Henderson: Anchors aweigh for one of greatest college football towns

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. — One of my favorite parlor games among fellow college football writers is naming the most miserable, disgusting college town in America. We also name the best.

The list under worst could be a Big 12 roll call. Ames, Iowa; Waco, Texas; College Station, Texas; Lubbock, Texas. The appropriately named Starkville, Miss., gets a few votes, too. Just to tick off the appropriate people, I always add South Bend, Ind.

The best is just as well defined. Austin, Texas, tops nearly everyone's list. Also up there are Boulder and Madison, Wis., and I like Columbus, Ohio, one of the underrated cities in America. But let me add another and put it way up there, a little past Boulder and challenging Austin as the best college town in the U.S. — Annapolis, Md.

I'm serious. I attended my first Air Force-Navy game Saturday, and a visit to Annapolis should be on every college football fan's bucket list. I've been to 69 of the 120 FBS schools, and Annapolis is one of the most pleasant surprises of my career.

My political leanings are just to the left of Gandhi, so I don't get misty-eyed watching military students marching in formation. Navy's option offense is not part of this equation.

But unlike the Air Force Academy, which is stuck in the middle of a frozen tundra between Colorado Springs and Castle Rock, the Naval Academy is smack dab in the middle of Annapolis. Its historic City Dock, rimmed with restaurants, bars and shops and boats bobbing up and down on the harbor, reminds me of some of the Greek harbors where I've hung out.

Replace the souvlaki with crab cakes, the ouzo with Yuengling beer and Greek fishermen with American midshipmen and you have game day in Annapolis. The state capital dates to 1649, and the downtown is lined with cobblestone streets and well-behaved Navy students too mature and disciplined to partake in public drunkenness. Unlike students in Lubbock.

Before the game, a trolley shuttled me between the beautifully renovated Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium to the academy, which is just a short march from downtown. I walked around the 164-year-old "Yard" and its green-domed chapel, as sailboats plied up the Severn River.

After the game, I ate a bucket of mussels with a glass of Australian sauvignon blanc while gazing at fishing boats in the harbor. Try doing that in Ames, Iowa.