Ernie Banks, coming off successive seasons as the National League Most Valuable Player in 1958 and '59, earned $65,000 in 1960 with the Chicago Cubs, the team for whom he played his entire 19-season career.

That was good money then — more than 11 1/2 times the median U.S. family income at the time — with the spending power of about a half-million dollars today.

But the money now is much, much better. The minimum Major League Baseball salary this past season was $480,000, and the New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez, a three-time MVP but no Mr. Cub, made $30 million.

There is more than one reason for this steroidal leap in pay, but they begin with Marvin Miller, an economist-turned-labor leader who upended baseball, sports and other aspects of American life in 17 years as founding executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association.

If Miller, who died Tuesday at age 95, wasn't the father of free agency for athletes in sports, he was the midwife who finally found a way to deliver on the long-unfulfilled promise.

"It would have had a big effect on me and all the players of my generation," Banks, by phone Tuesday, recalled of the windfall later players saw because of Miller's work. "Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Frank Robinson, Vada Pinson … I think about the guys of my time who didn't get a chance to enjoy all the benefits of what Marvin Miller brought to baseball. That was huge."

Aided in part by the hubris of owners who didn't sense their own vulnerability, Miller engineered the players' emancipation, emboldening athletes in other sports as well. No longer would development of a talent marketplace be thwarted by ballclubs' tight control of where players could play, a hold that extended even beyond the end of their contracts.

Miller's gains in "baseball clearly became a model for other sports and I think it's a model for professional and white-collar endeavors where the stars are very, very valuable," said Loyola University Chicago Law professor Spencer Weber Waller, co-author of "Baseball and the American Legal Mind." "It was sort of the beginning of the winner-take-all, or winner-take-most economy … the star getting a lot and everyone else riding on the coat strings."

The liberation of ballplayers coincided with the surge in pay in business and other fields. TV news anchors, for example, were beginning to be paid as stars in the 1970s, rewarded for their drawing power. Baseball always had its stars. Miller's work freed players to participate in the gold rush in a way they hadn't been able to for decades.
The sport's high-profile high salaries also helped establish the notion that Hollywood-size paychecks could extend beyond the movie business.

The flip criticism of Miller's legacy is that the labor movement in sports pits millionaire players against millionaire owners, but the players were nowhere near being millionaires when he launched the union in 1966. Some ballplayers were making as little as $6,000, none more than $100,000.

Miller came aboard in 1966. Baseball owners for years had had their grip on players reinforced by the reasoning of no less a jurist than the U.S. Supreme Court's Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in 1922 had contended that baseball was more sport that business and therefore exempt from antitrust laws.

Miller picked apart at it methodically. He encouraged Curt Flood's unsuccessful fight to control his own destiny and destination as a ballplayer. He pushed for Jim "Catfish" Hunter's free agency after Oakland A's owner (and Chicago insurance mogul) Charlie Finley missed a scheduled payment. He urged pitchers Andy Messersmith and Dave McNally to play without contracts for a season.

The latter situation opened the door for a historic 1975 ruling that liberated them from their respective teams. Subsequent gains were negotiated, sometimes through strikes, a risky tactic that doesn't always work (see the current National Hockey League mess).

"It is not a typical union, but it is probably the most successful union in the history of the United States," Waller said. "It's got to be frustrating for the current American labor movement that's just trying to keep what it's earned and not give up too much to have a small union demand hundreds of thousands of dollars."

It didn't hurt Miller's ballplayers that the amount of money to be divvied up in the game was poised to grow exponentially through the expansion to new markets, an increase in TV revenue and a willingness to hike ticket prices to prices on par with a concert or stage show.

"As an economist, he was a more creative and more legally oriented union leader than in many of the more traditional blue-collar unions," Waller said.

Miller was polarizing for the work stoppages he led and the changes he brought to baseball. A star player spending his entire career with one team is rare.

Banks, 81, said he never would have left the Cubs, but the existence of free agency almost certainly would have made him richer. Like his teammates, he found himself supplementing his income during the offseason with outside work. He recalled teammate Gene Baker worked with a beer distributor. "Gene didn't drink beer, but he would go in the clubs and make sure they had it," Banks said.

One day, Banks said, the Cubs' general manager called Baker in and told him to give up his job.
"Gene was an outspoken guy," Banks said. "He said: 'When I'm playing, you'll have some control over me. When I'm not playing, I have to make a living on my own, so I'm going to keep my job.' The next year, they traded him to Pittsburgh. … They traded him because they didn't want him to sell beer."

Baker came out ahead in the end, winning a World Series with the Pirates three years later, something Banks and the Cubs never managed.

Not even Miller could have negotiated that.