

What Is A Soccer Player Worth?

by Theodore Dalrymple



I surmise that the authors of [*Is Football Going to Explode?*](#) have been, like many of us, viscerally disgusted by the vast salaries paid to star footballers, and that this disgust was the most important motive force that impelled them to write their book. But, of course, their motive does not affect the validity of their arguments.

They start with the emblematic transfer of the services of a young Brazilian footballer, Neymar, to Paris Saint Germain for approximately \$250,000,000. They not unnaturally ask what can possibly justify this enormous sum. The answer that this is the price that the market will bear does not satisfy them.

Instead, they turn to what might be called – if he were a tool rather than a human being – the use-value of Neymar, and here the matter becomes inextricably complicated.

The average salary of a footballer in the league in which Neymar is to play is about \$600,000 a year: enviable from the point of view of 99 per cent of the population, but not pharaonic. (Incidentally, the French league is the lowest-paying of any of the five big European leagues, the others being the English, Spanish, German and Italian). Can Neymar really be 50 times better and more valuable or better, the authors ask, than the average league player? If he were, surely he alone could replace a whole team, indeed several whole teams.

Since this is clearly absurd, the price of his services cannot possibly bear any relation to their use-value – as the authors imply that in a rational world they would, could, or should. But how is the use-value of a footballer to be assessed, assuming that his use-value lies in procuring for his team as many victories as possible? Can there be any better or more accurate method of assessment than that of an experienced coach who says, “This is just the man I need for my team”? At best, the use-value of a footballer can be no more than an educated but hazardous and gestalt-type guess. The situation is complicated by the fact that it is not in the long-term interests of any club to win every match, because were it to do so the competition itself would lose interest, since the winner would always be known in advance and the supremely successful team’s victories would have no element of excitement.

What of Neymar’s purely commercial value to PSG? This is very difficult to assess. When he signed for the team, according to the authors, PSG sold 20,000 extra “official” PSG shirts with his name on them within three days although, even at a profit to the club of \$20 apiece, this would bring in less than half of one per cent of what they had spent on him. Presumably the

sales of such shirts would fall off as the novelty also wore off; but when Neymar signed for the club, PSG immediately had more followers on the social media than anyone or anything else in France.

The authors mistake the justification that economic liberals would provide for the high price paid for Neymar's services. According to the authors:

Idolaters of the market and of liberalism justify inequalities by talent, by competition. "If he costs a lot, it's because he's good," or "If he he's well paid, it's because he brings in a lot."

On the contrary, I think economic liberals (whether they be right or wrong in wider sense) would say that the high price was paid for Neymar's services was because someone thought they were worth the price, and this is so whether or not the person paying the price – the Qatari royal family, in effect – wanted or expected to make a profit from the deal. The monetary value of something is the price people, wisely or unwisely, are prepared to pay for it.

The authors hanker after our old friend, the just price, which we all instinctively think must be the correct price—the just price for my services being always a little more than anyone is willing to pay for them. The obvious problem with the just price is that someone all-wise and disinterested has to set it, and even so his scale of values may not meet with universal approval, in fact is almost certain not to do so. The just price requires the philosopher-king, and we all know where philosopher-kings lead.

The authors point out deformations in the scale of footballers' remuneration (here they take correlation, as most of us do, for causation). Footballers are paid more if they are good-looking, though good looks have, or should have, nothing whatever to do with the ability to kick a ball about

with great skill. Furthermore, players who play extremely well some days and not so well on others are better paid than those who are dependably good, but never as good as the undependable players at their best. This is because they get themselves talked about more, as do players with colourful personal lives. An uxorious man who leads the quiet life of a successful haute-bourgeois is no use to gossip columnists.

Here, I think, we come to the nub of the matter. Though they cannot admit it, what the authors are appalled by is the general culture of which football is now so large a part. (Such newspapers in Britain as the *Times* and the *Guardian*, which are at the higher end of the intellectual range, devote more space to football than to all foreign affairs.) If they would but admit it, they are horrified at the sheer idiocy and bad taste of 20,000 morons who are prepared to shell out good money for shirts with Neymar's name printed on it, and who find Neymar himself so fascinating, though it is unlikely that he is exceptional in anything other than his ability to kick a football with consummate skill, that they are prepared to spend their spare time reading about him. Human fatuity can go no further.

Disdain is a dangerous sentiment and one has to control it, though not by erecting complex theories to disguise it even from oneself. However, the authors' book, though I disagree with quite a lot of it, is a valuable one. The authors, rightly, take the cause of football as a microcosm and confirm what the late manager of the Liverpool Football Club in its salad days, said: Football is not a matter of life and death, it's far more important than that.

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