

Your Eyes Aren't Lying, Sports Attendance Numbers Are

Written by Maury Brown
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I worry for the revisionist history that is now being made and will be chronicled in books about sports. Those researching to make a case for or against the popularity of one or the other will look to attendance figures as a way to say how many fans went to view games as they happened in ballparks, stadiums, and arenas at the time. Those that may have actually been at a particular event will have a different view than what is published. They'll see more empty seats than history reports.

This is not some objective matter (although the amount one sees isn't an exacting science). The fact is, the announced number at virtually every pro and collegiate sporting event is vastly higher than the actual number of fans that are there.

Since the '90s, Major League Baseball has counted "paid attendance" or the number of tickets sold, rather than how many people were actually at the ballpark. This coincided with the

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adoption of revenue-sharing. The logic works like this: what really matters to the owners and the league is how much ticket revenue is generated that then counts towards revenue-sharing totals. At least MLB doesn't count comps, VIPs, and media as other leagues and colleges do, but that doesn't mean MLB doesn't count deeply discounted tickets in the announced paid attendance figures just the same as one that is paid at full price.

So, to the owners and the league, the matter is one of tracking the ledger. The problem is, they're more than happy to use the numbers to paint a different picture. Here's the first sentence of a press release last year touting overall attendance health (bolding by author):

Major League Baseball announced today that the 30 Clubs **drew 74,859,268 fans** in the 2012 regular season, representing the game's highest attendance since 2008 and the fifth best single-season attendance in Baseball history.

This simply isn't so. What happened was nearly 75 million ***tickets were sold***. Not that many attended.

In fact, numbers have swirled about that no-show rates can be as high as approx. 17 percent. If that were true, and we apply it to MLB's totals for the 2012 season, we get this:

17% of 74,859,268 tickets sold = 62,133,192 actual fans attended

It's this difference of approx. 12.7 million fans that is at issue. You could make a case that MLB (and for that matter, the NFL, NHL, NBA, MLS, *et al*) should announce in the box score the actual number of fans that attended the games. After all, the paid attendance figure is really only for internal purposes, so keep the numbers that way... internal. The reason that the league won't announce actual numbers is that it would be a PR nightmare. As it stands, there have been several games that have had paid attendance announced at under 10,000. Reporting actual attendance of around 8,000-8,500 a game would be a massive black eye.

In fairness, not every ballpark sees no-shows. As mentioned, MLB does not count comps, VIPs, or media in the paid attendance figures. In the case of some clubs that are seeing wild

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popularity, a ballpark can be over capacity with nothing but standing room only available. Those SROs get counted as "paid attendance" as one has to purchase a ticket to get in.

Still, this is more the exception, not the rule. There are far more ballparks with less people in them than announced as opposed to more. So, your eyes aren't lying, the box score is. The leagues will rationalize this as a change that needed to take place for accounting purposes, but you can darn well believe that if the numbers somehow came out negatively so, they'd not use them. They numbers announced at each game prop up the attendance numbers... history be damned. Just try to remember that in the future when you read books on a given sports popularity. Ghosts in the seats don't count.



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