

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 45: Baseball Stadiums with Andy Walczak

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Welcome to *Love What You Love*; I'm Julie Rose. I'm insatiably curious about people and the world around us, and absolutely in love with passion and unselfconscious enthusiasm. Every other week I geek out with someone about the thing that they love, and then I share it with you.

Welcome back! Or, Welcome! You might've noticed that *Love What You Love* has a new look. I'm super stoked with this new logo. It was created by Jonas Ramirez, who goes by [@MyFancyFox](#) on Instagram. He's a super talented illustrator and I'm just over the moon with the result. I'm so happy with it.

I also have to shout out my brother Chris, who's a really talented designer, who helped me bring the whole thing to life. I'm super excited to let you know that we have a merch store now, so in case you want to get that sweet, sweet logo on a t-shirt, or a coffee mug, or a travel mug, or a sticker, check it out! It's at Society6.com/LoveWhatYouLovePod. All the proceeds from the sales in August and September will go to one of my favorite nonprofits, and those are always linked in the show notes.

Onto this week's show. Did you know that professional baseball has been played in the United States since 1869? Yeah! 1869! That's incredible. I'm a relative newcomer to baseball, having started really following my local team, the Giants, only about 12 years ago. But today's guest, Andy Walczak, has been crazy about baseball since he was a kid; first as a tradition with his dad, and then as an adult with his friends, he's traveled all over the US to visit different ballparks. Over 40 and counting! It's incredible.

In this episode, we chat about connecting with family and friends, learning more about parts of the country you might not otherwise visit, the worst ballpark ever, how geography influences the game of baseball, the best ballpark food and where to get it, top tips for your first baseball game, and so much more. So find out why Andy loves baseball stadiums and why you might learn to love them too.

Julie: Hello, Andy! Thank you for joining me today.

Andy: Thank you for having me.

Julie: I'm so excited to talk with you because you do something that is so interesting to me. You visit baseball stadiums all over the country.

Andy: That I have. I've done that for, probably, more than 35 years at this point. So, it's been a long, long process with two separate different trips.

Julie: Oh my... It's only taken you two trips?

Andy: No, two separate groups of people that I've done the trips with.

Julie: Oh, okay! I'm like, "Wow, that's some dedication!" [laughs]

Let's start with, why? [laughs]

Andy: That's a very good question. Well, I think the basis, obviously, is just in being a very big baseball fan, something I'm able to share with my father, able to share with my friends growing up playing Little League and high school baseball, my cousin Greg

who's also part of this story a little bit in terms of visiting ballparks. Just, you know, a language to talk around, and then having family members from different parts of the country and being able to visit different ballparks got me interested in the variety of parks. Growing up in the Bay Area, I went to Candlestick and the Oakland Coliseum a lot, but to be able to go to different parks as a young kid really interested me in being able to see them all at some point. So, it all is based just in being a big baseball fan. It's just an extension of my fandom.

Julie: Got it. So yeah, that was another question. How long have you been a fan? What introduced you to baseball in the beginning?

Andy: Definitely my dad. He was a big baseball... He grew up in Detroit, Michigan and went to ballgames with his dad. And in fact, the first ballgame I remember going to was when we were visiting my grandmother in Detroit in the summer of 1980. We went to a Tigers game. I'll never forget it. The game eventually got rained out because of a thunder and lightning storm, and the one thing I remember about the game was the thunder and lightning you could see over it.

So yeah, my dad definitely got me into it. I grew up in Sunnyvale, California, and my very best buddy lived five houses down and we had that common love. We had an older neighbor who really got us into baseball cards. So, it was always around us. And playing Little League as well, just being outside, playing baseball with a tennis ball and a bat and that type of thing. So, having that as the basis and then having that first experience going to a ballgame outside of the Bay Area was really memorable as well.

Julie: So you started in Little League. What position did you play?

Andy: I started as a catcher and I played catcher up until I got to high school. I'm a pretty tall guy, almost 6'4", so I got to about high school and it was, "All right, let's put Walczak at first base," so I became a first baseman once I got to high school. But yeah, I played Little League and I played all through high school.

Julie: Got it. So, your dad would take you to games. You'd go to Candlestick; you'd go to the Coliseum. What was the... You know, presumably, maybe once you got out of high school you said, "Hey, I want to go visit all of these parks." Do you remember what that moment was and when you first hatched the idea of going to all of them?

Andy: I distinctly remember. It was a little bit earlier, because like I said, I have the two separate experiences. The first experience of visiting ballparks was with my dad. So, my parents split up and he moved to Chicago for business. It was summer of 1984. I remember it because it was the Los Angeles Olympics, and I spent almost two weeks with my cousin in Georgia, and at the end of that trip, my uncle, my aunt, and my cousin... He lived in Augusta, so on our last two days there we drove to Atlanta. We went to a Braves game with the baseball card shop, did some touristy things in Atlanta.

So we went there, and then from Atlanta I met my sister and my dad in Chicago. And there's two ball teams in Chicago, so during that trip of visiting my dad we went to Wrigley Field and Comiskey Park, two classic ballparks. One built in 1910; one built in 1914. So, in about a week and a half I'd been to three different stadiums, so I'm like, "This is kind of cool. I've been to six different stadiums," because you add in Detroit, Oakland, and San Francisco.

I remember my dad and I talking about it, all the different parks we'd been to. And a couple of summers later my dad had moved again to the East Coast, and me, my sister,

and my dad did about a two-and-a-half-week trip there visiting him. We went to Fenway Park, Shea Stadium, and also Yankee Stadium. We went to another three parks. At that point, there were 26 teams and by the age of 12 I'd already been to about nine ballparks. So, after that, my dad and I sort of hatched a plan, "All right, let's try to figure this out." So it was then that summer, at the end of that trip in 1986, we're like, "All right, let's figure out if we can get to all of the 26 ballparks."

So between that time and the time I graduated from high school in 1992, we had taken a bunch of summer trips and we'd made it to - heartbreaking - 25 of the 26 ballparks.

Julie: Aah!

Andy: Yes. The only one we did not make it to, which is odd because it's on the West Coast, was up in Seattle. So, we had done trips in the Midwest, the East Coast, down in Texas. We did a Southern California trip. It was great. And my best friend Greg, who I said grew up five houses down from me, he and his dad came with us on two of those trips. So, it was great. Some of the best... You know, my dad lived away from us for a while there, so it was great to spend time with him and also share the travel and the experience of seeing, you know, lots of parts of the country people don't really see.

Julie: When you're visiting these parks... I'm presuming you're a Giants fan, an A's fan, or both...

Andy: I'm an A's fan, yeah.

Julie: A's fan, okay. I'll still talk to you. [laughs] So, when you're going to these other parks, what's the experience since you don't necessarily have any skin in the game unless you're going to a divisional park?

Andy: That's a very good question. I mean, I think the trips with my dad, it was, again just hanging out with my dad and talking. You know, part of the fun was just the road trip of it. "All right, we're driving from Detroit to Cleveland. Where are we going to stop? What are we going to see? What's there to do in Cleveland?" And just enjoying baseball, really.

Part of the difference, obviously, growing up here, going to a ballgame here, in the summer you're wrapped up in sweatshirts, and jeans, and hats. And going back east, it's just so much more pleasant. You're in shorts and a t-shirt. When I was a kid, I'd have my third Dr. Pepper of the night. Those were the good times. And just enjoying being outside, and being on the road, and having that... you know, really enjoying the Midwest or the East Coast evenings.

And then with my friends, when we did my trips in the 2000s up until today, again, it was also about fellowship, and friendship, and talking, and making friends with the people in our section, and just that social factor of it because we sort of made it a point... We're all raising kids, and being husbands, and working professionals, so those three or four days we're on our baseball trip every summer, it's a time to catch up. Baseball's a part of it, but most of it is about being around each other, and telling the same old stories, and making fun of each other, and all that kind of stuff.

Julie: Yeah. So, have you been to the same park multiple times with different groups of folks?

Andy: That's a very good question. So, since my dad and I ended those trips in 1992, there was a humongous boom in... I don't know how much of a baseball fan you are, but just in tearing down all the ballparks that were built in the late '60s, early '70s, and it

all started, I think, with Camden Yards in Baltimore. And they started to build lots of new stadiums. So, I'm kind of looking at my list here of the different stadiums that we've been to with my UC Davis group. Most of them are brand new.

There was a couple that I'd went to with my dad in the '80s, but for the most part they are... and aside from, say, Fenway Park and Wrigley, most of them, if not all of them, are complete replacements. So, it's kind of been fun just to see what the new stadium builders valued compared to what they did in the '60s and '70s, where they're located, what's in the surrounding neighborhoods. Because my memories in the '70s and '80s, it was these multi-purpose ballparks on the side of a freeway with huge parking lots that we... I remember my dad and I got lost in the Houston Astrodome parking lot.

And now all these new stadiums are built downtown with bars and restaurants and nightlife around it. Just a completely different model than what they did when they were building those parks in the late '60s and early '70s.

Julie: Do you feel that the stadiums have lost something because of that, or gained, or is it just different?

Andy: Oh, I think 100% gained. I mean, just the... They call them the cookie cutters, and off the top of my head, like Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Atlanta, St. Louis... even the Oakland Coliseum and Candlestick, just these big round bowls that they said, "All right, we'll fit a baseball team in here. We can do our football team in here," which, they were probably better football stadiums than they were baseball just because of the sightlines and things like that. But now, these stadiums were built just for baseball.

They limited the capacity from 65,000 down to, say, 38-40,000 so it makes for a more intimate setting. Just the geography where they put them, they're just in these... you know, like the new ballpark in San Francisco, they built them closer to downtown, closer to public transportation, closer to places where you could hang out before the game and also after the game. Some of them said, "All right, let's find a view," so like in Pittsburgh, right on the river, and obviously San Francisco right on the water. So a lot of the stadiums had that part as well. "Let's make this not only a great place to watch baseball, but let's make it a place where people can get here at 4 o'clock in the afternoon and not leave until the bars close at 2."

Julie: So how many total have you visited?

Andy: I should've done the exact number, but I think it was 25, like I said, in 1991, and we've been to... I think we're at 42 different ballparks right now.

Julie: Wow!

Andy: Yeah, which says a lot to just the replacements. And we're down to, I think, seven or eight we have not been... There's a stadium in Texas that, sort of, came and went in between not even going there, so there's definitely been some that have only lasted around 20 or 25 years before they were replaced. So, there's about eight or nine that my Davis group has not been to that have been replacements for some of the older ballparks.

And honestly, they're in, sort of, cities and areas we don't necessarily want to go to. When the pandemic happened, we were actually going to go to Seattle, which was our first trip in 2004. We were actually just going to go there again. We looked at the schedule, we looked at what was available, and we were like, "We don't really want to

go to Tampa. Let's go someplace that we've been before that we had a lot of fun. Let's go to Seattle." So, that was kind of our decision last year.

Julie: Having been to 42 stadiums, do you rank them in your mind? Are they all so different that they can't be ranked? Do you have a favorite child?

Andy: I definitely... In terms of ranking, that's a very good question. I was sort of anticipating that question. I was trying to think about the way that I rank them. I try to put them in... I was fortunate enough to be able to go to a bunch of the parks that were built and are long gone now. Like I said, Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Tiger Stadium, Comiskey Park, Yankee Stadium, they were all built between 1910 and the 1920s, so that's sort of the classic group. And now that classic group, just sentimentally, I think Tiger Stadium was my favorite just because that was the first one I really remember going to. We went there a lot.

And then the other of the classics I really like is Wrigley. You can't beat the neighborhood. The stadium's actually... the sightlines and the seating is pretty good. Fenway Park, I hate to say this, I sound terrible, but it's kind of a hard place to watch a ballgame unless you have really good seats. I mean, the outfield seats are pretty bad. Once you sort of get up in the first and third base sides, you kind of can't really see the whole field. So, you really need good seats to really... I mean, the atmosphere is amazing, but in terms of watching the game, it can kind of be tough.

Comiskey Park where the White Socks used to play, as much as it was a classic ballpark, it was so rundown, even when I was 10 years old in that summer of '84. We had gone to a Cubs game like two days prior, and then we went to Comiskey, and I'm like, "Dad, that was quite different." [laughs] But whoever owned the White Socks just did not upkeep it. The old Yankee stadium was great.

And actually, the other old ballpark I forgot to mention, where the Indians played, Cleveland Municipal Stadium, which was built in the '30s. And that was another place... We went there in the summer of '87 and it... I'm *kind* calling it a dump. The one thing I remember about that stadium, aside from it was ginormous, I think the capacity was like 72,000. But just... It just smelled like cigar smoke and stale beer. It smelled like stale beer before I even knew what stale beer smelled like. But again, it was Doubleheader Sunday. I remember it was the Red Socks and the Indians. There were probably, I don't know, 15,000 people in the stadium fit for 72.

But then, you know, ten years later, going to their new ballpark, Jacobs Field was amazing. Just the re-envisioning of playing the ballgame. And we went to Cleveland... that was the last trip we went to in 2019. Just a fantastic ballpark, great atmosphere, the neighborhood's amazing, the food at the ballpark was amazing. You tear down the old and you build up the new. And again, not every place got it right, but they definitely got it right in Cleveland.

Julie: For these new parks, are you finding that they have changed the way baseball is played? Like in the design? Are they bringing in the walls more, or do you find that these revamped stadiums are more friendly to a pitcher versus a hitter, or vice versa?

Andy: Definitely friendlier towards the hitters. And I think... Those multipurpose stadiums were... Again, they were built almost more so for football than baseball, but they had the right field, left field, the power alley, and center are definitely wider. Also, the Astroturf, a lot of the players try to use the AstroTurf to, you know, hit the ball on the ground and try to make it a first base. And they definitely moved the fences in more. I

think a lot of it had to do with more confined space as well because they were building them in downtown areas so they didn't have the wide expanses that they did. Plus, I think they thought, "Hey we want more offense into the game," so I think they closed them.

Some of the examples of, like, the new Cincinnati ballpark, the new Philadelphia ballpark, the new Houston ballpark, Pittsburgh ballpark. Those are all really very much hitter's ballparks, whereas before, those cookie cutters were definitely built towards pitchers and guys that could run if you could hit the ball in the gaps.

Julie: Has there been an overall change in baseball? The approach to how you even play the game because of this?

Andy: Good question. I think you see it every night on the emphasis on the home runs and the way the defense plays. It pays off to hit the ball in the air over the shift that they do in the infield and into whatever short outfield fences they might have. And the way you build your team too. I think there's still some of those pitcher's ballparks... Obviously San Francisco still is; Oakland, no doubt, is. The older stadiums. Dodger Stadium is definitely still a pitcher's park. The ballpark in Kansas City which was built in the early '70s is still a pitcher's park.

And interestingly, as you said about Oracle, some of those stadiums that they'd build a little bit bigger, they have moved the fences in a little bit. I think they did that in Minneapolis where the Twins play. I think they moved those fences in a little bit as it became more and more obvious it was harder to hit a home run, so they moved the fences in there a little bit. But yeah, another place that's a big hitter's park is the stadium in Denver, but that has a lot more to do with the atmosphere and where they're at with the altitude being the Mile High City and that sort of thing.

Julie: When was the very first baseball stadium built?

Andy: You know, the National League started in 1876. They were playing in, I would say, ballparks more than stadiums at that time. Professional baseball started in 1869, so it's well over 100 years that they've been playing baseball in ballparks or stadiums. But I think the first, sort of, super modern stadium would probably be the original Yankee Stadium, which I believe was built in 1923. So that was really the first 30, 40, 50,000-seat stadium that was built. Because Wrigley Field, Tiger Stadium, Comiskey, Forbes Field, Shibe Park, a lot of those ballparks, some of them they still play in today, they look completely... If you look at a picture of Fenway or Wrigley from when it opened, it doesn't even look like it does now. So, it was more of a ballpark than what we'd traditionally call a stadium.

So yeah, the National League started in 1876. I think the Cubs, the Braves, and the Reds are the only three original teams that are still playing from that 1876. And the American League started in 1901, so they've definitely been playing professional baseball for a long time.

Julie: Are you only visiting MLB stadiums, or are you also looking at, you know, minor league stadiums, or like historical Negro League stadiums? Those sorts of things?

Andy: That's a good question. The one, sort of, offshoot we were planning, that we'd sort of been fiddling with is going to the College World Series, which is played every year in Omaha, Nebraska. One of my colleagues that I work with, he'd been there and he said, "Andy, it's great." In fact, they have a brand-new facility there that opened, I think,

maybe seven or eight years ago. But they play there every year in late June, which is usually when we do our trip. So that's been something that we've thought about.

What we've done a couple of times too is gone to the sites of some of the old stadiums. Some of the old stadiums have markers of where they were. Where the Twins used to play, in fact, you can see it at the Mall of America out in the Minneapolis suburbs. You can see where home plate was at Metropolitan Stadium where the Twins played for 25 years. There's actually a portion of the outfield wall where the Pittsburgh Pirates used to play at a place called Forbes Field. It's really cool. A portion of the wall still has ivy on it. It has the marker of 400 or whatever feet where that used to be.

There's actually a recreation out in the Cincinnati suburbs of Crosley Field where the Reds played. It's pretty neat. They somehow salvaged the scoreboard that used to be at Crosley Field and then they built, sort of, an amateur ballpark that, you know, high school teams can play at, junior college teams can play at, summer league baseball teams can play at. It was really neat, and it was famous for having, sort of, an incline in the outfield, so they included the incline in the outfield.

So yeah, we have not gone to any, sort of, minor league parks, but we've tried... As a former history teacher, I grab all of my buddies to these different... I'm sort of the pop culture and history guy, so to fill in the day times on our trips, I'm like, "Hey, let's go here. Let's go there."

And speaking of the Negro leagues, Kansas City, Missouri has an incredible Negro Leagues Museum, which is actually right next to... I think it's the American Jazz Museum. It's a really great facility and just a fascinating spot to visit. Good history. Again, I always try to drag the guys off to these history spots so they can soak up a little culture, which is always a big deal to me.

Julie: There might be folks... I know this is shocking, but there might be folks listening to us chatting who have never been to a baseball game. So, can you explain the experience and, like, how you feel when you're at the game?

Andy: If you've never been... To get the full experience, I really think you need to find a spot, get there early, and watch the crowds arrive. And most of these modern stadiums either have blocked off areas around the ballpark, or there are, you know, known spots to go where you can get some appetizers or some drinks before the game and just do a lot of people watching. So, I always suggest, if the game's a 7:05 start, make your way... If you're staying downtown, walk from your hotel to the ballpark, soak up the city a little bit, find a spot where you can, preferably, sit outdoors where you can watch the crowd arrive, go into the ballpark. I always suggest to do that.

And once you've had a couple drinks or whatever, then make your way to the ballpark. It's always fun to take a big lap around it. Every ballpark is different. Every ballpark is built differently. Every ballpark has its different known food, or food specialties, or views of the city. So it's always fun to, you know, arrive right behind home plate and do a lap. And all these modern ballparks have super wide concourses, so it's pretty easy to navigate.

The one exception, which is interesting, is Oracle Park, which still has the narrow concourses of a Wrigley Field. But the other newer ballparks have huge, wide concourses. So you can check out the food options and there's always local outlets of the popular food in town. So grab some food, make a lap around. If there's a good view of downtown or of the water, get some pictures. The new stadiums also have

statues of the famous ballplayers that have played there. Those are sometimes outside the stadiums; sometimes they're inside the stadium, so take a picture there.

All the stadiums have a couple of decks, so sometimes the good views are from up there, so make your way up to the second deck and see if there's some great views. At Oracle, in the city, there's always... If you go back behind the home plate area on the outside concourse, you can get great views of downtown. Take in all the different areas of the ballpark. And while you're doing that, you can watch a little batting practice and watch the hitters hit a zillion home runs during batting practice. If you have kids with you... It's harder today than it was when I was a kid, but if you have kids with you, try to get a ball during the batting practice, or try to get down low to get autographs from some of the players.

And then get good seats. [laughs] You know, we're all professionals and doing okay for ourselves now so we've sort of spoiled ourselves with our seats for these last, probably, six to seven years, so get good seats I always say. Behind home plate is always good so you can watch... You really get more respect for those pitchers and the hitters trying to bat against those pitchers because you really can see the movement of the ball. And if you don't get seats behind home plate, I always like trying to get seats maybe in the first five or six rows of the second deck because those... You get a good vantage point to the game, so I would suggest those. So, those are kind of my pointers.

And you know, as the ballgame's going along, obviously watch the game. If you have people around you, try to see where people are from. If they're locals, it's always fun to ask them, "Hey, where can we go after the game? Where's a good place to have a nice meal the next night?" So, that's always been what we've done over the years is make friends with... The group I go with, they're some... I am not the most gregarious person, but I have super outgoing friends and we always end up making friends with people around us, which is always a blast. So you know, talk to people and see what they do for a living, and how long have they been going to this ballpark, do they remember the old ballparks... We've always done that.

Julie: There's nothing like high-fiving a complete stranger over a home run.

Andy: Exactly! [laughs] To go back to your previous question, 'what's our skin in the game', we're always rooting for the hometown team. We're at the Houston Astros game, "All right, let's give a high five..." That's always a good time to make immediate friends and root for the home team. Very rarely have we seen... In our group, I'm the one A's fan, the rest are Giants fans, and then one Dodgers fan.

Julie: Oof.

Andy: It's okay. He grew up in Thousand Oaks.

Julie: Okay. All right. [laughs]

Andy: So, a true Dodgers fan. He's not from some random place and a Dodgers fan. He's from Ventura County, so he definitely gets a pass for being a Dodgers fan.

Julie: We'll allow it. [laughs] So, when you go to an A's game, where you actually do have skin in the game, what is your experience? Are you laid back? Are you stressed out the whole time? What's it like for you to go to your hometown game?

Andy: I'm a pretty laidback baseball fan. My fandom for football was a whole different thing. I would get a lot more involved in football, but baseball... It's just more pleasant, you know? There's 162 games, so big picture-wise, one loss doesn't mean a whole heck of a lot. So, some random Saturday afternoon in June is not going to make or break you.

I have a daughter, I've sort of made her into a baseball fan, which has been great. She likes to try to get autographs or get a ball, so we get there early and try to do that. Try to get nice seats at the A's game. And we know the players so it's fun to root for the players that she likes that have been with the team for a while. And then my wife is a native San Franciscan, so we go to Giants games as well. I've convinced my daughter to be an A's fan, so that has been a humongous victory in my lifetime. But if we go to a Giants game, she'll root for the Giants, but I'll just... If something big happens I'll just stay seated. I won't visibly root against the Giants.

I'm trying to think of traditions. We live in San Francisco, so it's easy to take BART across the Bay to the Coliseum, so that's always been a unique experience rather than driving up there like I did when I was a kid. And the experience is definitely different because when I was a kid my mom or my best friend's mom, Mary, would take Greg and I to the A's game, to the Coliseum, and those women could not have been greater. That experience was, "We're getting there before the gates even open to get to the parking lot as the players arrive to try to get autographs." Then we get into the stadium trying to get autographs during batting practice.

And usually... It would only be on a weekend, but on a weekend we could convince them to stay after the game as the players would leave as well. So, we had the greatest moms in the world. They would be patient and they would indulge our obsession with getting autographs of most of the A's players. Occasionally we'd get some visiting team players. But I mean, I have a binder full of autographed A's baseball cards of players probably no one's ever heard of.

It's interesting because once they got good in the late '80s, and I got older as well, it was a heck of a lot harder because they closed off the best areas to get autographs and the players were legitimate superstars at that time too. So, getting Jose Canseco's autograph was a lot more difficult than, say, Donnie Hill or Bill Almon. So, it was harder.

Julie: Now, do you still have all your cards? Do you still collect cards?

Andy: I do. Yes, I do definitely collect cards. It's interesting, over the years I've sort of developed... I got back into it probably about eight or nine years ago. And as a kid, it was always how many cards I can get. Now I usually try to get two or three nicer cards a year. But yeah, it's still... The obsession is not there as it was when I was 10, 11, 12 years old. The experience as an adult is definitely a lot different than going to games as a kid. The trips I've taken as an adult with my friends, it's a whole weekend long of activities and hanging out. A lot different than the road trips with my dad when I was a kid.

Julie: Sure. Now, you said that you have, sort of, a more obsessive football fandom. Do you have plans to visit all of the NFL stadiums?

Andy: I have been to football games in different stadiums. Not nearly as many. I think I've probably been to five or six different NFL stadiums. But, candidly, it's just different. I think football stadiums tend to be pretty similar because, obviously, with baseball there's no designated area of play. So, you can have one ballpark with... down the line

it's 310, another it's 345. But with football stadiums, it's going to be 100 yards with two end zones that are ten yards each, so most football stadiums are pretty similar.

The playing space is exactly similar and the stadiums tend to be big, large bowls that are completely round and the seating arrangements are similar. And it's a lot more intense atmosphere. People are really into it a lot more. [laughs] You'll see a lot more fights at football games and people getting out of control, whereas baseball, going to a ballgame on a summer night is just a lot more... Again, I'm not making friends with the section around me at a football game because everybody is too engaged into what is going on. And because there's only 16 games, every game means something, so it's a lot different experience.

Julie: I'm interested that there's no regulation around the field of play size. So, what's behind that?

Andy: You know, I do not know the history of that. The only thing I really can think of is that the way the game started, it was definitely a rural game where you probably played in a field someplace and you weren't going to put up a fence. And plus, you really couldn't hit the ball all that far the way the game was played in the late 19th century. So, I think having a fence was not necessarily... There was not an urgency to fence in where there was playing because it was such a rural game.

And I think once it, sort of, transitioned to being played professionally, being played in cities like Philadelphia and New York, Washington, Boston, and you're playing in a city and you don't want the ball flying into someone's front yard it was, "We need to have a little bit of fencing." And they probably just gerrymandered in the field of play of what plot of land that they had. And those original ballparks that were built in the early part of the 20th century are really a testament to that.

One of those most interesting ballparks was the Polo Grounds where the New York Giants played, and the Yankees for a little bit. It was horseshoe-shaped, so down the lines it was about 260 feet, and then straightaway center was 483 feet. And, interestingly enough, they actually had a... Yankee Stadium had the same thing. There were monuments in center field that were also in the field of play, so you know, if a ball went out there it might clank off a statue out there that was dedicated to people. A few of the old-time ballparks also had flag poles that were in play, so it was definitely a unique circumstance.

So, I think to answer your question, they just jammed in... Same thing is true today. They jammed it in where they could get... You look at Oracle Park as a prime example. And I think that if they build that new stadium in Oakland they're going to fit it into that super tiny plot of land they have right on the water there at Howard Terminal to make it... the foul lines will be whatever they can make it.

Julie: A big part of the experience of going to a ballgame is the food. Which stadium, either one now gone or current, has the best and which one has the worst?

Andy: I'm going to answer that in two parts. So, this references earlier, but one of the things that we've done and we've tried to do in the last, say, 10-12 years of our baseball trips is each city, aside from having its own one or two really cool, cultural, historical things to visit, also is known for... whether it may be a junk food or a ballpark food. Most of those restaurants in the city proper have an outlet at their ballparks.

So, a place like Cincinnati is famous – or infamous – for something called Skyline Chili, which apparently the secret ingredient to Skyline Chili is chocolate. So we've always tried to find that particular food item. In Philadelphia they have the cheesesteaks; Pat's and Geno's, the two famous Philly cheesesteak places that are across the street from each other. So, they have outlets at their ballpark.

Miami is famous for the Cuban sandwiches. Milwaukee is famous for its bratwurst. Actually, Milwaukee is also famous for its Bloody Marys, and a Bloody Mary in Milwaukee is an entire meal. It's ridiculous. When you have a minute, google 'Bloody Marys Miller Park Milwaukee'. It's amazing.

So, to go completely full circle there, the best food by far of any of the cities we've been to, any of the ballparks we've been to is in Kansas City. The barbecue there is un... We just became addicted to it. We went to Arthur Bryant's, which is sort of the old-school... right down the street from that Negro Leagues Museum. Old school Kansas City barbecue. I went to a place called Jack Stack which is described as, sort of, the white tablecloth version of barbecue, which was also amazing.

There's a place called Oklahoma Joe's, which is just called Joe's now. And they... I forget which, but I think it was Arthur Bryant's that had an outlet in the ballpark. So yeah, the Kansas City barbecue food at the Royal Stadium, and then also in the city, was just a culinary experience that everybody needs to have. Because no matter where you try to mimic it, it's never been the same as the Kansas City barbecue. So, Kansas City's great.

The worst, I would say, would be... Some of those original trips I took with my dad, just because it wasn't... The items there... It wasn't important to have more than just hot dogs and... you know, just really awful hot dogs, and popcorn, and sodas at the game. I remember having some super D-minus meals at that Cleveland Municipal stadium. The ballpark where the Mets played Shea Stadium was not only just an awful place to watch a ballgame but also to eat the food was really bad there. Candlestick had some terrible food.

The other thing each park has... particularly in the last eight or ten years, everybody has an outlet of the local beer. So you know, they have their cheap local beer and then there's also, sort of, the fancier, more local, more craft beers. So each ballpark will include some of the high-end beers there, which is also kind of fun to experience that. You get your \$7 beer and then there's always the \$13 beer. In San Francisco, of course, the bad beer is \$13 beer and the fancy beer is \$17. But all across the country they have the craft beers scene which has erupted over the last 10-12 years.

So, those are some of the more memorable... But I always prefer a bratwurst with a lot of mustard. And I'm definitely okay with a C-minus beer. It does not have to be fancy to enjoy it.

Julie: Obviously, in 2020 you didn't get to go on any trips. So what is your next big trip that you have planned?

Andy: We actually... I have a major family trip; we're leaving Tuesday. I'm trying to get my daughter to some more ballparks. She's only been to three. My cousin lives... The one that lived in Georgia now lives in Boston, so she's been to a couple games at Fenway. So, we're doing a National Park trip up north and we're going to end our trip in Seattle and go to a Mariners game. So, with my Davis group that started our trips in 2004... From 2004 to 2019, that was 16 straight years we went, which is pretty remarkable.

Canceled in 2020; we canceled in 2021. There's definitely been some emails flying around to see if we can squeeze something in the fall. But again, we're all in stages of our lives where it's harder to get away when our kids have activities and things like that, so we're probably going to postpone a second year and go someplace in 2022.

We have tentatively planned for a second Seattle trip. But what we try to do, we look at the schedule, sort of that last weekend in June and see, you know, what cities we haven't been to for a start, where we'd like to go, where we don't want to go. So the emails start flying around once the schedule comes out in... Usually, late November or early December is when the schedule comes out. Then we start looking at, you know, flights and hotel rooms.

The one tradition, which is kind of fun, even though we can all afford our own hotel room. One of the great traditions is all staying in one hotel room, which is... If we have four of us, it works. Our group can go from three to seven or eight, depending on who can go. If it's eight people, we'll get two suites, like an Embassy Suites-type thing. But if there's just four or five of us, we'll cram together, and that's kind of the experience of it.

So we start looking at hotels, can we get a nice couple of suites, who's in this year, who's out this year? It's a good group. And like I said, we pack a lot into... In the old days... Not the old days, but when we were in our late 20s, early 30s, it was: get to a city on Friday, hit the ground running, leave Sunday morning.

But now that we're older, we've added a third night. So now we get there on Thursday night. I always pick, let's say, a nice dinner. Not too nice, but a nice dinner on that Thursday night, and then we'll do a ballgame... Friday afternoon we'll race around the city to see some things, and then Saturday we'll go to... It's usually 4 o'clock on Saturday, for some reason, over the years. Usually a 4 o'clock game. So we'll always get a nice greasy spoon breakfast, do some more touristy things on Saturday, and then go to the ballgame on Saturday, and then leave on Sunday, which is always... Have you ever seen the movie *Stand by Me*?

Julie: Yes.

Andy: So I always... When we leave the airport on that Sunday, it always reminds me of that final scene when River Phoenix, and Feldman, and Will Wheaton, and Jerry O'Connell are saying goodbye to each other at the end, and everyone disappears, and we know we won't see each other as a big group again for another year. And I'm the one big sentimentalist of the whole group, which is why I'm the ringleader and do a lot of organization. But I always get that, sort of, empty feeling because, you know, we've had so many laughs and things.

But yeah, again, I value those friendships, and being able to build it around seeing a different ballpark in a different American city is really a unique and special thing. Again, I love the friendship, but I have to say I do love the different ballparks as well, which is just an amazing experience.

Julie: Yeah. So, you gave some top tips a little bit earlier. Let's say someone just has never been to a baseball game at all. They're not interested in going to another city. They just want to go to a game locally. Should they go to a minor league game? Should they go to a major league park? Maybe they don't know squat about baseball. What would you say to them? How would you recommend they get started with going to a game?

Andy: It depends on your location. Nothing beats the major league baseball experience. So if you live within driving distance of a major league park, definitely make that your first destination. But there are so many minor league parks, I think that is something as well. Especially when you're in the South, or the Midwest, or the Northeast where you can really have that evening experience where you can be out and about, and it's warm, it's the summer, the kids are out of school so you can have a late night out with your kids, I think there's definite value.

Most of those minor league teams have been there for decades if not a hundred years, so it's an ingrained part of the community, so there's probably specific traditions. So maybe try to find a good promotion night at the minor league ballpark. If it's a local Little League night, or they have a fireworks night, or you get to go run the bases after the game kind of a night. So, there can be some perks like those at the minor league parks for sure.

But going to a major league game is great. I would suggest going with someone who is not only knowledgeable about baseball in general, but just about that team and the history of the team. Again, I'm a baseball historian so I could talk someone's ear off for an entire game talking about who used to play here, why this player's important here, when this championship happened, here's where the team broke our heart, here's where the organization really made me angry, here's where our team fits into the wider landscape of major league baseball history... So, having someone that can provide a little bit of context.

And teaching someone how to keep score, I think, is... because looking at a scorebook is... Maybe not at your first experience at a game, but maybe at your second or third game is also kind of fun because it's like a whole language trying to... the lines, and the squiggles, and the squibbles, and all the little different notations is also teaching someone a little bit about the game that they wouldn't normally have while just flipping on the game.

And baseball's one of those few sports... I think the one sport which is infinitely better in person than it is on television. The other sport like that is hockey where it just does not translate on television. So, having that atmosphere at a ballpark is not replicable watching it on TV. You can see more, you can see more of the field, you can see more of the subtleties of the game. Like I said earlier about sitting behind home plate and seeing... You can't really appreciate what a 95mph fastball looks like until you're behind home plate or you're down near the bullpen while those guys are warming up because it is one of those talents which you cannot... I'm an old coach, you know, it's such a cliché, but you cannot coach someone throwing at 95.

You really have to see it up close to appreciate it, so I think that's important to see, particularly, what it's like to try to hit. And then to see those guys make contact and how effortless it comes sometimes when those guys really tee up a fastball, square it up, and hit either a home run or a double in a gap, to really appreciate the hand-eye coordination to hit something that's not only going 95 but is moving. And then what it's like to see a 95mph fastball followed by an 80mph off-speed pitch because it just... to watch those guys' knees buckle is kind of fun.

Julie: Well, Andy, thank you so much for taking so much time and for sharing your passion and your knowledge. This has been so interesting. I've actually learned a ton, so thank you.

Andy: You're quite welcome, and I was glad to share my passion for the game, and for ballparks, and just the tradition of reconnecting with old friends and really valuing that time to make those friendships that have been 25+ years really last. And also, you know, with my parents, and my friends, baseball definitely is able to connect all those different aspects of my life.

Julie: I love it.

[clip from "Stand by Me" by Ben E. King plays in background]

I'll include links to the history of baseball and the Negro League's baseball museum in the show notes, along with links to Andy's favorite nonprofits and mine too. Huge thanks again to Andy for sharing his passion with us.

Just a reminder that you can find this podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#), and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#).

All of the transcripts for *Love What You Love* are available for everyone on the website. Thanks to Emily White, transcription magician and proprietress of The Wordary. If you need transcripts, reach out to her at Emily@TheWordary.com. The music for *Love What You Love* is called "Inspiring Hope" by Pink-Sounds. A link to that artist is included in the show notes.

As always, thank you so, so much for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Related Links:

[History of Baseball](#)

[Negro Leagues Baseball Museum](#)

Andy's Favorite Nonprofits:

[Fremont High School Alumni Association](#)

[National Multiple Sclerosis Society](#)

My Favorite Nonprofits:

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