

# Why it's up to older fans to save MLB's future unless baseball reinvents itself

Appealing to the next generation is no easy task, but that doesn't mean it can't be a simple one

by [Cody Benjamin](#)

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If you've been following baseball in recent years, you probably know that Major League Baseball has been openly trying to combat the rise in average age of its fans -- now a [not-so-spring-chicken-y 57 years old](#) -- with a [plethora of tweaks](#) and [proposals](#) meant to speed up the game and appeal to the next generation.

What you probably don't know is that absolutely none of them will work.

That, essentially, is what's proposed by Susan Jacoby, former *Washington Post* reporter, in her new book, "[Why Baseball Matters](#)."

And it is not without merit.

Part of a Yale University Press series, the book acts as both a personal and historical tribute to baseball as well as a commentary on [MLB's](#) future, and in it, Jacoby tries to unearth how the game can reclaim its fading factions of young fans -- including women and African Americans.

But rather than peddle the league's current efforts, which shave a couple minutes off three-hour game times to cater to "a culture of digital distraction," she suggests something far more radical, yet far more logical: Unless MLB opts to change the very fabric of its game, it's up to older fans to pass onto kids the beauty of its seemingly "boring" pace.

If that sounds simplistic, that's because it is. It's a lot easier said than done, after all, to will a new generation into a better attention span. But the reality is that MLB is headed down one of two paths if it's serious about changing for the times:

1. Further tinkering of baseball's "timeless" structure (pitch clocks, commercial break limitations, etc.) in order to continually decrease the average length of games, if only by seconds or minutes.
2. Polarizing upheaval of traditional rules (automatic extra-inning base runners, pitching change limitations, etc.) that completely change the dynamics of the game and, thus, accelerate action.

The dilemma is not entirely dissimilar, at least in principle, to the crossroads the [NFL](#) could ultimately face in [countering its concussion crisis](#), with the league either steadily uprooting its commitment to contact in the name of safety or running full bore with the notion that football is, and forever will be, a play-at-your-own-risk venture.

The problem for baseball is also twofold, as Jacoby succinctly explains in "Why Baseball Matters."

Nothing beyond a massive rules overhaul -- like one cited idea of quickening extras by allowing each team's best hitter 10 pitches to try to hit a walk-off home run -- will either cut more than a couple minutes off average game times and/or inject "excitement" into a patient game. (Plus, aren't most people who stick around for extras the ones who actually care about the whole game anyway?) And yet *with* a massive overhaul, MLB would, as Jacoby puts it, be risking a rerun of Coca-Cola's infamous "New Coke" experiment of 1985 -- an alienation of fans who like baseball for what it is.

"Baseball should not run away from its strongest selling points," Jacoby writes. "The game stands up and out in the lowest-common-denominator American culture of distraction, disruption and interruption."

Bingo. These days, most of us are so conditioned to want things quickly and on demand (it's a Netflix culture, people) just like most of you probably no longer have the desire and/or power to read this sentence carefully, word for word.

But baseball is all about the sanctity of stillness. The quiet anticipation of a pitch. The hopeful -- or nervous -- crack of a ninth-inning bat. The hum of background ballpark chatter. The knowledge that redemption is possible as long as a team still has three outs to spare.

And protecting that stillness, Jacoby eloquently argues, is the most viable -- not to mention probably the most healthy -- route forward for MLB.

That's where the older fans come in.

There are countless other ways baseball must attract younger audiences, like upping its African-American representation and ingratiating itself as an affordable and affable sport for kids -- many of whom studies show drift from baseball fandom if they don't play themselves. But both the simplest and most overarching thing that can be done falls on the shoulders of the seasoned fans.

"The future of baseball depends not only on its institutions," Jacoby writes, "but on individual adult fans making an effort to show the young why we love the game and why they might love it too if they surrendered themselves, as an experiment, to time uninterrupted by clocks and clicks."

If that sounds too idealistic to you, well, you might be right. Truth be told, it remains to be seen if all those "clocks and clicks" of a world increasingly built for multitasking -- a society raising kids on screens and valuing an excess of mild interests over a couple of serious ones -- will ever lose enough luster for future sports fans to do more than swipe through fantasy lineups or choose app-ready highlights over the uncontrolled patience of a live game.

At some point, if consumption -- or lack thereof -- so dictates, maybe baseball will have no choice but to reinvent itself as something other than the beautiful process it is.

Until then, however, Jacoby is right. It's largely up to [MLB's current fans](#) -- those same ones weighing down the average-age studies baseball executives long to overcome -- to save its product for the fans to come. Because unlike the NFL, where safety concerns are driving the biggest changes to football, MLB has little reason to abandon the makeup of its unique offering other than the fact most people just need to relearn how to sit still.

So get to a game. Get the family some Ball Park Franks. (Maybe that's the real answer to all of this.) Bask in the breaks between innings. Play catch. (This one probably requires putting the phone down.) Just let the sport speak for itself in a time when everything else is barking for attention. And play ball.

MLB's future depends on it.