

Stop Calling it "Attendance"

Written by Maury Brown
Wednesday, 04 October 2006 06:37

Last night, at the beginning of Fox's pre-game show for the Tigers v. Yankees tilt, Jeanne Zelasko made mention of MLB's increased popularity. Zelasko said something to the effect of, "73 million people attended Major League Baseball games this season, setting a record for attendance."

I winced.

While MLB set a record for *ticket sales* this season, 73 million fans did *not* go through the turnstiles at ballparks across the US and Canada. That's a myth, and something that all the big 4-sports are guilty of, on some level.

Here's my plea: Stop calling it "attendance".

MLB and the other Big-4 sports should pick up Websters:

Main Entry: at·ten·dance

Pronunciation: &-'ten-d&n(t)s

Function: noun

1 : the act or fact of attending <a physician in *attendance*>

2 a : the persons or number of persons attending; *also* : an account of persons attending <the teacher took *attendance*

before starting class> b : the number of times a person attends

MLB counts ticket sales as "attendance". Regardless of how many no-shows are at any given game, it counts as paid attendance. It's why many are left scratching their heads when they go to a game and a sell out is announced, only to look around and see empty seats ringing the ballpark. It suspends our sense of disbelief.

MLB put this methodology for counting attendance into full practice over a decade ago, and it's now become "truth" as witnessed by Zelasko last night. And, it's not just MLB. The NBA, NFL, and NHL all practice this in one form or another.

In the case of MLB and the NFL, tickets that are discounted to levels as low as \$1 are considered as a sale, and therefore, paid attendance. The NBA and NHL take the practice even

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further with free tickets, or comps.

The reason is that these sports all deal with some form of revenue sharing, and therefore they are mostly concerned about the number of tickets sold, not necessarily the total number in attendance.

[As I outline today in my article for Baseball Prospectus](#) (***free today, no subscription required***), MLB is seeing an increase in long-term commitments through a variety of ticket packages. In many instances these sales may be from corporations or sponsors that may find that not all of their tickets are being used, and therefore, fewer through the turnstiles. This continued practice will create a disparity between the number of tickets sold as paid attendance and the actual number of rears in the seats. As an extreme example, it would be possible for all tickets for a game to be sold out, no one show up to watch it, and still be announced as a sell out via "paid attendance." Will it happen? No, but it is technically *possible*.

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MLB, and the other aforementioned Big-4 sports should stop this practice. It's disingenuous and, in some senses, will skew the historical record. After all, when someone digs through the Fox archives 20 years from now, there will be Jeanne Zelasko saying "73 million fans attended MLB games" in 2006. Too bad that isn't true.

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