

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

DEATH GIVES ADDED MEANING TO ANNUAL BASEBALL TRIPS

IT'S A PRIORITY FOR US. IT'S A TRIBUTE TO HIM NOW.



An Arizona Diamondbacks game at Chase Field was on the 2009 baseball tour itinerary for **Travis Wiltgen '06**, **Nat Tagtow '04**, **Jeff Fink '02** and **Brad Axdahl '06**.

A QUEST AMONG KOHAWKS

with a shared love of America's pastime to visit each Major League Baseball stadium has become a memorial to one of the instigators.

While attending games at Miller Park (home to the Milwaukee Brewers) and Wrigley Field (home to the Chicago Cubs) in 2007, **Jeff Fink '02**, **Nat Tagtow '04** and **Brad Axdahl '06** planned to start an annual baseball trip. The goal was to eventually visit all 30 Major League stadiums, the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, and both spring training venues in Florida and Arizona.

In 2008, one of Fink's co-workers accompanied the trio to games at PNC Park (Pittsburgh Pirates), Comerica Park (Detroit Tigers), Fifth-Third Field (home of the Triple-A Toledo Mudhens), Progressive Field (Cleveland Indians) and Great American Ball Park (Cincinnati Reds). In 2009, **Travis Wiltgen '06** joined in on visits to Chase Field (Arizona Diamondbacks), Petco Park (San Diego Padres), Angel Stadium in Anaheim, California, and Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.

"We just loved planning the trip and checking stadiums off the list," said Tagtow. "For us, it's just a great time to get together and share something we love."

Fink, Tagtow, Axdahl and Wiltgen were joined by **Josh Stanek '02** and **Kristin Smith Stanek '03** for a game at Miller Park in Milwaukee and **Dave Randa '02** joined the group in Chicago for games at Wrigley and US Cellular Field (home of the White Sox). The 2010 tour also included Target Field in Minneapolis (home of the Minnesota Twins).

The trio had knocked 12 Major League ball parks

off their bucket list in only three years before tragedy struck in 2011. While competing in a Warrior Dash – an extreme obstacle course event – in Kansas City on July 30, Fink collapsed in sweltering heat and was hospitalized for heatstroke. He died 10 days later from multiple organ failure. Tagtow, Axdahl and **Nate Clapham '06** were pallbearers at their 31-year-old friend's funeral.

"We decided to carry on with the trip and now view it as an annual celebration/remembrance of Jeff," said Axdahl.

That September, Tagtow, Axdahl and Wiltgen made an emotional trip to attend games at Cam-

brick memorializes Fink.

"Jeff really became an avid Royals fan when he moved to Kansas City," Tagtow said.

The foursome returned to Kansas City in 2013 for a large gathering of Fink's friends and family at Kauffman Stadium. They also try to attend an annual memorial celebration on the Fink family farm in Westgate, Iowa. "Between weddings and new babies, this was a tough year to plan much and we wanted to do something," Axdahl said.

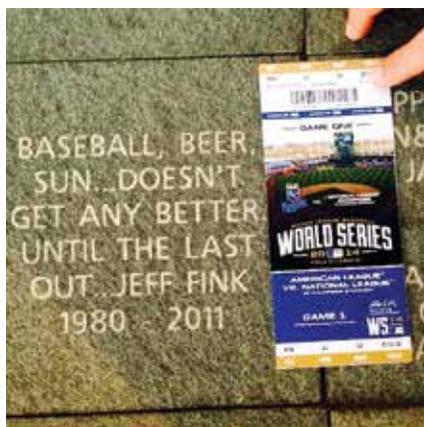
In 2014, the tour resumed with Tagtow, Axdahl, Wiltgen and Clapham attending games at Rogers Centre (Toronto Blue Jays) and again at Comerica Park in Detroit. When the Royals advanced to the World Series for the first time since 1985, Axdahl and Clapham made an unplanned trip to Kansas City and joined Karnik for game one.

Although the Royals lost to the Giants, 7-1, Fink's friends did witness the only run allowed by San Francisco pitcher Madison Bumgarner, who was named series MVP after the Giants' 4-3 victory.

"Jeff was on our mind and always is at a Royals game," Axdahl said. Fink is remembered on every trip and Scotch is raised as a toast in his honor.

To date, the baseball fans whose friendship was formed at Coe have attended 23 games at 20 Major League stadiums, plus a Triple-A stadium and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. They haven't worked out the details on this year's trip, but have only yet to visit Texas, the Pacific Northwest, New England, the Southeast and spring training before the bucket list turned memorial is complete.

"It's sad every year still, but it's a priority for us," Tagtow said. "It's a tribute to him now."



LEFT: Family and friends of **Jeff Fink '02** touch the brick placed in his honor at Kauffman Stadium when attending Kansas City Royals games. On Oct. 21, **Brad Axdahl '06** and **Nate Clapham '06** touched Fink's brick with a World Series ticket.

RIGHT: **Brad Axdahl '06**, **Nate Clapham '06**, **Travis Wiltgen '06** and **Nat Tagtow '04** paid tribute to **Jeff Fink '02** by visiting his Royals in Kansas City in 2013.



den Yards (Baltimore Orioles), Citizens Bank Park (Philadelphia Phillies) and Nationals Park in Washington, D.C. Fink's sister, Brianne Kopecky, joined them using the tickets he had already purchased.

In 2012, Tagtow, Axdahl, Wiltgen and Clapham visited Coors Field (Colorado Rockies) and were joined by **Cory DeShaw '06** at Busch Stadium (St. Louis Cardinals). The foursome was joined in Kansas City by **Brian Karnik '06**, **Jill Fink '05** and many of Fink's local friends and family for a Royals game at Kauffman Stadium, where an engraved