

SBJ salutes the hot dog

The lowly hot dog still accounts for 10 percent to 15 percent of concession sales

By BILL KING

Senior writer

Published July 17, 2006 : Page 01

As Tom Olson arrives for work at Miller Park soon after 7 a.m. on July 4, he crosses paths with a Milwaukee Brewers ticket manager, who beams while relaying the news that the day's gate might exceed 40,000.

"Well, good for you," Olson says, thrusting out an upturned thumb.

It is not particularly good news for Olson, the general manager at Miller Park for concessionaire Sportservice Corp. Not that he doesn't like big crowds. Big crowds drink rivers of beer and soda and eat enough nuts to choke an elephant. But on this holiday afternoon, they are coming at a higher rate than predicted, drawn by a promotion that is quintessentially Milwaukee.

Faced with years of slow sales for the holiday weekend, when many in the region head for the lakes, Brewers marketers decided to fight back this season. They are giving away a bobblehead. Or is it a bobbledog? What, precisely, should you call a bobblehead made in the image of a 7-foot-tall celebrity frankfurter? Whatever it is, they are giving one away to every fan who comes through the gates. They also are selling hot dogs for \$1.

Either promotion, by itself, would be cause for Brewers fans to polka. Polling shows that the racing sausages, four cartoon-faced mascots who circle the bases after the sixth inning of every home game, are recognized by more than 80 percent of Milwaukeeans and adored by most of them. The Brewers hot dog sponsor, the Klement Sausage Co., uses the characters liberally at festivals, supermarket openings and other events across Wisconsin and Minnesota.

A bland filler that rarely generates more than \$200,000 for most teams, the hot dog category brings in more than \$300,000 in cash and promotional spending for the Brewers, making it more lucrative than any of the team's auto deals.

"First all-fan bobble of a sausage in Brewers history," says Rick Schlesinger, executive vice president of business operations for the Brewers. "Combine it with dollar hot dogs and you go from good to great."



Dollar hot dogs at Miller Park were a Fourth of July treat for young and old alike.



A worker handles racks of hot dogs at one of the Klement Sausage Co. plants in Milwaukee.

It is the latter half of that combo that worries Olson, whose staff expects to cook and serve more than 30,000 hot dogs, which is about 5 1/2 times as many as it sells during a typical game.

With about 500,000 hot dogs sold last year, the Brewers keep pace with many of their brethren across baseball. The Yankees claimed to sell 2 million last year, when they drew 4 million fans. The Dodgers say they sell about 1.6 million a season, or 20,500 a game. The Cubs, Red Sox, Cardinals and Giants report that they're over 15,000 a game. But most teams say they come in at 8,000 to 10,000 a game, or 700,000 for the year.

That puts the MLB hot dog market at about 22 million for the season.

While retail hot dog sales have declined in recent years, most stadium managers say they've remained steady at the park, buoyed by a shift toward recognized brands, larger sizes and regional touches, such as the Skyline Chili cheese coney dogs that account for about 40 percent of hot dog sales at Great American Ballpark in Cincinnati.

Accounting for 10 percent to 15 percent of concession sales, the hot dog remains the top-selling food item at all MLB stadiums, even at Miller Park, where it gets, ahem, a run for its money from the bratwurst (260,000 sold last season) and Italian and Polish sausages (100,000 sold, combined).

Priced at \$1, the reliable old dog figures to dominate sales for July 4.

Schlesinger projected a crowd of about 20,000 when he sold Olson on offering dollar dogs on a holiday. Based on better-than-expected sales, he updated that to 29,000 a week before the game. By Saturday, it looked like 34,000 might be a more accurate number. And now, 40,000 appears to be in range.

"When you agreed to something like this seven months ago, it didn't seem like a big deal," Olson said. "But when they start talking about 40,000 people, it becomes one."

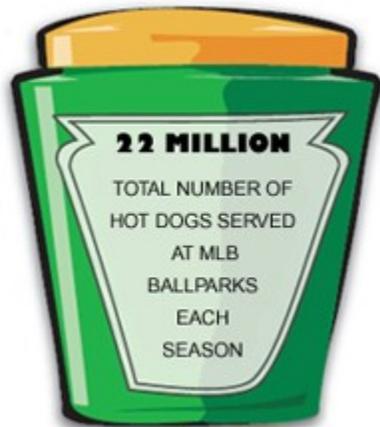
Still, Olson can't help smiling as he considers what lies ahead. He started in the concessions business 27 years ago, at age 16, as a porter at the Brewers' old ballpark. Finally, all these years later, the most consistent performer to come through Milwaukee gets its day.

America's birthday, and the hot dog is the star of the show. There is only one way to do its story justice.

Follow the frank.

■ The making of the dog

Though they don't come stamped with a born-on date, there's a good chance that most of the 33,566 Klement's hot dogs served at Miller Park on July 4 entered the world on April 17, when they were ground, mixed, stuffed, smoked and blast frozen to minus-12 degrees.



How much do you know about hot dogs?

[Take the National Hot Dog and Sausage Council quiz here.](#)

Klement's executives know this because each case of meat that leaves either of the company's two south Milwaukee factories carries a bar code that identifies not only when and where it was produced but also the source and path of each of the ingredients contained within it.

You might think of it as "mystery meat." In fact, those are the words one Brewers fan used to describe his cargo as he made his way from the concession stand with a cardboard carrier stacked with five dogs. But they disdain mystery at Klement's Lincoln Avenue factory, where 195 employees churn out almost 400,000 pounds of processed meat each week in the elder of two plants that the company operates.

When a 2,000-pound pallet of raw, butchered beef arrives at the factory, it is bar coded and entered into the tracking system.

Here it begins its march toward Miller Park.

Beef and pork each are classified as lean or fat and run separately through 1/8-inch grinders, providing a base. The meats are then mixed and ground again, following Klement's recipes. Some, such as the company's Chicago-style dogs, call for all beef. Others, like the hot dogs served at Miller Park, are blends of beef and pork.

Most anyone who makes or sells hot dogs will tell you that, as sure as there are red states and blue states, there are beef states and pork states. The Northeast and the West tend to prefer all-beef hot dogs. Mixtures are the norm in much of the Midwest and South.



"If you look at the country regionally, the flavor profile in the hot dog is very diverse," said Brett Lewis, executive chef at Centerplate, which operates concessions at MLB parks in New York, St. Petersburg, Kansas City, Minneapolis, San Francisco and Seattle. "In Indiana, they prefer a large amount of pork. In New York and California, it has to be 100 percent all beef. There are parts of the country that still think the fillers are good things. It can really vary."

Hot dogs are loaded into giant smokers at Klement's. Don't bother asking what spices the company uses; that's a well-guarded secret.

The distinction also can fall along lines of loyalty. In Southern California, where Dodger Dogs hold a revered place atop all sporting cuisine, the Angels have managed to eclipse their fabled neighbors on the field, but still can't match them at the concession stands. While the Dodgers say they sell about 20,500 of their celebrity weenies per game, the Angels sell about 12,000.

For several years, the Angels had hot dog provider Wienerschnitzel, a chain with 340 outlets in 10 states, working on a "Halo Dog" concept that they could call their own. A frankfurter shaped like a cinnamon roll and served on a hamburger bun showed promise until it unfurled when cooked in the test kitchens.

For marketing reasons unrelated to that misfire, the Angels switched this year from Wienerschnitzel to Farmer John, the same company that makes the Dodger Dog. Executives from the club and its concessionaire, Aramark, spent three days tasting hot dogs, searching for a dog they liked that could

stand on its own.

They are quick to point out distinctions between their dog and the Dodger Dog.

"We're all beef, they're all meat," said Kevin Hengehold, resident district manager for Aramark, which handles concessions for the Angels. "It's a different flavor profile and a different look. Ours has more snap. It's a darker product. A little more red."

Some of the flavor is dictated by the meat, but most comes from the blend of spices. At Klement's, that mix is concocted in a spice room that includes buckets of all the usual suspects, paprika, coriander and mace among them. A well-worn computer terminal on a work counter spits out recipes. Type in the code for the product, along with a quantity, and up pops a recipe.

Klement's says it makes about 800 variations of smoked meats, when you consider various sizes, but most sales come from about 100 of them. For the items that it produces most, Klement's buys spices pre-mixed. The company recipe for a standard hot dog, for example, contains a prodigious amount of "Basic Blend A."



Trying to get more specific than what's printed on the packages brings a raised eyebrow from Dan Sotski, vice president of plant operations at the Lincoln Avenue factory.

"The spice company knows what goes into our basic blend A, B or C, but that's all they know," said Sotski, who got his bachelor's degree in meat science from Wisconsin and has worked for Klement's for 25 years. "We take the secrecy of those recipes very seriously, because your flavor profile is your company. All plants have similar equipment. What's different is how you spice the product, how you smoke it and what meats you use."

Most hot dogs served in ballparks are identical to those that the providers offer at supermarkets. But some are made to order.

The San Diego Padres ran taste tests with fans last year as they searched for a higher-end alternative to their ballpark standard, the Friar Frank, made by Wienerschnitzel. They found an appetite for more spice — not surprising, considering that the Padres say they go through about 58 gallons of chopped jalapenos a game at Petco Park.

Working with local gourmet sausage maker Tarantino, they came up with the Diego Dog: a Bavarian-style, natural-casing, quarter-pound hot dog with a kick. Served made-to-order out of a cart, it comes with salsa and cabbage, like the fish tacos that are a San Diego staple. There's also a house-made jalapeno mustard applied liberally.

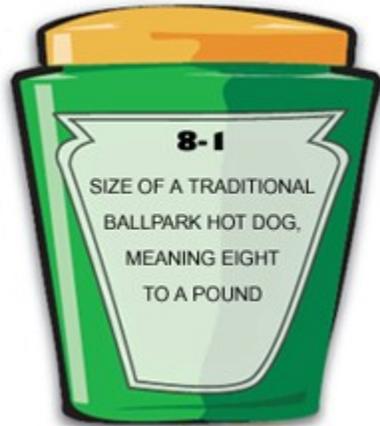
"People walk away with one and either love them or hate them," said Mike Phillips, Sportservice's GM at Petco Park, who said he has put on 10 pounds eating Diego Dogs this season. "Mostly, the feedback has been good."

Hot dog sponsors sometimes offer sizes in ballparks that they don't offer at the grocery store. But only one offers an entirely unique product. Hormel, the Minneapolis-based meat giant that makes the Dome Dogs served at Twins games, does not sell hot dogs in stores. But the company is a Twins sponsor and it wants its meats served at games.

And when's the last time you heard a vendor hawk a canned ham?

■ One big frank

Once the meat and spices are mixed, they're ready to take on their shape. The mixture is poured into a linking machine, where it is injected at precise intervals into casings. Settings determine the speed at which the meat flows and the number of twists that seal each link — 3.2 turns for a natural-casing hot dog — allowing the same machine to produce a narrow hot dog or a fat wurst.



While the sausage factory is far more automated than it was when the Klement brothers got into the business in 1956, this is a stage at which human hands are essential. Three women stand along the assembly line as the hot dogs emerge from the machine, checking each to make sure that the meat fed evenly into the casing, squeezing off those that didn't, and hanging them from hooks so they can eventually be transported to Klement's smokers in the next room.

Because natural casings are sheep intestines, they're not always consistent in thickness or length. A strip of natural casing rarely runs more than 20 feet. Manufactured cellulose casings run 95 feet and require less labor to stuff.

An aside for those looking for an authentic Chicago experience: Traditional Chicago dogs are skinless, made with a cellulose casing that is removed before it leaves the factory. When cold, the skinless Chicago dog will sink to the bottom of a vendor's tank of hot water. If made properly, the air inside it will expand after three minutes of heating, causing the dog to float to the top.

"That way," Sotski said, "the vendor always grabs the hot ones."

That you don't have to be at a Cubs or White Sox game to get an authentic Chicago-style dog — served with mustard, onion, sweet relish, a pickle spear, tomato wedges, sport peppers and celery salt, all on a poppy seed bun — is evidence that the broadening of ballpark menus extends to the most basic of items.

Long gone are the days of a one-size-fits-all frank.

The hot dog that Klement's provides to the Brewers is an 8-1, meaning eight to a pound. That's a traditional ballpark size, going back for decades, although in keeping with the supersize mentality of U.S. consumers, some parks have made a 6-1 dog their standard.

At Comerica Park in Detroit, the basic dog is Ball Park, by Sara Lee, a team sponsor. But, while the Ball Park frank you'll find at the supermarket is an 8-1, the company makes an all-meat 6-1 for the Tigers. The Hebrew National kosher frank sold at Comerica is a 5-1. The natural-casing dog used for the popular Detroit-styled coney dogs served at the park is an 8-1.

You need a scorecard to keep up with all the combinations offered at some stadiums.

At RFK, where the kitchen facilities are cramped and outdated, Aramark's local general manager created a Hounds by the Pound stand that allows fans to choose from three sizes — 3-1, 6-1 or 8-1 — or order a kosher dog or veggie dog. The cart offers chili, cheese, sauerkraut, salsa and other toppings.

"You can drag the hot dog through the kitchen," said GM Greg Costa, who says the concept has doubled sales at a slow stand in an area that has in-seat service. "It's something that people will find out about and go back to."

It's similar to a concept that Centerplate has tried to turn into a brand of its own, the "Top Dog." Top Dog is the Subway of hot dog stands, allowing the customer to choose from four hot and nine cold toppings, all of which can be adjusted to fit local preferences. Hot dogs can be pre-heated, held and finished on the grill. Centerplate chefs recommend at least a 6-1 sized dog for the stands.

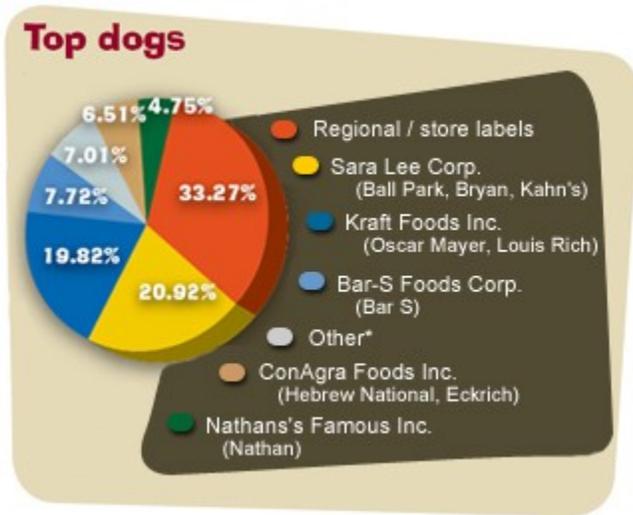
Bobby Diccio, director of concessions for Aramark at Turner Field, thought that was a hearty-sized frank when he worked at Shea Stadium and Fenway Park. When he took the job in Atlanta three years ago, the Braves told him they wanted to offer something larger. He put a quarter-pound hot dog onto the menu, along with the standard 6-1.

Three years later, he sells three of the quarter-pound dogs for every one of his smaller dogs. Both are made by Hebrew National.

"When I came here, you couldn't have convinced me that the bigger of the two would be the big seller," Diccio said. "Everybody wants the big dog. You don't believe that everything is bigger in the South until you see it with your own eyes."

In a nation that serves triple-stacked burgers through the window of your car, could the ballpark frank's upper limit be a quarter of a pound? Hardly.

The Padres offer a half-pound, all-beef Slugger Dog at the Randy Jones barbecue stand. The Angels grill a half-pound dog over an open flame. At the Metrodome, they'll sell about 350 half-pound Chicago dogs for a well-attended weekend game and more than twice that many for the typical Vikings game.



The sausage mascots that race at Miller Park have been a huge marketing tool for Klement's.

The Astros knew that their fans gravitated toward large sizes, based on the popularity of their signature frank, the Super Star, which weighed in at 1/3 pound. So when they were considering options for a grill in a high-traffic area on the main concourse, a half-pounder, served open-faced with peppers and onions, seemed like a fit.

"Like the Texas slogan says, often bigger is better," said Scott McGinn, Aramark's general manager at Minute Maid Park. "We looked around trying to find something unique, but you're talking about a hot dog. You have to stretch it to find something. We decided that we'd build on that 3-1 dog that had a lot of success.

"Bigger is indeed better."

■ Keep 'em coming

After the hot dogs emerge from the linker, they're ready for the Klement's smokehouse. Hanging by the hundreds on wheeled racks, they are rolled into a wall of gleaming steel smoking boxes. Once the door is closed and pressure-sealed, the hot dogs are rinsed and then dried.

Finely chopped hardwood chips — typically hickory — burn in bins attached to pipes that feed into the boxes. Smoke is injected under pressure in measured doses. The amount of smoke and moisture levels in the room affect both the taste and color of the finished product.

Once finished smoking, the hot dogs and sausages used in the food service industry are blast frozen in batches of 6,000 to 10,000 pounds, bagged and readied for delivery. The shipment that went to Miller Park for use on July 4 arrived on July 1. A day later, the kitchen staff emptied them, 80 to a pan, and stacked the pans in idle heaters, which they rolled into a vast holding cooler in the main commissary, where the dogs defrosted for two days.

That's where they were at 5 a.m., when catering chef Mike Clark arrived and started cooking.

"It looked like the Grand Canyon in here this morning," says Clark, pointing out a narrow aisle that he made between the stacked pans of thawing meat. By the time gates opened at 11 a.m., Clark had sent 11,440 cooked hot dogs out to the concession stands, where they could be placed on buns and served. An additional 3,200 cold dogs went out by 9 a.m. Those were steamed at the stands. When the game started, Clark had 1,920 steamed dogs at the ready in the commissary. As those went out, he cooked more.



For a typical game, at least 95 percent of all hot dogs served at Miller Park are grilled. But in order to keep up with the demand of a dollar day, about 38 percent will come out of the steamer.

"We'd generally rather not steam them," Olson said. "But if we didn't do it today, we'd get killed. We'd fall behind and we'd never catch up."

Grilling is the clear preference at most parks across baseball, made possible by a generation of parks built with cooking in mind (see related story, Page 14). But there are exceptions.

At Fenway Park, the venerable Fenway Frank comes boiled. When Aramark took over concessions there in 1995, it installed roller grills at every stand so that cooked dogs could be moved from the steamers and staged, making it easier to keep lines moving. It was a monumental flop. One fan after another waved off the franks that were on the rollers, insisting theirs come straight from the steam box.

"They didn't want anything to do with the Fenway Frank coming off the roller grills," said Rich Roper, Aramark's regional vice president who oversees Fenway. "They just wanted the stuff right out of the steamers. So today, even with all the renovations and the portable grills, we still steam most of them."

Aramark got another lesson a year later, when it planned on replacing the brown mustard served at Fenway with yellow mustard. When it made the switch at the club's spring training home in Fort Myers, Roper got a preview of what would ensue if the brown mustard went missing at Fenway.

"They were screaming in Fort Myers, so we knew what was coming," Roper said. "We made sure there was brown mustard. If you ever put out the yellow mustard again, you'd have a riot."

Of course, fans often are willing to soften expectations when they're only paying a dollar for a dog. The pressing issue on those days is distribution, rather than presentation. No concession operation is more familiar with those stresses than Aramark's crew in Philadelphia, where dollar dog days typically goose sales beyond the 40,000 mark. For one game earlier this year, they sold 54,000.

"When you're doing 54,000 hot dogs, you're preparing for the extremes," said Kevin Tedesco, director of concessions for Aramark at Citizens Bank Park. "It's just a frenzy. It's a cooking and feeding frenzy."

Tedesco says he's seen fans order 50 at a time, then take them back to a section to host a hot dog eating contest. Some hang spent wrappers from the railings near their seats as trophies.

Miller Park has hosted enough dollar days as part of an annual April promotion for Olson to have a feel for what it would take to pull it off for a larger audience. Because of the proximity to the holiday, he had to go outside Milwaukee for additional labor. He bused in 50 experienced concessions workers from Sportservice's operation in Detroit and put them up for a night. A bus with 60 workers from Soldier Field arrived in the morning.

When Olson phoned his Sportservice counterpart from Detroit to ask for the extra hands, he heard a chuckle on the other end of line.

"I told him, 'Good luck, Tom,' " said John Verespie, the Sportservice GM at Comerica Park in Detroit. "A dollar hot dog. It's just crazy."

■ **Sponsored sausage**

As fans file through the turnstiles at Miller Park, boxed bobbleheads in hand and dollars for dogs at the ready, Schlesinger watches from a window in his office, scanning final attendance projections.

On a wall to his left, a prominently placed photo features five faces that would be familiar to most baseball fans in Milwaukee: the four Klement's racing sausages — Hot Dog, Brat, Polish and Italian — and Jerry Reinsdorf, grinning like a child who just met Mickey.

The White Sox owner posed for the shot in April, after the sausage characters showed up at Comiskey Park in their sausage van, loaded with a congratulatory lunch for Reinsdorf and his staff. That the sandwiches came from a Milwaukee deli that MLB commissioner Bud Selig has owned since 1969 adds spice to the story.



Forget handing out bobbleheads of players. In Milwaukee, July 4 was all about the hot dog.

"We thought it was a nice way for us to acknowledge their winning the World Series," Schlesinger said.

A nice, uniquely Milwaukee way.

No other market in baseball has made as much hay from its hot dog sponsorship as the Brewers, who regularly generate national exposure for Klement's through the racing sausages.

When a misguided Pirates player dinked the Italian sausage with a bat three years ago, Brewers fans wanted him jailed. They settled for a \$432 disorderly conduct fine. Since then, the sausages have appeared in a film with Bernie Mac and a pair of ESPN's "This is SportsCenter" promotional spots, the first of which made its debut last month.

"The sausage characters have become a part of our mascot culture here," Schlesinger said. "The visibility is huge, which is great for Klement's and great for us. The marketing folks at Klement's get it. They understand how impactful it is for the company. All of that has manifested itself to make this a significant category for us."

As endemic as hot dogs are to baseball, the major brands that produce them have not spent heavily in sports. Hebrew National added four parks to its portfolio this year, bringing it to 14, but all but a few of those are smaller relationships that carve out a spot for the brand as a kosher product.

Hebrew National is testing promotions meant to raise its profile in several parks, making a push that featured Fred Lynn when it debuted at Fenway this year and running a contest that uses hawkers as brand ambassadors at Comerica Park. In Atlanta, it provides the primary dog served at Turner Field.

"One of the ways we're using these venue relationships is to acculturate the brands in these markets where kosher awareness is less," said Jon Swadley, marketing manager for ConAgra's Hebrew National brand. "There's not a great understanding, and maybe a 'not for me' connotation. When it's served at Wrigley Field or Turner Field, it does become for me."

Swadley says half the consumers who try Hebrew National will convert to the brand. Because of that, Hebrew National would rather do business with teams that can deliver ballparks rather than leagues, which cannot. MLB's ranking sponsorship executive, John Brody, says that's fine with him.

"I'm not actively pursuing any opportunities there because I really feel that this is a category that's best left to the clubs and their concessionaires," said Brody, MLB's senior vice president of corporate sales and marketing. "We don't like to get into their kitchen. We certainly don't want to get into their meat."

MLB might be more tempted if the meat companies spent sponsorship dollars the way the breweries and sodamakers do. Klement's is an exception, blending an advertising play that has happily, but unintentionally, gone national with a massive sampling opportunity that remains the core of the sponsorship.

"We do cooking demonstrations at the retail level, but you reach very few people that way," said Jeff Klement, a second-generation sausager who is vice president of administration for Klement's. "Getting it in their hands, and then their mouths, at a ballgame is a testimonial. You're taking your product out there and you're proving it every game."

"The signage in the park and all the things we do with the sausage racers are great reinforcement. But it starts with getting that hot dog or sausage into somebody's mouth at the game."

The premium

Klement's pays for the category is driven by a few factors. The popularity of the racing sausage characters gives it exposure that far exceeds that of the typical sponsorship. The Brewers own the

images of those characters that Klement's sends off to march in the July 4th parade. As a result, they could move Hot Dog to another sausage brand if the category turned over.

Milwaukee being Milwaukee, there is a second powerhouse sausage brand down the street.

"Usinger's and Klement's in this market are like Coke and Pepsi in other markets," said Schlesinger, who stressed that he negotiated only with Klement's the last time the deal came up. "Klement's would claim that Usinger's tries to do ambush marketing. I would say there is some fairly healthy give and take between two competitors and we're sensitive to that."

Of late, Klement's has been chafed about spots that Usinger's runs on Brewers radio broadcasts. Because the flagship station sells the commercial time, the Brewers can't protect their sponsor.

"It bothers me," Klement said. "It bothers me a lot."

■ Remembering the basics

The final tally from the Brewers' dollar dog day: 36,585 spectators in the house and 33,566 dollar dogs sold, a ratio strikingly close to that which Olson predicted heading into it.

"It's a lot of work and you give up some money," he says afterward, reviewing the scoresheet. "But it's the kind of thing you try to do to keep a good working relationship with the team."

Dollar dogs days aren't about selling hot dogs. They're about selling tickets. Typically, a ballclub sacrifices its commission on hot dog sales in order to make the promotion feasible. It also might reimburse the concessions company for additional staffing. Even then, it often means lost revenue for the concessionaire.

Based on interviews with more than a dozen ballpark concession executives, margins on a hot dog are slim, even at full price. To begin with, teams take about 50 percent of the price in commission. That leaves \$1.75 on a \$3.50 hot dog. Costs of food, labor and other overhead, such as taxes, eat away most of that, leaving a margin of about 10 percent.

Even with so narrow a profit on their No. 1 selling food item, concessionaires flourish, thanks largely to the take from beer and soda. The other menu items— gourmet sausages and wraps and nine different kinds of panini — generate healthy commissions for the teams. But, for the concessionaire, it's still about the basics.

The president of Sportservice, Rick Abramson, comes to the discussion as if sent from above, bearing tablets chiseled with the secret to the ballpark wiener's steady success. His first job was selling hot dogs at County Stadium in Milwaukee. His father worked for Usinger's, the sausage company. His mother still insists on taking shifts behind a concession stand at Miller Park.

"We can roll out a bunch of new stuff, but 80 percent of the business is still 20 percent of the products," Abramson said. "I don't care how you slice and dice it. That'll always be the case. And that's fine with us."

In an office on the Milwaukee lakefront, about five miles from Miller Park, one of the hot dog's more loyal fans says it's fine with him, too.

"My great affinity for hot dogs is very well known and well-documented," said Selig, whose daily jaunts to a Milwaukee custard stand for a lunchtime frank are legendary. "We're all creatures of habit. One of mine happens to be a hot dog at a baseball game.

"Fortunately, I'm not alone."