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Take me out to the ballgame, but fewer and fewer say yes

Major League Baseball should be riding high. The 2016 season was one for the record books. The World Series championship not only ended with the Chicago Cubs' finally snapping the longest championship title losing streak in North American major league professional sports history, but the contest also featured the Cleveland Indians, who had the second longest championship losing streak in baseball.

Seven games, the last one going extra innings — and with a rain delay! Ticket sales were brisk and prices were high on the secondary markets — Cubs fans that traveled to Cleveland for Game 7 paid the highest prices ever for World Series tickets — an average of \$1,759 for standing-room-only admission. Premium seats for Game 6 reportedly went for tens of thousands of dollars.

As pitchers and catchers begin reporting for spring training, fans all over the country are eagerly anticipating trips to the ballpark this summer.

Or are they?

The stark reality for MLB is that live attendance has been slowly declining around the country based on a wide variety of factors — which means there's no easy explanation or fix.

The Baltimore Orioles, for example, played home games to a half-empty Camden Yards during the 2015 postseason. Speculation about why ranged from the general to the specific, attributing the empty seats to increased ticket prices and an unusually hot summer as well as racial tensions and civil unrest in the city that forced the team to bar fans from the stadium for a game in April 2015.

Live attendance is actually

SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK



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down across sports. In addition to high ticket prices, at least one report cites new technology and media deals that provide a better at-home experience as reasons people are staying away.

According to a poll conducted by the Business of Sports, 36 percent of fans indicated increasing ticket prices and 56 percent cited the fact that they can have a better experience watching from home as reasons they didn't go to live games.

Attendance at MLB games fell 0.8 percent in 2016, representing the third year of declining attendance in the last four years, the Sports Business Journal reported. Other frustrating trends include fans focusing on high-demand games and ignoring lower-demand games as well as an increasing number of fans buying tickets and not showing up.

A trip to the ballpark can be out of some fans' league, financially speaking. In 2016, it cost a family of four and average of \$480.89 to attend a single MLB game — tickets, parking and concessions including food and beverages — according to

calculations by Team Marketing Report.

And ticket prices will only continue to rise, critics say, regardless of whether the team has just won the World Series or not.

MLB may be partially to blame for decreasing turnouts. By embracing new technology that gives fans a better at-home viewing experience, the league has made staying at home all the more attractive. MLB.TV is one of the most popular sports-specific over-the-top streaming services, which delivers subscription-based content to consumers through internet-connected devices.

MLB.TV gives subscribers out-of-market baseball games among other offerings. MLB also entered into an agreement with Twitter to stream live MLB games weekly over its platform.

New technology could also be MLB's saving grace, however. As the league enters into new partnerships with emerging technology, it may be able to use technology to its advantage by analyzing ticket holder behavior.

Data analytics may provide insights about which fans are most

likely to buy or renew season tickets as well as buying habits and attendance patterns. Teams can also use technology to rethink and improve the fans' live-game experience, providing new season ticket holder perks and benefits and tech-enhanced dining, entertainment and shopping options at the stadium.

MLB also faces a few unique challenges that the other major sports leagues do not.

First, MLB's fan base is getting older as younger people gravitate to other sports. Viewers watching baseball on television are the oldest of any sport, with ESPN reporting that the median average viewer age for the World Series rose from 46 in 2004 to 53 in 2014.

If younger viewers aren't watching the game on TV, they probably aren't heading down to the ballpark to watch it in person.

At the same time, baseball may be in danger of losing its traditional designation as a national pastime. Younger generations are playing less baseball and are therefore less likely to become lifelong fans of the game.

According to Nielsen market research, adults age 55 and older are 11 percent more likely to say they have a strong interest in baseball, while adults ages 18 to 34 are 14 percent less likely to say they have such an interest.

Further, children ages 6 to 17 made up only 4 percent of the TV audience for postseason games in 2015, falling from 7 percent in 2005, according to The Washington Post. Significantly, Little League officials admit participation has slowly declined in the past decade, in part because fewer kids' parents played the game themselves, according to a Washington Post report.

Finally, baseball is becoming a

more regionally focused sport, largely due to a lack of national and international superstars. While football and basketball have their own big-name stars with fans around the world, baseball's stars have largely faded away in recent years, as media outlets from *The New Yorker* to *WaitingforNextYear.com* have pointed out.

Think about it: The 1990s and 2000s were filled with baseball celebrities who captured the public's imagination, from Barry Bonds and Ken Griffey Jr. to Mike Piazza and Sammy Sosa. These days, fans tend to root more for the stars on their hometown teams.

Ticket sales for live games remain an important revenue

stream as well as an indicator of fan loyalty and overall success for the league. It's important to note, too, that MLB has one of the longest seasons in professional sports, playing 162 regular season games between April and October, so the sheer number of tickets that can be sold is considerable. And of course, players would always prefer to play to

stands full of cheering fans.

With the variety of factors to consider, a single definitive solution to lure fans back to the stadiums may not exist.

Still, the excitement of the 2016 season and the resulting fan engagement suggests the strong potential for a comeback for baseball – after all, if the Cubs can do it, so can MLB.