

Beyond the Maximum Wage: The Earnings of Football Professionals in England, 1900–39

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This article draws on the data held by football clubs and associations alongside newspaper evidence and biographical accounts to provide a detailed analysis of the earnings of footballers in England before the Second World War. It argues that, despite the apparent equalizing effect of the maximum wage rule, there were considerable differentials in pay between the playing élite and the rank-and-file. Benefits, bonuses, international match fees and other indirect forms of income helped to maintain the skew in footballers' earnings which had existed since the legalization of professionalism in 1885. The article concludes by considering the earnings of footballers in England in relation to other countries, other sports and other sectors of the entertainment industry.

How much were the early professional footballers paid? This apparently straightforward question has been one of the most difficult for historians to answer. Few football clubs have been keen at any time to publicize the amount their players earned. Like most conventional firms, they were loathe to disclose details of their private financial dealings with employees to outsiders. But there were other important reasons to keep quiet. Professionalism emerged in 1885 after a long period of struggle in which clubs from the north and midlands commonly offered their players illegal expenses and other forms of veiled payment. Being open to the press or the public about player payment under these circumstances was not simply indiscreet; it was counterproductive and could lead to fines or even expulsion from the Football Association (FA). While legalization prevented the issue becoming as contentious as it did in northern rugby, a cloud of secrecy and silence continued to hang over the issue of payment during the 1890s.¹ Directors avoided giving ammunition to critics who argued that the new football professionals were holding their clubs to ransom by demanding large wages and signing-on fees. Neither were they likely to disclose the terms of the contracts of star players who could then be lured away by ambitious rivals.

Historians have felt more confident about estimating levels of pay after 1901, when a maximum wage limit was set for the first time at £4 per week. The FA also introduced benefit payments and outlawed match bonuses but it was the maximum wage which preoccupied contemporaries and historians alike. Until its abolition in 1961, the maximum wage was an inescapable fact of life for everyone who embarked on a career in football. For the best players, it was an unnecessary restriction on earning power which prevented them from making the most of

their talent and taking their rightful place alongside the stars of sport and entertainment. The more moderate player who attained the maximum saw it as a mark of success, of having reached the top (or at least having made the first team) in his chosen profession. Alongside the retain-and-transfer system, it became a key feature of the industrial relations of football and the battleground for disputes between the Players' Union and the governing bodies. To a great extent, the maximum wage shaped the occupational culture of English football in the twentieth century.

However, there was more to player payment than the maximum wage. It is easy to forget that a player's weekly wage was only his basic form of remuneration. Bonuses, benefits and international match fees for the better players need to be considered alongside other less direct forms of income. The existence of the maximum wage has clearly convinced some historians that we know more about footballers' pay than we actually do. Those who are more familiar with the source materials are aware of its limitations.² Nevertheless, it is surprising that most studies have been based on the rather impressionistic evidence of the press while neglecting the more systematic data available in football club archives.³ Neither has there been any real attempt to compare the evidence on earnings by drawing on the experience of a range of employers. The aim here is to utilize the material from a number of club minute books, wage books and ledgers to examine the issue of payment in more detail and in a broader context than has hitherto been attempted.⁴

Earnings Before the Maximum

The payment of footballers before the maximum wage was a complicated affair. Not only were there considerable differences in levels of pay, but methods of payment also varied from club to club and sometimes from player to player.⁵ The aftermath of legalization probably made little difference to those who had been paid illegally before 1885, but the creation of the Football League three years later seems to have led to wage rises for the 12 teams included. Players were paid by the match, by the week or according to short-term arrangements embracing a series of games but, before 1890, few seem to have collected more than about £2 a week including bonuses. George Woodhall was probably not untypical in making £1 a week and an extra 10s. for additional matches with West Bromwich Albion in the 1889/90 season. According to Tony Mason's figures, the first professionals were commonly making anything between 4s. and 30s. per week (or per match), and some claimed as little as 2s. 6d., although it must be remembered that most of these were only part-time. One or two could command higher pay. Nick Ross, the best-known footballer of his day, was probably at the top of the game's earning hierarchy when he received £10 a month on signing for Everton in 1888.⁶

The 1890s witnessed an increase in the wages of the best players. In the early and middle part of the decade, wages of £3 or £4 were recorded at some clubs.

At Aston Villa in 1896 weekly wages for the first team players ranged from Wilkes' £3 winter and £2 summer pay to those of Athersmith, a past and future England international, who received £4 all year round plus a guaranteed £120 benefit payment.⁷ At around the same time, Newcastle United were apparently promising new players £3 a week and at Sunderland £3 became the recognized first-team wage.⁸ These were the leading clubs of the day, however, and were thus far from typical. Even at Aston Villa, some second team players were guaranteed no more than 15s. to £1, with possible increases if picked for the first eleven. At nearby Small Heath in the Second Division, Edwin Fountain made a basic £1 per week with an extra 10s. if good form or injuries elevated him to the higher level. In 1893, the average professional's wage was estimated at £3 per week in the playing and £2 per week in the close season, although Percy Young's suggestion of between 30s. and 40s. for a typical Football League professional seems more realistic.⁹ There is little evidence that these average figures had risen significantly by the end of the decade. The journalist J.A. Catton recorded the general First Division wage as between £3 and £4 a week by the late 1890s, while Sheffield Wednesday paid their star players £3 weekly in 1900.¹⁰ Yet the pressure of competition was clearly leading to pay increases at the top end of the scale. Although few could expect the £7 weekly wage throughout the year which Beats and Baddeley of Wolverhampton Wanderers were reputed to receive at the end of the decade, there is enough evidence to suggest that they were not alone. The best players at Aston Villa reportedly made £6 10s. just before the wage limit was introduced while, according to one of the club's directors, the Liverpool players who won the First Division championship in the 1900/01 season were being paid £7, which with bonuses could reach £10 a week.¹¹

Wages

Passed by the FA Council at its 1900 annual meeting, the maximum wage rule came into operation for the beginning of the 1901/02 season. Advocated by representatives of a number of small and medium-sized Football League clubs, such as Preston North End and Wolverhampton Wanderers, the twin objectives of the rule were to reduce wage bills and, in tandem with the existing retain-and-transfer system, encourage equality of competition. By limiting wages, it was hoped that the better players would have no financial motive to move clubs and thus the gap between rich and poor would be reduced.¹² What effect did it have? One suggestion is that it led to a general standardization and equalization of wages. Wray Vamplew has argued that the wage limit 'served to reduce the skew in earnings distribution among professional footballers' and that 'for the bulk of League players, especially in the first division, the maximum wage was the effective wage'.¹³ There is much evidence to support this view. Fred Rinder, chairman of Aston Villa and an opponent of the rule, claimed that the maximum wage soon became a standard wage for the top professionals. This certainly seems

to have been true at Sheffield United. The number of players on at least £4 a week leapt from just 5 in 1899/1900 to 13 by 1901/02, and remained stable for the next few years. Not all clubs, however, could afford to offer the maximum to their leading players. The Stoke secretary revealed that only 3 players at his club were given the maximum in 1906 while Second Division Blackpool had nobody on £4.¹⁴ Even at a richer club like Sheffield United the maximum was largely restricted to the first team. According to the FA, just 573 professionals of an estimated total of 6,800, mostly Football League and Southern League players, were receiving the maximum by 1910.¹⁵

Vamplew's thesis is less applicable after 1910, when the maximum wage law began to develop an internal hierarchy. From that year players in the Football League could earn an extra 10s. per week above the maximum after two years service and a further 10s. after four years, thus establishing a new élite wage of £5 per week (£260 a year). In 1920, the wage structure was further reformed, partly as a result of pressure from the Players' Union to increase wages 'to cover the extra cost of living' and allow annual wage rises 'according to merit'.¹⁶ Wages were henceforth regulated according to a sliding scale, ranging from a maximum of £5 per week for 'new' players with annual rises of £1 weekly over four years to a final ceiling of £9 per week. Players could now receive a new annual maximum of £468.¹⁷ Two years later the maximum was reduced to £8 during the 37-week playing season and £6 in the remaining 15 weeks of the close season. The sliding scale was retained but clubs were additionally permitted to increase the wages of players picked for the first team and reduce those of players dropped through loss of form.¹⁸

The sliding scale thus gave clubs a fair amount of flexibility to alter a player's weekly wage subject to the terms of his contract and the sanction of the League Management Committee. In particular, it was used as an incentive for players to reach the first team and, as such, became a device to intensify competition among the workforce. This could be done, first, by applying to the Management Committee to increase the wages of a reserve player regularly making the first team, although such requests were only accepted if the player had enjoyed a lengthy run – normally at least ten games – at the higher level. Alternatively, wages could be altered on a weekly basis according to the team for which the player was selected. During the 1930s, many clubs adopted a comprehensive incentive scheme pioneered by Grimsby Town and Sheffield Wednesday, in which the best players were guaranteed a weekly wage of just £6, with £2 extra providing they kept their first team place.¹⁹ In such cases the maximum remained effectively a first team wage, a policy made explicit by the West Ham United board in 1927.²⁰ Some players objected to this as it increased the pressure to perform consistently each week and denied them a constant and secure wage. *Topical Times* believed that the weekly sliding scale actually created 'a feeling of unsettlement which ... upset a team's spirit and efficiency' but this did not prevent its general adoption across all divisions of the Football League.²¹

Despite some contemporary opinion to the contrary, the available data suggest that, in the inter-war period, the maximum wage was far from standard. Indeed, given its central role in the payment incentive schemes of so many clubs it hardly could have been. Even at the more wealthy and successful League clubs the maximum was reached only by a minority, although the precise size of this minority is difficult to gauge. According to the Players' Union, fewer than ten per cent of professionals were on the maximum by 1939, although the figure may have been higher at more prosperous times, especially the immediate post-war years.²² Jimmy Guthrie thought that 'very few players' were on top wages in the 1930s, even in the First Division, and noted the case of one London club which paid its first teamers just £4 to £5 a week.²³ At many Second and Third Division clubs the maximum was unattainable even for the best players. The highest possible wage at Ipswich Town during their first season in the Third Division South in 1938/39 was £7, while Ratcliffe, captain of Oldham Athletic in the northern section, was heading his club's wage scale in the late 1930s at just £4. 10s. winter and £4 summer wages with an extra £1 in the first team.²⁴

Below the top earners at each club were a range of veteran, reserve and youth players moving up and down the scale depending on circumstances. Wage differentials both within and between clubs remained considerable between the wars. At the bottom end of the wage scale many professionals undoubtedly struggled to make a living, especially in the lower divisions where unemployment and the absence of summer wages caused persistent problems. Indeed, while wages were limited at the top of the scale there was no corresponding stipulated minimum to which League clubs were expected to comply. Sheffield United's lowest terms were offered to part-time nursery or 'A' team players who received £1 per week with increases of £1 if picked for the reserve or first teams. At Sunderland in 1908 wages of £1-£2 per week were received by players employed in other occupations throughout the week, but this had risen to £3-£4 when Raich Carter joined the club in 1931 as a part-time footballer and electrical engineering apprentice.²⁵ Young players were often employed on the groundstaff for minimal wages until they were able to sign professional forms at 17. Problems of low pay increased with the onset of the depression and the need of many clubs to economize by reducing wage bills. This often manifested itself in the stoppage of summer wages by releasing players in May and re-engaging them in August in time for the new season. Third Division Swindon, for instance, released almost three-quarters of its squad for this reason during the summer of 1931.²⁶ Moreover, in certain districts footballers were categorized as 'seasonal workers' and denied unemployment benefit, although the government eventually decided in favour of the player in 1932 after considerable Union agitation.²⁷

Benefits

While the weekly wage was the basic form of remuneration for League players, it was increasingly augmented by a number of other financial rewards. The most

important of these was the benefit, a practice borrowed most directly from county cricket but also with a long history in the theatre, music hall and other sectors of the entertainment industry.²⁸ From 1901, clubs were permitted to grant a benefit match at the end of a player's career or after five years continuous service and a second benefit after ten years.²⁹ As in cricket, special matches were set aside for the purpose but increasingly players were allocated some or all of the proceeds of competitive League or cup matches. In addition, directors often guaranteed minimum sums, a practice which guarded footballers from the risks associated with benefits in the theatre, music hall and county cricket, where vast expenses or poor attendance could seriously affect the amount raised.³⁰ After the First World War, most clubs stopped allocating specific matches and instead guaranteed players a fixed sum benefit payment. In fact, the footballer's benefit gradually evolved into a contractual right rather than a gift granted by the employer. In this sense, it was very different from its cricket equivalent which was a more discretionary and less reliable source of income. The tax authorities certainly treated them differently, taxing benefits in football but not in cricket. In 1923, and again in 1941, the High Court judged that, as benefits were specifically provided for in Football League regulations, they should be regarded as a payment for a player's services just like his wage, bonus and talent money.³¹ The benefit had become widely recognized as a basic element of a player's earnings and probably the main supplement to his weekly wage. Clubs were not compelled to grant benefits, of course, but they were likely to have a dissatisfied workforce if they refused.

The actual sum received via the benefit depended on the status of the player and the financial position of the club. The typical pre-1914 benefit at the two Sheffield clubs was between £150 and £250, although a wealthier organization like Aston Villa was able to grant sums of £300–£450 and even paid £500 to its England inside-left Joe Bache.³² Charles Sutcliffe of the Football League testified that £200 was a typical figure but added that some players were able to get £500 and, in exceptional cases, £1,000.³³ In 1920, Sheffield United allowed club captain, George Utley, a benefit of nearly £1,100 from a chosen League match, though this angered playing colleagues who complained of 'preferential treatment' and the board subsequently set the standard benefit at £500 for first team players.³⁴ After 1920, the League Management Committee stepped in to limit benefit payments to £500 (increased to £650 in 1924) for regular first team players with a proportionately smaller sum for less skilled professionals. In contrast with cricket, there was no possibility of additional revenue from subscription lists or collections until 1930, when clubs could arrange means of supplementing the player's benefit fund in accordance with strict League regulations.³⁵ Like wages, some benefits were linked to individual or collective performance. Examples include West Ham giving Hodgson and Moore a definite £300 benefit each, to be increased to £400 if the majority of their appearances in that season were for the first team; and the same club offering Collins £350

'which could be increased at our discretion if his play and our financial and league position warranted such' or a guaranteed £400.³⁶

Some players increased their earnings substantially as a result of the benefit system. West Ham's Jimmy Ruffell received four benefits of £650, £500 twice and £200 in the course of his 18 years playing with the club, which effectively added £100 to his annual wage.³⁷ As Table 1 suggests, a significant proportion of League players were granted benefits each season and most of these received £400 and above. These figures could hardly match those in cricket where sums of £800 were considered extremely poor, even at the less wealthy counties. At Lancashire, the average payment between the wars was £1,500, while wealthy Yorkshire established £1,000 as a guaranteed minimum and aimed for at least £2,000.³⁸ Yet, bearing in mind that cricket professionals were rarely granted a benefit before ten years' service, and that few received a second benefit, footballers probably did not fare too badly in comparison. Although guaranteed contractually, football benefits were nonetheless subject to delay or suspension. For clubs in financial difficulties, stopping non-obligatory payments like benefits was an obvious means of cutting costs. Sheffield United's decision to suspend benefits from 1933 to 1936 'until the finances of the club have improved' was probably not exceptional; and it was also common for clubs in temporary financial difficulties to postpone benefits until the following season. But non-payment was only tolerated for so long. Stockport County announced in 1921 that it owed £3,000 in benefit monies to players and issued a public appeal to raise that amount.³⁹ In 1934, the Wolverhampton Wanderers board ensured its supporters of the inaccuracy of rumours that benefits were being withheld: 'benefits have been paid immediately they were due ... and the Directors will follow the same principle in the future'.⁴⁰

Theoretically, the benefit was a reward for loyal service or 'a sign of the bond between [the player] and the club'⁴¹ but in practice it often became a source of conflict between the two. One such case was the dispute between Christopher Buckley and Aston Villa in 1911. Like many other players, Buckley signed an agreement entitling him to the proceeds of a League match with a minimum

TABLE 1
BENEFIT PAYMENTS TO FOOTBALL LEAGUE PLAYERS, 1931/32-1935/36

Year	Under £100	£100-199	£200-299	£300-399	£400-499	£500-650	Total
1931/32	—	15	13	7	3	29	67
1932/33	—	10	11	11	10	30	72
1933/34	3	9	10	12	22	45	101
1934/35	—	1	16	15	10	32	74
1935/36	—	7	11	7	14	38	77
Total	3	42	61	52	59	174	391

Source: PFA Archives, File 35, Statistics required from Football League on cases Corbett vs. Inland Revenue and Dale vs. Inland Revenue, 1939.

guarantee of £450. A disagreement then arose between the player, who believed he had been promised the lucrative match with FA Cup holders Bradford City, and the board, who repudiated this and offered him a choice of three less attractive games. After meeting with the directors, Buckley decided that 'if he could not have the Bradford match he would have none at all' and refused to play in the next League match. The board subsequently suspended him 'until such time as he expresses regret for his action'.⁴² In Buckley's view the club had consciously restricted his potential benefit income: indeed, 'It was common talk among the Villa players ... that nobody got a benefit from the club without a row, and then the player only got what they cared to give him'.⁴³ Ultimately, the player was powerless in such a situation: three weeks later Buckley backed down, apologized for his action and accepted the match against Sheffield United.⁴⁴ Even though clubs increasingly regarded the benefit as a fundamental player's right, there could still be conflict over the amount given. West Ham, for instance, refused Vic Watson's request for a maximum £650 benefit just weeks after congratulating him on his performance in an international match and he later accepted the club's standard first team payment of £500.⁴⁵ Moreover, before 1910 certain clubs seem to have avoided paying out altogether by transferring players shortly before their benefits were due.⁴⁶

However, from 1910 League rules entitled a player transferred before completing his five years' qualification for a benefit to receive an accrued share of it: that is, a sum commensurate to the length of his qualifying service and the amount which he would have received if not transferred. Initially, the amount the player could receive was regarded as a share of the transfer fee and was given in proportion to the increased fee made by the selling club, but in practice the Management Committee linked such payments to presumed benefits rather than the size of the transfer fee. In ideal circumstances, the player was adequately recompensed by his former club for loss of benefit. The West Ham board was happy enough to pay star forward Sid Puddefoot £390 (as a three year percentage of the expected £650 benefit) on his transfer to Falkirk for £5,000 in 1922 – a new record for a player moving from a Football League to a Scottish League club.⁴⁷ Yet, where the transfer fee was minimal, or the player had left the club in acrimony, such amounts were unlikely. Like the benefit itself, the accrued share was a discretionary payment which the club was within its rights to refuse. Indeed, players adjudged to have precipitated a transfer had no entitlement to the accrued benefit payment under League rules. Frank Barson's move from Aston Villa to Manchester United was one such example where 'the player, by his conduct and his demands on the club, had practically forced [them] to transfer him' and therefore received nothing.⁴⁸ Even when clubs were generous, the moving player could lose out if the League Management Committee intervened. This practice became particularly contentious during 1921 when the Players' Union urged the League to reconsider a number of cases in which transferred players had had their guaranteed payments severely cut by the Committee.

According to Union chairman Charlie Roberts, 'the player being transferred is in a blind alley – everything is subject to the consent of the Football League, and they, as representatives of the clubs, keep the amount the player receives down as far as possible'.⁴⁹

Talent Money and Indirect Payments

The 1910 financial package also included the introduction of talent money and the legalization of bonuses for Cup tie wins. Clubs finishing in the top five of the League's two divisions were henceforth entitled to distribute amongst their squads sums ranging from £275 for first place to £55 for fifth and corresponding amounts for FA Cup success. From 1920, a flat rate bonus of £2 for a win and £1 for a draw in all League matches and cup ties was adopted, with larger win bonuses of £4 in the semi-final and £8 in the final of the FA Cup added two years later. Win and draw bonuses of £1 and 10s., respectively, were permitted for the new third division clubs while smaller bonuses (initially 10s. and 5s. but doubled in 1921) were also agreed for reserve team players, although some clubs and reserve leagues refused to sanction such payments.⁵⁰ Talent money and bonuses had been advocated partly as a means of rewarding exceptional players 'who received no more ... than the mere mediocrity' under the maximum wage rule. Many directors accepted such payments as 'tantamount to a commission in addition to salary in commercial life' but others no doubt agreed with the FA's William Pickford that bonuses for match results constituted a form of bribery and meant paying the player twice over for the same work.⁵¹ In 1908, the Players' Union had suggested a marks system based on the 'good conduct and skill' of players, similar to that operated by first class cricket counties, but most clubs opposed the idea of individual rewards in an essentially collective team sport.⁵² Notwithstanding initial pockets of opposition, those clubs good enough to win matches, cups and championships were prepared to let their employees share financially in the success. Yet, as the Players' Union pointed out in 1937, only a small minority of the professionals engaged by the 88 Football League clubs benefited from these extra payments. Even at the most successful clubs, talent money was related exclusively to the performance of the first team and, as we have seen, the extension of match bonuses to reserve team players was only partial.⁵³

For the very best players there were a number of additional opportunities to make money. International match fees for Englishmen were £1 at the turn of the century, rising to £4 in 1907, £6 in 1921 and finally £20 by 1939, but this was still a relatively small sum given the infrequency of such matches – generally fewer than five each season – and the large revenue internationals generated for the respective FAs.⁵⁴ Continental tours, at both representative and club level, could bring some return either in the form of extra pay or gifts like the silver medals given to members of the Nottingham Forest team during their visit to Argentina

in 1905.⁵⁵ However, from 1912 the Management Committee decided that players 'must not be allowed to make a profit' on such tours and closely monitored their financial arrangements. Thus, while some players had previously been paid as much as £1 per day in addition to their regular wage, daily allowances of only 5s. to cover expenses were common between the wars.⁵⁶

Some of the better players could also theoretically boost their incomes through advertising and the endorsement of goods, especially football equipment and new leisure products like cigarettes, as well as by writing newspaper columns.⁵⁷ Yet it is misleading to assume that financial benefits inevitably flowed from such commercial contacts. In fact, in many cases players were used to endorse products without their knowledge, let alone any prior agreement, and were therefore unlikely significantly to increase their incomes in this way. Members of the triple-championship winning Arsenal squad of the early 1930s, for instance, were often featured in advertisements for which they received merely a token gift. 'Dixie' Dean, who was alleged by the press to have made large amounts through endorsements, claimed to have actually received just one ex-gratia payment of £50 from a cigarette firm for the use of his image in the whole of his career, and hence considered himself particularly exploited by advertisers.⁵⁸ In addition, all gifts to players were closely monitored and regulated by the League. Club committees were allowed to award medals or other 'mementos' to cup or championship winning sides provided this was regarded as part of their talent money, and from the early 1920s wedding presents were given and the payment of removal expenses permitted. Presentations or collections from outsiders, however, were strictly prohibited. Thus 'Dixie' Dean was to miss out again when offers to mark his achievement of scoring a record of 60 goals for Everton in the 1927/28 season with 'a memento' were stymied by the authorities.⁵⁹

Historians face obvious difficulties in assessing the significance of illegal or 'under-the-counter' payments. Derek Birley has argued that 'the practice was widespread' in the first decade of the maximum wage at least, and it is indeed likely that the inquiries and commissions instigated by the authorities touched only the tip of the iceberg.⁶⁰ Fred Rinder told the FA Council in 1908 that the rules restricting wages, signing-on fees and bonuses 'were being broken daily' and the Players' Union agreed that 'nearly all Football League ... clubs had broken the rules for their own advantage'.⁶¹ William McGregor, founder of the League, refused to admit 'that the rules are so widely broken as some people would have you believe' but accepted that certain clubs circumvented the FA's restrictions and that 'isolated players are getting more than the maximum wage'.⁶² Stars like Billy Meredith could undoubtedly benefit substantially from illegal payments of this kind. As a Manchester City player between 1902 and 1906, Meredith apparently received £6 per week (£2 above the maximum) and more than £50 a year in bonuses. Similar payments seem to have been made to Meredith while he was with Manchester United through a special account in his name and that of

another team mate. An FA commission found that as much as £598 had been paid into the account during a four-month period in 1907 alone. Meredith was fined and suspended in both cases but other leading players and clubs were evidently more fortunate in escaping detection.⁶³

There is no indication that clubs and players stuck to the rules any more in the inter-war period. League and FA inquiries continued apace, with Rotherham, Port Vale, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Bradford Park Avenue and Arsenal among those clubs found guilty of trying to evade payment regulations during the 1920s.⁶⁴ But the absence of quantifiable evidence makes it difficult to be precise about the extent of the practice. Anecdotal and oral evidence are thus particularly useful. The testimonies collected by Rogan Taylor and Andrew Ward suggest that under-the-counter payments or 'backhanders' to players were common ways of circumventing the wage restrictions in the 1950s and there is no reason to doubt that things were much different 20 years earlier.⁶⁵ Jimmy Guthrie, for one, admitted receiving an illegal bonus of £600 when he joined Portsmouth from Dundee in 1938.⁶⁶ In his 1957 autobiography, the Charlton manager Jimmy Seed had no doubt that the periodic revelations of illegal payments were not isolated cases and indicated that on a number of occasions his own attempts to sign international players in the 1930s had been frustrated by demands for 'a bit over the top'.⁶⁷ Although necessarily impressionistic, examples of this kind suggest that, for the leading player at least, there was money to be made in excess of his contracted terms. Too much emphasis on the élite of the profession, however, once again runs the risk of marginalizing the experience of the majority of players in the lower divisions, whose objective was to attain the legal maximum and were therefore unlikely to have been offered or to have demanded anything extra.

Footballers' Pay in Context

With all these potential rewards taken into consideration, the overall earnings of a Football League professional could be significant. According to his autobiography, the Everton and England centre-forward Tommy Lawton made a little over £531 during his club's championship winning season of 1938/39.⁶⁸ Lawton was hardly typical but his example does reveal what was available for the most successful players by the late 1930s. Average incomes, of course, were much lower. In 1909, *Football Field* calculated that First Division professionals were paid an average of £210 a year while Second Division players made £150.⁶⁹ Just before the maximum was increased in March 1920, the Players' Union estimated that the average weekly income stood at £4 11s. 1d. in the First Division and £4 2s. 3d. in the Second, but there is insufficient evidence to attempt a fruitful comparison over time.⁷⁰

How well did footballers themselves think they were paid? In later recollections, Lawton suggested that he had made 'good money' and even 'a fortune' when compared with the income of other workers but he was evidently

less impressed by what he earned at the time. He informed readers of his autobiography that 'the top class player should be paid a great deal more money weekly' and that, while the best were sometimes lucky enough to go on foreign tours and pick up advertising contracts, 'for the majority of players there's little else to be made out of the game, other than a salary that an American baseball or ice-hockey player, or a world-famous boxer wouldn't even look at'.⁷¹ Many players agreed that as a profession they were inadequately rewarded. Raich Carter was 'frankly disappointed' with his moderate starting wage at Sunderland, especially as he had a mother and two sisters to support.⁷² But it was generally members of the playing élite, rather than the rank and file, who complained about payment. There were manifold expressions of resentment from those who believed that they were restricted from making the most of their talent by the wage limit and other regulations. International match fees were a particular bone of contention for players who considered '£6 or a medal' as insufficient reward for those representing their country at the very top of their profession.⁷³

In contrast, there were many observers from both inside and outside the game who believed that League professionals were well paid. In the opinion of John Lewis, a director of Blackburn Rovers and vice-president of the Football League, 'a man who gets £4 for five years, and then a £350 benefit, followed by another after a second five years, does uncommonly well for himself, and ... makes a far better start in life than ninety-nine hundredths of those in a similar station'.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, William Pickford felt that most footballers were 'in a position of financial soundness that might not be attained [in] a labouring or mechanical trade'.⁷⁵ Even William Bassett, a former England international, believed that 'Professional footballers are a handsomely remunerated set of men, and call for the commiseration of no one'.⁷⁶ Views of this kind reflected the concentration of the press, and later the electronic media, on the activities of the top players and clubs. The Players' Union opined in 1939 that distorted media coverage gave the public an impression that 'the player was doing wonderfully well'.⁷⁷ Be that as it may, in comparison with other broadly-defined working-class occupations, professional football did indeed offer substantial remuneration.⁷⁸ As Table 2 indicates, the basic earnings of a First or Second division footballer on the maximum wage – excluding benefits or other extra payments – easily outstripped the average salary of clerks, skilled and semi-skilled workers and even supervisors and foremen throughout the period. Thus, for instance, a professional with Stoke or Burslem Port Vale in 1906 who earned up to £4 per week was clearly better off than a worker in any part of the region's pottery industry, with the possible exception of those at the peak of the wage hierarchy, such as firemen.⁷⁹ Those further down the wage structure or in the lower divisions, like Fletcher and Richmond (Table 2), were closer to the foremen category, but even they would probably have taken home more when extra payments are considered.

Comparisons with industrial workers, however, are possibly less appropriate than those with employees in other football leagues, sports and entertainment

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF AVERAGE ANNUAL EARNINGS OF CLERKS, FOREMEN,
SKILLED AND SEMI-SKILLED WORKERS WITH FOOTBALL LEAGUE PROFESSIONALS,
1906-35 (£)

	1906	1924	1935
Clerks	—	182	192
Foremen, Supervisors, Inspectors	113	268	273
Skilled Workers	97	182	197
Semi-Skilled Workers*	63	126	134
Football League Professional (Maximum Wage)	208	386	386
(Fletcher, West Ham United FC)	n/a	260	n/a
(Richmond, Walsall FC)	n/a	n/a	211

Note: * Including agricultural occupations.

Source: Guy Routh, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1906-79* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp.92, 98, 101, 109; Minutes of West Ham United FC, 28 April 1924; Walsall Record Office, Walsall FC Players' Registration Book, 1932-46, 522/1/66.

industries. For a first team player at a leading Football League club, there were few opportunities to improve one's earnings. The Scottish League had no maximum wage but generally only Rangers, Celtic and Hearts offered their players a sum equivalent to the maximum in England.⁸⁰ For the more adventurous professional, some overseas clubs offered higher basic salaries. In the mid-1920s, clubs from the professional American Soccer League were prepared to offer wages of £12-£20 a week, often to work during the week in a local factory and play football at the weekend. The soccer section of the New York Giants baseball club reputedly offered 'Dixie' Dean £25 per week to cross the Atlantic in 1928. He resisted but dozens of other Football League players were tempted to the United States on terms which they could never have hoped to negotiate at home.⁸¹ Similarly, unemployed League players were obtaining agreements with French clubs during the depression on terms 'far in excess of maximum wages in England'. The maximum wage in the French League was set at 2,000 francs per month, exactly double the wage of a skilled French worker but equivalent to just £5 a week in England. Bonuses and illegal payments could swell this figure considerably, however.⁸²

In cricket, the summer national sport, the earnings of the top players were not markedly dissimilar from those in football. At the turn of the century, a good cricket professional playing for a relatively prosperous county could make about £275 a year with possible increases in the form of test match pay, benefits and talent money. Lesser players might only receive basic groundstaff wages and be deprived of winter pay, though most counties had introduced it in some form by the 1900s.⁸³ In the inter-war period, the 'big six' counties agreed to limit the annual wages of their professionals to £440, with a maximum of £500 when additional payments were considered. But benefit payments, test match fees and

tour bonuses all easily dwarfed their football equivalents and meant that the biggest cricket stars were certainly earning more than the top footballers. League cricket could also be lucrative. Learie Constantine apparently received some £800 in 1938 for playing 20 weeks as a professional with Rochdale in the Central Lancashire League. Although Constantine's case was hardly representative – he thought he was 'perhaps the best paid professional cricketer in the world' – there is evidence that weekly wages equal to the maximum in football, and sometimes more, were often guaranteed the club professional.⁸⁴ Even so, in both county and League cricket, as in football, there was a considerable rump of professionals below the highest earners whose pay, conditions of work and job insecurities were much closer to those of the average industrial worker. Tony Collins has argued that, for the élite of rugby league players, 'wages were comparable with those in the Football League'. Before the First World War, some star players could earn as much as £4 and, without a wage ceiling, earnings such as Billy Batten's massive £14 a match at Hull were possible. Large signing-on fees, particularly for those Welsh players tempted north, also significantly bolstered a professional's career-earning capacity. However, rugby league's high earners seem to have been few and far between and differentials in pay, based on playing position as well as talent, were undoubtedly wider than in football.⁸⁵

Earnings were higher still in more commercialized sports like horse racing, boxing and baseball. Top flat jockeys often received several thousand pounds a year in retainers, riding fees and other gifts and even moderate jockeys at the turn of the century could make £1,000 in a season. National hunt riding fees were even larger – five guineas for a losing ride and ten for winning throughout this period – but retainers were scarcer and fewer meetings often led to periodic unemployment for some.⁸⁶ But even these figures were dwarfed by those open to baseball players in the United States. The average annual salary was \$3,000 in 1910 (equivalent to £617) but rose to \$5,000 (£1,091) in 1923 and reached over \$7,500 (£1,543) six years later, incomes which compared favourably to those of dentists, doctors, lawyers, professors and other upper-middle-class occupations. The star players, meanwhile, earned much more. Pittsburgh's Honus Wagner was paid \$18,000 (£3,703) in 1911 and Detroit's Ty Cobb made at least \$20,000 (£4,201) in 1915.⁸⁷ At the upper limit, Babe Ruth could command a salary of \$80,000 (£16,460) by the end of the 1920s. Writers have seized on the American star's amazement at the paltry earnings of soccer's 'superstar' 'Dixie' Dean when the two famously met in 1930 as an incident which symbolized the contrasting value attached to sportsmen in the two societies. Yet it must be remembered that, even in baseball, there was a large army of low earners: in Ruth's New York Giants team some players were apparently earning only \$2,500 (£514) a year.⁸⁸

As well as other sportsmen, entertainers more broadly were becoming a key reference group for the leading footballers in this period. Yet star footballers' remuneration did not come close to the £50 plus a week which actors in the upper range could earn before 1914. Film work could pay stars as much as £3–5,000 per

picture in the 1920s and even more with the introduction of sound, although stage work might only guarantee £20 a week. However, earnings were extremely uneven in the acting profession, with estimates putting the average weekly income of actors at £2 or even 27s., a level of pay equivalent to the very bottom of the wage scale at most League clubs.⁸⁹ Before 1914, the wages of variety artistes also ranged widely, from £3 to over £100 a week. The majority of managers, some operating a minimum wage, ensured that earnings commenced at £3–£5 per week, an arrangement which meant that ‘even many less established acts fell within the contemporary lower-middle class pay bracket.’ Middle-ranking acts, on £10 to £40 weekly, were closer to the upper-middle class category, while star pay was at a similar level as that of barristers or even Cabinet ministers.⁹⁰

Conclusion

Football directors were certainly not the only employers to seek to control wage levels, but they seem to have been unique in their attempt to place an upper limit on the individual earnings of employees. Most sporting bodies, especially those in the United States, recognized the economic value of maintaining an equality of playing competition but chose alternative methods to achieve this end. English football, too, enacted other equalization policies – such as income-sharing and the re-election and promotion-relegation systems – but it was the maximum wage which, alongside the transfer system, came to be perceived as fundamental to the survival of the sport at the top level. Despite its perceived centrality to the viability of the Football League and League ‘system’, however, the maximum wage seems to have increasingly come to represent a symbolic rather than a real ceiling on earnings.

The comparisons of footballers’ earnings with those in other industries have not been employed simply in order to locate the former within an abstract occupational or class category. Most historians agree that the majority of professional footballers in this period were working class, and that they were generally drawn from industrial communities and manual backgrounds. What they have tended to ignore or gloss over are the very real divisions which existed, divisions which were based on more than transient employer/club loyalties. It should be clear that the earnings of professional footballers varied significantly and that the maximum wage never operated as an effective income ceiling. In this, as in many other areas, footballers were not an homogeneous group. At the bottom of the pile, where wages were low, extra income was rare and employment was dependent upon the vagaries of form, injury and the finances of the club, football was only ever a partial escape from the pit or the shopfloor. However, for the small number of elite players, whose weekly wage was supplemented by bonuses, benefit payments and talent money, the entertainment industry represented a more logical point of comparison. Whether footballers were considered as wage slaves or labour aristocrats depended of course not only on who was making the

appraisal, but also on who was being appraised.⁹¹ A study of levels of pay may only be the first stage in a more detailed and wide-ranging analysis of the occupational and social history of the professional footballer in the twentieth century, but it does suggest that we need to seek interpretations which are more sophisticated and nuanced than at present and which account for variegated experiences within the general development of the sport.

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NOTES

1. The best account of the emergence of professionalism in football is still contained in T. Mason, *Association Football and English Society, 1863–1915* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), Ch.3. On the issue of payment in northern rugby, see T. Collins, *Rugby's Great Split: Class, Culture and the Origins of Rugby League Football* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998).
2. See D. Russell, *Football and the English: A Social History of Association Football in England, 1863–1995* (Preston: Carnegie, 1997), p.47. General histories are particularly guilty of glossing over the complexities of player earnings. See B. Murray, *The World's Game: A History of Soccer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp.13–14.
3. See, for example, Mason, *Association Football*; S. Tischler, *Footballers and Businessmen: The Origins of Professional Soccer in England* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).
4. For a more detailed discussion of the problems associated with the access to and use of football-related archives, see M. Taylor, 'Football Archives and the Historian', *Business Archives: Sources and History*, 78 (Nov. 1999), 1–12.
5. Mason, *Association Football*, pp.94–8. See also W. Vamplew, 'Playing for Pay: The Earnings of Professional Sportsmen in England, 1870–1914' in R. Cashman and M. McKernan (eds.), *Sport: Money, Morality and the Media* (Brisbane: University of New South Wales Press, 1979), pp.104–30.
6. Mason, *Association Football*, p.95; Smethwick Library, A267, Agreement between George Salter and Edward William Watkin Hellis and George Woodhall, 30 March 1889 (I would like to thank Neil Carter for this reference).
7. Mason, *Association Football*, pp.96–7.
8. A. Appleton, *Hotbed of Soccer: The Story of Football in the North-East* (London: Sportsman's Book Club, 1961), pp.126, 178.
9. Mason, *Association Football*, pp.96–7; Professional Footballers Association (hereafter PFA), File 2, Agreement between Small Heath Football Club and Edward Joseph Fountain, 5 May 1896; P. Young, *A History of British Football* (London: Arrow, 1973), pp.195–6.
10. Vamplew, 'Playing for Pay', p.121.
11. T. Matthews, *The Wolves: An Encyclopedia of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club, 1877–1989* (London: Paper Plane, 1989), p.18; Vamplew, 'Playing for Pay', 121; *Athletic News*, 27 May 1901.
12. For more detailed discussion of the rationale behind the introduction of the maximum wage, see M. Taylor, "'Proud Preston": A History of the Football League, 1900–1939' (Ph.D. thesis, De Montfort University, 1997), 248–77.
13. Vamplew, 'Playing for Pay', p.123.
14. *Athletic News*, 4 June 1906; J. Rawcliffe, 'Blackpool Football Club: From Lancashire League to Second Division' in Anon., *Book of Football* (London: The Amalgamated Press, 1906), p.176.
15. FA Archives, FA Circular on Financial Arrangements Between Clubs and Players, 10 Jan. 1910.
16. Minutes of Association Football Players' and Trainers' Union (hereafter AFPTU), 23 Feb. 1920.
17. C.E. Sutcliffe, J.A. Brierley and F. Howarth, *The Story of the Football League, 1888–1938* (Preston: The Football League, 1938), p.123.
18. Sutcliffe, Brierley and Howarth, *The Story of the Football League*, p.124.
19. *Topical Times*, 2 May 1931. The records of Aston Villa, Sheffield United, West Ham United, Ipswich Town, Walsall and Oldham Athletic show all developed variations of the same basic wage structure between the wars.
20. Minutes of West Ham United FC, 19 April 1927.

21. *Topical Times*, 10 April 1926; Minutes of AFPTU, 23 Aug. 1937 (AGM); J. Seed, *The Jimmy Seed Story* (London: Phoenix, 1957), p.84; J. Guthrie, *Soccer Rebel* (London: Pentagon, 1976), p.32.
22. Minutes of AFPTU, 27 Feb. 1939 (EGM); Minutes of Sheffield United FC, 3 May 1921, 1 May 1934.
23. Guthrie, *Soccer Rebel*, p.32.
24. Suffolk County Records, Wage Books of Ipswich Town FC, 1938/39 Season; Minutes of Oldham Athletic FC, 12 April 1939.
25. Minutes of Sheffield United FC, 9 Sept. 1931, 1 March 1933; PFA, File 6, F. Means to H. Broomfield, 25 Oct. 1908; R. Carter, *Footballer's Progress* (London: Sporting Handbooks, 1950), pp.36, 39.
26. Wolverhampton Wanderers Club Programme, 14 April 1933; N. Fishwick, *English Football and Society, 1910-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p.78.
27. Minutes of AFPTU, 8, 22 Aug. 1932 (AGM), 24 Aug. 1936 (AGM).
28. R. Sissons, *The Players: A Social History of the Professional Cricketer* (Sydney: Pluto, 1988), pp.129-40; W. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game: Professional Sport in Britain, 1875-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.221-2; K.A.P. Sandiford, 'The Birth of the Professional Cricketer's Benefit Match', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 8, 1 (1991), 111-23; N. Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp.122-3; P. Bailey, 'A Community of Friends: Business and Good Fellowship in London Music Hall Management, c. 1860-1885', in P. Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp.41-7.
29. FA Archives, Minutes of FA Consultative Committee, 17 Dec. 1900.
30. See Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*, p.123; Bailey, 'A Community of Friends', p.44; Sandiford, 'Birth of the Professional Cricketer's Benefit Match', 113, 121.
31. M. Golesworthy, *The Encyclopaedia of Association Football* (London: Sportsman's Book Club, 1957), pp.25-6; *Athletic News*, 30 May 1927.
32. Vamplew, 'Playing for Pay', p.123; Minutes of Sheffield United FC, 1905-14, *passim*; Minutes of Aston Villa FC, 23 Jan., 16 April 1912.
33. *Athletic News*, 22 March 1909, 11 Sept. 1911.
34. Minutes of Sheffield United FC, 11, 25 Feb., 2 March 1920.
35. FA Archives, Minutes of Football League, 17 Oct. 1927, 4 April 1930.
36. Minutes of West Ham United FC, 19 April 1927, 2 May 1933.
37. Minutes of West Ham United FC, 13 April 1926, 15 May 1933; C. Korr, *West Ham United: The Making of a Football Club* (London: Duckworths, 1986), p.184.
38. J. Williams, *Cricket and England: A Cultural and Social History of the Inter-war Years* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), pp.170-71; Sissons, *The Players*, p.234.
39. Minutes of Sheffield United FC, 22 Feb. 1933; Minutes of AFPTU, 26 Sept. 1921 (AGM).
40. Wolverhampton Wanderers Club Programme, 3 March 1934.
41. Korr, *West Ham United*, p.186.
42. Minutes of Aston Villa FC, 14, 28 Nov. 1911.
43. *Athletic News*, 4 Dec. 1911.
44. Minutes of Aston Villa FC, 19 Dec. 1911.
45. Minutes of West Ham United FC, 7, 29 April, 6 May 1930.
46. See *Athletic News*, 11 March 1907.
47. Minutes of West Ham United, 13 Feb. 1922; Korr, *West Ham United*, p.59.
48. FA Archives, Minutes of Football League, 18 Dec. 1922.
49. Minutes of AFPTU, 2 Feb. 1921.
50. Sutcliffe Brierley and Howarth, *Story of the Football League*, p.119; Minutes of AFPTU, 23 Feb. 1920; FA Archives, Minutes of Football League, 13 Sept., 11 Oct. 1920, 12 April 1922 (SGM).
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57. Mason, *Association Football*, pp.97-8; S. Wagg, *The Football World: A Contemporary Social History* (Brighton: Harvester, 1984), p.14.
58. J. Harding, *Alex James* (London: Robson, 1988), pp.165-8; N. Walsh, *Dixie Dean: The Life of a Goal*

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 61. *Athletic News*, 1 June 1908; Minutes of AFPU, 15 Dec. 1908 (AGM).
 62. W. McGregor, 'The £. s. d. of Football' in Anon., *Book of Football*, p.62.
 63. *Athletic News*, 4 June 1906; FA Archives, FA Report and Recommendation of the Committee adopted by the Council re. Manchester United FC, 30 March 1910. For detailed discussion of the incident, see J. Harding, *Football Wizard: The Story of Billy Meredith* (Derby: Breedon, 1985).
 64. FA Archives, Minutes of Football League, 27 April, 14–15 June, 16–17 Nov. 1923, 13 Sept., 17 Oct. 1927.
 65. R. Taylor and A. Ward, *Kicking and Screaming: An Oral History of Football in England* (London: Robson, 1995), pp.138–60.
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 67. Seed, *The Jimmy Seed Story*, pp.48–50.
 68. T. Lawton, *Football is my Business* (London: Sporting Handbooks, 1946), p.120.
 69. Cited in R.W. Lewis, 'The Development of Professional Football in Lancashire, 1870–1914' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Lancaster, 1993), 404–5.
 70. *Daily Mirror*, 17 March 1920.
 71. Taylor and Ward, *Kicking and Screaming*, p.37; Lawton, *Football is my Business*, p.121.
 72. Carter, *Footballer's Progress*, p.36.
 73. For example, see Carter, *Footballer's Progress*, pp.73–4; T. Finney, *Finney on Football* (London: Soccer Book Club, 1960); Lawton, *Football is my Business*, p.120.
 74. *Football and Sports Special*, 27 Feb. 1909.
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 76. W. Bassett, 'Big Transfers and the Transfer System' in Anon., *Book of Football*, p.160.
 77. Minutes of AFPTU, 27 Feb. 1939 (EGM).
 78. See especially Mason, *Association Football*, pp.101–3.
 79. R. Whipp, *Patterns of Labour: Work and Social Change in the Pottery Industry* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.58–63; Fishwick, *English Football*, p.80.
 80. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.213, 224; B. Crampsey, *The Scottish Football League: The First 100 Years* (Glasgow: Scottish Football League, 1988), p.101.
 81. *Topical Times*, 11 Aug. 1928; C. Jose, *American Soccer League, 1921–1931* (Maryland: Scarecrow, 1998).
 82. Minutes of AFPTU, 26 Aug. 1936 (AGM); A. Wahl and P. Lanfranchi, *Les Footballeurs Professionnels* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), pp.63–7.
 83. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.218–22; K.A.P. Sandiford, *Crickets and the Victorians* (Aldershot: Scholar, 1994), pp.85–6.
 84. Williams, *Crickets and England*, pp.168–9, 176–7.
 85. Collins, *Rugby's Great Split*, pp.175–7.
 86. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.216–18; R. Munting, *Hedges and Hurdles: A Social and Economic History of National Hunt Racing* (London: Allen Lane, 1987), pp.130–34.
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 88. Harding, *For the Good of the Game*, p.165; L. Lowenfish, *The Imperfect Diamond: A History of Baseball's Labor Wars* (New York: Da Capo, 1991), p.112.
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 91. Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game*, pp.254–6.