

Fifth Grade – Writing  
Activity: Persuasive Writing

*Students will write their own opinion piece.*

## **Why Baseball is the Best – And Least Exploitative – American Sport**

*By Michael Kazin, March 31, 2012*

Since the 1960s, professional football has supplanted baseball as our nation's favorite sport—generating higher revenue and better television ratings. And, as the past few weeks have demonstrated, college basketball has captured the attention and diminished the productivity of the American workforce in ways baseball does not. But let's not confuse popularity with superiority.



Major League Baseball (MLB), the oldest spectator team sport in the nation, has become the most affordable and least exploitative one—and its labor relations are remarkably harmonious, too. Compared to the dysfunction, scandal, and discontent commonplace in other professional sport, baseball is looking better than ever.

Let's start with cost: A family with a middle-class income can attend a baseball game without straining its budget but has to think hard before splurging for an afternoon or evening spent inside an NFL stadium or an NBA or NHL arena. In 2011, the average price of an MLB ticket was about \$27, compared to over \$48 for a pro basketball game, \$57 for a hockey match, and a whopping \$113 for one ticket to a gridiron bruise-a-thon.

Of course, it's a lot more expensive to buy your way into Yankee Stadium than into, say, PNC Park, home of the Pittsburgh Pirates, who have not had a winning season in 20 years. But victory doesn't always lead to overcharging the customers. After capturing the World Series in 2010, the following year, the San Francisco Giants raised the average price of a ticket to just \$25. This bought you a seat in perhaps the most beautiful stadium in North America, where, from the upper-deck, you look out on San Francisco Bay and the Oakland hills beyond. Next fall, that same amount will buy you just a beer and a serving of nachos at MetLife Stadium, the home of the New York Giants, located in the featureless flatland adjoining the New Jersey Turnpike. Alas, even the worst seat to watch the 2012 Super Bowl winners there will run you over \$100.

In addition, pro baseball, which sold more than 73 million tickets last year, has also become more internally competitive, despite wide spending disparities between rich teams like the Yankees and the relatively impoverished Pirates. Pittsburgh actually led their division halfway through the summer, before the young squad endured an epic collapse. And last year, the Tampa Bay Rays, one of the poorest teams in the Majors, squeezed into the playoffs with a stunning, almost unprecedented comeback on the very last day of the season. The scrappy Rays rallied from seven runs behind in the eighth inning to defeat the mighty Yanks, whose annual payroll is five times larger than theirs.



MLB players, compared to athletes in the other major sports, are also a fairly contented bunch. The 1994 strike, which wiped out the World Series that year, is all but forgotten. The collective bargaining agreement the powerful players union signed last fall runs until 2016 and raises the minimum salary to \$500,000 per year. Neither pro basketball nor pro football owners write checks so large to first-year players. The new baseball contract also instituted a strict drug-testing program, which the players accepted in order to avoid any repetition of the steroids scandal which badly tarnished their image.

Unlike their counterparts in football and basketball, the baseball authorities actually pay a salary to most of the young men they think have a serious chance of making a MLB roster. Even the best college baseball players usually serve an apprenticeship in the minor leagues before they are ready for the big time. Of course, no one gets rich toiling in the minors: First-year players receive a minimum of \$850 a month in the lowest or rookie league and \$2150 a month in AAA, the highest. Yet few perform before large crowds or have their names inscribed on t-shirts or hoodies. Compare their lot with that of the famous “student-athletes” in basketball and football who make millions in profits for big-name universities like Ohio State, Alabama, and Kentucky, yet are prohibited by NCAA rules from receiving so much as a free plane ticket back home.

In pro basketball, even handsome salaries don't guarantee contentment. This year's NBA season was delayed almost two months and almost cancelled altogether because of an angry dispute about how owners, all but one of whom are white, and players, over 80 percent of whom are black, would share revenue. At one point, the popular broadcaster Bryant Gumbel compared league commissioner David Stern to a “modern plantation overseer, treating NBA men as if they were his boys ... keeping the hired hands in their place.”

Racial tensions are less severe in baseball, where white players are in the majority, but Latinos comprise about 30 percent and African-Americans about 10 percent in MLB ranks. Another indicator of the less severe racial dynamics affecting baseball: Last week, Magic Johnson, one of the greatest basketball players in history, became the first black owner of a MLB team, buying the Los Angeles Dodgers for an astonishing two billion dollars along with other investors.

Meanwhile, few MLB players ever endure the concussions that are alarmingly routine in the NFL and present what may be the most troubling problem in contemporary pro sports. According to the Washington Post, as many as 1,000 former players are currently suing the NFL for ignoring or concealing the head traumas they suffered during their careers. The National Hockey League, which only recently prohibited hard checks to the head, may not be far behind.

Thus, at the opening of its 142nd consecutive season, major league baseball is healthier than it has been in years. This may make it easier for the casual fan to walk through the gates of a ballpark and take pleasure in a game whose rules and aesthetics have changed little since Grover Cleveland lived in the White House. In *The Art of Fielding*, Chad Harbach's delicious first novel, a wise young college catcher reflects on “the almost unfair beauty of a professional ball field, the expensive riotous green of the grass, the scalloped cutouts around the bases, the whole place groomed like living art.” You get to drink beer and yell at the umpire too.



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