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Male vs Female Professional Sports Salary Comparison

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The average American woman earns 81% of what an average American man earns, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). And this stark disparity has hardly budged for more than a decade: the pay gap between men and women has sat at 80%-83% since 2004.

The gap varies by industry, [according to Payscale](#): the legal profession has the worst discrepancy at 64%, while arts, entertainment and sports comes in well above average at 94%. While this is heartening for advocates of equal pay, there is still progress that needs to be made—especially when it comes to professional sports.



With a new decade ahead, we are taking a look back at how athlete compensation changed over the past ten years, and the obvious trends of wage equality in sports. We compare average salaries of male players vs female players across sports like basketball, soccer and tennis, and highlight some of the major steps forward in the pursuit for equal pay.

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The Gender Pay Gap in Sports

Each league and sports organization has its own structure of compensation and benefits. But, while the level of pay varies from sport to sport, a look at five popular American sports shows a common reality: female athletes consistently make less than men.

Average Player Compensation per Sport, 2019

Sport	Men	Women
Basketball (NBA & WNBA)	\$8,321,937	\$75,181
Golf (PGA & LPGA)	\$1,235,495	\$48,993
Soccer (MLS & NWSL)	\$410,730	\$35,000
Softball/Baseball (MLB & NPF)	\$4,031,549	\$6,000
Tennis (ATP & WTA)	\$335,946	\$283,635

Sources: CareerTrend ([NPF](#)); ESPN ([PGA](#) & [LPGA](#)); Global Sports Salaries ([MLB](#), [MLS](#), [NBA](#), [WNBA](#)); NWSLSoccer.com ([NWSL](#)); Tennis.com ([ATP](#); [WTA](#))

Whether professional players receive salaries or individual prize money from competitions, male athletes in basketball, golf, soccer, baseball and tennis make anywhere from 15% to nearly 100% more than female athletes. While compensation for women has improved over the past decade, the gap still extends to even the world's highest-paid players.

Top-Paid Female Athletes vs Male Athletes

In 2010, golfer Tiger Woods made 124% more than tennis player Maria Sharapova. In 2019, little had changed: soccer star Lionel Messi made 125% more than tennis star Serena Williams.

Forbes's Top-Paid Athletes, 2010 versus 2019

	2010	2019
Men	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Tiger Woods, \$105 million Floyd Mayweather, \$65 million Kobe Bryant, \$48 million Phil Mickelson, \$46 million 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lionel Messi, \$127 million Cristiano Ronaldo, \$109 Million Neymar, \$105 million Canelo Alvarez, \$94 million

	5. David Beckham, \$43.7 million	5. Roger Federer, \$93.4 million
Women	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Maria Sharapova, \$24.5 million 2. Serena Williams, \$20.2 million 3. Venus Williams, \$15.4 million 4. Danica Patrick, \$12 million 5. Kim Yu-Na, \$9.7 million 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serena Williams, \$29.2 million 2. Naomi Osaka, \$24.3 million 3. Angelique Kerber, \$11.8 million 4. Simona Halep, \$10.2 million 5. Sloane Stephens, \$9.6 million

Source: *Forbes* (men [2010](#), [2019](#); women [2010](#), [2019](#))

While the pay disparity didn't change, there is one aspect of the *Forbes* top-ten list that did. [The top ten highest-paid women in 2019](#) were all tennis players when a decade ago the top-ten list [included NASCAR, ice skating and golf](#). Tennis has made moves to increase equal pay between their male and female players, and today all four major tennis tournaments offer equal prize money. This is just one of the ways that professional sports are working to improve pay inequality. But as recent [lawsuits](#) and even [Twitter battles](#) show, we still have a ways to go.

Let's take a closer look at the professional athlete salary statistics for three sports that have made headlines when it comes to the gap in professional pay: basketball, soccer and tennis.

Basketball

Every year since the Women's National Basketball Association's inaugural season in 1997, the highest-paid women's basketball player has earned less than the lowest-paid National Basketball Association player. In the 1997-98 season, NBA rookies made 176% more than WNBA rookies. And while that gap narrowed slightly at the start of the 2010s to 172%, it widened again by the end of the decade to 182%.

NBA versus WNBA Salaries

	1997-1998 Season	2010-2011 Season	2019-2020 Season
NBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum rookie salary: \$242,000 • Salary cap: \$26,900,00 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$473,604 • Up to six years: \$13,603,750 • 7-9 years: \$16,324,500 • 10+ years: \$19,045,250 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$898,310 • Up to six years: \$27,285,000 • 7-9 years: \$32,742,000 • 10 years or more: \$38,199,000
WNBA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum salary: \$15,000 • Salary cap: \$50,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$35,190 • Three years: \$51,000 • Six years: \$97,000 • Salary cap: \$99,500 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$41,965 • Three years: \$56,375 • Six years: \$115,000 • Salary cap: \$117,500

Source: [NBA](#))

The starkest gap remains at the very top. Golden State Warriors player Stephen Curry was on track to make more than \$40 million in salary alone during the 2019-20 season. In the same year, DeWanna Bonner, the [highest-paid WNBA player](#), was eligible for a [base salary](#) of \$127,500, a difference of almost 200%.

However, the past decade has seen some attempts to narrow that gap. In 2009, the WNBA started to allow sponsorship on jerseys in order to boost revenue, a move that [the NBA repeated in 2017](#). In 2016, ESPN doubled their rights fee to show WNBA games, paying \$25 million a year. And in 2019, [CBS Sports made a deal](#) to pay for additional games. But one of the biggest moves was the WNBA's 2020 community bargaining agreement.

Revenue Sharing and the 2020 Community Bargaining Agreement

For years, another major difference in compensation came in the form of revenue sharing. NBA players receive about [50% of the league's revenues](#). Up until 2020, the WNBA received 20% of their league's revenues. That changed with a [new community bargaining agreement](#), reached in January of 2020, which agreed to a 50-50 split and brought WNBA players in line with their male counterparts.

The 2020 agreement was also a big step forward in terms of WNBA players' salary potential. For the first time, the average salary reached six figures.

The WNBA's 2020 CBA Boost

WNBA 2019-2020 Season	After 2020 CBA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$41,965 • Three years: \$56,375 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rookie salary: \$57,000 • Three years: \$68,000

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veteran players: \$115,000 • Salary cap: \$117,500 • Average: \$75,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veteran players: \$185,000 • Salary cap: \$215,000 • Average: \$130,000
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Source: Women’s National Basketball Players Association ([2019](#), [2020](#))

While 2020 brought unexpected changes to both the NBA and the WNBA, with both leagues’ seasons affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the [CBA still remains](#). Both men’s and women’s basketball used the unusual circumstances to play with online options and enhance the at-home fan experience, and the WNBA saw its [highest draft viewership](#) in 16 years during the 2020 virtual draft.

Soccer

Bloomberg News recently [touted soccer](#) as “the future of sports in America,” and soccer fandom has clearly grown within the United States. In 2018-19, the federation reported total revenue of \$115,128,170, a growth of 160% over the last decade. In 2019, [14 million](#) people watched the U.S. Women’s National Soccer team defeat the Netherlands to win the FIFA Women’s World Cup—10.5 million more viewers than their 2001 finals appearance.

But, with all this growth, are men’s and women’s earnings in line?

U.S. Professional Soccer Teams Comparison

Major League Soccer played their first game in 1996, after the United States hosted the 1994 FIFA World Cup. The National Women’s Soccer League played their first game in 2013, following the end of the Women’s Professional Soccer league the previous year. Both teams [have a salary cap](#), meaning each team has a limit on how much they can pay their players and some limits on how they can divide that pot of money.

MLS Versus NWSL Salaries

	2013	2020
MLS	Minimum: \$46,500 Maximum: \$600,000* Team salary budget: \$2,950,000	Minimum: \$63,547 Maximum: \$612,500* Team salary budget: \$4,900,000
NWSL	Minimum: \$6,000 Max: \$30,000 Team salary budget: \$200,000	Minimum: \$20,000 Max: \$50,000 Team salary budget: \$650,000
Percent difference	MLS rookie players made 87.1% more	MLS rookie players made 64.44% more

Source: MLS [2013](#); [2020](#); NWSL [2013](#), [2020](#)

*Does not include [designated players](#) or [targeted allocation money](#).

While both men’s and women’s soccer players are seeing salary increases alongside the sport’s rise in popularity, men still far outearn women. That gap is narrowing slightly, however. In 2020, the league difference in rookie pay decreased by 50% (down from 154%), while the salary budget gap closed by 22%.

There is still quite a ways to go to close this gap, but the NWSL [is making changes](#) to offer more competitive compensation.

FIFA World Cup Prize Money

The pay disparity in professional soccer exists at an international level as well. In 2019, the teams in the FIFA Women’s World Cup shared a \$30 million prize pool. That equaled the prize money for a single winning men’s team a decade earlier.

- 2010 Men’s World Cup: \$420 million, \$30 million winner’s share
- 2011 Women’s World Cup: \$5.8 million, \$1 millions winner’s share
- 2018 Men’s World Cup: \$400 million, \$38 million
- 2019 Women’s World Cup: \$30 million, \$4 million winner’s share

In 2019, FIFA [proposed doubling the women’s prize pool](#) to \$60 million in the 2023 World Cup, and [announced that they would spend \\$1 billion on women’s soccer](#) over a period of four years. But many players say this is not enough.

US Women’s National Team versus U.S. Soccer

While MLS and the NWSL have only been around for a few decades, the United States has fielded national soccer teams in World Cups since 1930 (US Men’s National Team) and 1991 (US Women’s National Team). Since then, the women’s team has won four [FIFA Women’s World Cup](#) titles. Until 2018, the men’s team qualified for the World Cup every year since 1990, but has not won a championship.

For much of the decade, the US Women’s National Team and the U.S. Soccer Federation have clashed over equal pay. Two major moments in this dispute include:

- 2016: Five USWNT players filed a wage-discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The EEOC never publishes a response, but the players received a 30% raise among other benefits in 2017.
- 2018: Twenty-eight USWNT players joined a wage-discrimination class-action suit against U.S. Soccer. The suit is still ongoing.

The SBNation site Stars and Stripes compiled [a full timeline](#) of the USWNT’s negotiations with U.S. Soccer over the years.

Tennis

Tennis is one of the few sports where the United States women, on average, make more than men. However, the men still come out ahead internationally.

Outside the majors, the average earnings of U.S. women ranked by the Women's Tennis Association were higher than the U.S. men in the Association of Tennis Professionals. At both the start and end of the decade, the top female player in the United States made more than the top male player.

ATP versus WTA Top-100 Earnings

	2009	2019
ATP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Average of all top-100 men: \$677,618Average of U.S. men in top 100: \$788,538Top U.S. men's player: Andy Roddick, \$2,187,719	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Average of all top-100 men: \$335,946Average of U.S. men in top 100: \$275,860Top U.S. men's player: John Isner, \$411,414
WTA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Average of all top-100 women: \$533,091Average of U.S. women in top 100: \$1,484,559Top U.S. women's player: Serena Williams, \$4,266,011	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Average of all top-100 women: \$283,625Average of U.S. women in top 100: \$307,343Top U.S. women's player: Sofia Kenin, \$3,012,043

Sources: Tennis.com (ATP [2019](#); WTA [2019](#))

Gender equity in tennis has been in the spotlight for decades, stretching back beyond Billie Jean King's threat to boycott the 1973 U.S. Open. Over the span of 34 years, the four major tennis tournaments decided to pay their men's and women's winners equally.

- 1973: U.S. Open
- 2001: Australian Open
- 2006: French Open
- 2007: Wimbledon

Another sign of growth toward pay equality is that tennis players from both the ATP and WTA have come together to campaign for [a larger share of tournament revenues](#). Their hope is that by moving closer to a 50-50 split, common in other pro sports, they can increase salaries for all players, male and female.

You Can Shape the Future of Sport Salaries

If you are interested in equalizing athlete pay, or if you want to push for better compensation for players overall, consider a career in sport management. Managers, owners and other administrators can have direct input in how much players get paid. Agents can be advocates for fairer wages and better benefits. And sport marketers can attract more fans to a league or player, increasing revenue and support.

Adelphi University's [MS in Sport Management](#) empowers students to pursue their unique passions and better support the sports they love. Their top-ranked masters is offered online and on campus, and its flexible curriculum allows students to take a general track or choose from specializations in sport marketing or collegiate athletic administration. Students develop wide-ranging leadership skills and learn to conduct the marketing and administrative tasks of sport organizations and business operations.

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