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Why Is The Michael Jordan Of The WNBA Paid Less Than Adonis Jordan In 1999?



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Phoenix Mercury guard Diana Taurasi, the "Michael Jordan of the WNBA," during a game against the Connecticut Sun on June 16. (Photo by Kevin Abele/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images) (PHOTO BY KEVIN ABELE/ICON SPORTSWIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

"I was, like, star-struck. I was speechless. She's the Michael Jordan of the WNBA."

This is what DeAndre Ayton, the first pick in the 2018 NBA draft, said after recently meeting Diana Taurasi. It's possible that Ayton's praise undersold [Taurasi's amazing career](#). So far, Taurasi has won four Olympic gold medals (MJ

had two) and nine league championships in the WNBA and in Europe (MJ had six), and she is the all-time leading scorer in WNBA history ([MJ is only the fourth-leading scorer in NBA history](#)).

In addition, she seems to be immune to age.

On July 5, the WNBA reached the midpoint of the 2018 season. At that point, here were the five most productive players in the league (ranked in terms of [how many wins each player had produced](#)):

1. Sylvia Fowles (Minnesota Lynx): 4.68 wins
2. Diana Taurasi (Phoenix Mercury): 3.97 wins
3. Elizabeth Cambage (Dallas Wings): 3.77 wins
4. Breanna Stewart (Seattle Storm): 3.44 wins
5. Elena Delle Donne (Washington Mystics): 3.17 wins

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Last month Taurasi celebrated her 36th birthday, and she is still the second-most-productive player in the WNBA. At that age, Jordan was retired for the second time. And [Jordan was definitely not the second-best NBA player](#) when he eventually came back with the Washington Wizards.

Despite this amazing résumé, [High Post Hoops](#) reports that Taurasi's 2018 salary is only \$115,233. To put that in perspective, [Jordan was paid \\$550,000 as a rookie in 1984-85](#).

The story gets even worse. [Adonis Jordan was reportedly paid \\$350,000](#) by the Milwaukee Bucks in 1999. For that, he played only 18 minutes and scored only 6

points (yes, those were his season totals). So the "Michael Jordan of the WNBA" isn't even as paid as well as a very unproductive Jordan from nearly 20 years ago.

So why is Taurasi paid so little? The answer to this question builds upon and updates [what I have written in the past](#) about the gender wage gap in professional basketball. And as this brief discussion highlights — and contrary to what the league's detractors seem to often say — the problems are really not related to the league's players or its teams (i.e., the product the WNBA produces).

When it comes to player pay in the WNBA, there are two primary issues. The first is the level of revenue in the league. The second is how that revenue is shared.

With respect to the former issue, [Forbes reports](#) that all the teams in the NBA in 2016-17 earned \$7.368 billion in revenue. Meanwhile, the WNBA's revenue is ... well, that isn't as well known.

[It has been reported](#) that ESPN pays the WNBA \$25 million per year to broadcast some of its games. [It has also been reported](#) that WNBA teams averaged 7,716 fans per game in 2017. According to the ticket prices reported at [WNBA.com](#), the average minimum ticket price for the WNBA's teams in 2018 is \$17.42. Given that minimum price, the WNBA's gate revenue this season has to be at least \$27.4 million (assuming attendance hasn't changed). And that means WNBA revenue should be at least \$52.4 million.

Gate revenue and the WNBA's deal with ESPN, though, are not the only source of league revenue. [It has been reported](#) that the WNBA also has a deal with Twitter, it has jersey patches promoting sponsors, and it has formed partnerships with Tidal and FanDuel. In addition, there are other sponsor deals and merchandise sales, and each WNBA team has a local television deal. Finally, [there is WNBA League Pass](#). For just \$16.99, one can view every single regular-season WNBA game online. The number of subscribers hasn't been reported, but every 58,858 subscribers would be worth \$1 million in revenue.

Given all the other sources of revenue, league revenue is likely much higher than \$52.4 million. Of course, the NBA's revenue is \$7.4 billion. So although we can't know for sure how much the WNBA is earning, we can be certain it isn't in the

billions. And that means one reason WNBA players are paid less is that revenues in the WNBA are lower.

But why are revenues so much lower? [Earlier this year Adam Silver](#), the NBA's commissioner, argued the WNBA was not doing enough to connect with young women ([a point Delle Donne disputes](#)). Silver's interest in this issue is related to the NBA's reported subsidizing of the WNBA. Despite this support, the WNBA is still nowhere near the NBA in terms of revenue or attendance.

All of this might lead some to ask: If the men can do it all by themselves, why can't the WNBA thrive with the help of the men? The answer to this question is simple. The men in the NBA have never done it all by themselves.

The men employed by the NBA today inherited a league that has existed since 1946. Yes, the NBA has higher attendance today. But when the NBA was the same age as the WNBA today, [its average per game attendance was actually lower](#). And yes, the NBA subsidizes the WNBA. But those subsidies pale in comparison with the [more than \\$3 billion in taxpayer subsidies](#) the NBA has received.

Taxpayers are not the only group that has given the NBA something for free. For more than a century, the sports media — via newspapers, radio, television, and more recently the internet — has given extensive coverage to the sports industry. [Studies show, though, that less than 5% of coverage from the sports media goes to any women's sports](#). It's not unreasonable to think all that free advertising — which the NBA receives 365 days a year — is worth far more than anything the NBA is giving the WNBA.

Not only does the WNBA get far less free advertising, the league is also treated differently by its major sports media partner. This past year [ESPN made a substantial effort to let everyone know](#) that there would be a prime-time NBA game on Saturdays (the Saturday game is in addition to all the games broadcast on other nights). But look at [ESPN's broadcast schedule for the WNBA](#): ESPN is broadcasting only 13 of the 204 regular-season games in the WNBA. All of these broadcasts are on ESPN2. And although there are only 13 games, these broadcasts occur on five different nights of the week (only Monday and Saturday have no

games). In addition, the broadcasts begin at six different times in the evening. Yes, it almost looks as if ESPN were trying to make this schedule as random as possible. Obviously, such inconsistency makes it much harder for the WNBA to consistently attract a television audience.

All of this tells a clear story. The NBA's substantial revenue advantage isn't just about what the men in the NBA are doing today but also about all the advantages the men in the NBA have been given.

The revenue difference doesn't tell us the entire story about the gender wage gap between the two leagues, either. [The NBA's collective bargaining agreement](#) indicates the players must receive about 50% of the league's basketball-related income. The WNBA players clearly are not getting that much.

[High Post Hoops](#) reports salary data for 87 players in 2018. The average in this sample is \$75,931. If that average is accurate for all players, then the 150 players who have been employed by the WNBA in 2018 are collectively receiving about \$11.4 million.

Some simple math reveals this is only 21.7% of the \$52.4 million in revenue we know about. And if we knew about all the revenue sources, we would likely see that the players are getting much less than one-fifth of league revenue.

Given what Diana Taurasi did in the first half of the season, she is on pace to finish the 2018 season having produced 7.1 wins (only Fowles and Cambage are on pace to produce more). Imagine the WNBA paid its players in a fashion similar to the NBA, with the players receiving 50% of league revenue and players being paid primarily to produce wins. As the following list of top five players indicates, Taurasi would then be paid ([according to the methodology outlined here for estimating pay in women's college basketball](#)) an estimated \$737,129:

1. Sylvia Fowles (Minnesota Lynx): \$907,049
2. Elizabeth Cambage (Dallas Wings): \$780,017
3. Diana Taurasi (Phoenix Mercury): \$737,129

4. Breanna Stewart (Seattle Storm): \$677,705
5. Elena Delle Donne (Washington Mystics): \$663,246

Currently, none of these players are paid as well as Adonis Jordan in 1998-99. But if the WNBA paid like the NBA, all would be paid better than both Adonis Jordan and Michael Jordan (at least, the rookie MJ).

Yes, that's not nearly as much as many bench players in the NBA today make. But again, the NBA is much older, has received billions in subsidies, and has received an immense amount of free advertising from the sports media. Given all the advantages NBA players are given, it's not surprising a bench player in the NBA is paid better than the Michael Jordan of the WNBA.

I am a professor of economics at Southern Utah University who has spent the last two decades researching sports and economics. I am the lead author of "The Wages of Wins" (Stanford Press, 2006) and "Stumbling on Wins" (Financial Times Press, 2010). In addition, I am the so... MORE