



# *Baseball Between Us*

**16 YEARS. 32 BALLPARKS. 43,000 MILES.**

A Road Map to a Winning Father/Son Relationship

**MIKE LUERY**  
with Matt Luery

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## *Introduction*

*“Now batting, the center fielder,  
number 7, Mickey Mantle, number 7.”*

BOB SHEPPARD

**With a crack of the bat**, the San Francisco Giants leadoff hitter, Omar Vizquel, lined a fastball down the third base line. Tigers infielder Brandon Inge gloved it easily, then glided a step to his left. With a fluid motion, he fired the ball to first base, where Dmitri Young eagerly smothered it within his six-foot, two-inch frame.

“Out!” screamed the umpire to the delight of the 37,456 rabid fans at Detroit’s Comerica Park. And with that, my baseball fantasy was on the fast track – the first game of a father-son road trip through the Midwest that would take me and my 16-year-old son Matthew to 4 ballparks, 8 states and 1 foreign country in 11 days.

### **The Road Trip Begins in 2005**

The date on the calendar was June 18 and I probably should have been home in California, celebrating my 22<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary with my wife, Carol, but instead I was in downtown Detroit, running around the bleachers like a kid – with my kid

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– and my trusty baseball glove. I was trying desperately to snag a batting practice home run. Capturing only the moment, but no ball, the calendar said it was 2005 – yet I felt myself flashing back in time to a far away memory tucked deep inside of me.

I looked around for my son, but quickly realized he was not in the ballpark. I did not panic, but instead felt a warm sense of calm surround me as I looked up and discovered a familiar face I hadn't seen in eight lonely years.

“Dad, is that you?” I said to myself.

In my vision, the kind and handsome man placed his arm around me. His face was silhouetted against the sun as he silently gave me a hug.

I felt childlike and small as I pressed myself against his belt, looking up at the man I missed so much in life. He smiled at me and then waved his arm to the crowd around us. The fans were dressed in old-fashioned clothing from a different era; in my flashback it was the fall of 1963 and my dad and I were together again at Yankee Stadium experiencing one of our happiest moments: at the very place where we truly bonded as a father-and-son team.

My lifelong passion for baseball was born on a crisp October day, when my dad, Robert Luery, took me to see my very first World Series game – in Yankee Stadium, the House that Ruth Built. Although I was only eight at the time, I can still vividly recall being mesmerized by the baseball monuments in center field and seeing the sun radiate against the brilliant green grass of the stadium. It was in Yankee Stadium where on many occasions, I would see my hero Mickey Mantle slug one out of the park. Mickey had massive muscles that rippled as he gripped the bat from either side of the batter's box. My favorite Yankee was also one of the most powerful switch hitters in the history of the game.

But it was more than the players who captivated me, for I quickly fell in love with the smell of the ballpark: the smoky

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roasted peanuts and the sugar-laden Crackerjacks mixed in with the aroma of fresh popcorn. Baseball is also about touch. I still love the tactile sensation of pounding that greasy Glovolium oil into my weathered mitt, to form the perfect pocket. The sounds of baseball are equally important: the crack of the bat, the cheers from the fans and the screams of excitement when a foul ball comes your way.

But the greatest sound of all was the rich and resonant tone of “the Voice of God”: Bob Sheppard, the eloquent public address announcer for the Yankees, who inspired baseball fans for more than half a century with his player introductions. I can still hear Sheppard’s powerful voice echoing off the canyons of Yankee Stadium with reverberation: “Now batting, the center fielder, number 7, Mickey Mantle, number 7.” Sheppard pronounced “Man-tle” with a dramatic pause that bounced off the walls with a force so powerful it could make your spine tingle.

My dad was my baseball buddy. We traveled to Yankee Stadium as often as we could, studying the standings together and debating the intricacies of the game. We wondered who would be on the mound for our next ballgame and which player in pinstripes would be the hometown hero for the day. I always placed my faith on number 7, the Mick, although in many contests it was number 9, Roger Maris, who would lead the way.



I will never forget the moment it happened. Dad came home from work with a big smile – and holding two tickets.

“Michael,” he said, “I got them.”

“Got what?” I asked.

“I’ve got two tickets to the World Series!” he declared as I leaped three feet into the air in sheer excitement. “I’m pulling you out of school tomorrow,” Dad said. “And we’re driving to the Bronx to see Game One of the World Series.”

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“Woo hoo!” I screamed.

I was ecstatic about missing school but even more excited about going to my first World Series at the tender age of eight. Back in the early '60s, the World Series was actually played in the daytime, when fans could follow the action while the sun was still in the sky, unlike today's games, which routinely end after midnight on the East Coast.

But best of all, I would actually be witnessing history at Yankee Stadium, the epicenter of the baseball universe, while my third-grade buddies would all be stuck in school, forced to listen to the game on transistor radios hidden in their jackets.

“Be ready to go early tomorrow morning,” Dad said.

“Don't worry, Dad,” I said. “I'll get ready tonight.”

I ran to my bedroom and quickly grabbed my navy blue Yankee warm-up jacket and slung it over my shoulders. I pulled up my dungarees and placed my Yankee hat on the pillow, then dug down deep into the sheets. Taking no chance of being late for the game, I decided to sleep in my Yankee outfit. I didn't want to miss a thing. By dawn's light, I was in the car, ready to leave my Connecticut home for the magic of New York City.

The 1963 World Series was a contest of baseball titans: on my side was the heavily favored American League Champion New York Yankees. On the other was the National League's Los Angeles Dodgers. Topping it all, my dad had scored two tickets to see one of the premier matchups in the history of baseball: Yankee ace Whitey Ford vs. the Dodger's lefty legend, Sandy Koufax.

I was absolutely convinced my Yankees would sweep the Dodgers in four straight games. After all, “we” had one of the greatest teams ever assembled. True baseball fans always use the term “we” to describe their team. Fans feel like they are an integral part of the club's success.

And in 1963, the Yanks had assembled one of the greatest lineups in all of baseball: Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, Tony

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Kubek, Bobby Richardson, Yogi Berra, Elston Howard and Rookie of the Year Tom Tresh, plus one of the best left arms ever – Whitey Ford, the Yankee “Chairman of the Board” who had defeated 25 opponents that year. The Yanks had run away with the American League pennant in '63, capturing the flag by 10½ games.

But the Dodgers were loaded too. They had Maury Wills and Frank Howard, along with Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. And on that sunny October day, Koufax was masterful in mowing down the first five Yankee batters he faced in the opening game of the Series. I watched in disbelief as one after another, Kubek, Richardson, Tresh, Mantle and Maris all fanned in frustration against the flame-throwing Dodger pitcher, a boy from Brooklyn, the original home of the team that now played in faraway Los Angeles.

The torment continued as the game entered the second inning, when Whitey Ford gave up an RBI single to former Yankee Bill “Moose” Skowron. No one at the park was expecting what happened next as the Dodgers put two more runners on base, setting the stage for John Roseboro to smack a three-run homer over the fence. Yankee fans were shell-shocked to see their best pitcher give up a home run, the first and only four-bagger Ford had allowed to a lefty batter all season. The Dodgers were up 4-0 before the Bronx Bombers could even hack their first hit against the lightning lefty who would strike out 15 Yankees on that October day. At the time, it was the most strikeouts of any World Series pitcher in history.

Even the mighty Mickey Mantle struck out twice that day, as Koufax teased and taunted him with a motley mix of curves and fastballs that turned my action hero into a mere mortal. Yankee second baseman Bobby Richardson struck out three times, leaving the crowd stunned. He had never even whiffed twice in a game all year – until he faced Koufax, the King of K's.

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Only Tom Tresh was able to connect that day, socking a two-run homer in the eighth inning, but alas it was the lone bright spot in a dismal day that saw the Dodgers triumph 5-2. Sandy Koufax went the whole distance, hurling all nine innings to secure the victory for the visitors.

In those days pitchers routinely finished the game they started. It was not like today's game, where starters pitch a mere six innings before yielding to rocket-armed relievers who hurl six pitches and then limp off to the locker room, only to wrap ice around their strained biceps.

But back in the rough-and-tumble days of the 1960s, pitchers went the distance. There were no posers as closers, no micromanagers who needed a committee of four high-priced hurlers to get three outs.

It was a different era in 1963 and the crowd of 69,000 at Yankee Stadium was crestfallen by the loss – especially an 8-year-old boy from Connecticut who took it personally, crying the whole way home, heartbroken that his Yankees were no longer invincible.

The New Yorkers were eventually swept in four games and scored just four runs the entire World Series – the second lowest total by any World Series team at that point in history. Although the Yanks lost the Series, I gained a love for baseball and a deep bond with my dad, who got me hooked on America's pastime.

As a kid in love with baseball, I went to every game I could, attending dozens at Yankee Stadium. My dad also took me to the old Polo Grounds, which served as the New York Mets' first home until Shea Stadium opened in 1964.

I can remember how the New York fans rose to their feet to applaud Willie Mays, who was playing for the visiting San Francisco Giants against the hometown Mets. The partisan crowd jumped for joy when Willie launched a massive home run deep into the center field seats. As a kid, I couldn't understand why all those New Yorkers were cheering for an opposing player,

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until my dad explained that Willie Mays had played for the New York Giants before his team moved to San Francisco in 1958. While thousands of New Yorkers were crushed about losing their Giants, they never lost their love for the Say Hey Kid.

As I grew older, I saw the Mets play many times in Shea Stadium and traveled frequently to visit friends in other cities to catch a ballgame. In Baltimore, I loved seeing Brooks and Frank Robinson lead the Orioles to victory in the now-defunct Memorial Stadium. It didn't matter who was playing; I always rooted for the home team. Unless, of course, the visitors wore the gray flannel road jerseys of the New York Yankees.

Over the years, I visited half a dozen parks that have since been torn down or replaced, including Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, the original Busch Stadium in St. Louis, the Astrodome in Houston and the Kingdome in Seattle. I also saw the Padres play at the old Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego and the San Francisco Giants at Candlestick Park.

By the mid '70s, I had become a full-fledged baseball fanatic and promised myself that one day, I would visit every Major League stadium to see a game in person. But it was not until decades later that I would actually launch my plan into action, thanks to the help of my wife, Carol, and our two children, Sarah and Matthew. They all became my baseball companions – giving me both the chance to reach my boyhood dream – and to write this book, which I hope will capture my passion for the game of baseball and my love for life on the road.



## *The Road Trip Begins*

Saturday, June 18, 2005

Comerica Park, Detroit Tigers

*“You Tiger fans, you’ve given me so much warmth,  
so much affection and so much love.”*

ERNIE HARWELL

**Life-sized replicas of Al Kaline, Ty Cobb, Hank Greenburg, Charlie Gehringer and Willie Horton** surrounded us. The home of the Tigers is bursting with Bengals.

“Look, Dad, there are Tigers everywhere,” Matt observed as we walked along Brush Street, home of the Detroit Tigers and Comerica Park. And indeed there are giant Tigers carved into the stadium itself, but these concrete cats are chewing baseballs with their oversized fangs, serving as a Motor City mosaic of modern culture, an ornate shrine to the secular religion of baseball.

Giant striped tiger replicas, radiating their orange and black aura into the night, surround the stadium. But the most impressive Tigers of all are the ones named Cobb, Kaline and Greenburg, who form a statuesque parade of baseball greats that include Gehringer and Horton – a living tribute to the legends of the game. Ty Cobb’s statue shows him sliding into

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third, spikes up, of course, hoping to draw blood from his intimidated opponent.

“Ty Cobb was one of the most feared and most hated players ever,” I explained to Matt. “He was a conniving, tobacco-spitting racist with a personality so abrasive that even his own teammates couldn’t stand him. And when he died, only two ballplayers attended his funeral.”

But Cobb’s lifetime stats tell a different story, a chronicle that shows the fierce competitor who dominated the diamond for two decades. Ty Cobb had a lifetime batting average of .367 – the best of any hitter who ever played the game. Cobb won 12 American League batting titles and hit over .400 in 1911, 1912 and 1922. The Georgia Peach also hit at least .300 for 23 seasons in a row, showing his consistency as a competitor.

It’s only fitting that Ty Cobb, a segregationist son of the South, would find his final metallic resting place at Comerica Park right next to the statue of Willie Horton, a beloved black player who epitomized the passion and soul of Detroit from 1963 to 1977. Only baseball could integrate two men from two different eras and make them statuesque teammates, baseball brothers bonded in bronze and the love of the game, forging a fantasy friendship that will last forever at Comerica Park.

Fatefully, the home team was victorious for our opening game, with Brandon Inge hitting a home run and double to lead the Tigers to an 8-2 victory over the San Francisco Giants, who competed without their best player and superstar Barry Bonds, a DNP (Did Not Play) on this warm Detroit night. Matt and I were jetlagged from our early flight and happy to settle in to our room at the Hilton Garden Inn – conveniently located just five minutes from the ballpark.



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We woke the next morning and grabbed a quick breakfast in the hotel lobby. It took only a few minutes to load our rented Chevy Trailblazer with our two travel bags for the day's journey. Our first destination: Windsor, Ontario, a gleaming Canadian city just across the Detroit River through the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, the second busiest crossing between the United States and Canada.

Windsor's pristine, sparkling beauty contrasted sharply with the grittier, grimy feeling of downtown Detroit. It was Matt's first time in Canada and so we drove along the waterfront on Riverside Drive, a scenic roadway meandering along the banks of the Detroit River. The steel monoliths of the Motor City shone in the distance, with the Renaissance Tower serving as our beacon.

We headed back to Michigan over the Ambassador Bridge, only to be stopped by border security.

"Purpose of your visit?" asked the border guard.

"A baseball trip," I said. "My son and I are on a road trip and he's never been to Canada before," I blabbered.

"I'm really more of a hockey fan," said the border guard. "Enjoy your trip," he said before waving us through to the United States.

Back in the Wolverine State, we drove on to Grosse Pointe Shores, a town nestled on the banks of Lake Michigan, where my wife had lived as a child. We wandered up to the house where she resided for two years before moving to Arizona.

"Wow, Mom lived here in this house?"

"Yes," I said. "Let's call her and tell her what it looks like now."

"No, Dad. Why do you have to ruin everything with a phone call? Can't you just enjoy the beauty of the moment and keep it in your mind?"

"No," I said. "My memory isn't what it used to be."

"Dad, you're impossible! How am I going to survive this trip?"

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“Here, talk to your mother on the phone; tell her about the house.”

Matt just rolled his eyes and stared daggers at me.

I decided to ease the tension by hitting the gas. From Grosse Pointe, we traveled west to Ann Arbor, home of the University of Michigan, my dad’s alma mater – conveniently located just an hour west of Detroit.



Dad was a proud Wolverine, always rooting for the Maize and Blue in the Rose Bowl, where his favorite football team was pummeled year after year it seemed, by the opponent from the Pacific Ten Conference champion. The Pac Ten had mastered the aerial attack, while the Big Ten was endlessly trying to grind out three yards on the ground with a cloud of dust, often falling short of the first down.

At the university bookstore, I purchased a Maize and Blue Michigan T-shirt in honor of my dad, who had passed away in 1997, well before Matt could really get to know him. So Matt and I walked the campus to get a feel for the school my father had loved and the place where he had worked as the equipment manager for the University of Michigan swim team before joining the Reserve Officers Training Corp to help pay for school.

“Grandpa Bob would be happy you visited his school,” I said to Matt. He nodded.

“You know you can go here too if you want,” I said with encouragement. “I can see you as a Wolverine.”

“No, Dad, I see right through this whole charade.”

“What charade?”

“The charade where you parent-bomb me with frequent visits to Ann Arbor, while secretly becoming a wannabe Tigers fan. What you really want is to visit Comerica Park.”

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“Busted,” I said to myself.

“Well, Comerica is a beautiful park,” I countered. “You can see the whole skyline of downtown Detroit from the upper deck behind home plate.”

“Yeah, Dad, but I want to pick a college that’s right for me – not because it’s conveniently located near a ballpark.”

“You sound just like your sister.”

“She’s right. I want to have my independence. And sometimes that means being away from you.”

“But...”

“Keep it up and I’ll be sure to pick a school that’s far, far away from home,” said the mouth that roared.

I ducked from the brushback pitch. “Wow, I didn’t see that coming,” I said.

“Well, I’m growing up.”

Deep inside I knew he was right. Still, it’s hard for a father to let go of a child – especially one who was obviously very eager to become a man.