

StarTribune



Jesse Marquette and Kari Ahlstrand control the operations of the scoreboard during the Cleveland Indians vs. Twins baseball game at Target Field in Minneapolis, Minn., on Friday, July 19, 2013.] (ANNA REED/STAR TRIBUNE) anna.reed@startribune.com (cq)

Target Field kiss-cam team wants fans to pucker up

Article by: Andrew Wagaman

Star Tribune

July 30, 2013 - 6:57 AM

Forget full counts, loaded bases and the bottom of the ninth.

At Target Field, the only certain drama arrives in the middle of the sixth inning, when a diamond-shaped camera appears on the gigantic center-field scoreboard and a love song blares from the ballpark speakers.

Joe Mauer might be the next at-bat, but Jesse Marquette has your undivided attention.

You can't see him, but the "kiss cam" coordinator just might see you.

The game of baseball alone isn't enough to bring sellout crowds to the ballpark anymore. Right or wrong, languorous leisure activities are America's past, not pastime. That's why teams, including the Minnesota Twins, are continually looking for ways to keep the ballpark experience fresh.

Most are gimmicks with as much staying power as their starting pitchers. Then there's the kiss cam, one of the ballpark's few truly modern traditions.

Behind the 80-second scoreboard skit that coaxes people to pucker up are Marquette, the scoreboard director, and others on the Twins production team. The shrewd crew members pick out “couples” for PDAs and create lighthearted yet suspenseful theater.

Spectators can't help but wonder: How will chosen couples react? Wait, what if I'm next?

“We're always watching, and we will find you,” Marquette said. “You should never think that you're safe.”

Paradise by the scoreboard light

Kiss cams began appearing in professional baseball in the 1980s, and the Twins have produced the segment since 2001. What it lacks in nostalgia, it makes up for in anticipation.

Production manager Sam Henschen — Marquette's boss — said the Twins keep bringing the feature back because sponsors keep coming back. Why? The kiss cam keeps the crowd glued to the big screen.

“Everyone feels like they're the next potential victim,” Henschen said. “You always have to be looking.”

Even players can't help but watch. Cameraman Joe Casey, the son of longtime announcer Bob Casey, said he once got Dan Gladden to embrace Jack Morris.

“You see couples on a first date that don't necessarily want to kiss, and you get that awkward moment,” center fielder Aaron Hicks said. “I love that.”

The 80-second segment doesn't come together in a few haphazard moments. More than two hours before the game, the production team meets on the top floor of Target Field, where the control room is. Three cameramen with designated locations and two other roving cameramen then disperse around the ballpark. While they film pregame features, they're scouting for potential kissers.

Upstairs in the control room, Marquette watches everything on six TV screens. Via headset, he asks the cameramen about potential smoochers.

Man behind the curtain

Marquette said he doesn't just play Cupid. The 35-year-old said the goal is to get a wide range of couples. He often looks for moms with babies or little kids because babies cause the crowd to coo and little kids usually elicit laughter because they loathe the embarrassment. But everyone's in the strike zone, from 16-year-olds to same-sex couples.

Elderly couples are the kiss-cam equivalent of a fastball down the middle — the crowd always reacts well to them with applause and “aww.”

“We've had guys pop out teeth before they kiss,” Casey said. “You never know what you're going to find.”

Sometimes Marquette creates the humor himself. He makes split-second decisions about which couple will come up next. He loves catching people guzzling a beer or with a ketchup-smeared mouth full of hot dog. Couples both wearing baseball caps can offer up some awkward maneuvering.

“It's a ‘Wizard of Oz,’ man-behind-the-curtain type thing,” Marquette said.

Like a hitter distinguishing between balls and strikes, he said, he believes that he has improved with practice at spotting actual couples. But sometimes he'll mistake siblings or stumble onto co-workers. Then

there are the times when a woman is sitting between two guys and she shows up on the scoreboard with the wrong one.

“So then you pan over, and it’s always a funny moment,” he said. “But from the outsider’s eye, it looks like she should have been with that other guy.”

Then the kiss cam is over, and the baseball game resumes.

Taking romance out of game?

Not everyone believes the kiss cam is any better than other gimmicks such as mascot races just because it’s popular. George Ritzer is a University of Maryland sociologist, baseball traditionalist and co-author of “The Postmodern Ballpark as a Leisure Setting.” He said ballparks are becoming “Disneyfied” theme parks designed to appease a new generation hooked on constant, rapidly changing stimulation. He calls the kiss cam “childish, distracting and silly.”

“What’s appalling is that people are less and less able to enjoy the slow-building dignity of a baseball game,” he said. “You need things like the kiss cam to keep people interested, and it’s disturbing.”

But the Twins production team considers it simply a fact of life — and marketing. “People in this day and age like to be stimulated,” Henschen said.

Marquette said he doesn’t think that the fun interferes with the game. In fact, he said, the kiss cam complements it.

“Baseball is very conducive to something like the kiss cam,” he said. “I mean, you have things like the seventh-inning stretch. It’s not like the craziness of football, where you’re standing and screaming almost the entire game. It’s a more cozy, intimate environment.”

He also understands firsthand the adrenaline rush the kiss cam can give.

A few years ago, Marquette and his girlfriend went to a Twins game. She never saw the kiss cam coming. Even he felt a little unnerved when he saw their faces on the scoreboard. Still, he made his move.

“There’s only one thing you should do,” he said. “Just kiss. It’s pretty simple.”

Andrew Wagaman • 612-673-4645

© 2013 Star Tribune