

MLB batting wireless: Scores, tickets, more to hit mobile phones

By Greg Gatlin

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If you're one of those baseball fans who insists on bringing a phone to the game and waving to the TV camera, wait 'til you hear what Major League Baseball has in store for you.

MLB.com is expanding its focus to wireless opportunities - inside and outside the park.

Three weeks ago, MLB and Nokia launched a service that, for \$7.99 a month, gives fans access to constantly updated scores and standings, video highlights and live audio feeds of home and away radio broadcasts for all 30 teams - streamed to their Nokia 6600 and 6620 video phones.

The service is distributed through Cingular, T-Mobile and AT&T Wireless. Sprint PCS offers another audio service. But that's just the start of it.

Baseball is testing a ticket-sales system that would allow fans to sign up for a text-messaging service alerting them on game day when extra tickets are available, said George Kliavkoff, senior vice president of business development for MLB Advanced Media, baseball's interactive media arm.

Fans could use their wireless phones to buy tickets (press #1 for one ticket, #2 for two.)

A code, messaged to ticket buyers' wireless phones, could be scanned at the stadium gate, allowing fans access to a game. The ticket charge would show up on a mobile-phone bill.

MLB is even talking with all 30 teams about putting Wi-Fi wireless networks in ballparks, which could one day allow fans to order sodas or upgrade their tickets from their seats, Kliavkoff said.

He figures almost everyone will eventually carry around a device through which Major League Baseball could sell something. Already fans are paying between 99 cents and \$2.49 for team logos used as screen savers on their wireless phones. They're also buying MLB-licensed games for the phones.

Wireless is "a newfound and surprisingly large revenue opportunity for us, and we think in the next two or three years it will become a significant piece of revenue for us," Kliavkoff said. "The growth rate we see in wireless services and the revenue opportunity exceeds even what we saw in the early days of the Internet."

Adam Zawel, analyst with the Yankee Group in Boston, says MLB's wireless efforts are in the second inning. "They have some idea what they're doing, but they're still trying things out."

Baseball is focused on developing alliances with the right partners. Wireless carriers, handset makers, tech companies and mobile commerce partners have all been calling, Zawel notes in a research report. He says there's "a delicate balance" between MLB and the wireless carriers in terms of divvying up revenue.

"From a wireless perspective, this is a niche, but a potentially nice-sized niche," Zawel said. "It could be replicated in other sports, and sports is just one of many categories. It's promising."

