

# Take me out to the screen: VR baseball a hit

July 10 2017, by Ronald Blum

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In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, Dennis Milman reaches to catch a virtual ball at the All-Star FanFest in Miami Beach, Fla. Virtual Reality baseball is a hit at the All-Star FanFest in Miami. Fans get to feel what it's like to be the San Francisco Giants' Buster Posey catching without the pain of snatching major league pitches at 86-to-93 mph. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

Nicholas Montes put on goggles and a catcher's mitt and crouched.

The 13-year-old will never catch a 104 mph pitch from Aroldis

Chapman. But at the All-Star FanFest, he felt what it's like to be Buster Posey snagging virtual strikes.

"It like I was actually in the game. When I was catching, I felt the ball move and everything," the 13-year-old from Miami said enthusiastically Sunday. "And then when I saw it go in my glove, I tried touching the ball, but I felt the remote control thing. So it was pretty cool."

Developed by GMR Marketing, the Esurance Behind The Plate With Buster Posey VR Experience allows fans to "catch" fastballs, curveballs and sliders from a generic pitcher at velocities ranging from 86-93 mph.

"I've always said that I thought it would be cool for the average fan to either step in the box or like this get behind the plate and get the same sense of what it's like to see a 90-plus, 95-mile an hour fastball coming your way," Posey explained last week.

Esurance Insurance Services Inc., a subsidiary of Allstate Corp., became a sponsor of Major League Baseball in 2015 and signed Posey as a brand ambassador. The company had a 180-degree photo experience at the 2015 FanFest in Cincinnati, then provided 360-degree videos of fans taking swings last year in San Diego.



In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, Andy Grabin takes off the catcher mitt with sensors after catching visual pitches at the All-Star FanFest in Miami Beach, Fla. Virtual Reality baseball is a hit at the All-Star FanFest in Miami. Fans get to feel what it's like to be the San Francisco Giants' Buster Posey catching without the pain of snatching major league pitches at 86-to-93 mph. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

In a dual setup at FanFest, which opened Friday and runs through Tuesday, people get to signal for three pitches over about 90 seconds as Posey's recorded voice offers tips. They can choose the pitch type by pointing their glove toward an icon on the screen, triggering a sensor.

When a pitch is successfully caught, the person hears and feels the mitt snap.

"It is as real as it can be," Danny Devarona, a 48-year-old who coaches youth baseball in Miami Lakes, said after taking his turn.

Commercial and social media content was shot over two days during spring training in Scottsdale, Arizona, where Posey's San Francisco Giants train. Posey's voice-over was recorded after the season started.

"Are you ready? All right, let's see what you've got," Posey's voice tells fans. "This guy throws a nasty curve. The trick is to keep your glove below the ball and your eye on it. ... Keep your chin down and be ready to slide to your right, because this one might hit the dirt."



In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, the catcher mitt with sensors and goggles used for virtual catching are shown at the All-Star FanFest in Miami Beach, Fla. Fans

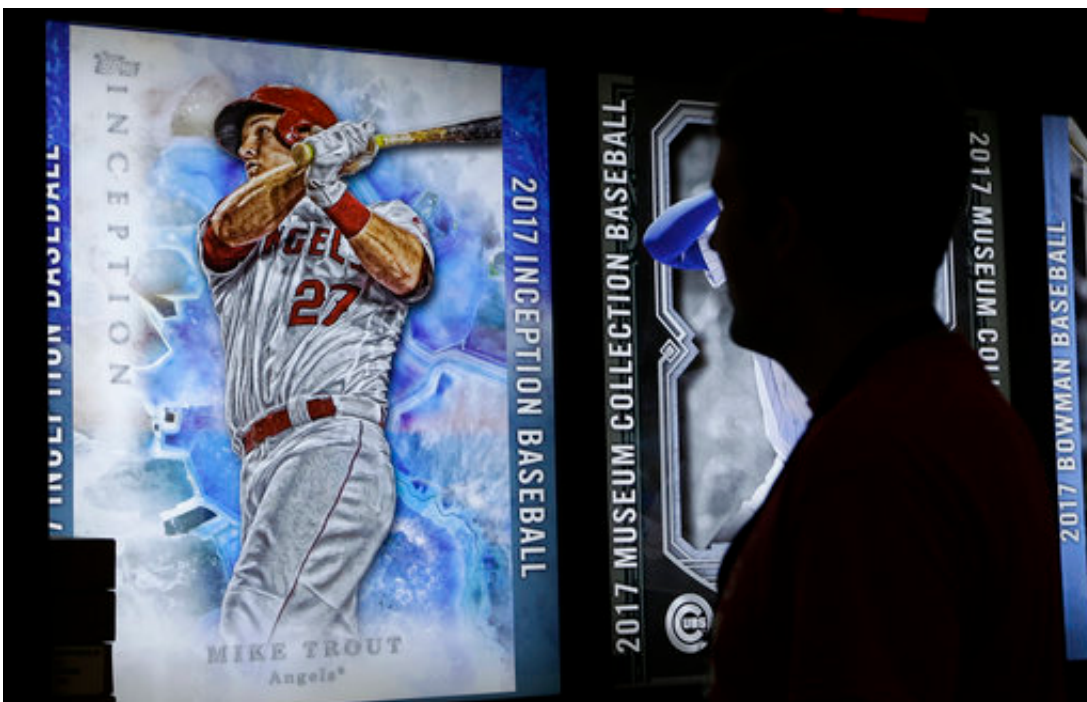
put on goggles and a catcher's mitt, crouch and get ready. They will never catch a 104 mph from Aroldis Chapman. But at the All-Star FanFest they could feel like what it is like to be Buster Posey, receiving virtual pitches. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

"Nice job! Right in the pocket," he tells fans when they succeed.

"Yeah, that was a tricky one," he says when they fail.

Based on PITCH f/x data, breaks of 38-to-52 inches are simulated.

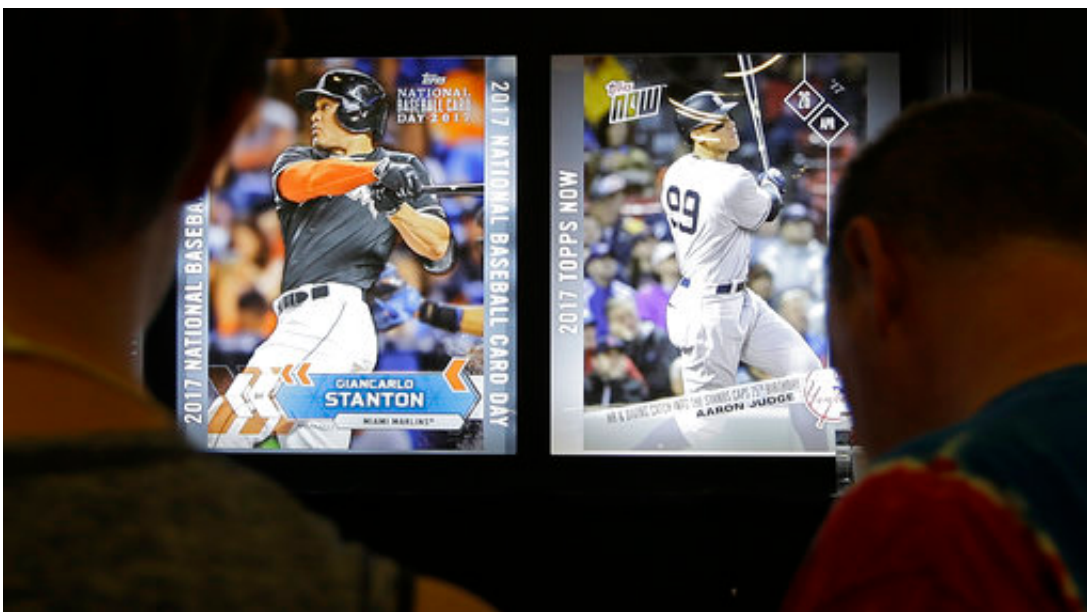
"Fans will receive a social-sharable video for them that they can then distribute to their friends," said Kristen Gambetta, Esurance's brand partnerships manager. "With VR, there's something really entertaining about seeing people's facial reactions and kind of seeing their movements and how they react to having a ball flying at their face."



In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, a fan looks at an enlarged baseball card of Los Angeles Angels' Mike Trout, at a booth at the All-Star FanFest at the Miami Beach Convention Center in Miami Beach, Fla. Virtual Reality baseball is a hit at the All-Star FanFest in Miami. Fans get to feel what it's like to be the San Francisco Giants' Buster Posey catching without the pain of snatching major league pitches at 86-to-93 mph. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

Several thousand fans were expected to put on the electronic "tools of ignorance" over the five days. And unlike real catchers, they won't have to stuff sponges in the glove to absorb the impact.

"Let's just say I'm pretty impressed. I don't think I can ever catch or hit for that matter a Major League Baseball curveball," said Pablo Souki, a 38-year-old from Venezuela who lives in Miami. "That was pretty eye-opening."



In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, a fan looks at enlarged baseball cards of

Miami Marlins' Giancarlo Stanton, left, and New York Yankees' Aaron Judge at a booth at the All-Star FanFest at the Miami Beach Convention Center in Miami Beach, Fla. Virtual Reality baseball is a hit at the All-Star FanFest in Miami. Fans get to feel what it's like to be the San Francisco Giants' Buster Posey catching without the pain of snatching major league pitches at 86-to-93 mph. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)



In this Friday, July 7, 2017, photo, fans walk by photo of Washington Nationals' Bryce Harper at the All-Star FanFest at the Miami Beach Convention Center in Miami Beach, Fla. Virtual Reality baseball is a hit at the All-Star FanFest in Miami. Fans get to feel what it's like to be the San Francisco Giants' Buster Posey catching without the pain of snatching major league pitches at 86-to-93 mph. (AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

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