

MLB testing hands-free entry for fans utilizing facial authentication, AI security

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A facial scan camera is seen at Citizens Bank Park before a baseball game between the Los Angeles Angels and the Philadelphia Phillies, Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023, in Philadelphia. The Phillies ballpark is the site of an MLB pilot program that allows ticketed fans to walk into the stadium just through facial recognition. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Slocum

Major League Baseball is testing facial authentication-based entry that would allow ticketed fans to walk directly into stadiums—a convenient new arrival method that the league says won't compromise on safety and security.

No more fumbling for a phone at entry, waiting through a wonky bar code scan, or shuffling through a lengthy line at one gate to catch a baseball game at the home of the National League champions.

The Philadelphia Phillies have partnered with MLB to use their stadium as the site of a pilot program called [Go-Ahead Entry](#), which uses facial authentication-based entry for ticketed fans.

Forget Shohei Ohtani or Bryce Harper, the faces of the game at Citizens Bank Park this week were the fans that snapped selfies through the MLB Ballpark app, breezed past a facial scan camera, and were soon hunting for their seats or nearest hot dog stand.

Sports fans have long adjusted to electronic tickets on smartphones, and have the capacity to order everything from chicken fingers to foam fingers on devices from their seats without missing a pitch, punt or power play.

Now comes hands-free entry to one ballpark—one that takes advantage of existing contact-less security protocols. Fans have eagerly used the technology so far, even after safety fears were heightened after Chicago police said a shooting that wounded two women at Friday night's Athletics-White Sox game most likely involved a gun that went off inside Guaranteed Rate Field



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Karri Zaremba, Major League Baseball's senior vice president of product, said Go-Ahead entry had been in the works for more than two years. The program—complete with Go-Ahead banners at the first base gate directing fans—was launched Aug. 21.

All Phillies fans entering through the first base and left field gates could already walk through security screening without having to stop to open bags or be checked individually. The Phillies use Evolv Technology,

which uses AI sensor technology to expedite entry and eliminate the need to remove cell phones, cameras, coins, and keys and place them in a screening bowl, or to have patrons checked individually with metal detecting wands.

"These are the most advanced security systems on the market today," Zaremba said. "That is a completely separate step as part of (Go-Ahead), but we pair it together because both support free flow."

Evolv technology is used at select other stadiums, such as Fenway Park and SoFi Stadium, and puts a premium on safety. Baseball fans and players say they've always felt safe at the ballpark.

"I can't remember a time where I felt scared of another human at a ballpark," Phillies outfielder Brandon Marsh said. "That's never on my mind. I'm worrying about the task and job at hand. There's already a lot to worry about."

Jason Ritchie, from Bath, Maine, road-tripped to Philly with his 13-year-old son to watch four Phillies games and used the Go-Ahead entry for every one. Ritchie said he had no concerns about the program and appreciated the volume and speed—an E-ZPass, of sorts, for humans—the cameras could handle that made entry a snap.



Fans line up outside a facial scan entrance at Citizens Bank Park before a baseball game between the Los Angeles Angels and the Philadelphia Phillies, Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023, in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Phillies ballpark is the site of an MLB pilot program that allows ticketed fans to walk into the stadium just through facial recognition. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Slocum

"You don't have to put your bags down," he said. "You keep walking and I don't have to have my tickets out. I think it's a great idea. If they don't have to go through your bags, if you don't have to keep your tickets out, it makes it very easy."

Fans 18 and older can register and take a selfie for Go-Ahead entry through the app. The photo is stored as a unique numerical token before the image is deleted—and a photo needs to be taken only once. Then

fans walk through the gate—the Phillies have two stations set up at the first base gate—without stopping or needing a phone.

One device was used for the first series of a nine-game homestand and a second Go-Ahead facial scan camera was deployed for the final six games based on enrollment numbers and positive fan sentiment.

More than 7,000 fans had enrolled ahead of a three-game series against the Angels.

Zaremba said fan photos are instantly deleted and the tokens are not connected to any type of security system.

"That's part of the reason it's taken us a long time," she said. "We wanted to be very thoughtful and considerate in our approach. We wanted to make sure that fans were comfortable. It's a completely optional service. No one has to use this. But if they want a faster, more frictionless experience to enter the ballpark, then we wanted to offer them a way to do that."



A person walks through a facial scan entrance at Citizens Bank Park before a baseball game between the Los Angeles Angels and the Philadelphia Phillies, Tuesday, Aug. 29, 2023, in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Phillies ballpark is the site of an MLB pilot program that allows ticketed fans to walk into the stadium just through facial recognition. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Slocum

The Phillies, who lead the NL wild-card standings and average 38,866 fans, said they might add another camera or two for the postseason, if necessary. Should the program meet MLB's expectations, it could expand to other ballparks next season.

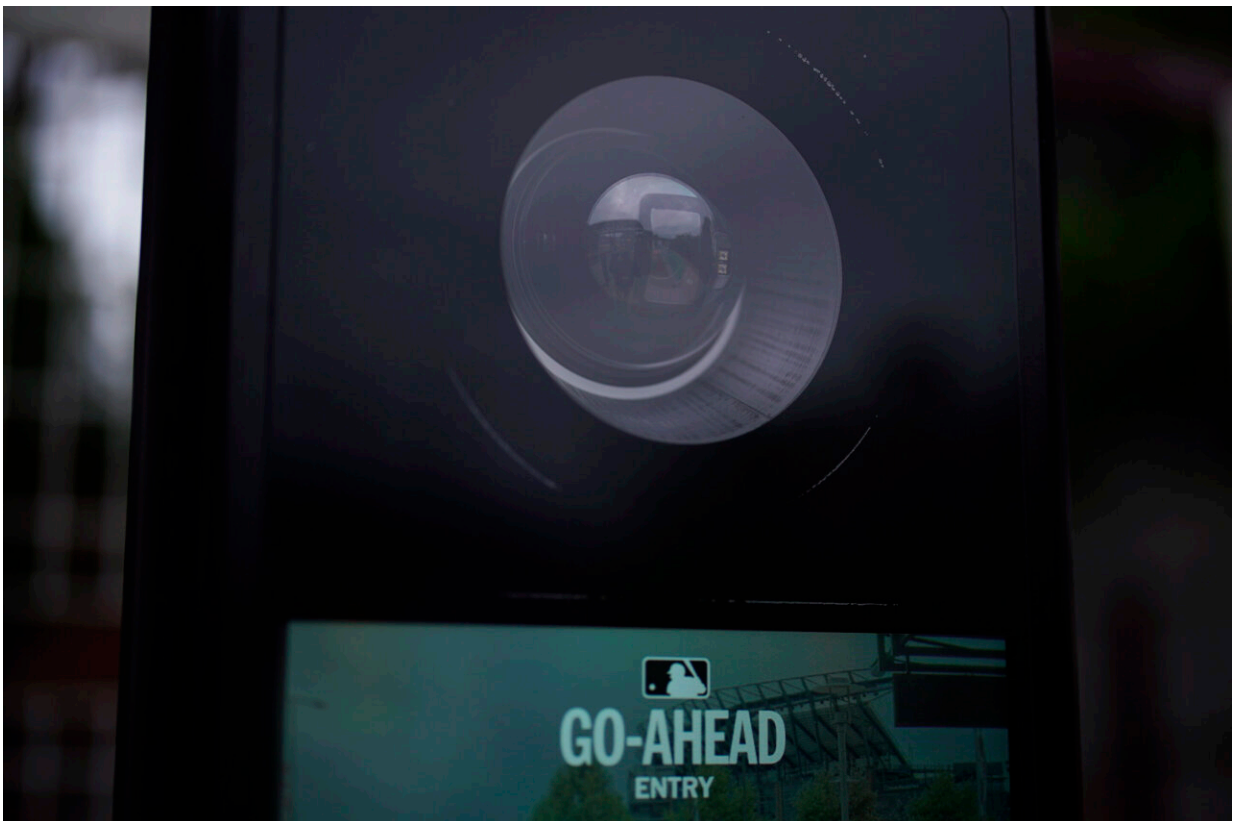
Fans seemed to enjoy mugging for the camera, smiling, laughing, as they walked inside. One early hitch, the camera captured too many background faces, a problem resolved simply by spacing people out a bit

more.

Zaremba said the program was designed to remain separate from any kind of security or monitoring system at the ballpark.

In other words, don't expect to get kicked out of the stadium like how some [fans](#)—notably, attorneys—were [booted by James Dolan and Madison Square Garden](#) through the arena's use of facial recognition technology.

MLB and the Phillies were quick to [note the difference](#) between their facial authentication and facial recognition.



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"This is not scanning a crowd looking for people," said Phillies vice president and chief technology officer Sean Walker. "This is determining if a person is authenticated. We're not tied to any law enforcement. There's certainly no sharing of the data. It's simply to get you into the ballpark. It's not facial surveillance."

Smile. You might need one to attend a Phillies game.

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