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Ballgame keepsake goes electronic

By Tim Lemke
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The paper ticket might be on its way to joining AstroTurf and scheduled doubleheaders in the graveyard of sports obsolescence.

A host of professional teams, including the Washington Nationals, are introducing new systems allowing fans to enter games using their cell phone, driver's license or similar means, potentially making paper tickets a thing of the past.

The Nationals and Tickets.com last weekend began testing a new system called Ticket@Phone, which allows fans to send an electronic ticket to their cell phone and enter the game by scanning a bar code on the phone's screen. Only four fans used the service over the weekend at Space Coast Stadium in Viera, Fla., where the Nationals are in spring training. But the team

plans to make it available to fans throughout the season at RFK Stadium on a trial basis.

"This is a first step," said Nationals spokeswoman Chartese Burnett. "It's a viable option, but we just have to see how it goes. We're interested in doing anything that enhances the fan experience."

Tickets.com, a division of Major League Baseball Advanced Media, first tested the Ticket@Phone system with employees at a playoff game with the Oakland Athletics last year. It followed by offering it to Pittsburgh Pirates fans during the team's off-season Fan Fest event. The system was created by Mobiqu, a Scotland-based company that has operated for years in Europe and Asia.

The cell-phone ticketing option is similar to a system used this season by the Cleveland Cavaliers called "Flash Seats" that allows season ticket holders to enter a game using only a driver's license or credit card. Ticketmaster and other companies are also in the process of developing similar services.

"What you're seeing are the first steps toward the near-virtualization of the ticket," said Sean Moriarty, chief executive officer of Ticketmaster. "I don't think the [paper ticket] will be completely eliminated. But for a team, the goal is to provide fans as much flexibility as they can to access events."

Teams contend the technology will allow fans to move through lines more quickly and that it eliminates the problem of lost or forgotten tickets. Other businesses, including the airline industry, have used ticketless systems for years with good results.

"We've been lucky enough to piggyback on what the airlines have been doing in the past few years," said Derek Palmer, senior vice president of operations for Tickets.com. "It gives more options to the fans because it's an opportunity for them to not have to carry a physical ticket. It also decreases operational costs."

Sports teams are finding the new ticketless technologies to be particularly valuable because they are designed to work hand-in-hand with Web-based resale systems allowing fans to sell, buy and exchange tickets electronically.

Cavaliers officials said about one-third of the team's season ticket holders use the "FlashSeat" service and report a 98 percent satisfaction rate. The system is integrated with the team's Web site, where season ticket holders can sell their tickets to other fans right up until the tipoff or first pitch. But unlike traditional resales, where scalpers and ticket brokers

are in control, the team is tracking the use of that ticket and earning any profit from the sale.

"Our argument all along is that the team is the one creating that value," Cavaliers spokesman Tad Carper said. "Why shouldn't that value be reclaimed by the team itself?"

As the technology evolves, it's likely teams will be able to use the information to enhance their fan databases and create more targeted marketing, such as an advertisement for an upcoming game or a coupon for a free beer delivered via cell phone.

"There's a customer data benefit in terms of knowing who's buying and who's using the system," said Paul Swangard, executive director of the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at the University of Oregon. "The Holy Grail will be when you know who is holding that phone and deliver customizable content based on their likes and dislikes as a consumer. What we may see is that a ticket is just another content-distribution channel."

For the Nationals, trying the new cell-phone system is part of a broader plan to prepare for 2008, when the team opens its new ballpark to replace the aging RFK Stadium. The team installed ticketing kiosks to supplement will-call windows even before Theodore N. Lerner and his family took over ownership of the team last spring, and has offered season ticket holders a way to exchange and sell tickets on the team's Web site since last year.

"One of the pillars of the organization is fan experience," Miss Burnett said. "As much as we try to do what we can at RFK, the new ballpark is going to be 'wow.' It's going to be top of the line. So it obviously makes sense to take a look at these technologies so that the fan experience is one of the best -- if not the best -- in the league."