



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

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

“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

The astonishing untold story of the people who transformed sports, in the span of a single generation, from a job that required top athletes to work in the off-season to make ends meet into a massive global business.

In the cash-soaked world of contemporary sports, where every season brings news of higher salaries, endorsement deals, and television contracts, it is mind-boggling to remember that as recently as the 1970s elite athletes earned so little money that many were forced to work second jobs in the off-season. Roger Staubach, for example, made only \$25,000 in his first season as the starting quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys and wound up selling commercial real estate during the summer. Today, when *Fortune* reports that every athlete on its Top 50 list makes more than twenty million dollar per year, it’s clear that a complete reversal of power has occurred right before our eyes.

Players is the first book to tell the astonishing narrative behind the creation of the modern sports business—a true revolution that moved athletes from the bottom of the financial pyramid to the top. It started in 1960, when a young Cleveland lawyer named Mark McCormack convinced a young golfer named Arnold Palmer to sign with him. McCormack simply believed that the best athletes had more commercial value than they realized—and he was right. Before long, he raised Palmer’s annual off-the-course income from \$5,000 to \$500,000 and forever changed the landscape of the sports world.

In *Players*, veteran Wall Street Journal sports reporter Matthew Futterman introduces a wide-ranging cast of characters to tell the story of the athletes, agents, TV executives, and league officials who together created the dominating and multifaceted sports industry we know today. Beginning with Palmer and McCormack’s historic partnership, *Players* features details of the landmark moments of sports that have never been revealed before, including how legendary Wide World of Sports producer Roone Arledge realized that the way to win viewers was to blend sports and human drama; the 1973 Wimbledon boycott, when eighty-one of the top tennis players in the world protested the suspension of Nikola Pilic; and baseball pitcher Catfish Hunter’s battle to become MLB’s first free agent.

Players is a gripping, fly-on-the-wall account of the creation and rise of the modern sports world and the people who fought to make it happen. From the professionalization of the Olympics to the outsize influence of companies like IMG, Nike, and ESPN, this fascinating book details the wild evolution of sports into the extravaganza we experience today, and the inevitable trade-offs those changes have wrought.

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

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Michael Minns says

this book started out slow. Because it started out with two chapters of golf which was like 50 pages long then went into swimming. Then I'm going to the more fun stuff like football and baseball and basketball and hockey. But all in all it was a pretty good book.

Don Gorman says

(2 1/2) This is a case history book for serious sports enthusiasts and business folk. I was pretty familiar with several of files. The creation of the sports agent/content provider/800 pound gorilla IMG was a history I had studied in the past. I was pretty familiar with the Catfish Hunter story as well. All of that being said, this is a really good reference piece for anyone interested in how the business of sports marketing and the massive generation of dollars it has created. Some of the side characters in these cases are really fun.

Matt says

Major league sports is big business. I don't think any metrics or factoids are necessary as this is a rather uncontroversial and unsurprising assertion. What's more interesting is that this wasn't always the case. Major ballplayers often had to supplement their relatively meager athletic incomes with side pursuits until fairly recently. For example, Roger Staubach earned less as the rookie starting quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys than author Matthew Futterman's father did working as an assistant lawyer for the U.S. State Department, and this tidbit served as the impetus for *Players*, Futterman's examination of the emergence of athletics as big business and how NFL starting quarterbacks eventually came to out-earn government lawyers by several million dollars. The book provides an overview of the major developments in major sports that helped spur this change as well as profiles of leading figures driving the movement.

Players is roughly segmented by sport: there are chapters on Nick Bolletieri and the evolution of the sports training academy, Catfish Hunter's fight to become a free agent, and how the creation of the NFL's Quarterback Club brought in huge sums to the league's gunslinging stars (but actually siphoned off revenue to the NFLPA), among others. Despite what the title might suggest, non-athletes such as agents and trainers played a huge role in the growth of sports business, and there are extensive profiles of Arnold Palmer's agent Mark McCormack (a Cleveland lawyer who eventually founded sporting industry megalith IMG) and former MLB union head Marvin Miller and how they were instrumental in growing sports as a business. Roughly half of the book is devoted to sports outside of America's big four, with extensive chapters on golf, tennis, and the Olympics, and the evolution is tracked in a loosely chronological fashion.

Players shines when it touches upon less popular sports and draws from interviews and detailed first-person accounts. Futterman writes for the Wall Street Journal's exceptional sports section and is a strong writer who is just as comfortable explaining the subtle mechanics of Jimmy Arias' forehand as he is describing the tax implications underpinning why Arnold Palmer deferred his tournament bonuses from his sponsors. Additionally, Futterman was able to parlay his industry connections to get interviews with the likes of

Bollettieri and Bill Bradley for insider accounts of the movement. The chapters drawing heavily from interviews and exclusive content were more engaging to me than those on more recent topics such as cable sports networks that leveraged more familiar subjects and works such as the oral history of ESPN *Those Guys Have All The Fun* that I had already read.

The one-sport-per-chapter approach gives the book a somewhat disjointed feel, as many passages touch upon some common themes found in other sports (such as a shift to more player-friendly free agency policies) that don't get fully explored. The section on multi-team cable television channels naturally does cover several sports, but other chapters suffer from this organizational structure. Futterman also restricts most of his analysis to American athletes, with only brief mentions of foreign leagues, which was a bit of a bummer. Maybe it's because I work at an ad agency, but I also wish Futterman went into more detail on how brands began to get comfortable with and then openly embrace associating with athletes, as these sponsorships were a major factor in raising incomes for marquee athletes.

While there are a handful of books chronicling the economic growth of particular sports, *Players* is one of the few books with the ambitious goal of chronicling the business growth of all major sports. Its sport-specific chapters prevent it from presenting a clean and all-encompassing narrative (not that there really is one, I fully understand there were some sport-specific factors at play), but it does a fine job and outlining the major forces behind the movement. It will impart a good bit of knowledge on the subject, especially some of the older topics that will probably be less familiar to readers, and it is a solid book overall. I don't think *Players* is strong enough to recommend to a sports fan with only a passing curiosity in the subject, but if you are someone who reads the *Wall Street Journal* and its sports section and/or finds Futterman's premise appealing you should give *Players* a look.

6.5 / 10

Josh says

Good read on the business of sports and how it evolved from purely sport to a money-driven business. Goes from Mark McCormack (IMG founder) and his relationship with Arnold Palmer to Edwin Moses, Phil Knight and several others who were key to the evolution of the way sports leagues/owners and athletes interacted with one another. An interesting read but not amazing.

Mary says

I'm a baseball fan(atic), love football, tolerate basketball, and for years I've been slightly appalled at the amount of money the players make. Contracts for \$300 MILLION? Are you kidding me? They play a GAME, for goodness sake; not perform life-saving medical miracles or something morally brilliant.

While I still think it's an awful lot of lettuce, after reading this book (among several) I understand that it's not that simple, and that for years players of professional sports were exploited for their talents without a smidgen of respect and very little monetary compensation. In 1960, a young lawyer named Mark McCormack changed all that by becoming Arnold Palmer's agent. Palmer went from earning \$5000 a year off-course to \$500,000 and the ability to choose the brands his name would appear on, the quality of goods he was representing.

Most people grumble about how much athletes earn, but few know (or care to) how much money teams and

companies make off these people who shine for a short, short time in their lives. And they ARE PEOPLE, not demi-gods. Some don't handle it well, and that's what the public tends to focus on (a la Johnny Football), but others are just trying to make a long-term living on a short-term career, support their family and have some security....this book helped me understand that in a very factual, unemotional way.

If you like sports and have ever wondered about the gazillion dollar contracts, read this book. Even if you DON'T like sports but have wondered about the gazillion dollar contracts, you should read this book.

I won it as a Goodreads giveaway, but I'd probably have picked it up in the library anyway, brought it home and read it just as happily. It's a good one to have on my shelf and I'm grateful to Simon and Schuster for the truly good read. I'll be sharing it!

Mark Pace says

I didn't end up making it all the way through this. I made it a little over halfway and gave up. I tried and tried, but I found myself bored every time I tried to read it. It's about an interesting topic I usually enjoy reading about, and there was certainly some good information, but it's just not an appealing read.

Ashley Mills says

Really fascinating book about the sports industry and how it became the money-maker that it is.

Judy Collins says

A special thank you to Simon & Schuster and NetGalley for an ARC in exchange for an honest review. Bold impressive cover!

Matthew Futterman, a senior special writer for sports with the Wall Street Journal; who better to tell readers of this incredible journey-PLAYERS, The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution a well-researched, gripping and insightful look at "big business" American professional sports industry.

From the fifties to the essential shift in the 1960s, with the first eight decades of the twentieth century—a profession largely one of exploitation—to its driving force today. *How we arrived.*

Timely, and newsworthy, a story of sports, history, revenues, power, money, greed—those courageous individuals who helped make the rise of modern sports, and its transformation to today. A wide-ranging cast of characters, from athletes, agents, TV executives, and league officials who together created the dominating and *multifaceted sports industry.*

Futterman delves into the history as far back as Mark McCormack with his simple ideas. "Sports stars were about athletes." They needed gasoline to make them go. People wanted to connect with them. They were a salable commodity that was being undervalued, and by doing so, the industry was preventing these athletes and the sports from being as good as they could be. *They were being held back in so many areas.*

McCormack wasn't about just higher salaries for athletes. He wanted to uncover ways to enrich the clients he represented. His philosophy 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.

More control and freedom—leaving athletes more time for training, ultimately improving quality of the competition—more valuable to the industry as a whole as well as the entertainment industry. More from leagues and event organizers to invest in the experience for fans, stadiums, arenas, and be able to charge higher prices. *He was determined to make life better for everyone.*

The first part of the book is focused on Mark McCormack, (the man who invented sports), a Cleveland lawyer who moved into the full time sport agent, starting with Arnold Palmer, with much success. (my favorite part). For those who are fans, and history buffs, will enjoy the nostalgia, back as early as the late fifties. *Being a Georgia girl, enjoyed the connection in Atlanta.*

Readers also learn of McCormack's childhood; two loves: golf and making money—which I found fascinating. He desired a way to combine them. Using his experience, he could represent a professional golfer the same way as he represented other clients. We learn how this came about with a simple handshake, the legend- and an integral part in changing the history of sports and its players.

We also learn about **Roger Staubach**, (Henry S. Miller --being from a commercial real estate media background, Staubach, now Jones Lang LaSalle—a former client of mine). A success story—Staubach joined the Dallas Cowboys in 1969 as a 27-year-old rookie with a salary of \$25,000. In comparison to a quarterback today making *\$18 million a year!*

From Palmer and golf to baseball pitcher James “Catfish” Hunter. Where the name meant something. The image sells. From the challenges, the ups and downs, politics to McCormack's death in 2003.

Beyond the numbers, the lesson he taught the world's greatest athletes and the corporations—they represented the essence of sports. They needed to be empowered. By empowering them, he allowed them to transform modern sports. He set into motion, a path which continues today.

From here we shift into baseball, tennis, soccer, basketball and football. From Olympics, endorsements, contracts, media, royalties, Nike, IMG, ESPN, NFL, and networks--to the big business of Major League sports today—from athletes, greed, and power.

As Futterman reiterates, money in sports isn't on its own, a bad thing. But when money becomes the motivating goal and main purpose in sports-- *a bad thing*. When a player whose sneaker contracts is more important than his team's win total, and therefore bad for an owner or a league whose teams become little more than a commodity to be traded for a big-pay television contract. From enablers, handlers, corporate sponsors—anyone in the position of power—exploitation.

What about the fans who have sustained the industry for a century and a half—the ability to enjoy the games they love and the athletes they admire without getting ripped off, lied to, or insulted by either the athletes, who play the sports or the people who run them. A fan's love of sports is precious, unique, and not something to be trifled with, or used as a tool.

PLAYERS A "must read" for all sport enthusiasts, from a writer with the credentials and expertise to tell the "insider (behind the scenes)" story--- from entertainment business, media, historic, financial, economics; interviews, research, to exclusive and engaging content!

"An athlete cannot run with money in his pockets. He must run with hope in his heart and dreams in his

head." -Emil Zatopek 1952 Olympic Champion

JDCMustReadBooks

Ted Lehmann says

Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution by Matthew Futterman (Simon & Schuster, 2016, 336 pages, \$17.63, 12.99) tells the story of how the business interests of both athletes, their agents, and sponsors worked to wrest control of sports and athletics from the hands of team owners and rich, socially prominent “guardians” of the pure amateurism of more gentlemanly sports, thus changing both the emphasis and the economics of sports forever. Futterman carefully, yet graphically and interestingly, details the work of sports agents, television networks, equipment manufacturers, and others to broaden the appeal of sport, leading to sharper, more focused competition, and a better deal for the workers (athletes) bearing the brunt of the physical effort, toil, and danger. Written with verve, energy, drama, and careful research, the book tells a story every sports fan should read and understand while they continue to make sports the object of near worship and high drama entertainment in their lives.

The first quarter of this fascinating, well-written book details the rise of Mark McCormack from his privileged but unremarkable childhood in suburban Cleveland, where he played low-handicap golf and loved sports statistics, to become the pre-eminent sports agent who parlayed recruiting and signing Arnold Palmer in the early days of the champion golfer's career into a sports empire that managed the careers of sports stars in many sports. Starting with Palmer, Nicklaus, and Player in golf, he also managed tennis stars Bjorn Borg, Chris Evert, and Pete Sampras in tennis, stars in other sports as well as entertainment and politics through his company International Management Group (IMG) and its event subsidiary TWI, Trans World International. Along the way, he invented non-sanctioned events, labeled trash sports, such as World Team Tennis and the Superstars competitions which provided income for athletes competing across disciplines when not playing in their seasons. He helped create a star system which superseded team events associated with local owners. The stories of how McCormack signed many of these outstanding athletes while changing the face of world sport is riveting and instructive, providing understanding of the why and how our loyalty is now focused as much on individual athletes as it is on teams and leagues. Many other sports entrepreneurs were influenced by McCormack's vision.

Donald Dell, a former professional tennis player who became a sports agent and tennis marketing guru, is, along with McCormack, considered to be one of the founders of the modern sports agent business. When he encouraged Nicky Pelec and Stan Smith to boycott the 1973 Wimbledon Championships, he brought professional tennis to the world of the big four national championships (Australia, France, Wimbledon, and the U.S.) creating a vastly lucrative and popularized tennis environment while making it possible for tennis players to earn millions of dollars instead of taking small payments under the table. Nick Bollettieri, piggy backing on this trend, invented the sports academy for tennis players. This small beginning has mushroomed into a hugely successful sports school and camp industry which virtually dominates the development of sports stars in American sports, both individual and team. After 1973 the quality of athletes, equipment, media coverage all improved and earnings exploded.

Futterman then goes on to detail the development of players' unions, the destruction of the idea of “pure” amateurism, the influences of race and class in sports. He particularly emphasizes that the changes show the democratization of sport in supporting goals of equality. He also shows that the emphasis in sport has moved from the team to the individual as the opportunities to achieve personal wealth have improved. The Players overlooks the importance fantasy sports play in supporting the rise of the individual over the team, the event,

or the city. The time, interest, and money generated by fantasy sports has helped create wall-to-wall sports and cable packages allowing gamblers and fantasy players to keep up with every game played all night long. The story of the development of ESPN and regional sports networks, often owned by teams, is also detailed, although this material is probably worth another book.

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.

Matthew Futterman has turned what might have been a pedestrian story about sports business into an intriguing, fast-paced yet detailed account of the massive changes that have taken place in the world of sports during the past half century through re-organization and increased media. In doing so, he also mirrors changes in the larger society. As such *Players: The Story of Sports and Money, and the Visionaries Who Fought to Create a Revolution* (Simon & Schuster, 2016, 336 pages, \$17.63, 12.99) functions as social history as well as sports history, providing insight into how and why sport so dominates our media and our conversation. I read the book as an electronic galley provided to me by the publisher through Edelwiess: Above the Treeline. I read it on my Kindle app.

Carly says

I loved it!!! It is a very revealing and readable account of the intersection between big sports and big business. It just hard to fathom in world where athletes get multi-million dollar contracts before they play even one professional game that pro-athletes once upon a time were not super rich and had to work in the off season to make ends meet. Overall, very fascinating and enjoyable to read.

Since the epilogue was about the U.S Women National Soccer team I am hoping that Matthew Futterman writes a book on women's pro sports.

Ruth says

An interesting exposition of how we went from athletes barely making enough money to cover rent & food in the 1960's to the mega earnings they are showered with in more recent times. Very interesting read.

Paul Miller says

Great story of how sports became big business. The pioneering work of Mark McCormick in golf lit the spark, but the story was then repeated in parallel, sport by sport. For example, I never realized professionalism was introduced (formally) into the Olympics b/c the czars of the sport needed 'stars' to emerge over multiple Olympics to drive US ratings and hence higher rights fees - US media rights being the mother's milk of the whole thing.

Strong recommendation.

Allen Adams says

<http://www.themaineedge.com/sports/do...>

Sports fans have long become accustomed to the massive amounts of money that are inherently part of professional sports. Whether we're talking about the huge salaries paid to athletes or the immense television deals or the exponentially growing sums required to purchase teams, money is simply everywhere in pro sports.

However, it wasn't always that way.

Veteran sportswriter Matthew Futterman offers a look at the evolution of the sporting economy in "Players". It's an examination of just how much the landscape has changed over the past 50 years.

Futterman's journey starts in 1960, when a young lawyer named Mark McCormack had an idea that would utterly alter the accepted career trajectory of the professional athlete. When McCormack partnered up with golfer Arnold Palmer, whose star was just beginning to truly ascend, what followed would redefine the very nature of the relationship between players and owners.

McCormack was essentially the proto-agent, the first to devote himself to serving the best interest of the athlete against that of the league in which the athlete played. That first relationship led to more, and still more, ultimately resulting in the sports/entertainment empire known as International Management Group, or IMG.

From there, Futterman takes us on a journey across the decades, looking in on every significant shift in advantage away from the old-guard powers that be. He talks about the tennis world's transition as it entered the Open era and the rancorous relationship between the new breed of professional players and the erstwhile gatekeepers of the game's traditions. He discusses the advent of free agency in Major League Baseball and the parts played by union chief Marvin Miller and star pitcher Catfish Hunter.

The chapter discussing famed tennis coach Nick Bollettieri and the impact his methodology has had on the nature of youth athletics is a fascinating one. So too is the chapter about legendary hurdler Edwin Moses and the ultimate redefinition of the Olympic ideal. The changing paradigm of play in the NFL spearheaded by Bill Walsh is also given close examination.

All of this, plus some wonderfully in-depth and insightful material on the financial ramifications that impacted the sports world regarding the massive success of Nike and the ubiquitous proliferation of sportscentric cable and satellite networks.

If one hopes to follow the money in sports over the past half-century, there's only one direction to go – up.

It's easy to argue that professional athletes make too much money; we see those numbers and can't help but be taken aback. However, the truth is that they are only getting their fair share of the mind-boggling money being brought in by pro sports teams and leagues. For too long, they were being denied their piece of the pie. Today, they're getting that piece – and the pie is much, MUCH bigger.

Futterman spends the most time on the Palmer/McCormack relationship, and with good reason – the partnership between those two men largely laid the foundation for the financial wellbeing of the modern athlete. McCormack's vision – which ultimately changed not only the lives of athletes, but the manner in which the very games they played were conducted and conveyed. Much of how the current sporting world works – for better or worse – can be traced to the path followed by McCormack and IMG.

There's a lot of sports history to unpack in these pages. It's a wonderful walk through the different eras of professional athletics, offering the opportunity to remember some very different times. While there will certainly be a ton of new information for casual fans, even the most hardcore will likely find themselves surprised on numerous occasions. That accessibility springs from Futterman's narrative touch – he handles this potentially dry subject matter with ease, creating a story that entertains and engages even as it educates.

“Players” is a must-read for any sports fan who seeks a better understanding of the foundation on which the object of his or her admiration rests.

Gregg says

Appeals to my interest in the variety of ways people, companies, and industries make money. The mechanism is no surprise--selling sports stars and a compelling story about their "heroism" in sports and/or life--but the evolution of big money in sports is interesting. Looks like we primarily have golfer Arnold Palmer to thank for ushering big money into sports which, the author argues, gave elite athletes the ability to train and play their sport full time. This made their play even better, which in turn made sports even more compelling to watch and sold more tickets to make more money for the athletes, teams, and leagues.

Jason says

A solid read with some good insights on how the ownership side of pro sports has functioned. However, there are some glaring omissions of the labor side, including not a single mention of the most important figure in free agency in Curt Flood. Reads a bit too cynical when it comes to labor, but fairly spot on in regards to management/ownership.
