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Sam Bunn

*Seattle University*

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# Why Baseball's Labor Dispute is Finally Turning Heads

Sam Bunn, Volunteer Reporter

Major League Baseball (MLB) has a big problem. Players and team owners are deadlocked over money, and it's possible that 2022 will not have a professional season.

The players have a long list of grievances. For one, the minimum salary in the MLB has been increasing by less than 2% each year since 2017. This is a stark contrast to the 12.5% per season average yearly increase that the minimum salary saw between 2002 and 2014. This, combined with three years of team control built into rookie contracts means that players in the major leagues make significantly less money than they used to.



The players also want more restrictions against tanking, the process in which a rebuilding franchise fields a subpar team so that they can lose a lot and end up with the opportunity to accumulate the best young players. For instance, the Baltimore Orioles put a total of 42 million dollars into roster construction in 2021. This number is less than a sixth of the payroll of top teams, meaning significantly less money is going towards their players. As a result of their tanking efforts, the Orioles had the worst record in baseball last year. They were able to accomplish this feat because nothing prevents them from fielding a poor team and paying their players next to nothing.

Seattle University History Professor and lifelong Red Sox fan Fr. Thomas Murphy S.J., notes that this approach often makes more money than trying to build a winning team.

"Owners [of tanking teams] don't particularly care whether they win or not," Murphy said. "I mean they'll indulge the fans every once in a while by saying they're concerned, but I've always had the sense they run it more as a business."

To further line their pockets, owners are salivating at the idea of expanded playoffs. Playoff games make significantly more money for the league than regular season games, and players are often not compensated any additional amount. Neither side has budged in negotiations, and as a result, the league is currently in a state of purgatory. Players aren't required to report for spring training, they're also not allowed to use any team facilities or interact with team-affiliated trainers or coaches.

In past lockouts, public sentiment has decided what direction the league takes. After all, the people who attend baseball games, purchase TV subscriptions and buy merchandise are what makes the financial machine go round.

In the past, the media and the court of public opinion frequently sided with the ownership.

"When I was a child," Murphy said. "[Red Sox owner Tom Yawkey] was regarded as this nice little gentleman."

Today, this is no longer the case. Outlets that would've been on the side of the owners in the past are publishing pro-player articles.

“Instead of viewing MLB players as rich guys trying to get richer, I think it would help to reframe the issue as workers trying to get paid a fair share of the money they earn,” Jeremy Greco wrote in an article for Royals Review.

It’s no longer a game of who can buy the most airtime on television or favorable articles in newspapers. MLB stars are now able to broadcast their voices to millions on Instagram with the click of a button. As has happened numerous times throughout history (most notably with racial integration), what happens on the baseball field often reflects a broader shift in a society. As movements against abusive labor practices are gaining steam, fans are turning to the diamond and seeing their favorite players also feeling overworked and underpaid.

Andy Patton, a Seattle sportswriter and podcaster, sees the baseball lockout as a visible sign of burgeoning social change in the country.

“More people are seeing ownership for what they are,” Patton said, “as these cost-cutting and money-making machines are more concerned about that than anything else. And I think that’s kind of a microcosm of what’s happening in the country.”

Seattle U Volunteer Assistant Coach and former professional player Joey Wong points out that everybody suffers if the players don’t get back on the field.

“If I’m a bench player or a bubble guy, I don’t want to risk missing a year of my career for maybe a little more money later. If I’m a player, I want to play,” Wong said.

During this current labor movement, the players are taking a huge gamble. It remains to be seen if it’ll pay off and give players fairer compensation, a guarantee against losing their best years to tanking teams and a powerful statement that the demands of workers can’t be ignored forever. Neither is it certain if baseball will head into the 2022 season locked out, with the parties who need their paycheck the most stuck in financial purgatory.

The MLB will surely look very different in 2022, and the impact could stretch far beyond the diamond.