

Barnidge: A baseball road trip that bonded dad and son

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You might remember Mike Luery from his time with KNTV (Channel 11) news. He served as the station's Sacramento bureau chief from 2006-09.

Or you might have seen him more recently on KCRA-TV (Channel 3), where he currently works as an investigative reporter.

Then again, it might have been at a baseball game. He and his son, Matt, have made it a point to visit every stadium in the major leagues.

That's the subject of his new book, "Baseball Between Us" (Sleuth Publishing, \$17.95), a nonfiction work that is more about father-son bonding than fastballs, strikeouts and home runs.

Luery figures he and Matt covered 43,000 miles to witness games in 32 ballparks -- most of that when Matt was a teenager and they were trying to understand each other.

"We had a lot of fun on the trips," Luery said, "but we also had a lot of fights -- over wake-up time, bedtime, what music was on the car radio. I was into rock; he was into rap. He liked Nelly and 50 Cent; I liked Jimi Hendrix and the Grateful Dead."

It was the give-and-take and the search for boundaries that characterized their experience.

"We were in Cleveland on our way to an Indians game," Luery said, "and Matt goes, 'Hey, Mike what are we doing next?'"

"I said, 'Did you just call me by my first name? I'm the dad, you're the son, and maybe a little respect would be appropriate.'"

"He said, 'That's an old-fashioned concept, Mike. Better get used to it.'"

The hard edges in their relationship softened as they spent more time together. Dad's flawed sense of direction -- he drove the wrong way down a one-way street in Minneapolis, caught the wrong subway in Boston and the wrong train in Connecticut -- became a source of recurring humor and earned Dad the nickname "Wrong-Way Mike."

"That ended up becoming a pretty good bonding experience," Luery said, "because he realized that Dad was not infallible. I was human; I made mistakes."

Between games, they found time to enjoy landmarks such as St. Louis' Gateway Arch and Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Their baseball highlights featured not only some memorable games (Barry Bonds' 715th homer) but the chance to meet former stars such as Maury Wills, Bernie Williams and Boog Powell.

"Matt told me one of the things he liked best about baseball is the pace of the game. Because it's slower, you get to talk strategy between innings and pitches. Are they going to hit-and-run? Is the pitcher going to throw a fastball or a curve?"

"Then you have the opportunity to throw in a question like, 'Who are you taking to the prom?' When the dialogue is going and his guard is down, it allows a teenager to open up about a topic he wouldn't otherwise."

Matt is 23 now, a senior studying architecture at the University of Southern California. Mike, when he isn't in front of camera, is promoting his book. He will appear at a signing from 2 to 6 p.m. Saturday at the Walnut Creek Barnes & Noble store.

Luery describes his story as "a bonding experience between father and son that changed us, enriched our relationship and gave us something we'll share forever."

It also accomplished something else. Matt now refers to his traveling companion as "Dad."