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## The Great Potato Toss

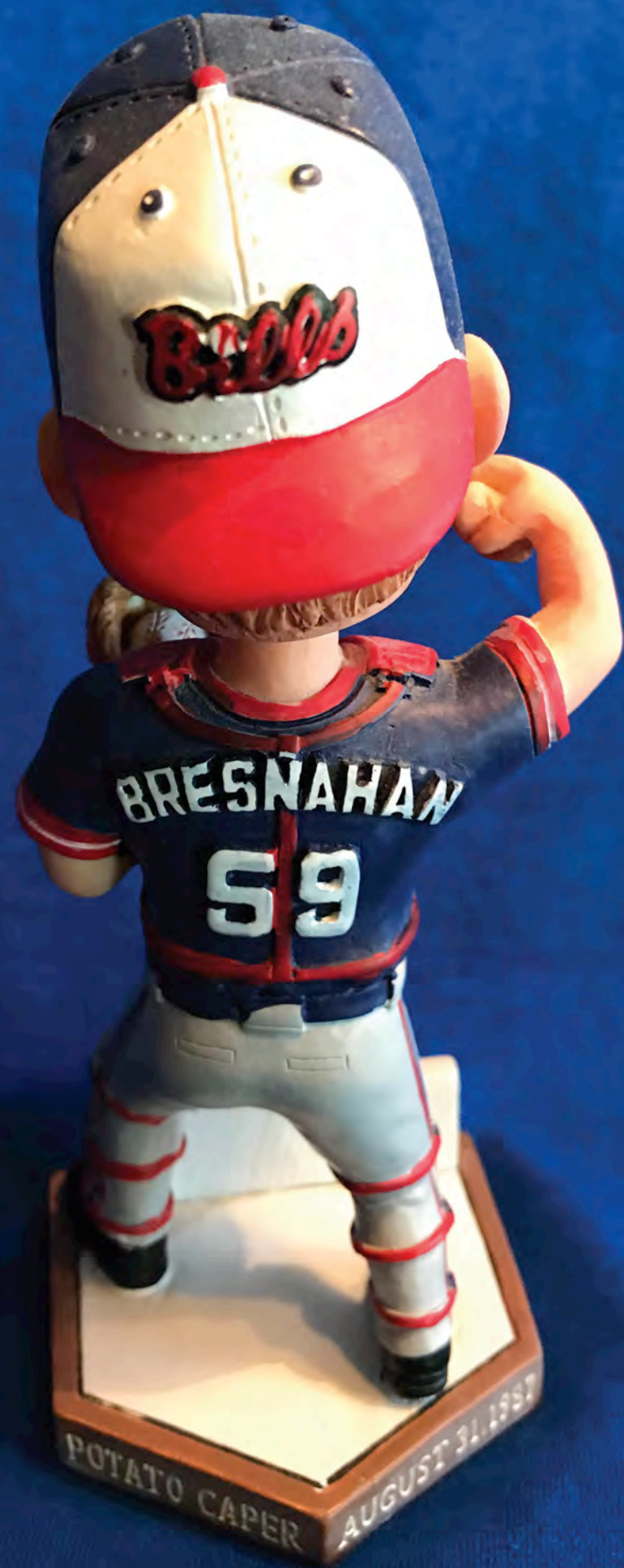
Thirty Years Ago,  
Williamsport  
Minor League  
Catcher Dave  
Bresnahan Threw a  
Potato in a Game,  
and It Hasn't  
Landed Yet

by Brendan O'Meara

Tractor Time at Tioga County Fair  
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AUGUST 2017





# The Great Potato Toss

Thirty Years Ago, Williamsport Minor League Catcher Dave Bresnahan Threw a Potato in a Game, and It Hasn't Landed Yet

By Brendan O'Meara

**3.01 The Ball.** *The ball shall be a sphere formed by yarn wound around a small core of cork, rubber or similar material, covered with two strips of white horsehide or cowhide, tightly stitched together. It shall weigh not less than five nor more than 5 ¼ ounces avoirdupois and measure not less than nine nor more than 9 ¼ inches in circumference.*

—Official Baseball Rules

At one hundred and ten calories, potatoes are full of starch, have more potassium than a banana (who knew?), and are great source of Vitamin B6 (10 percent) and Vitamin C (45 percent).

Bake them. Fry them. Roast them. Home fry them. Hash brown them. Tater tot 'em. Mash, smash, and hash them. Gratinized, scalloped, French fried, or twice baked. They grow eyes. They live in dirt.

Out of the innumerable recipes for potatoes, one stands tall for its pure ingenuity and timeliness. It was cooked up thirty years ago this month. It involved equal parts despair, boredom, and—after over one hundred games with nothing to show but sore arms, sore legs, and sore egos—the need for a goddamn laugh.

Dave Bresnahan, the backup catcher for the Williamsport Bills, then the Double-A affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, and his roommate, Rob Swain, third baseman, were eating pizza and drinking beer at their favorite pub. Up on the television were the highlights for the day. Early August, 1987, they saw Joe Niekro, the knuckleball pitcher for the Minnesota Twins, throw an emery board out from his back pocket, trying to show the umpires that he had, in fact, *not* been doctoring the balls.

Bres and Swain laughed when they saw that and figured they needed to bring a bit of lightness to Bowman Field, not outright *cheat* like Niekro, but some bit of trickery.

“It was tough to go to the clubhouse knowing we’re probably not going to win tonight,” Swain recalls, “and that was everybody’s attitude. That’s the way it was.”

Bres had read somewhere, either in a comic book or an old book, that there was a guy who tried to pick a runner off with a potato.

So, they purchased several russets from the grocery store and fashioned them into the size of a baseball. Swain and Bres stepped out into the front yard and played catch. “It’s a slippery bastard when you try to throw it,” Bresnahan says.

After a few passes they looked at each other and said, “This is going to work.”

Orlando Gomez was the Triple-A manager up in Buffalo. The club made a change sending Gomez down to Double-A Williamsport, a demotion, which didn’t breed any feelings of good will as the Double-A manager moved up to the Triple-A spot vacated by Gomez.

The Williamsport Bills couldn’t properly sync up. If they hit well, the pitchers got lit up. When the pitchers shut down the opposition, the bats went dry. This led to an abysmal record in the Eastern League and long days that felt far, far longer.

Eating fast food, drinking no shortage of beer, riding buses for four, eight, twelve hours at a clip, playing 140 games in 142 days, waiting out rain delays, then starting at 1 a.m. when the tarps finally came off the field, getting back on that godforsaken Greyhound to be in who-knows-where by noon the same day for a 1900h start, it’s no wonder these guys popped “greenies” (slang for amphetamines) just to keep energy levels up.



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The potato play: Bresnahan (center, at an ESPN shoot last month), with potato co-conspirators third baseman Rob Swain (left) and pitcher Mike Poehl.

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Gomez rode into town with a thirty-four-inch Louisville Slugger up his (non-baseball term), and soon Bresnahan was sent down to Single-A for nine games to help with the staff, or just because his bat lagged.

But like a straw creating a void of pressure from up top, Bres would soon be back in Williamsport thanks to Bo Jackson, the two-sport hulk who, in your correspondent's opinion, was, physically speaking, a freak's freak.

In Kansas City, on a slow comebacker to the Indians' lefty pitcher Scott Bailes, Jackson broke for home. Bailes threw to catcher Rick Dempsey, who secured the ball and awaited 235 pounds of Newtonian hell heading his way on a violent vector.

Jackson (A casual reminder: Jackson was also an NFL running back. Chew on that before you continue reading.), reached full speed in a few strides, lowered his shoulder, went parallel to the ground about twelve inches above the turf, and hit the ever-living crap out of Dempsey.

How Dempsey held onto that ball defies all natural laws. Jackson was called out. Dempsey was lucky to have only had his thumb broken when it looked as though both of his ACLs might have snapped off into the press box. In a 2013 story, *The New York Post* ranked the collision the fourth worst of all time.

And what do you know?! The Indians suddenly needed a new catcher. One presumes that this was the chain reaction: the Cleveland backup replaced Dempsey, the Triple-A guy moved up to the Show, the Double-A guy hopped up to Triple-A, and Dave Bresnahan shipped back to Williamsport as the backup catcher he was before Bo Jackson used the nuclear option on Dempsey.

And maybe now is as good a time as any to take a breather and remind ourselves how good a player has to be in order to reach Double-A ball.

For all that's about to happen with Bres, and Swain, pitcher Mike Poehl, and the disgruntled Gomez—who by this time was the caricature of malcontent—Bres, despite his sub-.150 batting average was a damn good ball player. They all were.

On the strength of his arm, the quickness of his release, his capacity to call a game and manage a staff, Dave Bresnahan became a late-round pick by the Seattle Mariners in the 1984 draft as a five-foot-ten-inch 180-pound backstop.

"I like to say that catchers are like shortstops with no range," Bres says.

Once in the baseball machine you're in the one-percent club. Then, at that level, there's the one percent of the one percent who make it to the Bigs.

"The competition gets stiffer as you climb that ladder. In minor league ball, what a lot of people don't realize, there's about one hundred players in each Major League-affiliated organization and in some cases it could be 150," Bres says, and they're always drafting and signing more.

By reaching Double-A ball, he was in that "one phone call club," meaning that top half of the org chart that *could* be one phone call away from the Show.

Bres was on that path. In the 1986 season, by this time playing in the Indians organization out of Waterloo, Iowa, he

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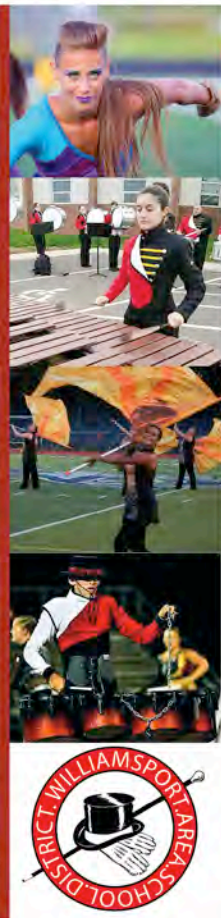
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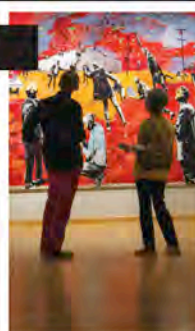
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**THE GALLERY  
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*Potato* continued from page 9

made the All-Star team and was among players like Larry Walker, Walt Weiss, and Mark Grace. These guys went on to have great careers in the Show. Bres, for a time, was among them.

“That gave me some confidence that if I can continue playing at this level [I could have] a certain level of success,” he says. “My future was going to be as a backup, and I viewed it as a realistic chance to find a job as a backup catcher at the Big League-level because I could switch hit, call a game, throw guys out. I’m not going to be a guy they’re going to build a team around. I was an eighteenth round pick, signed for like \$2,000.”

Catchers are also a different breed of player. While others face the batter, a catcher faces the field, sees all those looking back at him. He calls the game, becomes an extension of the manager, takes a lot of the heat. He squats hundreds of times per game over nine innings plus warm ups. Sweat runs down the gutter of his spine. He wears the tools of ignorance. He takes foul tips off the fingers, shoulders, chest, and the facemask, which rings your bell like nobody’s business. He’s down on his knees blocking pitches that could render him reproductively unfit, and, if that wasn’t enough, Bo Jackson could plow him into another zip code.

Kevin Wilson, a hitting consultant, founder of KW Baseball and author of *The #GoodBatting Book*, says, “Typically your catchers are your leaders. They have a different view, and look at the game through a different lens.”

Which seems to sum up Dave Bresnahan pretty well.

Depending on what story you read, whether it’s the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, or *Chicken Soup for the Sport Fan’s Soul*, Williamsport was anywhere from twenty-six to twenty-eight games out of first place that August of 1987, which even for the most passionate ball player is hard to face every day. And that’s exactly why Bres hatched The Scheme.

“Because everyone was looking forward to the season ending,” Bresnahan says, “and because it was such a sour season, people heard about what I was thinking. They were thinking it was funny, and they almost asked me, *dared* me, ‘Well, you gotta do it!’ I’m thinking, ‘Well, that’s during the game. I don’t know.’ The challenge became more and more like a testing of manhood. I said, ‘Well, you know what, we were playing a double-header against the [Reading] Phillies next week. I know I’m catching one of those games. *That’s* Potato Day.’”

Mike Poehl, the Indians’ first overall pick in the 1985 draft, thought the idea was brilliant, one of the funniest things he ever heard, *so long as he wasn’t pitching*. He had high hopes for his six-foot-five frame and right arm. A prank of this nature that could result in a run against his ERA, a loss instead of a win, a gag testing his earnestness as a pro—it all could mean the difference between moving up or down in the organization.

Poehl had had a great summer and was there in Williamsport for the final push through the season. As he put it, he hadn’t been “suffering like those guys,” so he understood the context for Potato Day.

“I thought it was hilarious,” Poehl says. “I was very opposed to it happening [while I pitched]. If I was charting in the stands, I thought it was a great idea. I can’t say I gave permission. I finally turned my hands up, ‘Whatever y’all want to do.’ If by chance

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it happens, I’m spectating, just do what you want.”

The mood around the clubhouse lightened up, as if the team was making a run for the playoffs. It didn’t matter that Gomez, who knew the prank *could* happen, but never thought it *would* happen (let’s face it, who did?), continued to be a wet blanket. Teams tend to take on the attitude of its managers, so this team was in desperate need of a laugh. The team looked toward Bres, “Two days until Potato Day!” as if popping open the doors of an Advent calendar.

And on that day, with the Phillies in town, the Philly Phanatic making the trip north (a major draw), and Bres penciled in to catch Game 1, Potato Day had arrived and Mike Poehl, the reluctant accomplice in this mess, would be starting.

Bres tucked the peeled potato—baseball-shaped—somewhere in the neighborhood of five ounces and 9-1/4 inches in circumference, into the webbing of a spare glove in his bag in the first-base dugout.

Poehl, by this point, had forgotten about the possibility of the potato. He was throwing great, had great action on his ball. Then, in the fifth inning, as luck would have it, Bresnahan’s ideal—and only—scenario had risen: runner on third, two outs, a right-handed batter at the plate.

Bres called time, said the webbing of his glove broke. Umpire Scott Potter put his arms in the air, stopped the game.

Swain, standing over behind third base watched Bres jog to the dugout.

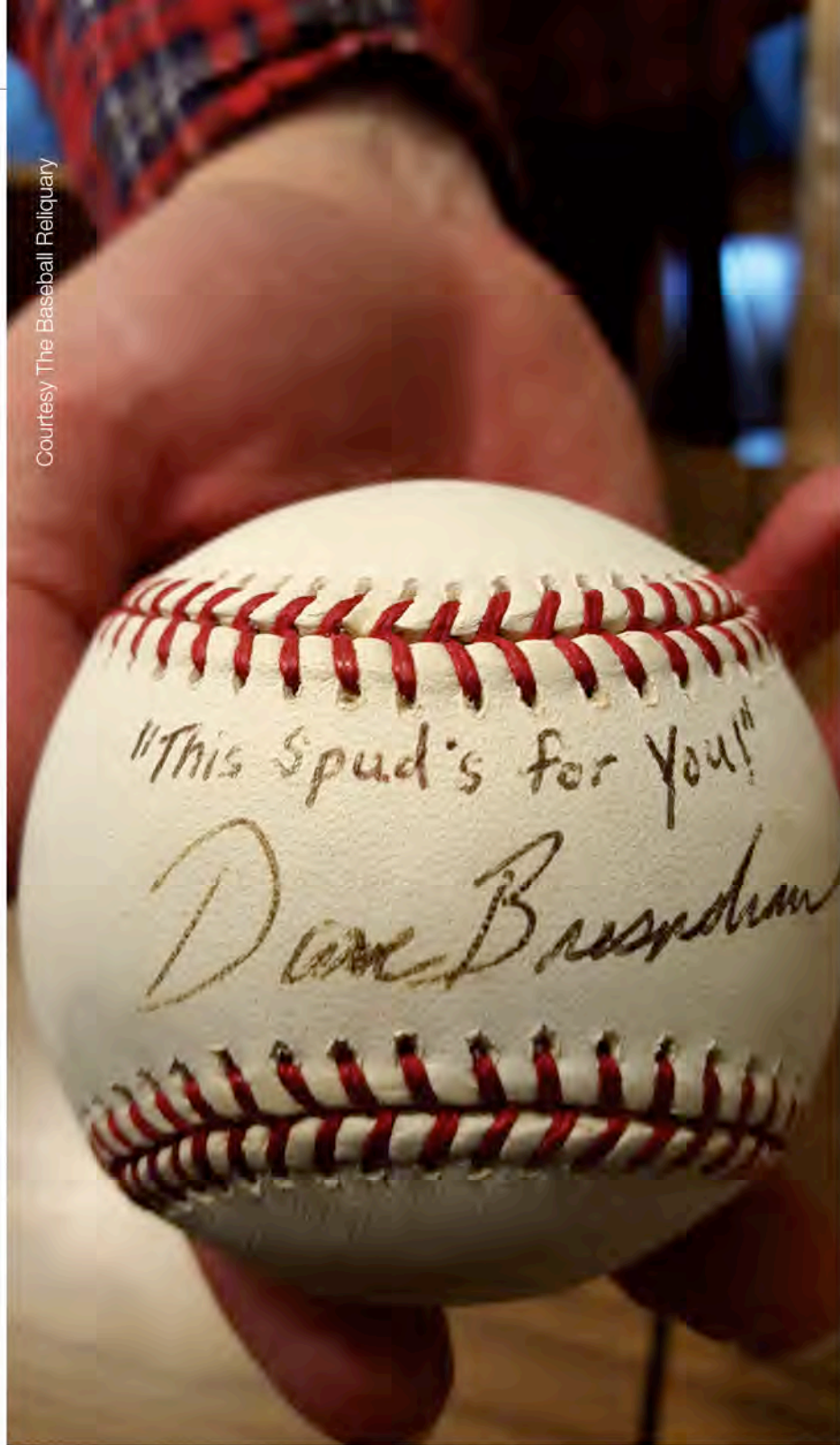
“He had to jog a long way,” Swain says. “Bres did not jog fast. He’s going toward the dugout, I’m starting to chuckle. I couldn’t watch him because I was about to lose it, so I turned around to the outfield and groomed the ground with my feet, messing with the dirt. ‘Oh, man, here it comes, this ought to be good,’ but I can’t look at him.”

“I certainly knew what was about to happen,” Poehl says.

“Bres,” Swain says, “was calm and cool. He went back to the dugout. Everyone’s laughing. ‘You guys need to be quiet. We don’t want these guys to catch on.’ ‘I can’t believe you’re doing it, Dave!’”

“I guess it’s a go,” Poehl says.

Bres went into his crouch, potato in his mitt.



Courtesy The Baseball Reliquary

“I remember looking over toward third base [at the unsuspecting runner], and shaking my head,” Poehl says. “You have no idea what’s about to happen here.”

Bres called for a slider, low and away, just far enough so it wasn’t a wild pitch and the batter wouldn’t swing.

“I don’t know how Mike threw the pitch and got it close to being where it was supposed to be,” Swain says. “Then it

would’ve been over, knowing what could have happened. I would’ve lost it. Good thing I wasn’t the pitcher.”

“[Poehl] did what he was supposed to do,” Bres says. “I transferred the potato from my glove to my bare hand while the ball was in flight.”

“...held the potato in his glove until the last possible moment,” Swain says.

“...caught the pitch...” Bres says.

See *Potato* on page 40



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Potato continued from page 12

And fired that son of a bitch to third base.

The thing is, a peeled potato is slick, and the potato nearly hit the runner, Rick Lundblade, in the helmet, which would have exploded on account of Bres' strong arm. But Lundblade dove back to the bag, thus dodging the errant throw, which rolled into left field. The third-base coach yelled, "Score! Score! Score!"

Bres threw his mask down, cursed the ground in mock disgust. "I chuckled to myself," Bresnahan says. "It is gonna work."

Lundblade, knowing there would be no play at the plate, trotted toward home.

"Just before he reached home plate, I tagged him and showed him the ball and rolled it to the mound," Bres says. "I thought that was it. My teammates were burying their heads in their gloves laughing."

The Phillies along the third-base line were laughing. The third-base coach, Joe Lefebvre, said it was a [expletive] potato. He laughed. The Bills laughed. Everyone laughed.

Except the home plate umpire, Scott Potter, and, of course, Orlando Gomez, who fined Bres fifty dollars and insisted Bres be released stat.

Potter, unamused, awarded the player home plate, the run counted (much to Poehl's chagrin), and Bresnahan was allowed to finish the inning.

Gomez naturally found little humor in the situation. He thought he was being shown up by his team, and specifically Bres, for getting shipped down to Single-A Kinston for those nine games a few weeks ago. There was no bitterness on Bresnahan's part. He only wanted to make his teammates laugh a little.

"Right after it happened I thought, 'Oh, boy, what did I just do?' And then when I saw the people had seen the humor in it, I went back to 'all right, well, that's why I did it.'"

After the Bills won the game (much to Poehl's enjoyment), Gomez called Jeff Scott, the Indians' director of player development, wanting to release Bresnahan right then. Scott told him to wait on it, you don't want to be left with just one catcher for Game 2.

The following day, at 10:30, Bresnahan got a phone call from Gomez, said to come down to the park. Gomez had the phone off the hook in his office, handed it to Bres, told him it was Jeff Scott. Gomez stood outside the office within earshot.

Scott, though amused and good natured about the prank, knowing that Bres meant no harm or disrespect toward Gomez, just wanted to add some fun to a season otherwise devoid of it, told Bres that they can't have players throwing potatoes and they'd have to let him go.

This may have been the only time Gomez smiled all season.

Bres knew that seeing a player clean out his locker demoralizes a team. Bres, a beloved teammate, didn't want that hanging over their heads, but he knew he wanted to make one last gesture before he left professional baseball for good.

He ran to the grocery store, bought several bags of potatoes and placed one in each of his teammate's lockers. Then, as a final salute to his manager, Bres put a bag of potatoes on Gomez' desk with a note saying, "Surely you don't expect me to pay the \$50 fine now that I'm released, but here's 50 potatoes. This spud's for

See *Potato* on page 46

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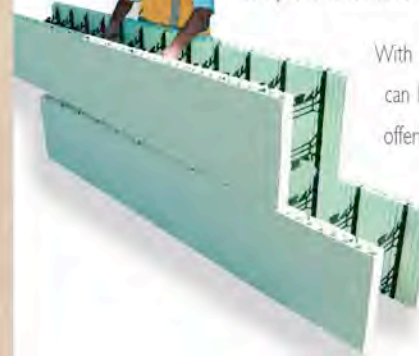


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you, Bres."

Bres heard that Gomez stormed out of the office asking the players where he lived. He wanted to fight Bres.

This little stunt was supposed to be a quick moment in the middle of a meaningless game at the end of a long, tired season. It took root.

A year later, Bresnahan's No. 59 was retired at Bowman Field. Poehl, who was one of the few actually on that team, was there, in uniform, and smiled the whole time. People were admitted into the game for a buck and a potato.

Bresnahan, who never played another inning and soon became a stock broker and now runs a marina, would, within mere days of Potato Day, or The Great Potato Caper, or the tater trick, would be making the rounds to New York, Chicago, and, of course, Idaho.

He received checks in the mail offering to help pay for the fifty dollar fine. Bresnahan wrote them back saying he wasn't going to cash the checks, but he'd love to hang onto them as a memento.

"Literally, after the game I thought it was over," Bres says. "At the end of the week when I was with Marv Albert at Yankee Stadium for the Game of the Week, I thought it was over. Then I was with the Harry Caray in Chicago for the Cubs game, and I thought it was over. Then at the end of that year, Bob Verdi, who was with the *Chicago Tribune*, named me Sports Person of the Year. And I thought *now* it's over. It just never ends!"

When Poehl, who sells insurance near Houston, Texas, picked up your correspondent's phone call, the first words out of his mouth were, "The story that never dies."

Rob Swain, who is the director of a sports complex in Jourdan, Texas, doesn't know why the story endures either. "That is beyond me. I have no idea. When I think when this was all conceived it was to have a joke, to have fun, wasn't to do anything to make anything out of the ordinary. 'Hey, it sounds like a good idea. Let's do it.' It's the never ending story, you know?"

Bres even said that he supposes it's better to be known for something than for nothing.

Then again, what if being known for nothing meant he achieved the ultimate goal? Would he trade this undying notoriety that *still* has people from regional magazines, national newspapers, and even ESPN knocking on his door for one whiff of the Big Leagues? To stand on that clay? To stand within the moon-white chalk lines, and look out over that infinite-green grass? To hear his mitt crack with the heat of Big League fire baller?

"Oh, yeah, in a heart beat! I would've traded the whole thing for a cup of coffee in the Big Leagues," he says. "One at-bat, catch *one* inning. Without a second thought, I would in a heart beat, absolutely."

Award-winning writer Brendan O'Meara is the author of *Six Weeks in Saratoga: How Three-Year-Old Filly Rachel Alexandra Beat the Boys and Became Horse of the Year*.