



# Tuning Up the Game

Technology infusion creates a retail paradise at the ballpark

BY M.V. GREENE

Going to the ballpark for a professional baseball game endures as one of the great American rites of spring and summer.

It is an activity that Ken Babby, the owner of two minor league professional baseball franchises, has a longstanding love for. A die-hard fan of the Baltimore Orioles, Babby fondly recalls attending games with his father — former Orioles General Counsel Lon Babby — at Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

He has a unique view of the game, as he also is running a business as an owner. Baseball is rooted in being a fun and wholesome activity. What isn't lost

on Babby is that the ballpark is a retail paradise where clubs must be in tune with their customers — the fans.

“The process and the environment around the ballparks has changed. I know it from the experience of growing up and going to the ballpark with my dad,” Babby says, who purchased minor leagues clubs in Akron, Ohio, and Jacksonville, Fla., in 2012 and 2014, respectively.

“The experience used to just be about grabbing a hot dog and sitting in a ballpark seat and watching the game,” he says. “As we evolve as consumers, we have needed to adapt and evolve our

business to that of the fan.”

## INFUSING TECHNOLOGY

What that means for Babby is infusing technologies that fans use in their everyday lives into the ballpark experience. People today, he says, are swayed by technology long before they walk through the turnstiles.

“The fan experience now starts when fans really make the decision as a family or a group that they are going to come out to a game,” he says. “There are a lot of factors that play into that, whether it is weather, directions or parking.”



Babby's club in Jacksonville, an affiliate for the Miami Marlins major league team, is the flagship location for Minor League Baseball's "Ballparks of the Future" initiative that seeks to enhance the fan experience at minor league parks through technology.

Babby's approach is to ingratiate and incentivize his fan base through their penchant for technology to help them decide to choose the ballpark for their entertainment dollars.

"We're constantly connected and driven by offers and discounts and value experiences using technology to drive us to make different purchasing decisions, whether that is through ecommerce for purchases online or in person through a traditional bricks-and-mortar retailer. It seems only logical that those same technologies would evolve to the point that they are in ballparks, stadiums and arenas," Babby says.

In addition to embracing technology, clubs must be diligent retailers, whether that is selling tickets or caps and T-shirts. They must also be creative in marketing in smaller, community-focused cities where minor league ballparks often operate.

One of the first things Babby did after buying the franchises was to change the club names, mascots, logos and identifiers. The Jacksonville club went from being the Suns to the quirky Jumbo Shrimp, and the Akron club from the Aeros to the RubberDucks.

The name changes drew some consternation from long-time fans and community leaders, but Babby stuck to his vision that the fan experience needed to represent something fun and memorable.

### CONNECTING CONSUMERS

At the core of the Ballparks of the Future initiative in Jacksonville is

modernizing the process for accepting and processing payments, both for customer-facing activities as well as for back office operations. Ballparks, which traditionally have relied on cash-based transactions, see great value in the movement toward mobile and electronic payments as a convenience for customers along with a data-collection opportunity for clubs, Babby says.

Working with FIS, the official payments and loyalty provider of Minor League Baseball, the Jumbo Shrimp franchise launched intuitive point-of-sale and business management systems that process as many as 10,000 financial transactions per game.

Bob Legters, FIS senior vice president and chief product officer, says the new payments platform in Jacksonville helps eliminate an often-thorny process in the way clubs traditionally have accepted money from their fans.

"One of the hardest parts about making things easier for the customer is the taking-money part," Legters says. "It is about changing the way [fans] access their money when they are in the ballpark so that they can focus on having a good time."

Payment terminals on the platform accept credit, signature debit and gift cards as well as providing support for electronic wallets.

One of the planned innovations in Jacksonville includes giving fans the ability to order and pay for food concessions from their seats via smart devices and having the

items delivered to them. Other fan-friendly approaches involve sweepstakes loyalty inducements such as discounted tickets and upgraded seating and parking.

A popular attraction at the Jacksonville ballpark is the Tiki Terrace in left field, an open-air, thatched-roof structure that offers terraced seating with circular tables and a play area for kids. Legters says the platform technology allows parents to connect with their kids in the play area through wearable devices

"While the kids are in the play area, the parents can go get a soda and tie into technology. Anything around convenience means the world to customers," he says.

### REAL-TIME DATA

On the business side, the FIS platform assists with processing payments to better track employee expenses, streamline team travel and purchasing and provide real time payments to club employees.

The POS system processes data in real time, allowing park employees to adjust inventory to customer needs. If the data shows customers tend to buy beer in the third inning instead of the fifth, satisfying that demand can make a difference to the park's bottom line, Legters says.

"You ramp up for the third inning and get those beer guys out there in the third," Legters says.

"Understanding that data and understanding your customers is a big part of where loyalty comes in, and tracking that information is a lot easier in the electronic world than handing over \$5 bills."

Babby says the Ballparks of the Future initiative is moving fans "from the passenger seat to the driver's seat" at ballparks.

"We've taken a certain foundational platform of technology experiences and are really trying to build thought-leading and immersive experiences for both teams and customers in a way that hasn't been done before. From our vantage point, we want to make that as memorable and as easy and frictionless as possible," he says. **STORES**

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