

She Played Hard for the Money: Making a Living as a Female Professional Athlete in America

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Writers have frequently discussed the differences between earnings of female and male athletes, while making little mention of how women athletes' incomes stack up against the population as a whole, or against women generally. Since women's earnings are below men's in almost all field and always have been, this paper emphasizes the viability of professional sports as a career path for American women. Although professional athletes earn income from a variety of sources, this paper discusses only salaries or official earnings. Average per capita income (APCI) is the basic unit of comparison, since it is universally understood and widely available for all time periods. Where possible, family incomes by percentile ranking are also included.

From the turn of the century to the Depression, there were very few female professional athletes in this country other than rodeo cowgirls. In 1912, the first year for which dollar figures are available, two cowgirls earned over

\$1,100 apiece in one rodeo, placing them in the top third of the population. In 1919, Florence Randolph collected over \$1,500 in a single rodeo, placing her in the top 5 percent of American families, a swift rise from near bankruptcy. During the roaring twenties, several cowgirls' prizes at major rodeos alone placed them in the top 2 to 5 percent of American families.

In 1935 Tad Lucas's reported income was \$12,000. Almost twenty times the APCI, it placed her in the top 1.5 percent of Americans. Babe Didrikson made over \$1,000 per month playing basketball in 1933, and a similar amount the following year playing baseball. Her earnings for three months would have placed her in the top 6 percent of American families. In 1935, she earned \$11,000 annually for golf exhibitions and endorsements.

The All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL) began during World War II. However, players' salaries for the three to four month season were well below average and would not have sustained them through the remainder of the year, despite having expenses paid. During the late forties, cowgirls and golfers benefited from the creation of the Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) and the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA). In 1949, the champion all around cowgirl earned \$2,761, placing her in the top third of the country. Didrikson was the first LPGA champion. She won \$3,400 in 1948, and \$4,560 in 1949. Both were in the top 15 percent of national incomes.

During the fifties, the APCI remained between \$1,800 and \$2,700. The top woman golfer's earnings ranged from \$12,629 to \$26,774. Toni Stone, the first woman in the Negro leagues, earned \$12,000 playing baseball. The AAGPBL average was less than 10 percent of Stone's salary. In rodeo, champion barrel racers won between \$5,000 and \$6,500 annually.

During the sixties, baseball disappeared from the women's professional sports. The top barrel racers earned between \$6,000 and \$9,700, for an average of \$7,629. The top golfer's winnings ranged from \$16,000 to \$49,000. They averaged \$31,444. More golfers than cowgirls won enough to exceed the APCI during this decade.

Rodeo winnings more than tripled during the seventies, while golf winnings quadrupled. At mid-decade women's professional tennis began, already above the other two. In 1974 the top woman tennis player won \$141,935, compared to \$84,109 for golf and \$14,304 for rodeo. The top tennis player's winnings reach one million dollars in 1982, and now exceed two million. Golf

reached the \$100,000 mark in 1976 and rodeo in 1986, but neither has crossed the million dollar threshold. Bowlers have yet to reach \$100,000.

During the eighties, two women's professional basketball leagues existed briefly, the Womens Professional Basketball League (WPBL) from 1979-1981, and the Womens Professional Basketball Association (WPBA), 1984. The average player salary for both was around \$11,000, although a few super stars earned \$100,000 or more. In 1993, the top two women on the Women's Professional Volleyball Association (WPVA) tour earned \$65,000 and \$59,000 respectively, placing them in the top 20 percent of national incomes. The next four women made in the \$20,000 range, and ten more won \$8,000. Only seven volleyball players exceeded the APCI.

Whether they are in an elite, multi-million dollar sport like tennis, or a working class sport like rodeo, the top female professional athletes have since at least 1912 earned far more than the average American, male or female. Even the fragmentary data available shows that professional sport is a viable career for women. Through the years quite a few not only made a living, they literally went from rags to riches.