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'Poet Populist' throws out first pitch at Safeco

Pilot did it to raise awareness of poetry

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The Curve Ball

*He wakes up suddenly, stands up like he's at home plate,
Hears somebody he'll admit sounds a little bit like Dave Niehaus,
Sees the wild pitch,
thinks if only he could hit the curve ball he could sleep...*

Bart Baxter, a poet, cries the lament of many a baseball fan.

"I could be playing," he says, "if I could hit a curveball."

Last night, Baxter finally got his chance in the big leagues. Nearing the end of his year as Seattle's anointed "Poet Populist," he threw out the first pitch at a Mariners game.

Thirty pennant races have passed since Baxter, 50, played the hot corner on dusty Texas fields. So last week, he practiced for his big pitch, limbering up his arm like a propeller in bad need of oiling.

He worried about throwing out his back.

Or worse yet, throwing like a poet.

*...The sky was china blue.
The blue was white as resin
And there was noise, too...*

Baxter never did master that baffling art of hitting the curve ball.

An Alaska Airlines pilot for 21 years, Baxter did master the takeoff and the touchdown.

And he's as mighty as Casey when it comes to rhyme and rhythm, and evoking laughter and tears.

Hoping to raise the profile of poets -- albeit not to Edgar or Ichiro heights -- City Councilman Nick Licata created the position of Poet Populist. Licata, however, didn't want the honor bestowed from on high.

"We didn't want the City Council having to vote for who it was going to be. And we really didn't want the mayor picking him."

Licata wanted to let the people pick their poet.

So for the past two summers, a literary organization called Eleventh Hour Productions, organizer of the annual Seattle Poetry Festival, held an open vote on its Web site, at the festival and by mail-in ballots.

The people picked Baxter, a veteran of Seattle's poetry slam scene and the winner of the 1998 Seattle Poetry Grand Slam. And the populist title seems appropriate.

"A lot of 20th century poets don't care about the audience," says Baxter. "They're sort of self-absorbed."

Poetry slams take poetry out of the parlor and the classroom. They are about entertaining the audience, he says.

And stepping up to the mike is not that different from stepping up to the plate. You get one chance. And you can either get beamed or hit a home run.

"The greatest feeling is when you're in front of a rowdy crowd, with nose rings and black leather," Baxter says.

"When you're reading, the audience is so quiet you can hear a pin drop. That's like a three-run homer."

*... It looked too high
Behind his back, and he went down ...*

Baxter likes to tell stories, sometimes strange ones. There's one about a Metro bus driver who stops his route to hold up a grocery store.

He wrote about how he missed his grandmother, and how she hated the Yankees, and how one afternoon as she watched the Boston Red Sox hold a lead over the Yankees, she died.

His poem went like this:

"... And I brushed back her hair and I kissed her on the forehead. She was more beautiful than I could imagine, the picture of innocence and gracious acceptance of life and its hardships, death and its final peace. She looked calm and serene. So I turned off the TV."

"She sat up and yelled 'What the hell are you doing?' And she snapped up so hard in the La-Z-Boy rocker that the shock waves knocked over the porcelain figures of Jesus on the end table by the window, so hard I fell back into the pile of crocheted afghans and National Geographics. And she said, 'You turn that back on, and get out o' the way, you skinny, crooked-tooth little neurotic. Boston's got runners at the corners and there's only one out. They're gonna pitch around Ted Williams and I might have the gout. But I'm not dyin' before I find out if the New York Yankees get beat.'"

His poem about being unable to hit a curve ball is really about how his father was there to say, "Hey, that's okay."

"In the space of one poem," said Eleventh Hour Productions director Danika Dinsmore, "he can go from making you laugh to making you cry."

Baxter's reign as Poet Populist will end on May 5. With time running out, Licata wanted Baxter to have his day on the mound. He asked the Mariners to let him throw out the first pitch.

One pitch, with tens of thousands of eyes watching.

He bails instead of swinging at the call -- third strike -- that breaks over the plate.

He lies back down in bed,

But hears his father in the bleachers say, "C'mon, ump. Way inside!

Hey, that's OK."

Playing third base, as Baxter once did, requires being able to throw all the way across the field. So hurling a ball 60 feet from rubber to plate should be a snap, right?

"Yeah," he said last week. But he added, "That was 30 years ago."

"I'm just going to try to get it over. I just don't want to bounce it. I don't want to throw like a poet."

Forty-five minutes before the pitch last night, Baxter arrived at Safeco Field with his 18-year-old daughter, Maggie, and some friends. They would watch from the field. His daughter jumped up and down.

He looked more airline pilot than poet in a blue blazer and red-and-blue diagonally striped tie.

Gordon Hawkins, of the Seattle Opera, tuned up for the national anthem.

"You don't get any warm-ups," said Dave Caserio, who had played catch with Baxter at Cowen Park on Tuesday.

"You should check the runners," said his friend, Thomas Hard.

"You should shake him off," said another friend, Tom Green.

Baxter just smiled, rubbing the ball, and waiting.

Then it was time. He was told he could throw it from two feet away if he wanted to. He walked just short of the mound.

And without a windup, he threw.

There would be no joy in Bohemia.

The mighty Bart bounced the pitch.

But hey, that's OK.

"It was only one bounce," said the poet, smiling. "It was an epiphany in 48 feet."

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