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COMMENTARY

#TicketPrices

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Every few months, it seems, people rediscover that attending very popular events can be very expensive. This summer’s major target of outrage is the World Cup, where not only tickets, but parking and transportation are eye-poppingly expensive: ticket prices have been in the thousands for the final match, with the most prestigious seats listed for over \$30,000,¹ and parking is in the hundreds even for the semi-final match here in Atlanta.² All told, it seems attending the tournament will cost several times more than attending the 2022 World Cup, and fans aren’t the only ones complaining. Some states (e.g. New Jersey) have even launched investigations into FIFA’s ticketing practices.³

Similar complaints have been made about this year’s NBA Finals, especially with the New York Knicks involved. Before that, it was Taylor Swift concerts. The names change, but the chief complaint stays the same: ticket prices are out of control.

To be fair, it is certainly true that the entities selling tickets want to make as much money as possible. Ticketmaster and Live Nation are not exactly beloved companies, and for (some) good reasons. When people complain about monopolies, exclusive contracts, or various fees that seem to appear out of thin air, they are sometimes pointing to real issues.

What always shocks me about all the complaining over ticket prices, however, is that it focuses almost entirely on the sellers. Nobody wants to talk about the many, many buyers.

Economists (correctly) view prices as the result of both supply and demand. When “ordinary” (non-econ) people see a \$5,000 ticket, however, they often treat that price as though it were determined solely by the company selling it. The seller matters, of course, but so do the hordes of buyers willing to pay those prices.

Take the World Cup, for example, which has one—and only one, in contrast to the 149 concerts which were part of Taylor Swift’s *The Eras Tour*—final match that takes place every four years. Only one stadium can host it each time. There are only so many seats available. The same logic applies to a Knicks Finals game in Madison Square Garden. Even if the arena wanted to add another 20,000 seats, it couldn’t. For all intents and purposes, the supply of seats for these sorts of events is fixed. Demand, meanwhile, is not.

Millions of people around the world would love to attend a World Cup Final. Knicks fans have spent decades waiting for a championship that may or may not have finally arrived by the time anyone reads this. When huge numbers of people compete for a fixed number of seats, prices go up. This should not be surprising, in logical terms. In fact, it would be *very* surprising if they *didn’t*.

Suppose, for example, that World Cup Final tickets were priced “fairly”⁴ at \$100 each, for all matches, and resale of any kind was magically prevented. Many people would celebrate such a decision. Unfortunately, the underlying problem would remain *exactly the same*. There would still be far more people who wanted tickets than there were tickets available. Actually, the perceived problem would likely be worse, since the number of people wanting tickets at this artificially low price would be much greater than the number truly wanting tickets at the actual prices we observe. The only thing that would really change is who does the complaining.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2026/05/28/nx-s1-5836514/2026-world-cup-fifa-ticket-prices>.

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/soccer/worldcup/2026/06/09/world-cup-2026-stadium-parking-price-availability-location/90391807007/>.

³ <https://www.nysportsday.com/2026/06/08/fifa-world-cup-2026-ticket-fiasco-price-hikes-fan-outrage/>.

⁴ As in previous Commentary pieces, I will avoid the lengthy endeavor of carefully defining what “fairness” really means. Here, I’m using a sort of layman’s version, along the lines of, “All seats should cost the same and be affordable,” just for the sake of example.

Instead of people complaining about prices, they'd complain that tickets sold out instantly. "I didn't get in line early enough!" Or that only people with the right connections could get access. Or, maybe, that those notorious entities known as "bots" purchased them all on behalf of some evil cabal. And tickets would likely still end up on secondary markets for thousands of dollars, because a complete prohibition of resale is almost impossible to enforce when some people are simply willing and able to pay more. The frustrations would not disappear because the *scarcity* would not disappear.

The broader lesson is that, when people say ticket prices are "too high," what they really mean is that ticket prices are too high for *them*.

That is an understandable complaint, and one that many of us have experienced at some point in our lives. I would like to attend all kinds of sporting events, concerts, and other attractions. The problem is, there are all these other people who either value those events more than I do, have more money than I do, or both. That's reality.

This is not a defense of every ticket pricing practice. Nor is it an argument that monopoly power never matters. There are certainly situations where sellers use market power to raise prices above what would otherwise prevail. Those concerns are legitimate. But even in competitive markets, rare and coveted things that a lot of people want to buy can be extremely expensive.

The next time ticket prices make headlines, then, it may be worth remembering that prices tell us something about buyers as well as sellers. A \$5,000 ticket is not merely evidence that someone wants to charge \$5,000; it's also evidence that someone else is *willing* to pay it.

If nobody bought the tickets, prices would fall, and in fact this is likely to happen, even in the case of the World Cup. There are currently some group-stage games that are undersold, because prices were initially higher than what people were willing to pay for those matches in those venues. Those prices will likely come down as game times approach, but those matches are not likely the ones people are complaining about (similarly, I don't recall ever hearing complaints that tickets to see the band *Camera Box* were overpriced).

Prices were also, as many are now pointing out, much lower back in 2022. But the games in 2022 were held in Qatar. There appear to be more fans willing and able to pay to attend the games in North America.