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Story

Baseball's Back: Can It Reverse The Curse?

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With the first pitch less than a week away, Major League Baseball is running a new marketing campaign, underscoring the historical connection the sport has with Americans. But with its image still bloody from the steroid scandal, the baseball brand is wobbly. In the latest Sports Fan Loyalty Index from Brand Keys, MLB finds itself in third place -- after the National Football League and the National Basketball Association. (Yes, baseball is still ahead of the National Hockey League.)

MLB kicked off its "This is beyond baseball" effort last week with a 30-minute documentary-style program, which includes vignettes that "communicate the magnitude of what baseball represents and that the scope of its impact goes well beyond the game on the field," MLB says in its release. Narrated by Vin Scully, it includes commentary from such baseball greats as Ken Griffey Jr., Derek Jeter, Cal Ripken Jr., Curtis Granderson, Derek Lee and Terry Francona, as well a profile of the Upton family -- father Manny and sons B.J. and Justin.

But will it be enough to woo back fans, who are still struggling to come to terms with the idea that some of the game's greatest players are chemically enhanced cheaters? It's hard to say, says Robert K. Passikoff, president of Brand Keys -- who points out that part of baseball's problem is that inherently, it just isn't as exciting as football and basketball. "In baseball, the perfect game is where nothing happens," he says, so it loses to other sports in terms of pure entertainment value.

And while it ties with football in terms of history--another key driver to fan loyalty and the aspect of the game stressed by the new MLB effort -- it's most vulnerable in the area of fan bonding. "That's where baseball is getting killed," he says. "You're not supposed to be playing on steroids, and people don't like knowing that have put their faith in people who have feet of clay."

The recession won't help much, either. MLB is said to be bracing itself for the first decline in ticket sales since 2002, reports Street & Smith's *Sports Business Journal*, with the league likely to draw about 75 million fans in the coming season, "6% below the sport's high-water mark of 79.5 million in 2007."

Some teams, to be sure, are seeing strong sales, including Philadelphia, Tampa Bay, the Chicago White Sox and Milwaukee. But the report says markets like Oakland, St. Louis, and San Diego are seeing declines. And in Detroit, it says -- thanks to the cratering of the auto industry -- the Tigers "have lost about half of their 2008 full-season-equivalent base."

Still, there are plenty of signs of spark, especially in attendance at Spring Training games: The Boston Red Sox reported that its game against the Detroit Tigers last week drew its largest crowd ever.