in a system as exploitative toward its labor force as professional sports was, or in the best athletes in the world

being forced to hold down jobs that deprive them from training to be the best that they can be. Despite the inevitable pitfalls and crassness money has wrought, money has also made athletes and the sports they play immeasurably better. An upside-down business needed to be turned right-side up, for better or for worse.

The worse side has tested the devotion of even the most devout sports fanatics. In 2012, in the midst of Lance Armstrong's doping scandal psychodrama and downfall and the constant hype surrounding the LeBron James–led Miami Heat, a still-rabid sports fan who had become increasingly frustrated with the crassness, the commercialism, the lying and the cheating, and the soaring prices that come with sports these days, shook his head and said, "I just want to know how we got here."

This is my attempt at an explanation.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

William Martin:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important take action, like looking for your favorite book and reading a publication. Beside you can solve your trouble; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution. Try to make the book Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution as your pal. It means that it can to be your friend when you really feel alone and beside that of course make you smarter than in the past. Yeah, it is very fortuned for you. The book makes you a lot more confidence because you can know every thing by the book. So , we should make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

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