



History lesson for Trout: Rookies once were paid firmly middle-class wages

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Mike Trout just absorbed the lesson most of us learn early and often: the boss ain't gonna pay for production and quality unless the gun's to his head.

A player most likened to Roy "The Natural" Hobbs (and Trout said last year he never heard of Hobbs), the Los Angeles Angels' wunderkind was forced to settle for a \$510,000 second-year salary. That's just \$30,000 more than the major-league minimum mandated by the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

By today's standards, \$510,000 seems chump change for a player of Trout's accomplishments. But he doesn't yet have arbitration rights, and free agency is still five years away. The Angels might as well save some bucks now to make up for the mega-millions they'll be forced to shell out to Trout in upcoming seasons.

Now, none should cry for Trout. His paycheck makes him a comfortable 1 percent-er at just 21. But if Trout ever wants to educate himself on history – after he learns about Roy Hobbs -- he'd find he's fortunate to play in the second decade of the 21st Century. Rewind to 1977, the first full year of free agency, and baseball rookies were still consigned to the 99 percent who had to manage their bills paycheck to paycheck.

A yellowed, torn Chicago Tribune Page 3 sports section tearsheet from April 10, 1977 that's been resting in the files of my office for nearly 36 years displays why the gulf between the ballplayers of another generation and the average person pales in comparison



Making \$510,000, Mike Trout probably could not conceive of a \$19,000 salary for a young player. Photo credit [Keith Allison](#).

to today. Stars now are compensated like top Hollywood celebrities, and often keep the same distance from the rest of us. And rookies like Trout hit the income jackpot right off the bat, squandering their payout only if they're foolish.

In addition to a story by Don Pierson featuring fans at the Cubs' season opener ruminating over the 25-cent rise in bleacher prices to \$1.50, a United Press International chart listed all starting players' salaries. The modest compensation, by today's standards, of both rookies and 10-year stars is a revelation.

Bakers' dozen making just \$19,000

In the salary chart, a total of 13 big-leaguers, including four on the expansion Toronto Blue Jays, are listed as making just \$19,000. Another kid, second baseman Cesar Gonzalez of the Houston Astros, was listed at \$18,500. Among the \$19,000 crowd was future Hall of Famer Eddie Murray of the Baltimore Orioles.

Consider the math. A salary of \$19,000 comes out to just under \$10 an hour. Minimum wage in the mid-1970s was \$2.30 an hour. I was completing a three-year run as a weekend Tribune copy clerk in the city room. I was paid \$4.60 an hour, clearing about \$60 weekly for a pair of 7 1/2-hour shifts.

How did \$19,000 stand out in society in general? Probably a fair to middlin' middle-class wage, more on the fair side. As in 1950s and early 1960s, when the longtime rookie salary was stuck at \$6,000 for years, the players earned the same as many of the ink-stained wretches who covered them. In 1977, \$19,000 would have been a third- or fourth-year salary for a sportswriter from a large metro newspaper. The income gap between interviewers and interviewees was not wide at all.

In 1978, at my first job out of college, I drew \$12,500 annually in the internal publications department of the World Book-Childcraft encyclopedia publisher in Chicago. I was glad to get the salary level, compared to the more common \$10,000 or lower starting salaries at smaller-city publications who hired kids right out of school. I was chosen after a laid-off veteran reporter of the just-shuttered Chicago Daily News disqualified himself by asking for more than \$20,000, a salary commensurate with what he earned at the Daily News. Meanwhile, the Tribune hired few rookie reporters, having the pick and choice of talent from all over the country. When they did, the scale was reportedly \$276 a week in the mid-1970s. Fresh out of the University of Chicago, future Obama advisor David Axelrod earned around this amount working the night shift on the Tribune's city desk.

Pay did not jump that dramatically in either journalism or baseball once experience was notched on the belt. The salaries listed showed why ballplayers lived year-round in middle-class communities, such as Arlington Heights and Northbrook in the Chicago area. They could not afford a second home. Now, Chicago players often have a permanent Sunbelt address, then a fine in-season second home or luxury condo in the swank Lincoln Park or River North neighborhoods. If they rent, they'll often pay \$2,000 or more a month during the season for safety and security. Many times, players won't even reveal to you the specific neighborhood in which they live, suspicious of fans

stalking them home.

Murcer paid more than Madlock had requested



Bobby Murcer was the highest-paid Cub in 1977, earning more than Bill Madlock, for whom he was traded for salary reasons, had requested. Photo credit Photo credit [Jim Accordino](#).

In the 1977 Cubs list, right fielder Bobby Murcer was the best-paid at \$250,000. Murcer's compensation smelled. In one of his last acts as owner, 82-year-old P.K. Wrigley ordered two-time batting champ Bill Madlock traded to the San Francisco Giants for Murcer after Madlock asked for a total \$1 million, three-year deal. The Cubs then turned around to pay Murcer more than Madlock had requested on an annual average. The bad deal was tinged with racial overtones. The Giants rewarded Madlock with a \$225,000 deal.

Other Cubs starters' salaries were catcher Steve Swisher, \$50,000; first baseman Bill Buckner, \$100,000; second baseman Manny Trillo, \$50,000; shortstop Ivan DeJesus, \$30,000; third baseman Steve Ontiveros, \$80,000; left fielder Jose Cardenal, a Wrigley favorite, \$150,000; center fielder Jerry Morales, \$80,000, and pitcher Ray Burris, \$75,000. Total payout was \$805,000.

Bill Veeck had to watch every penny in the second year of his final White Sox ownership tenure. The '77 Sox would turn into the beloved, lusty-hitting "South Side Hitmen," with rent-a-players Richie Zisk and Oscar Gamble. The catch-lightning-in-a-bottle strategy worked for 2/3 of the season before the Sox faded under the onslaught of the talented Kansas City Royals.

Free-agent-to-be Zisk drew the second-highest Sox salary at \$125,000 playing right field. Best-paid honors went to Ralph Garr at \$160,000 in left.

The remaining Sox starters were catcher Brain Downing, \$50,000; first baseman Jim Spencer, \$70,000; second baseman Jorge Orta, \$60,000, shortstop Alan Bannister, \$30,000 (and Steve Stone still believes Bannister's fielding was worth much less); third baseman Eric Soderholm, \$40,000; center fielder Chet Lemon and designated hitter Lamar Johnson, \$35,000 each, and pitcher Ken Brett, \$70,000.

Top salary in the entire big-league list was \$400,000, drawn by two-time National League MVP Joe Morgan of the Cincinnati Reds, three-time NL home-run champ Mike Schmidt of the Philadelphia Phillies, and former 1973 NL rookie of the year Gary Matthews of the Atlanta Braves. Morgan's and Schmidt's salaries were understandable. Matthews was the beneficiary of Ted Turner's big-splash spending spree starting out his Braves' ownership. Turner also overpaid first baseman Willie Montanez at \$330,000. Meanwhile, Braves shortstop Pat Rockett made just \$19,000.

Underpaid future Hall of Famers

Underpaid players by comparison – and all of whom eventually made the Hall of Fame -- were Tom Seaver (\$225,000) of the New York Mets, Reggie Jackson of the New York Yankees (\$250,000), Johnny Bench (\$235,000) of the Reds, Lou Brock (\$150,000) of the St. Louis Cardinals, Willie Stargell (\$175,000) of the Pittsburgh Pirates, and Fergie Jenkins (\$150,000) of the Boston Red Sox, after seven 20-win seasons under his belt.

Two Chicago MVPs, past and future, were at different levels of the salary scale. In his final big-league season, Dick Allen made \$150,000 for the Oakland Athletics. With just one month's experience under his belt, Andre Dawson of the Montreal Expos earned \$25,000.

The Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers were the only teams with as many as eight starting players already at or above the \$100,000 level.

As with today, the only set scale by the CBA was the rookie salary. Owners, then and now, were free to pay according to their whims. The monster salaries given out today are totally at the owners' discretion. Paid for partially by exploding TV rights, the salaries are also subsidized when fans have to chip in with inflated ticket prices of \$50 or more.

Today's ticket costs make the quote in the Tribune article from 1977 right-field bleachers fan Dave Ciarrachi seem quaint, and wistful. Lombard resident Ciarrachi, father of Cubs pro scout Jake Ciarrachi, still pays his way into the bleachers in a way he could have never foreseen 36 years ago:

“I think if they continue to increase prices, they'll lose the lifeline,” he said to Pierson. “But 3 or 4 bucks isn't like hockey or football, where I have to pay 12 or 15.”



Despite seven 20-win seasons, Fergie Jenkins, shown with a frame of the legendary 1969 Cubs in his home, was still making just \$150,000 starting out 1977.

Today's players thank you, Dave Ciarrachi, and so many others. But they need to get a copy of that 1977 salary list to really appreciate where they've come from, and which owners and Players Association chiefs they ought to thank.