Baseball Vs. Football Essay, Research Paper

Baseball vs. Football: Which Is The True American Pastime?

In today’s world of big time professional sports there are the two major players and they are football represented by the National Football League (NFL) and baseball represented by Major League Baseball (MLB). Now there are other sports that the American public enjoys watching, however the argument generally boils down to which sport is the true favorite of the American people: baseball or football. In this paper I will attempt to examine both sports from several different angles to include attendance, television revenue, ticket costs, venues, salaries, entertainment value, and athlete perception. The goal of this exercise will be to determine, once and for all, which sport is the American favorite and can truly be called the “American Pastime”.

One of the single greatest measurable facets of professional sports is attendance. A sport’s popularity is in direct correlation to the number of people that will show up to watch that sport. Overall 2000 regular season attendance in Major League Baseball was a record 72,782,013 in 2,416 games for an average per game crowd of 30,125 whereas official overall paid attendance in the National Football League for the 2000 season was 16,387,289 in 248 games for an average per game crowd of 66,077. The average per game crowd is the measurable statistic due to the fact that the number of games in a regular season for baseball and football are very different. A NFL team plays a regular season schedule of 16 game however a MLB team plays a regular season schedule of 162 games so average attendance per game presents an accurate picture of popularity. Therefore, football appears to be more than twice as popular as baseball when measured by attendance.

Ever since the introduction of television into American pop culture professional sports organization have looked to maximize this medium. Television revenue is now big business in sports today with television networks paying large amounts of money to secure the right to broadcast sporting events. The Super Bowl (which is the championship game in the NFL) is consistently the highest rated broadcast every year, which allows the lucky network to charge ungodly amounts of money in advertising. The NFL and MLB both enjoy large television contracts although their revenue sharing plans are quite different. The NFL currently receives 2.2 billion dollars a year in television revenue, which amounts to 73 million per year per team. MLB currently receives 340 million dollars per year in television revenue, which is divided up among the teams in a formula so complicated that you need understand quantum-physics and theoretical mathematics just to gain a rudimentary understanding of the distribution structure. These numbers are interesting in that there are less football teams to televise which means that the NFL must garner obscene ratings to demand that much money. Baseball games are on almost every night on a variety of different channels and ratings can be considered dismal when placed in comparison to the NFL. I believe the main reason for the ratings difference is season length. The NFL season is so short and every game means so much that the drama level is much higher when compared to the daily rhythm of 162 baseball games where losing one or two games a week is not considered disastrous. If a NFL team were to lose 5 games in a row chances are they would not make the playoffs however if a MLB team loses 5 games in a row they may still win it all.

How much does it cost to see a professional football or baseball game? Ticket prices vary but the average ticket price in 200 for a NFL contest was $54.14 with the highest average ticket price being $74.28 to see the Washington Redskins (Washington, D.C.) and the lowest average ticket price being $33.99 to see the St. Louis Rams (St. Louis, MO). The average ticket price in 200 for a MLB contest $20.02 with the highest average ticket price being $28.33 to see the Boston Red Sox (Boston, MA) and the lowest average ticket price being $11.72 to see the Milwaukee Brewers (Milwaukee, WI). Once again the season length and game importance being the most important factors in determining ticket price. It is not realistic to expect a MLB team to ask for $75 a game over a 162 game season however the NFL can because of the short season length. These figures only take into account the admission price and not the added costs of snacks or refreshments, which can be astronomical. However, these figures suggest that the best value for today’s American family would be to attend a baseball game.

Some say that the greatest part about going to a baseball or football game is not the food, the athletes, or the weather, but rather the stadium itself. Today’s professional sport venues are more Disneyland than backyard and have become a gathering place for families, friends, and co-workers. Many corporations now do serious business in the luxury boxes at several stadiums and unfortunately the blue-collar presence that was everywhere 10 years ago seems to be disappearing at today’s outdoor events to be replaced by the white-collar crowd. I believe the best thing about a sporting event is the crowd noise, which can be a result of cheering, booing, or just too much alcohol. However, there is nothing better than feeling a stadium rumble in your chest. Crowd noise is dependent on stadium capacity and that is where baseball typically falls behind football. The average MLB venue can hold around 47,000 people with stadiums in San Diego setting the bar high at 66,307. The smallest MLB venue can be found in Boston at Fenway Park, which holds 33,871, which is curious because as we learned above the Boston Red Sox also have the highest average ticket price. The average NFL venue can hold around 70,000 people with the largest stadium being the Detroit Silverdome, which can hold 80,311 people. The smallest NFL venue is located in Indianapolis and can hold 56,120 people. In addition to crowd noise the second most important feature about a NFL or MLB venue may be their historical value. Many baseball fans will tell you the importance of places such as Wrigley Field in Chicago or Fenway Park in Boston although the owners of those teams will tell you that they need new and more modern venues. The oldest ballpark in the MLB is indeed Fenway Park in Boston and was built in 1912 and the oldest venue in the NFL is Soldier Field in Chicago and was built in 1924. I have visited both venues and will admit that there is something special about sitting in a stadium that was built 80 or 90 years ago and thinking about all the great players that have played there. I believe the evidence supports the argument that the NFL venues are truly larger and louder whereas MLB ballparks are known for their history.

Player salaries are often claimed by team owner to be the single largest factor in the decision to raise ticket prices. Player salaries are now so large that the American public cannot even make a comparison. The average player salary in MLB in 2000 was a little over two million per year with Alex Rodriguez leading the pack at $25,200,000 per year. The average player salary in the NFL in 2000 was 1.18 million dollars per year. Baseball players consistently make more money than their football counterparts due in large parts to the salary cap structures in the respective leagues. In the NFL each team must field a 53-person roster while keeping their salary under the 2001 salary cap of 67.4 million dollars, however in MLB there is no salary cap so players can make as much as possible. There used to be a system of luxury taxing in MLB but that system expired in 2000 so there are currently no salary obstacles to players in baseball. The luxury tax system required the five baseball teams with the highest payrolls to pay a tax that helped to keep the playing field level between large and small market teams. However, with no type of salary control in use by MLB each player can receive as much money as an owner is willing to pay as evidenced by Alex Rodriguez’s huge salary. The NFL salary cap has been lauded as the sole reason that the NFL is so competitive and a different champion seems to emerge every year, however in baseball the same teams are near the top every year and it is no coincidence that the New York Yankees have won the World Series the last few years and they also have the largest payroll. A large market team such as the Yankees can afford to overpay players because they enjoy a bigger gate and larger television revenues than a team like the Montreal Expos. In the NFL all the money is disbursed equally and the salary cap helps to keep all teams competitive. Therefore, the league with the highest player salaries is not necessarily the league that offers the most competitive product. The only lesson to be learned here is that if you have an athletically gifted child you may want to direct that child towards baseball to maximize his/her payday.

Athlete perception in both sports plays a large part in attendance, television revenue, ticket costs, and several other areas within the NFL and MLB. Currently the players in the NFL are regarded as the most dangerous and out of control athletes. The recent dramas involving O.J. Simpson, Ray Carruth, and Ray Lewis have given the NFL a serious black mark among the fans. While baseball players are generally seen as a greedy bunch the football player is now seen as a criminal with little or no regard for the law. Domestic violence has now unfortunately become part of the NFL and MLB mainstream with several incidents documented in both leagues each year, yet the fans do not even seem to care about these incidents but rather focus on the more theatric, more serious, and more rare serious crimes. There are hundreds upon hundreds of domestic violence cases each year but only one stabbing outside an Atlanta nightclub involving Ray Lewis. Guess which one the public remembers? The NFL and MLB have taken several steps to improve their images with advertising, meet the player campaigns, and community service and only time will tell if these attempts work but I believe for all the good that these players do and for all the positive publicity that these players may gather it will only take one player to ruin it all for that is the true nature of being a celebrity. Based upon the above information I believe that MLB players are currently seen in a better light than NFL players and as more favorable role models although they may be perceived as greedy.

Entertainment value is hard to measure since there is no way to know for sure what people like to see. Obviously fans of one sport will claim their sport offers the best product. Both the NFL and MLB put a solid product on the field that is well attended, relatively affordable, and fun to watch. Therefore, it is my opinion that both sports offer equal entertainment value and neither should be condemned on this factor. Both sports are so different that comparing their entertainment value would be unfair. As a spectator of both sports I am happy to report that I feel that both sports did an equal job in fulfilling my entertainment needs.

I have examined both baseball and football from several different viewpoints and it my belief that football is truly the American pastime. Football enjoys larger average attendance, reasonable tickets costs given the season length, reasonable player salaries when compared to baseball, better overall venues, and football provides a thrilling and exciting product to watch. Football destroys baseball in television ratings and television revenue by demanding and getting television contracts that baseball can only dream about. And what is a better benchmark for popularity then television ratings? Plus football’s championship game, the Super Bowl, is part of pop culture in that practically everyone throws or attends a Super Bowl party each year. The Super Bowl is the highest rated broadcast on network television each year and serves as a gathering event for friends and families. Some companies even give their employees the next day off, which means that the Super Bowl is practically on par with a national holiday. None of these things happen for baseball. While it is true that football does get a black mark in athlete perception I believe that it more than makes up for that in the other areas and while baseball is a relatively inexpensive medium for family gatherings the baseball games just don’t carry as much importance as football. Therefore, I believe my arguments support my conclusion that football is the true American pastime and on a separate not I cannot wait for September and the first kickoff of a new season!

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