Nearly 125 years after their introduction, scorecards continue to connect with fans for their engaging simplicity and affordable collectibility

By TOM SCHOTT

In our technology-saturated 21st-century über-culture—when a fan in London can follow a Cardinals game as easily as one in Ladue, not to mention one in attendance at Busch Stadium—a folded piece of cardstock has stood the test of time.

The official scorecard, hawked by vendors at ballparks across the country, is one of the genuine staples of the American pastime, and no iPad or Droid can replicate its hands-on, tangible beauty. Today’s scorecard is your father’s scorecard, and his father’s—even his grandfather’s. They are simple yet unique, providing spectators a means of both identifying players and immersing themselves in the time-honored ritual of putting pencil to premium-weight paper to document the events of a game.

While sportswriter Henry Chadwick, a member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, introduced in the 1860s the system by which most fans keep score, Harry M. Stevens is credited with developing the “modern” scorecard in 1887. A baseball aficionado from England, Stevens was frustrated by his inability to identify players on the field using the bare-bones scoresheets available to fans of his era. When he created a scorecard imprinted with player names, a business enterprise was born—and so was the enduring sales cry of vendors, coined by Stevens, that persevered into the next century and beyond: “You can’t tell the players without a scorecard!”

The first known official Cardinals scorecard appeared in 1911, although there are local examples that date back to the 1880s, when the franchise’s forerunners, the St. Louis Browns, played in the American Association. Additionally, there are a variety of “scorebooks” that have survived from the 19th century—5- by 7-inch booklets of 20 or more pages of content built around a scoresheet displayed in the centerspread.

Besides providing a service to fans, Stevens also theorized that scorecards could serve as a vehicle to sell advertising that generated additional revenue. He
When Jesse Haines pitched the first no-hitter in Cardinals history in 1924, the details of the landmark moment occupied a not-so-prominent share of the game’s scorecard, which — like all cards of the era — was dominated by advertisements.
proved to be a visionary in that regard, too, as scorecards became sponsor-driven for virtually their entire existence. Advertisements have been a fixture on Cardinals scorecards since their inception, peaking in the period between the 1920s and 1949, when 30 to 40 advertisements monopolized the scorecard layout.

The importance the Cardinals attached to the scorecard was underscored in 1962, when the club announced it would become the first National League team to display players’ names on the backs of their jerseys. Stevens’ timeless sales pitch no longer was true – now you could, in fact, tell the players without a scorecard. But, as general manager Bing Devine pointed out at the time, the club decided on the switch only after consulting with the Chicago White Sox, who’d made the same move two years earlier and confirmed that scorecard sales hadn’t suffered.

In 1895, when the “Cardinals” were still called the Browns, spectators could follow the action with a pocket-size “scorebook,” a forerunner to the modern scorecard that combined 20 or more pages of content with a scoresheet in the centerspread.
The story of the Cardinals scorecard is mostly defined by four distinct eras, beginning in the 1920s. Prior to that, the history is difficult to pin down, given the scarcity of scorecards that have survived from the era. Other than the 1911 scorecard pictured below (from the collection of Jerry Vickery, former curator of both the Cardinals and Missouri Sports halls of fame), the oldest scorecard in the Cardinals Hall of Fame Museum dates from 1924, from a July 17 game in which Jesse Haines pitched the first no-hitter in club history.

The two-color, "advertising" era: From the 1920s through 1947, advertisements dominated the Cardinals’ official scorecard. Hawking everything from hot dogs to hotels and cigarettes to funeral services, sponsorship ads were what caught a fan’s eye. The entire front cover was dedicated to advertising, sometimes with as many as six ads on the page. Counting ads placed on the inside two pages and outside back cover, a scorecard might comprise nearly 40 ads. (The scorecard for the Cardinals’ 1928 pennant-winning season featured 36 advertisements.) The space allotted to the actual scoring “grids” was minimal – perhaps one-fourth of the actual page layout.

Full-color production was still a futuristic vision. Given the economies of using two-color printing, Cardinals scorecards were printed in red and black, or red and blue inks. The cost savings were critical. For much of the first half of the 1900s, team-produced scorecards competed with “unofficial” scorecards produced by bootleg vendors and sold outside the ballpark, often under the banner of “Everybody’s Scorecard.” Like the official club-produced product, the bootleg versions subsisted mainly with the support of advertising, in effect providing competition not only for game day sales of scorecards to fans on the street but also for the all-important advertising dollar.

The illustration era: Front-cover advertising took a sabbatical from the Cardinals scorecard beginning in 1949, when the club switched from a two-color printing process to full-color capabilities under owner Fred Saigh. The switch led to what many consider the “golden age” of Cardinals scorecards, with vivid paintings and hand-drawn illustrations featured on the cover through 1964.

Contracting with local illustrators, the club capitalized on the image of the Cardinal bird, as the cover became a canvas portraying iconic visuals still reproduced today. The depiction of a menacing Cardinal peering over his left shoulder, prepared to deliver a pitch, carried the cover for back-to-back seasons, in 1955-56. For four

Exactly 100 years ago, Cardinals fans who invested a nickel were scoring games on what is believed to be the earliest example of the team’s official scorecard.
consecutive years, 1958-61, a perky Cardinal sped around the basepaths. For the two years after that, a Cardinal bird soared skyward to make a game-saving catch. Each bird caricature — along with other illustrations from the era — has been recreated in artwork and ballpark signage still in use by the club in 2011.

The photography era: After the Cardinals captured the 1964 World Series title, the momentum of contemporary color photography took over the scorecard under the ownership of Anheuser-Busch. Color photographs dominated the team’s scorecard covers into the early 2000s, save for a brief renaissance of illustration during the 1970s. In addition, advertising returned to the cover. Except for the 2010 season, ads appeared on every scorecard cover beginning with the club’s May 12, 1966, move into Busch Memorial Stadium.

Notable from the era is the cover photograph of Cardinals shortstop Dick Groat, taking a hearty cut during the 1964 World Series. The image was featured not only on the 1965 scorecard cover, but also on scorecards for the first 10 home games in 1966, until the team moved out of old Sportsman’s Park (Busch I). At that point, a new scorecard was introduced featuring an aerial view of the new downtown ballpark and Gateway Arch, with the return of advertising to the front cover.

The illustration renaissance: As the 1990s gave way to the new millennium, Cardinals scorecards mixed a variety of...
images – an illustration by noted sports cartoonist Amadee Wohlschlaeger that saluted the beginning of interleague play in 1997, several photo-driven layouts, and a computer-generated graphic in 2002. But beginning in 2003, inspired by the creative vision of St. Louis artist Mike Right, retro-styled illustrations have ruled the roost. Right’s classic Cardinal-bird caricatures have been forced out of the lineup just once, in 2007, when the scorecard parroted a move also made in 1983, featuring a photo of the World Series trophy captured the previous season.

‘Get your lineups!’

Many fans are old enough to remember the anticipation they experienced as they purchased a scorecard at the ballpark, eager to inspect the starting lineups that were revealed inside.

It’s a feeling that exists only in memories, however. As baseball strategy evolved, with managers poring over matchups and tweaking their starting lineups almost daily, teams abandoned the tradition of producing scorecards with pre-printed game lineups. Given the potential for last-minute maneuvering, starting lineups often became outdated between the time a scorecard went to press and the point the umpire shouted “play ball.”

Starting lineups appeared in Cardinals scorecards through the 1982 season, facilitated by the luxury of having a printing press on-site at both Busch Stadium and Sportsman’s Park. The drill for getting lineup information from the manager’s office onto the scorecard was, literally, an overnight mission.

Shortly after the end of a game, a member of the Cardinals’ PR staff visited the home and visitors clubhouses to retrieve each manager’s probable starting lineup for the next day’s game. The information was whisked off to the press room – located behind the right-field corner at Busch and under the first-base stands at Sportsman’s – and delivered to a two-man team of union printers that had just clocked in at the ballpark. Setting type by hand, the pressmen cranked up the old press and ran scorecards past dawn, typically 10,000 to 15,000 per game.

Kip Ingle, a member of the club’s media relations staff through the 1980s, remembers the drill in its twilight years.

“Whitey (Herzog) was great; he always had his lineup ready,” Ingle recalled. “The visitors clubhouse could be another story. One manager, in particular, always seemed to be more occupied with visitors, and you’d be trying to pull the lineup out of his back pocket while he was entertaining guests.

“I’m not a historian or an expert on presses, but I remember that being an actual Gutenberg press,” Ingle continued, noting the German inventor credited with developing the modern, movable-type printing press in the 1400s. “There were two old pressmen who ran it, and they set metal type by hand, letter by letter.”

Even after starting lineups were discontinued, allowing scorecards to be printed without an overnight press run, it could still be a challenge gathering roster information for opponents.

“That was long before the days of email, so it was a matter of getting on the phone and writing down the roster from each opponent a few days before they came to town,” recalled Brian Bartow, the club’s current media relations director who joined the staff full time in 1987. “The typesetters were big fans and took a lot of pride in being accurate, and I don’t remember any gaffes along the way. They followed the transactions as closely as we did, and if something slipped by us, I remember they’d spot it before it ever made it to print.”
From the late 1960s into the new millennium, an anything-goes attitude defined the scorecard’s personality. While photo-inspired artwork became a front-cover fixture, hand-drawn illustrations still made cameo appearances.
Collecting memories

For countless fans, scorecards represent the perfect keepsake of a trip made to the ballpark. “Scorecards prove you were there. They tell stories and spur memories,” Vickery said.

They also have stature as a popular collectible in memorabilia circles, particularly scorecards from record-setting games or “special edition” scorecards that are produced specifically for milestone events. The Cardinals printed unique scorecards for Stan Musial’s final game in 1963, for the last game at Busch Memorial Stadium in 2005, and for the first game at Busch III a year later.

Scorecards that feature pre-printed game lineups also have special appeal, with the presence of Hall of Fame or All-Star players adding to the value.

With printing presses on-site at the ballpark, starting lineups appeared in Cardinals scorecards through the 1982 season. In the early 1920s, when uniform numbers were in experimental use, players also were assigned a “board number” (below), which was used to display lineup information on the hand-operated scoreboard at Sportsman’s Park.
In general, scorecards have proved to be a fairly inexpensive collectible. Vintage cards can command hundreds of dollars – and thousands for milestone games when they’re autographed by players who had principal roles in the game of note – but even scorecards 60 years old can be found for less than $50. Of course, condition is a prime consideration, with unscored cards deemed most valuable.

“Scorecards also are popular because they are the cheapest collectible to get autographed,” Vickery noted.

Indeed, as long as fans have lined box-seat railings seeking player autographs, scorecards have been a memento of choice for signatures. One of the most impressive collections of autographed Cardinals scorecards belongs to former Saint Louis University baseball coach Bob Hughes, who amassed more than 70 of them, most of which contain 10 to 15 autographs.

“He could pull out any of those scorecards and some memory would pop into his head,” said Vickery, who appraised the collection in 2008. “He could remember what happened the day of each game and the details of his meeting the individuals whose autographs he obtained.”

And for many scorekeeping purists, therein lies the greatest value of what a scorecard represents – the nostalgia of having been there and the memories associated with the plays they dutifully scored for posterity.

Bartow, who grew up in the 1960s and ’70s keeping score at games, wishes that more parents would pass on the tradition of scoring to their children.

“I’m not sure how many moms and dads are teaching their kids how to keep score,” he said. “In the press box, we keep score electronically on Major League Baseball’s computer system, but I still keep a scorebook every game.

“It’s one of the great traditions of baseball.”

Tom Schott is a free-lance writer based in Indiana.