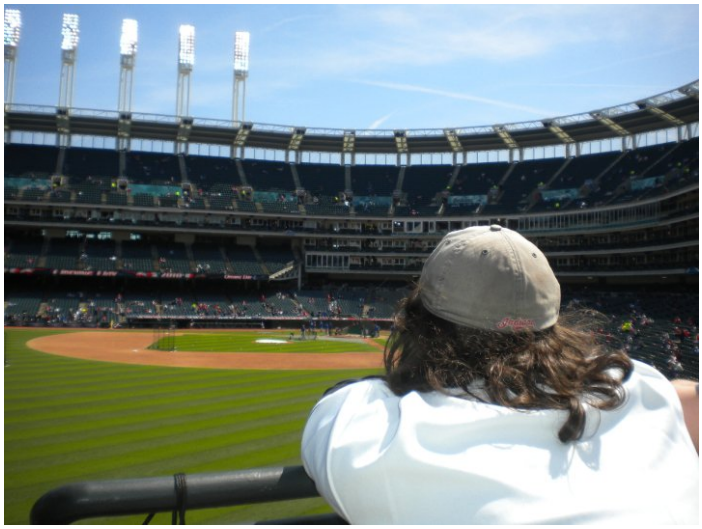

Thursday night was a rarity for me. The Indians had played a thrilling day game that ended just around 4:15 and I was actually able to pay attention to my fiancée at night. Usually, my schedule is planned around the Indians schedule and, whether I'm at the game or watching it on TV, it leaves little time for doing anything besides eating dinner after my fiancée gets out of work around six before the game comes on. As a result, I actually like west coast games far more than most people do.

My fiancée works at a day care center as part of the "Latch Key" after school program. As with any job involving children, some are good, some are bad, some are in-between, and some are heathens. Though she isn't really supposed to admit it, she's got her favorites and, by all accounts, she's right to consider them her favorites. Three of them play Little League Baseball for the Old Brooklyn Area Little League, or O.B.A.L.L.

Unfortunately, my parents never pushed me towards playing baseball, even though my father played a lot of softball when I was growing up and was pretty damn good at it. I played one year of co-ed softball when I was 13 and have ever since regretted not playing hardball in my youth. I did spend quite a bit of time at nearby Loew Park watching my childhood best friend play and learned a lot about the game.

In any event, with this free time on Thursday, what better way to spend it than by watching baseball? Three of the boys, ages six to eight, in my fiancée's after-school program had a scrimmage at 6:30. If any of you have kids that play, played in your youth, or were at least around the game, it's amazing to watch such a disorganized, cluster-f of a game as coach pitch baseball and still love it. It's nostalgic and sentimental. A time when life was so much easier. Where the biggest concern you had was not catching chicken pox from the girls you talk to at

recess.

Kids were more interested in looking like Pigpen from the *Peanuts* comics than fielding ground balls. Grown men swore to themselves about not throwing pitches in the miniscule strike zone so these kids could make contact. Parents laughed and jumped at the slightest of accomplishments – making contact in fair territory, fielding a ball and then promptly throwing it 15 feet over the first baseman's head, running the bases.

It's easy to point out the kids who have natural talent and the kids who will soon find out that baseball really isn't for them. Some kids have great hand-eye coordination for their age and others are lucky that losing baby teeth from a ball in the face is okay because they were going to come out anyway.

With an organization like O.B.A.L.L., where all of the coaches are volunteers, and usually parents, everything looks one giant free-for-all. I wanted to go up to these kids and explain to them why they should choke up on the bat, how to throw to first so you don't launch the ball over the first baseman's head, how to square up their shoulders to keep the ball in front of them. Obviously, I didn't, because it's not my place.

These kids are playing for the sake of playing. Most of them don't even care if they're out or safe. If they're going to successfully catch the ball in the field. They don't know the rules, the proper swing techniques. They probably don't even know what the final score was when the game ended.

But, that's where it starts for everybody. Every Major Leaguer you see started at or around that age. They learned on fields like those at Loew Park, or in most cases, probably even worse ones. For the Latin players, I can't imagine what it was like for them growing up. Awful fields, having to play with any kind of equipment that they could find.

The path to the Major Leagues is incredible. Even though every circumstance is different, they all start in a similar manner. Late night sacrifices by parents to allow their children the chance to play a wonderful game.

As we approach summer and the end of school for the kids, I implore all of you to get involved with your children or, if you don't have any, make some time to teach a kid the game of baseball. Plenty of organizations are looking for volunteers to give their time to help. It's a great game. We look at inflated player salaries and scoff at baseball and what it has become. In its simplest, purest form, the form that I watched this past Thursday, it's still America's pastime.

Fathers (or mothers) should revel in the opportunity to play catch with their children or pitch to them in the backyard. Organized sports teach children a lot of skills and values that come in handy as they get older. For baseball, specifically, it teaches teamwork, work ethic, success, failure, hand-eye coordination, how to make friends, and numerous other things that are beneficial to those formative years.

Like I said above, I'm not a parent. I wasn't pushed to play sports or try new things. As I've talked about in this column before, I never went to many baseball games as a kid. I grew to love the sport from an outsider's perspective, not knowing what it's like to stare down a pitcher while waiting on a 3-2 fastball or gauge that fly ball to end a bases loaded threat. I regret very much that I never got a chance to play a meaningful game of baseball.

Plenty of kids have that opportunity, and it's one of the more affordable sports to get children involved in. Sometimes, when I'm on the Porch, a kid will come running up to the rail, fascinated at how close they can get to their idols. Kids, decked out in their replica jerseys and promotional items that are too big, will stand there in awe, ignoring their parents who want to keep moving towards whatever concession stand they were attempting to get to.

With summer coming, warm nights at the ballpark are just around the corner. Baseball has given me a lot of memories and I'm sure that there are a lot more to come. Create memories of your own. Be around the game as much as you possibly can and hopefully you'll get as much, or more, out of it as I have.