

# THANK YOU, 72



- Speaker 1: [00:03](#) Welcome to this Badger Bonus: a conversation with a special guest alum making a visit to campus. Today, *Wall Street Journal* sports and humor columnist, Jason Gay. Here's your host, Tod Pritchard, director of media and public relations at the Wisconsin Alumni Association.
- Tod Pritchard: [00:19](#) Jason Gay's flare for humor is beloved by his *Wall Street Journal* readers. The 1992 political science grad still wears his Badger pride on his sleeve in many of his columns. He's also the author of the bestselling book, *Little Victories: Perfect Rules for Imperfect Living*, and he was named the 2016 Sports Columnist of the Year by the Society of Professional Journalists. Jason stopped by the Wisconsin Alumni Association just before his winter commencement address. Joining me for this conversation is my colleague Vince Sweeney, vice president of communications. Vince is also a former sports writer for the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the *Los Angeles Times*.
- Vince Sweeney: [00:59](#) Tell us the story of how you got to be a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, leaving this campus as a political science major. What were the milestones along the way that allowed you to get a career to the point that's in —
- Jason Gay: [01:11](#) Yeah. The truth is, I just walked right out of Camp Randall into the *Wall Street Journal* column job and that was it. It was as simple as that. Listen, it was a really curvy, up and down kind of road. And I think all of us have those kinds of experiences. And that's a little bit of what I'm trying to talk about tomorrow, that even the best of us, even the most prepared of us are making this up a little bit as we go along. And certainly my case, I came out of college, I wasn't somebody coming out with a journalism degree. There's a terrific journalism school here. I'm embarrassed to tell you I didn't spend any time in it. I worked in a restaurant, was my first job out of college. I had a friend who was working on a newspaper, who she was selling advertising.

And she quit the job. All of this is true. She quit the job because she wanted to go horseback riding.

Tod Pritchard: [01:56](#)

Okay.

Jason Gay: [01:57](#)

So she quit her advertising job. And I said, “Well, advertising sales at a newspaper, well that sounds like a kind of job you should have after college graduation. I should throw my hat in the ring here.” And I applied for the job. I got a job at this newspaper selling ads. I was the worst ad salesperson in the history of this newspaper. Had I stayed on that job, the newspaper would have gone completely out of business. They realize this, and they say, “Well, maybe we can make this donkey into a sports writer. He doesn’t have any skills selling advertising. But maybe he can be a sports writer.” And that’s honestly the way this happened. I got into sports writing through failing at something else. Had I been good at ad sales, we wouldn’t be here right now.

Jason Gay: [02:36](#)

But anyway, that’s the truth of it. And I started at a tiny little newspaper on Martha’s Vineyard island in Massachusetts, which, sounds kind of tony, right? July and August. But there is also a winter in Martha’s Vineyard where about three people live. And it’s a different kind of experience. But it was real small-town newspapering. And I needed the whole education. As I said, I didn’t have any sort of background in it. And there’s nothing like — and you probably can speak to this, Vince — small-town reporting is sort of the essence of newspapering, I think, because you run into the people you write about.

Vince Sweeney: [03:09](#)

Yeah, that’s right.

Jason Gay: [03:09](#)

And you got to take, I don’t know what your two cents is, and tell me what you think, like community newspaper is the lifeblood of it all.

Vince Sweeney: [03:10](#)

Yeah. You face the people you write about each and every day. And live and work with them, and you know their families and you know their businesses and —

Jason Gay: [03:26](#)

Kids. Yeah. All this stuff.

Vince Sweeney: [03:29](#)

It’s good training.

Jason Gay: [03:29](#)

It is excellent training for me, and I think that it’s a shame, actually, a lot of those smaller newspapers are dying out. That one still actually is miraculously around. But a couple others that I worked afterwards are not. But I worked there —

Vince Sweeney: [03:43](#) Still reeling.

Jason Gay: [03:43](#) Yeah. Went to Boston. I worked at a paper called the *Boston Feedings*, which is sort of like the *Isthmus*. Is the *Isthmus* still around here?

Tod Pritchard: [03:50](#) Oh sure.

Jason Gay: [03:51](#) It is?

Tod Pritchard: [03:51](#) Yep, absolutely.

Jason Gay: [03:52](#) So it was kind of the *Isthmus* of Boston without an isthmus. Then I went to New York City, and worked at a paper called the *New York Observer*, which is sort of down to the rubble now. I don't think there's much of it left anymore. And then I worked at magazines. I worked at *GQ*. You can tell obviously that I spent a lot of time at *GQ*. Look at me. And then I was at *Rolling Stone* for about 10 minutes, went back to *GQ*, and then the *Wall Street Journal* called. And I candidly, like, I didn't read the *Wall Street Journal*. I was not in their target demographic. Like sort of like slovenly writer guy living in New York who doesn't know anything about finance. I was not exactly in their —

Tod Pritchard: [04:33](#) Not your demo, yeah.

Jason Gay: [04:35](#) That's not my demo. But they were building a sports section. The paper was changing, they were building a sports section and I said, "Well, that sounds like a job that you should have after college, writing for the *Wall Street Journal*." And that's what it was. I did a tryout. You ever do one of these things where you write fake stuff that doesn't get published?

Tod Pritchard: [04:55](#) Oh, for sure. Yep.

Vince Sweeney: [04:55](#) Are we talking fake news already?

Jason Gay: [04:56](#) No. That we do every day. I mean it like they're trying you out.

Tod Pritchard: [05:01](#) Absolutely. Here's your facts and you just put them together. You go —

Jason Gay: [05:03](#) Like this stuff happened.

Tod Pritchard: [05:04](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [05:05](#) Let's pretend this is running.

Tod Pritchard: [05:06](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [05:07](#) And we're going to see if you can put the nouns before the verbs.

Tod Pritchard: [05:10](#) Right, right.

Vince Sweeney: [05:10](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [05:10](#) Yeah. That's what they did. Yeah.

Tod Pritchard: [05:12](#) Wow. And you passed?

Jason Gay: [05:14](#) Yeah, but they regret it. Come on, let's face it. Ten years now. Ten years is coming up for me there. So that's as long as I've ever had a job. Which probably says something bad about them.

Tod Pritchard: [05:28](#) I love how you talk about how you have, your dad was like, he was a coach, right, he was a tennis coach. And the last thing he wants you to do was be involved in sports writing, right? He used to get the paper, right? And —

Jason Gay: [05:43](#) Right. No, my father was a high school tennis coach and a high school teacher, but he had, I don't want to say a low opinion of like sports writing, but he definitely was like, there's other important stuff you should read in the newspaper before you read the sports page. Like the sports page should be the dessert you get after you're reading about world news, and national news, and state politics, and all this kind of important stuff, culture. And he would take the newspaper, we would get the newspaper delivered.

Jason Gay: [06:08](#) He would take the newspaper and take the sports section out of it and put it up on top of the fridge. I'm not kidding you. And I would only get it after I sort of hauled through a bunch of like dry-as-hell stories about Washington politics or whatever is happening around the world. And it was a treat that I would get after reading other parts of newspapers. So in the great tradition of children rejecting parental advice and whatever guidance their parents were giving, I turned into the very thing that he didn't want me to be.

Tod Pritchard: [06:36](#) But that really, you fell in love with sports writing, right? It sounds like when you're going to high school, you were reading the great writers of the time and here at the university you were reading those guys.

- Jason Gay: [06:46](#) Sure. No, unquestionably. Boston is a place, *Boston Globe* is a terrific newspaper. And they had kind of this legendary sports page where they had all these incredibly seismic columnists from Lee Manfield, to Bob Ryant, to Lesley Visser, to Jackie MacMullan. And on and on it went, Dan Shaughnessy. And yeah, just like, I don't know, don't they say that about like Velvet Underground records that everyone who bought the record started a band? I felt like everybody who read the *Boston Globe* sports page in the 80s that's what they wanted to do because it just seemed like the place to be. The funny thing is that they didn't win a damn thing back then.
- Tod Pritchard: [07:25](#) Right.
- Jason Gay: [07:25](#) Boston was just kind of loser town. Now it's just like championship town. But anyway, enough about Massachusetts. Then I got to get here and you have two daily newspapers at the time, the *Cardinal* and the *Herald* were both dailies. And as bad as the Badgers were at sports, it was still a very sort of lively thing to talk about, there are all sorts of machinations happening with the athletic department. I didn't get involved. I hesitate to talk about some of this because I'm a little embarrassed that I didn't take advantage of it. I would urge anybody listening who's like a student, an undergrad especially, to like take advantage of these incredible resources that exist here. The fact that there's this tremendous journalism program here in these existing papers, that's just a wonderful thing. I wish I had done that. I can tell you all about the Plazaburger, though, if you have any questions about that, because that's where I spent most of my time.
- Vince Sweeney: [08:15](#) I was going to ask you about some of your top memories, your favorite memories of spending your college years here in Madison. What do you look back on most fondly about?
- Jason Gay: [08:26](#) The 1,000 percent truth is that the friends that I made here are lifelong friends. I'm in constant contact with people that I lived with here in Madison to this day. I see them all the time. We talk all the time. I know them better than I know my own children. It's a little sad. We are constantly talking about the Badgers. And I think that as time has gone on, I'm even more nostalgic for that connection. As you get older, you appreciate friendships and the unspoken bonds that you create. And so that's the first thing that comes to mind for Madison, just having those friends and that group of men and women that I really loved. It's funny to think about this, and I was thinking about this as we were going through the speech writing. How

did we do it back then, guys? We didn't have the internet. We didn't have telephones.

Tod Pritchard: [09:24](#)

Oh, right, right.

Jason Gay: [09:24](#)

How did we ever get to a party all together? How did that ever happen?

Vince Sweeney: [09:29](#)

Dumb luck.

Jason Gay: [09:30](#)

I guess so. I guess you would be like, "I'm going to 423 West Wash. Then I'm going to East 86 East Johnson. Then maybe I'll go back and go to something on West Mifflin." But I don't know how we managed to pack as much in as we packed in. But we really did it. And so that was tremendous. And then of course I'm being a little bit silly about the academic part of it. I didn't study journalism, but I had a tremendous education here. And I had tremendous teachers in political science and English. I got into creative writing my last year here. There's a professor here, Jesse Lee Kercheval, who is still here at Madison who was enormously influential on me in terms of just encouraging. And that's another part of Madison is that you kind of ... I went to a very tiny high school and graduated with 50 students.

Tod Pritchard: [10:20](#)

Wow.

Jason Gay: [10:21](#)

There were 50 people in the elevator my first day at school at Madison. I just couldn't believe how packed it was and I would be taking lectures where there'd be 700 people in it. And when you can have those kinds of connections and you break into those small classes like some of those creative writing classes, and actually have those kind of bonds with students. And those memories have stuck with me for a long time.

Tod Pritchard: [10:39](#)

Jason, why don't you talk a little bit about the, you obviously still love being here, love talking about the Badgers, and follow them. And you write about them still quite a bit. Your latest article was pretty awesome. Yes, "To Save the World, Wisconsin Really Needs to Beat Michigan." Can you talk about that a little bit of what inspired you to write that piece?

Jason Gay: [11:02](#)

Well, it's all situational. So I work at the *Wall Street Journal* in New York City where I have Wolverines to the right, I got Wolverines to the left, I got Wolverines here, I got Wolverines there. They're everywhere. At one point and —

Tod Pritchard: [11:14](#)

I'm so sorry.

- Jason Gay: [11:15](#) It sounds like I'm making this up. At one point my boss, my boss's boss, and my boss's boss's boss were all Wolverines. Okay? And they really liked themselves. I'm just going to leave it there. And sort of good natured fun. And especially when Jim Harbaugh came aboard the Wolverines, making for a very sort of delicious khaki-wearing target, it sort of took on this as a topic. I was shocked at the reaction to it. I think that there are a great many people who love the University of Michigan, it's a massive school, has a massive imprint around the world, but there are an equal number of people who have kind of had it with Michigan.
- Jason Gay: [11:56](#) And I heard it from both sides. And actually over time the Michigan people get in touch, and they're like, "Oh, you haven't picked on Michigan in a while. Where is it?" And it's a healthy rivalry. It's a funny thing also because Badger people, some of them are like, "Wow, Michigan's not really the thing. It's Minnesota. Isn't that the real rivalry?" But I think over time Michigan has kind of evolved into a bigger thing. And certainly we've all seen how college sports have just gone bananas in the last bunch of years, in addition to the fact that the Badgers are so good. Coaches are making millions of dollars. We're seeing just the full, almost professionalization of the games here in college is less so at Madison than in other places, but still part of the fabric here. So it's fun, and I hope, and I think that people get that 99 percent of it is tongue in cheek.
- Jason Gay: [12:47](#) But it has been a real delight to just hear from so many people who are Badgers and Badger graduates, and especially from Badger graduates who remember the last time when things were really great. They're like, "Listen man, I was there when Elroy Hirsch was there and Crazy Legs. We went to the Rose Bowl three times. What are you talking about Badger's not being so good." So that's been a real pleasure too. All of it. Look, you know what it's like, Vince. You get into a newspaper sometimes, I worked at places where you got one letter a month, and you'd be like, "Look, we got a letter." So the fact that people or engaging in writing and even to tell you —
- Vince Sweeney: [13:25](#) Yeah, that's very good.
- Jason Gay: [13:25](#) — to blow it out your ear, it's fine.
- Vince Sweeney: [13:28](#) Yeah, they're reading.
- Jason Gay: [13:30](#) They are reading. Anybody.

Tod Pritchard: [13:31](#) What do you think about the Rose Bowl coming up here? You got any thoughts on that?

Jason Gay: [13:35](#) Well, I like Oregon. No. No, I like the Badgers. Listen, it's been a funny season, right? Came flying out of the gate. That Michigan game, I was here. One of the great experiences of my life —

Tod Pritchard: [13:50](#) Really?

Jason Gay: [13:50](#) — watching that thrashing of the Wolverines at Camp Randall. Hit a little speed bump in Illinois. Hit another little speed bump in Columbus. But a very satisfying win over Minnesota to close out the regular season, win the Big Ten. What the heck do they call it? The East or the West. Whatever.

Vince Sweeney: [14:09](#) It's the West.

Tod Pritchard: [14:10](#) West, yeah.

Jason Gay: [14:11](#) We're the West. All right. So we're in the West, I still don't understand it. Remember when it was the Leaders and Legends.

Tod Pritchard: [14:14](#) Yes, yes.

Jason Gay: [14:14](#) Oh my God.

Tod Pritchard: [14:14](#) Yes, right.

Jason Gay: [14:16](#) Well East and West is better than that. We get to this championship game. And I'm telling you, the first 45 minutes of it, I thought I was hallucinating. I thought this was the greatest thing I've ever seen in my entire life. I was like calling my boss. I was like, "You're going to have to hold page one. I think we're going to upset the number one team in the country." I don't know if you shut off the TV after the first half, but it changed. It got a little different.

Tod Pritchard: [14:39](#) Yes.

Jason Gay: [14:41](#) But I think Ohio State's the best team in the country. I think the Badgers really hung with them for a while. I think they're a formidable team. I think that the Big Ten is an outstanding football conference. Not top all the way to the bottom. I don't know about Rutgers in Maryland. But a lot of talent in it. Minnesota was an outstanding team this year too. I think they're going to be very tough. I think the PAC 10, not terribly tested traditionally. I like it. I like their chances. I'm happy to see

the respect for the program. We were an 8–3 club, which is ranked eight in the country right now.

Tod Pritchard: [15:17](#)

Great.

Jason Gay: [15:18](#)

Which is a high ranking for a three-loss program. And I think speaks to what they have built over the last couple of decades here that they know that the Badgers are not like padding schedules and they play quality games, beat quality opponents, and it's not nothing that they hung with Ohio State for as long as they did.

Tod Pritchard: [15:36](#)

You interview so many fascinating people in your job, I know you probably get this, this is the obligatory question, and you probably get all the time, but who's the favorite person you've ever interviewed? And do you want to talk about the least favorite person you've ever interviewed?

Jason Gay: [15:53](#)

Well, favorite is clearly Barry Alvarez. That's the person that I love the most. Barry, listen, he's the godfather. We can all acknowledge it. In terms of like fascinating, least ... What is the question? Who's the best? Who's the worst?

Tod Pritchard: [16:08](#)

Yeah.

Jason Gay: [16:08](#)

All right. Here's one's going to surprise you a little bit as far as the best, somebody who you wouldn't think would be an actually interesting conversation or funny or sort of. So Roger Federer, you like tennis at all?

Tod Pritchard: [16:17](#)

Sure. Yes. That's a very surprising answer, yes.

Jason Gay: [16:21](#)

When you look at Roger Federer and you say, "Okay, this guy looks kind of snooty." He's like James Bond. He's doesn't seem like he'd be a good hang, right?

Tod Pritchard: [16:30](#)

Right, right.

Jason Gay: [16:31](#)

He's surprisingly down to earth for a guy who might be the best tennis player of all time, who has made close to a billion dollars. He is surprisingly funny. Does impressions, is self-effacing about himself.

Tod Pritchard: [16:44](#)

That is a total shocker.

Jason Gay: [16:45](#)

He's got two sets of twins. That's like a sitcom waiting to happen, right? Roger Federer has two sets of twins. So I've talked to him a number of times. Obviously I had this

background with my dad through tennis that that's a thing for me. So it's a real cool thing to get a chance to talk to the number one player in the world or certainly one of the best ever. I would say put him at the top of sort of like surprise people. As far as the worst, I can't say any particular individual because I always am willing to give people the benefit of the doubt that, "I bet they're having a bad day." Like I'm having now.

- Jason Gay: [17:22](#) And they just maybe don't have their game face on to be interviewed. But I will tell you what's the pit of the experience, which is these scrums, especially something like Super Bowl Media Day. And for all you young journalists out there who are thinking about getting into the sports media racket, whatever you do, don't go to Super Bowl Media Day. There's no greater recipe for hating yourself. It's like the situation where you have, there's that athlete, Tom Brady, and there are 750 people sticking their hands up like this, and you can barely hear what they have to say. There's no privacy, there's no opportunity for any kind of human connection. You probably did a bunch of things like that. It's the worst.
- Vince Sweeney: [17:58](#) A few.
- Tod Pritchard: [18:00](#) And there's no content. Nothing is being said that is of — hardly of any interest, right?
- Jason Gay: [18:03](#) Exactly. No. It's this kind of like meta commentary on society that you have these people who are there asking like if you could be a cantaloupe, what cantaloupe would you like to be? There are people like dressed as bananas, the whole thing. And I hate it.
- Vince Sweeney: [18:19](#) Let me ask you a variation of Todd's question and not so much the people you interviewed and such. But as you sit down someday with your grandkids and say, "The greatest athletic event that I ever covered was." What are the ones that are on the list right now that — game seven of the World Series or?
- Jason Gay: [18:43](#) Yeah, sure. Who cares about the game seven of the World Series? Okay. I'm not kidding. You're going to think that I'm just like sucking up here. But I swear to you, one of the most exciting things I ever got the privilege to witness as a sports writer was when Wisconsin shocked undefeated Kentucky in the semifinals of the 2015 March madness. I don't know what happened in the game after that. I just stopped watching after that. But seeing that up close and seeing that team, and like Frank the tank and Sam Decker, Nigel Hayes. These were guys

who, scrappy doesn't even begin to tell the story of just, they were like a really tight, tough team that beat just an undefeated juggernaut that people were talking about as being in this historic UCLA team and this game was in Indianapolis, the Badger nation was in full effect there.

- Jason Gay: [19:37](#) I felt like the stadium was about 80 percent Badger fans. And that was just a very ... and also it's a very hard moment to like, there are some protocol as you know, Vince, like with sports writing you're not supposed to be up there, "Let's go Frank. Okay. Let's go." So I really have to button it up. I couldn't do that kind of thing. And then at the end of it, like there was hugging and cheering, and I can't run onto the court and start like hugging the guys. I'd get fired probably. But that was a huge thrill. And then more recently, and not to turn this into like tennis talk and Bucky Badger land. But Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic just played about a five-hour Wimbledon final.
- Tod Pritchard: [20:24](#) Right.
- Jason Gay: [20:24](#) Which I had the privilege to cover for the *Journal*. And it just felt like every once in a while one of these sporting events — never a Jets game — but every once in a while, one of these sporting events you truly feel you are at the center of the universe. If everyone on Earth could pick the place that they are at, at this moment, you are there. And that's what it felt like when they went to the fifth set, and they went into extended fifth set, and they went to the tie break. It really felt like if anybody could be anywhere at that given moment, it'd be where you were exactly at that time.
- Jason Gay: [20:57](#) And you were seeing two legends in a match that people will talk about for generations. And that's the part of the job that I never want to like lose an appetite for. It's a grind. And I'm sure you felt those feelings, too, of like not everything is like that. Most is not. So it can wear you down and especially, I have a young family, it's not the kind of life that lends itself to going to 162 baseball games — or six. But those experiences you'd do for free. Don't do it for free though.
- Tod Pritchard: [21:33](#) No, don't.
- Jason Gay: [21:33](#) Don't do it for free.
- Tod Pritchard: [21:34](#) Are you really looking forward to the Olympics? Is that like your next big thing that you're looking forward to?

- Jason Gay: [21:37](#) I love it. I love it. I love the Olympics. And the Olympics are a very sort of imperfect thing because they are this like gargantuan international enterprise where there's a lot of like corruption. We've had a lot of scandals, both in terms of stuff that's happening on the field, but also a lot of shenanigans that are happening in terms of the awarding of the Olympics and all that stuff. However, that said, as an actual sports-going experience, you're getting to see the greatest day of somebody's life every day. That's kind of a remarkable thing. There's these people — and most athletes are not J. J. Watt. They are not people who are on the covers of magazines and like being flown around the world.
- Jason Gay: [22:15](#) They are people who are working in obscurity, who are struggling, who have second, third jobs sometimes. And to see them, whether it's just a participant in the Olympics and march in the opening ceremony, or maybe they're so good enough that they can medal. It's a really cool experience. And also it's in Tokyo this year. It's a hell of a town, Tokyo. I'm interested to see what happens with that. But you know what I'm holding out for? I just got to make sure that I cannot get fired from the *Journal* until 2024 because the summer Olympics are in Paris. Sounds pretty great, right?
- Tod Pritchard: [22:50](#) Right.
- Jason Gay: [22:51](#) But Paris announced just the other day that surfing is now part of the Olympics. So Paris said, "You know what? There's no good surfing in Paris. There's not much we can do about it." And they sent out applications to like, or requests for proposals from municipalities on coastal France, and they came in and they went, "You know what? Those don't really cut it. We're going to do this in Tahiti." So the summer Olympics swimming in 2024 is going to be in Tahiti. So I'm thinking of starting a Tahiti bureau. I should probably get there soon, right? Just cover like the buildup and all that kind of thing.
- Tod Pritchard: [23:28](#) Right. You got to establish yourself.
- Jason Gay: [23:29](#) Yeah. I want to get boots on the ground or sandals on the ground there and be the Tahitian correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal* Sports Department. I think that's a move.
- Tod Pritchard: [23:37](#) I think that's a great move.
- Speaker 1: [23:41](#) This Badger bonus podcast is brought to you by the UW Alumni Store. Whether you're looking for some stylish apparel or spirited accessories, visit UWAlumniStore.com. Because when

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Tod Pritchard: [24:19](#) Can I ask you about your book a little bit? Because you did *Little Victories* a few years ago. It's beloved by readers. It started out as a way to poke fun at self-help books. But then you said you — kind of in the middle of it, it kind of morphed into something a little different. Can you tell us about that a little bit?

Jason Gay: [24:36](#) Sure. This, it began as completely as a comedic exercise. This was a book that I was writing as kind of a joke upon self-help books and especially kind of the surety that people have in self-help books. You read those self-help books all the time, and they're like, "Whatever you do, don't wear a brown sweater on Thursday." And they're just so conditioned and right. And they feel so perfect. And the last thing I am on planet Earth is perfect. And so I wanted to write a self-help book for the rest of us. But in the course of doing it, some big stuff started happening, which my father was diagnosed with cancer, and which was a big blow, obviously. And he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer stage four. He didn't live terribly long.

Jason Gay: [25:23](#) It was a really rough few months before we lost him. And I'm sure you've had circumstances like this in your lives that where things happen to people you love, and it makes you do a lot of reevaluation, and it makes you kind of think seriously about things you might've not taken as seriously. And you think deeper thoughts, not as glib thoughts. So I think that, and thanks to dad for dying, but it really made the book a different book. It just really was, I think, elevated by some of those experiences that I was having, and hopefully, and I hear from people a good deal about that element of the book, losing somebody and being able to relate to aspects of it because there's processes of grief. And this was happening in real time as I was writing the book.

Jason Gay: [26:13](#) I was trying to be as just nakedly honest as possible. And that's to me, like in my job, that's what it's all about. Is just being brutally honest about your truths, and shortcomings, and mistakes and not knowing. We are so accustomed now, and not to turn it into like reliable sources here, but we're so

accustomed to this culture of like the media telling you how it is and like this is ... What you don't hear terribly often is, "I don't know. I don't know what's going to happen."

- Tod Pritchard: [26:43](#) Right.
- Jason Gay: [26:44](#) I don't know what's going to happen with impeachment or whatever. And I really feel very strongly that when I don't know, I should say so. And that was like with the book and my dad's experience and my family's experience sort of like you're processing in real time just all kinds of colliding feelings in conflict with each other. And so I appreciate the question. Because it was something that it started with one thing and it became something different. And obviously I'd never want to wish that upon my father or anybody else, but I think that it became a more meaningful thing, at least for me writing it.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:20](#) You have so many great thoughts in the book. The one that I love the most is give up trying to be cool because it's a waste of time and —
- Jason Gay: [27:29](#) Yeah. But you're pretty cool.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:30](#) No. I've never been cool in my entire life.
- Jason Gay: [27:31](#) Motion W jacket rocking.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:33](#) No, no. Never. You ask my son. I'll say, "Am I cool?"
- Jason Gay: [27:36](#) Your glasses are pretty cool.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:39](#) He's like, "Yeah. You've never been cool." No. I've never been cool.
- Jason Gay: [27:41](#) All right.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:42](#) I've given up. But I succeeded at giving up at being cool. I think I've succeeded. I haven't succeeded at not soaking my pans — greasy pans — before washing them. I'm still a coward.
- Jason Gay: [27:53](#) You still don't do that? Okay.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:55](#) I'm a coward when it comes to washing the pans, yeah.
- Jason Gay: [27:57](#) Listen, clearly I was lying in that part of the book because I'm cool as hell. Look at me. Come on, folks. It doesn't get any cooler than this. I just feel like you need to liberate yourself.

There's no sort of like stronger cultural force than the idea of selling cool, right? It sells everything.

Tod Pritchard: [28:13](#)

Right.

Jason Gay: [28:13](#)

Like there are cool toasters, razors, haircuts, everything. And there's just so much cultural pressure from basically age one. My son is six years old. He feels pressure to get the cool Pokemon. It's ridiculous. So I wanted to kind of like write a little manifesto telling people that you didn't need to worry about those kinds of things. There is a medium — you don't want to start being the kind of person showing up in sweatpants to weddings and stuff like that.

Tod Pritchard: [28:37](#)

Right.

Jason Gay: [28:39](#)

A certain amount of self-care is helpful.

Vince Sweeney: [28:41](#)

Are you speaking from experience on that one or?

Jason Gay: [28:44](#)

Sweatpants are perfectly comfortable.

Tod Pritchard: [28:46](#)

I'd like to ask you real quick about youth sports because I have a 13-year-old.

Jason Gay: [28:50](#)

Okay.

Tod Pritchard: [28:50](#)

He plays hockey.

Jason Gay: [28:51](#)

Okay.

Tod Pritchard: [28:52](#)

And he loves it. But it is like cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs out there. It is like parents going crazy. There actually is a new movement in the state legislature to potentially pass a law making harassment of an official a misdemeanor.

Jason Gay: [29:10](#)

Okay.

Tod Pritchard: [29:11](#)

Which — so it's kind of, it's gotten to that level. But I know you have some thoughts on youth sports. And it's just amazing how parents just think this is the ticket to my kid becoming a billionaire.

Jason Gay: [29:25](#)

Sure.

Tod Pritchard: [29:26](#)

And it's just crazy out there right now.

Jason Gay: [29:28](#) Sure. And it turns out like one out of two kids does not make it out of the NHL.

Tod Pritchard: [29:31](#) Yeah, right.

Jason Gay: [29:32](#) It's amazing. Are you a crazy hockey parent? Where do you fall on the spectrum of lunacy?

Tod Pritchard: [29:39](#) I tend to be very stoic. I only get crazy if my wife starts to get crazy.

Jason Gay: [29:47](#) Okay.

Tod Pritchard: [29:47](#) Because I have to calm her down. She's usually like right next to me, and she's usually pushing me off the bleachers so I have to like calm her down, so I don't get physically hurt.

Jason Gay: [29:56](#) Now do you ever pound the glass?

Tod Pritchard: [29:58](#) I do not pound the glass. My wife —

Jason Gay: [30:00](#) Oh come on.

Tod Pritchard: [30:00](#) No. I don't. My wife pounds whatever object, usually me, or some metal or whatever is nearby. So we're the yin and yang of that whole thing. I actually, you know what, to be honest, I'm usually running the clock during our game.

Jason Gay: [30:17](#) Oh, is that a fact? Okay.

Tod Pritchard: [30:17](#) Yeah. I'm usually like an office official. I'm usually running clock.

Jason Gay: [30:20](#) Do you ever screw it up, or do you get it messed up?

Tod Pritchard: [30:20](#) Oh yeah, I've screwed it up. Yeah, yeah. And then —

Jason Gay: [30:24](#) I think it's a really hard job running the clock.

Tod Pritchard: [30:25](#) It is a hard job.

Vince Sweeney: [30:26](#) Yeah, there's pressure.

Jason Gay: [30:26](#) I had to run the clock in junior high, I screwed up all the time.

Tod Pritchard: [30:27](#) There's a lot of pressure. All of a sudden you forget to press the button to start the clock. And then you're usually playing Janes —

Jason Gay: [30:32](#) Or you got that home cooking going where you don't —

Vince Sweeney: [30:35](#) Is there anything in the legislature about protecting the timekeeper?

Tod Pritchard: [30:38](#) There should be some, there might be. Especially when you're playing Jamesville or Beloit. Then you really got some yelling going on there.

Jason Gay: [30:45](#) Well, you're right to ask about youth sports because it really is the ... if I could pick a topic that will create a conversation or an argument, or a fistfight wherever I go, it is youth sports in America in 2019. It just is unbelievable. It just seems like not a week goes by that there's not a story from someplace where there are two parents like wrestling each other in the parking lot of a hockey rink or a baseball diamond or a soccer field or something. It's just, we have lost our collective minds. And a lot of it is, as you said, parents under the illusion that the child will be a ticket someplace. It might not be a ticket to the pros. I think most people are at least tuned in somewhat to the idea that their kids are probably not going to evolve into Sidney Crosby. But they might think it's a ticket to college.

Tod Pritchard: [31:28](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [31:28](#) Or to partial scholarship or even just admission to a good school. And that might not be a realistic expectation. In most cases, it's not a realistic expectation. But it's created this whole bizarre economy of people who are willing to prey upon that idea. And I'm sure you're inundated with —

Tod Pritchard: [31:45](#) Absolutely.

Jason Gay: [31:46](#) — the kinds of clinics and camps and video training and all this kind of stuff that you could buy for top dollar to supplement your child's youth sports experience.

Tod Pritchard: [31:57](#) And it's hard to say no. It's hard when you get all those things. You're like, "Well, if I say no, am I jeopardizing him from being the best he can be?"

Jason Gay: [32:05](#) Right. Absolutely. No, no question. And I look at it and try to reverse engineer it a little bit from having the opportunity to know some pro athletes who play all kinds of sports. And one thing I find fascinating, you might've had this experience, too, is that a great, great, many of the people who are terrific athletes at something didn't start until a little later on. They might've played something else. I'll give you an example, Odell Beckham

Jr., terrific wide receiver for the Cleveland Browns, NFL, was with the Giants last year, played soccer most of his life, switched over to football later on, became a top college recruit. A great many people who actually reach those pinnacles didn't have that kind of giant crazy helicopter-parenting umbrella of insanity. They just had somebody who looked out for them when it counted later on in their lives. And I think there's way too much focus upon young people's competitiveness, and keeping score, and stats, and all the shenanigans of like rankings people — you're ranking eight-year-old basketball players in this country.

Tod Pritchard: [33:15](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [33:16](#) That just seems absurd and it usually has very little bearing on how it pans out. But we're also, the other part of it is we're really losing sight of the reasons to play sports in the first place. My son is six, so we're just getting underway with soccer and baseball. He had a very funny thing happen to him in soccer. First year playing soccer, they run the table, undefeated the whole season.

Tod Pritchard: [33:43](#) Wow.

Jason Gay: [33:43](#) Not only undefeated. I don't think they trailed an entire game. They were blowing the doors off of everybody. Now my son is not blowing the doors off of, he's not the Messi of his team. He's a bystander. He's a nice kid, but he's a bystander. The great thing about it is that the coach had his head completely screwed on straight and really drilled down to these kids that it wasn't about the winning and losing. He never kept stats. He never congratulated them on winning. He made darn sure that when they got up ahead in a big lead that he took out the good players and sometimes through tears, which was kind of funny. But he really drilled down the correct message was that it wasn't about that winning and losing, or dominance or anything, undefeated, nothing.

Jason Gay: [34:28](#) It was about the experience of having friends and teammates and being a good sport and that kind of stuff. And I fear that those kinds of presences are fewer and far between. So you've touched a nerve there. I think that this is like probably the topic in sports, and I think, candidly, people in my profession don't talk about it enough because we're so fixated on the pros and the top college stuff that the conversation is probably when you're with friends and you're talking about sports, I'd assume 80 percent of them are about crazy hockey parents and not about like the Bucks or the Badgers.

Tod Pritchard: [35:02](#) Right. That is a huge topic when we're talking about things. Do you foresee yourself becoming a crazy soccer dad?

Jason Gay: [35:11](#) It's very hard. Well first of all, I don't know a darn thing about soccer, so there's no danger of me becoming a soccer guru dad. But I did play baseball, and I was guilty of getting very excited when he got a hit. And I wondered about that. I wondered if like me jumping up and down like Steve Martin when he hit the part of the infield was a detrimental thing. It's a strange thing. I'm a work in progress. I can tell you that my own father, he and I went back and forth for years and years about a great many things. But he would come to sporting events on rare occasions. Most of them, he just dropped me off.

Jason Gay: [35:49](#) But when they would show up, he would get a lawn chair, he'd open it up, and he'd read a book. And I think that is about the correct attachment for a parent to a youth sporting event. And I'd look over, I'd be at bat and my dad would be reading like Norman Mailer or something like that. And I'd be like, "Dad, are we doing this for real?" But actually I think he did me a favor. I think that's the appropriate parental attachment to Little League games.

Tod Pritchard: [36:13](#) Jason, a couple of final questions. What was your favorite food during your UW time?

Jason Gay: [36:19](#) That's a really good question. Okay. I have a whole bunch of answers. You have another hour?

Tod Pritchard: [36:25](#) Sure. You don't, I don't think, but —

Jason Gay: [36:28](#) Listen, I think that, first of all, do they still make the taco salad in the Memorial Union?

Tod Pritchard: [36:32](#) Yes.

Jason Gay: [36:33](#) They still have those?

Tod Pritchard: [36:33](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jason Gay: [36:33](#) Okay. Well, those were part of my lifeblood for a good deal of my time. Not exactly Wisconsin food, but those were terrific, like Plazaburger, top-notch. Mickey's, the griddle cakes, top notch.

Tod Pritchard: [36:49](#) Okay.

Jason Gay: [36:49](#) In fact, I think I could just eat those full time. Definitely the french fries at the Plaza, too. Dottie's Dumpling Dowry is right across the street from where we're staying with my family. I'm going to make my kids have that later on today. Is the Rozino's pizza truck still around?

Tod Pritchard: [37:10](#) That I don't know about.

Jason Gay: [37:13](#) Pizza is, they're like rock bands, they come and go. They have eras, right?

Tod Pritchard: [37:17](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [37:17](#) Well, back in the day, kids, there was a thing called the Rozino's pizza truck, and they were so brilliantly strategic. They were ahead of our time because —

Tod Pritchard: [37:24](#) Yeah, now everyone's doing a food truck.

Jason Gay: [37:25](#) ... [crosstalk 00:37:25] food, everyone's got a food truck.

Tod Pritchard: [37:27](#) Right.

Jason Gay: [37:27](#) So Rozino's just used to find the biggest party in town, just park that sucker right outside of it because they knew come like 1:30 in the morning, there'd be a hundred kids who would be really thirsting for a bunch of pizza. So I just have very fond memories of that.

Vince Sweeney: [37:41](#) What about nightlife? What were your watering holes that you frequent?

Jason Gay: [37:44](#) Yeah. So I like the oldies but the goodies. I loved the Plaza, clearly. The Silver Dollar, which I was thrilled to see is still in effect up by the Capitol, it still has the, what do you call it?

Vince Sweeney: [37:57](#) Shuffleboard?

Jason Gay: [37:58](#) Shuffleboard, but those sort of like small shuffleboard. The Pub, rest in peace, that's no longer... now it's like some sort of thing with like a mechanical bull, or it's all kinds of craziness happening in there. I don't know.

Vince Sweeney: [38:07](#) They do, yeah. [inaudible 00:38:09].

Jason Gay: [38:09](#) State Street Brats, of course was. But listen, this is a boring answer and it's going to sound like I'm sucking up, but like nothing beats like just a nice day when you're sitting out there

on the Terrace with a pitcher by yourself. No. And it's a very warm day in Madison, so it's like 29 degrees out. And there's just nothing beats that. There's no school, and I've been to a lot of them now, nothing compares with it. It's just fabulous.

- Tod Pritchard: [38:40](#) It is fabulous. And it is so awesome that you're here doing the commencement. And thank you so much for being here —
- Jason Gay: [38:48](#) I appreciate that.
- Tod Pritchard: [38:48](#) — participating in our podcast. And just the best of luck to you. Continue wearing your cardinal and white on your sleeve as much as possible. We love it.
- Jason Gay: [38:57](#) I will.
- Vince Sweeney: [38:57](#) You're always welcome here.
- Jason Gay: [38:57](#) Am I not supposed to call it red? I have to call it cardinal?
- Tod Pritchard: [38:59](#) No, no. You could.
- Jason Gay: [38:59](#) It's like are you sticky about that?
- Tod Pritchard: [39:01](#) I was just being official on it.
- Vince Sweeney: [39:03](#) Nobody's sticky.
- Jason Gay: [39:03](#) Okay.
- Tod Pritchard: [39:03](#) But red's fine, too.
- Jason Gay: [39:04](#) Okay. Because you know the Michigan people — it isn't yellow, it's maize. I hear about that every once in a while. So it's good to know I can say, okay, red.
- Tod Pritchard: [39:13](#) Red's fine. Yeah.
- Jason Gay: [39:14](#) Okay. Okay. I am genuinely honored and touched to be here. It's a thrill of a lifetime to be able to come back to school, and to be able to speak. And it just, it touched me a great deal. And for somebody who is always trying to be a little silly, it moved me. So thank you very much.
- Tod Pritchard: [39:32](#) That's great.
- Vince Sweeney: [39:32](#) That's great. Good to have you here.

Tod Pritchard: [39:33](#) Thank you.

Vince Sweeney: [39:33](#) Thank you.

Jason Gay: [39:33](#) Thank you.

Speaker 1: [39:36](#) You can find Jason Gay's commencement address on YouTube, and his book *Little Victories* is available in paperback on Amazon. Thanks for listening to this Badger Bonus podcast from the Wisconsin Alumni Association. For more alumni stories, visit [ThankYou72.org](http://ThankYou72.org).