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## OPINION

# On being a professional

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Sometimes it seems there are not enough words in the English language. Professionalism is a core value for the SOA, and yet there is a broad spectrum of behavior and values embodied in the word “professional.”

For example, Roberto Alomar is a professional baseball player with the Baltimore Orioles. Last season he was suspended for spitting in the face of an umpire, and even though the suspension did not take place until after crucial playoff games at the end of the season, it does show he was subject to a code of conduct and discipline.

In a *Newsweek* article (April 14, 1997), George Will points out that “Alomar has repeatedly apologized for that inexcusable act . . . .” Will says there was a bad call by the umpire, and the umpire threw Alomar out of the game for saying, “Just play!” Alomar “went ballistic” and the umpire called him a derogatory name. Nevertheless, I doubt if anyone would condone Alomar’s response as professional.

Will goes on to say that baseball’s biggest problem on the field is “the incompetence, confrontational surliness, and premeditated misbehavior of some umpires . . . . Part of the problem may be resentment arising from the widening disparities of players’ and umpires’ incomes. Another part is the declining professionalism of some players — arrogance, disrespect for the game, and an inclination to blame their failures on umpires.”

In contrast, Will says Alomar has an “unembarrassed love” for baseball. Though Alomar makes \$6 million a year with the Orioles, he plays winter ball in Puerto Rico for pocket change. He quotes Alomar as saying, “This is what God chose me to do. He sent me here to play baseball.”

Getting back to linguistics, someone who does something out of pure love is an “amateur” according to the Latin root of the word. A “professional,” according to *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, is “one that engages in a particular pursuit, study, or science for gain or livelihood.” Another definition given by Webster’s is “participating for gain or livelihood in an activity or field of endeavor often engaged in by amateurs (a ~ baseball player).” It is the money that has transformed Alomar from an amateur to a professional; it is the money that makes the much-maligned major league umpires professionals, too.

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Now, what does all of this have to do with the SOA’s concept of professionalism? At a Fellowship Admission Course (FAC), I asked how many people knew the motto of the SOA. Very few hands went up, and one group even erupted in laughter. A soon-to-be-new Fellow had said that our motto was: “Show me the money.” This phrase is taken from *Jerry Maguire*, a movie about an agent for professional athletes, and it is the mantra that Jerry’s only client used to describe what he expected out of professional sports. Although I accept that the remark at the FAC was made in jest, I am forced to acknowledge its element of truth. Even so, the SOA would like to inspire in its members a higher ideal.



The SOA uses “professional” in the context of this *Webster’s* definition: “one who belongs to one of the learned professions or is in an occupation requiring a high level of training and proficiency.” Although the “learned professions” of medicine, law, and theology long predate the development of actuarial science, the SOA aspires to meet the following definition of “profession” in *Webster’s*: a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods, maintaining by force of organization or concerted opinion high standards of achievement and conduct, and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service.

In its Mission and Vision Statement, the SOA defines itself as a professional organization and lists serving the public ahead of serving SOA members.

It would be naive to think that economic concerns don’t matter; often the definition of professional in financial terms can coexist with the principled definition. However, at some point in your career, you may be challenged to decide just what kind of professional you are. Your mettle, as well as the true essence of the actuarial profession, will be defined by your response to such a situation.

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