

# Equal Play Equal Pay?

The Economics of Some Compensations



**DIFFERENT EQUAL**

A staple of the 2016 presidential campaign stump speeches from one party's candidates was the demand for "equal pay for equal work," though in reality that was largely just political theater. Another high-profile skirmish occurred in advance of the Rio Summer Games when members of the U.S. women's national soccer team campaigned for compensation equal to that of the men's national team, based on their popularity, on-field performances and revenue-generating ability. (They took their protest to the United States soccer federation bargaining table, the court of public opinion, and the Senate, where a non-binding resolution for pay equity was approved.)

## BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON

Leaving aside economy-wide debates, how should one think about "equal pay" and "gender equity" when it comes to two specialty occupations: sports and entertainment?

When Serena Williams wins a tennis Grand Slam she pockets the same prize money as the men's champion, yet she couldn't come close to winning a set against Novak Djokovic or any of the seeded male players, and by one estimate she would lose to more than 1,000 males around the globe. The first female to cross the finish line in the Chicago, Boston or New York City marathon picks up a check equal to that of the first male, though she wouldn't have been one of the top 25 runners.

Jamaican Usain Bolt holds the world re-

cord for the 100-meter dash (9.58 seconds). The women's mark, 10.49 seconds, set by Florence Griffith-Joyner, is slower than the Illinois high school record for boys – 10.34 seconds. If men competed against women in other Olympic sports – track and field, swimming, basketball, soccer – the outcome is obvious.

So how should we compare – and pay – apples and oranges? And is it even clear what "equal play" might mean? We separate by age – and gender – in youth sports to create opportunities and maintain competitive balance. Later on we carve out weight classes for boxing and wrestling. We could segment basketball by height, such as 6'4" and under, but there appears to be little interest.

Yes, men and women play tennis on the same court, though the men play five sets and women only three. Both men and women run 26.2 miles on the same marathon course, and in equestrian sports and auto racing men and women compete on equal footing. In professional golf men and women both play 72 holes, but the women play on shorter, less challenging courses. NBA players and their WNBA kin both play on the same-size court, though the women use a smaller ball and men play "above the rim" and women, below it. Should Lexi Thompson or Michelle Wie be paid as much as Jason Day or Rory McIlroy? Or should Diana Taurasi and Elena Delle Donne draw the same salary as Stephen Curry and LeBron James?

Well-known Hollywood actresses – Patricia Arquette, Meryl Streep, Jennifer Lawrence – have complained at the Academy Awards podium and elsewhere about being paid less than the male lead in their

movies. But if we prefer to watch Jennifer Lawrence act more than Casey Affleck, or Miley Cyrus to sing more than Justin Bieber, or even Serena Williams play tennis instead of Andy Murray, there is no reason their pay should be the same. In fact, an "equal pay" requirement could lower the earnings of these female stars.

Four of the last five solo artists performing at halftime at the Super Bowl have been women – Lady Gaga, Katy Perry, Beyoncé, Madonna. Maybe we should require the NFL to alternate genders.

Pop stars Taylor Swift and Katy Perry likely out-earn their male counterparts. And female Super Models for sure. Female figure-skaters and gymnasts have more lucrative post-Olympic opportunities than the males. And there are no male Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders or NBA dance squads. (Baseball mascots tend to be male, but it's hard to tell what gender the Phillie Phanatic is, or who's in those racing sausage costumes in Milwaukee.) Maybe the Bears should bring back the Honey Bears, if they're not afraid of the competition; after all, whom would you have rather watched these last two seasons?

And why focus on "equal pay" just by gender? There is much more inequality within female (or male) actors or athletes than there is across genders. After all, Serena, Taylor or JLaw would definitely not want to be paid the same as other females in their professions. In the global broadcast world in which we live the rewards to being the top artist or athlete will go to a precious few, male or female.

Remember: (1) be careful what you wish for, and (2) "equal" and "equitable" are not the same concept. □