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Inestimable value of Warren Spahn

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NCR Today

Warren Spahn was a member of my parish, Saint Sebastian, in Milwaukee, where I grew up. You cannot imagine the thrill of the experience of attending the annual parish Father and Son banquet the year he spoke and handed out baseball bats, 1957. It was an unforgettable year. I was 13; Spahn had an ERA of 2.69; it was the year the Milwaukee Braves beat the Yankees in seven games to take the World Series.

Baseball, and life itself, was untarnished then.

I met Spahn at Wick field one day. He was a lefty and so was I. He showed me his wind up. I tried to imitate in from that day on. Oh, the high leg kick. I thought I was a master.

Does life get better at 13?

I thought of Spahn the other day when I read that former Kansas City Royals pitcher and 2009 Cy Young American League Award winner Zack Greinke had agreed to a six-year, \$147 million contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers. I begrudge Greinke nothing. He is a good man, shy to a fault. He came up through the Royals and, of course, the team eventually lost him to higher bidding clubs.

But what does it mean for an athlete to be worth \$147 million?

Greinke was 31-11 over the last two seasons; has a nine-year major-league career ERA of 3.77. Spahn, who in 1957 earned \$57,000 (not bad, but a long way from the millions), ended up with lifetime ERA of 3.09.

Consider this: More than 25 major league baseball players were paid more than \$17 million last year. Virtually any starter is paid a million or more.

No doubt about it. Professional athletics exists in a different world a long way from the rest of us. The difference between that world and ours, at least as measured by earnings, which seems to be a primary measurement these days, is mind boggling, as we well know.

Professional, television-supported athletics and money come together in a unique way today in our colleges and universities. This jumped out at me again when I read today a story in The New York Times saying that three dozen private-college presidents earned more than \$1 million in total compensation in 2010, according to The Chronicle of Higher Education's analysis of federal tax documents.

Some might think this is high, and, of course, it's a lot of money. However, these numbers seem to recede when you consider the compensation of Division I college football coaches.

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According to USA Today, six years ago, 42 major college football coaches made at least \$1 million. Today, 42 make at least \$2 million and 13 receive a base salary of more than \$3 million.

- The average annual salary for head coaches at major colleges is \$1.64 million, up nearly 12% over last season and more than 70 percent since 2006.

- Alabama's Nick Saban is the highest paid at \$5.5 million.

These numbers tell us something about our priorities, including the high value we give to television entertainment. It also tells us something about how we value education.

Some might consider being upset about the pay some university presidents receive. I ask: How can we be when it is a mere fraction of that many of them are forced to pay their athletic coaches. The demands come from fans, from the collective marketplace.

It makes me ask if I am not a good part of the problem when I watch my weekend football. Questions here, but of two things I am certain: No baseball player is worth \$147 million and my old friend, Warren Spahn, was worth more than \$57,000 in 1957.

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