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HEADLINE: Sports World Feels Labor Pains This Holiday Weekend

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BODY:

Millionaire baseball players on strike. The NHL commissioner pressuring wealthy NHL players to accept a new collective bargaining agreement. The NBA in court over a player's multimillion-dollar contract.

It's hardly what Matthew Maguire and Peter J. McGuire had in mind when they staged the first Labor Day parade back in 1882. Maguire, a machinist, and McGuire, a carpenter and union activist, wanted a way to honor workers, and President Grover Cleveland made Labor Day a national holiday 12 years later.

But on a holiday intended to celebrate the working stiff who punches a time clock or pushes papers across a desk, labor problems are looming over the big-bucks world of professional sports.

"It's not the kind of thing we should be thinking about on Labor Day," said Campbell Harvey, a finance professor at Duke University. "It's the wrong spin for what the founders of Labor Day would be thinking."

Even though union membership is declining and the labor movement is hardly at its strongest, it's the most tumultuous time in recent memory for players' unions in major league baseball, the NBA and NHL. And the NFL's officials are threatening a strike as well.

Baseball is in the fourth week of a strike that may end up wiping out the rest of the season and even the World Series. But there are no picket lines, no replacement workers standing by - only players making an average of \$ 1.19 million a year unwilling to give back the gains they won in six previous work stoppages.

Don Fehr, head of the players' union, foresees an even longer impasse if the season doesn't resume.

"If this goes past the end of the season, I don't expect they'll be interested in discussing much with us until next June," he said.

Even though NHL players, who make an average salary of \$ 520,000, went through the entire 1993-94 season without renewing a collective bargaining agreement that expired last September, they will be taking the ice this month at training camps.

The league wants a link between revenue and player salaries, while the players, discontented with strict rules governing free agency, want easier movement between teams and salaries set by the open market.

The two sides have talked, but league commissioner Gary Bettman upped the ante when he reduced player benefits Thursday.

That means some players had to pay their own way to camp and spring for their own means. And teams will no longer pay for players' medical and disability coverage.

Meanwhile, the NFL and its officials met to try to work out a new contract. No strike date is looming for the officials, who call games only as a part-time job and want a bigger piece of the pie - a doubling of their per-game pay and a tripling of their pensions.

NBA players have gotten in the labor strife act, too, playing without a contract since the old one expired after this year's playoffs. Their union took the league to court in June, challenging the legality of the salary cap, the college draft and free agency rules under antitrust provisions.

A federal judge ruled there was no antitrust violation, but talks between the league and union on a new collective bargaining agreement have stalled since.

And the NBA, vigilant against what they believe are attempts by teams to circumvent the cap, recently voided the contracts of A.C. Green with the Phoenix Suns, Horace Grant with the Orlando Magic, Toni Kukoc with the Chicago Bulls, and Chris Dudley of the Portland Trail Blazers.

Green, who in July signed a five-year, \$ 26 million deal, and the Suns have sued the league, and the case goes to court Sept. 12 in New Jersey.

With the nation's unemployment rate at 6.1 percent and the economy far from robust, it's hard for the average wage earner to feel too sorry for highly paid athletes fighting with rich owners for millions in revenues, Labor Day or not, Harvey said.

"In a way, this is quite repugnant to the public to see people making millions saying, 'We're not making enough money,'" Harvey said. "For labor in general, it's a big negative. It smacks of greed on both sides."

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