

Final reward

Loved ones' ashes find their way into ballpark soil

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MILFORD, Conn. - Across enemy lines, south of New Haven and deep in New York Yankees territory, Britton John Broatch lived and breathed the Red Sox. He was Nomar Garciaparra in the backyard Wiffle ball games with his three brothers, and he defended himself admirably against the rabid fans of the Evil Empire.

"He got heckled, definitely," said his younger brother, Kierran. "We're across the Mason-Dixon line, but he didn't care."

There were the family pilgrimages to Fenway Park, and trips to Yankee Stadium to root for the Sox against the Bronx Bombers.

But in an instant, the good times ended.

Britton died suddenly of a brain aneurysm on July 1, 2003, while visiting his brother in San Diego. He was only 25. The devastated family wrote to Red Sox president Larry Lucchino. They wanted to scatter Britton's ashes at his favorite place: Fenway Park.

Initially, there was no response.

The Broatch family had bleacher tickets at Fenway for an August game against the Twins. As they were leaving the house, they took Britton's ashes with them.

Then the phone rang.

"We were literally in the driveway, heading up to Boston," said Britton's mother, Cydney. "We had to go back and answer the phone. A representative for the Red Sox said, 'Your request has been granted.'"

The Red Sox gave the Broatches a VIP tour of the park. The family watched batting practice from the field. Principal owner John W. Henry shook their hands, and they watched a Red Sox victory.

They were invited back the next morning. It was an off day before a big Yankee series.

"The park looked beautiful in the early-morning light," recalled Cydney Broatch. "It was so amazing because it was so quiet. You'd think of how many times you'd gone there and the thousands of people.

"There was the [grounds] crew there and they were working and raking and doing their thing. Then, all of a sudden, like magic, everything stopped."

The family walked to home plate. Britton's father, James, said a prayer. The family, including three brothers and a sister, solemnly scattered Britton's ashes around the plate. One of the brothers wore a Red Sox jersey with "B. Broatch" stenciled on the back. It had been given to him by a Yankees fan at the wake.

"The gentlemen that were working and raking and scrubbing and cleaning and getting ready took off their hats and just stood there with their hats over their heart," said Cydney. "They were just amazing."

The brief ceremony was kept secret.

"They didn't want to tell the team," said Kierran. "I don't know why, superstitious or what?"

The next evening, the Yankees marched into Fenway and the Red Sox pounded them, 10-5.

"Make sure you say ever since we did that, we won two championships," said Kierran proudly. "It's all magical. When we spread my brother's ashes around home plate, we took some Fenway dirt back with us. I've got a jar of it here. I had it in my pocket for both World Series victories."

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Change in policy

The Broatch family thought their idea of scattering ashes was unique.

"We thought we were the only people on earth to ever have thought of this," said Cydney. "I believe when it's your son, you believe you're the only one. How many thousands are thinking the same thing?"

Too many, according to the Red Sox, who no longer honor such requests.

"We had to implement a change in that policy," said vice president of media relations John Blake. "We were concerned that we were getting too many requests."

"I think a million people would want to do it," agreed Lou Gorman, the former Red Sox general manager and current executive consultant. "Many times you go out there after a game and you'll see [ashes] on the grounds. I went out there last year twice, and twice I saw it on the warning track.

"It's unbelievable. It's almost like a burial ground of Red Sox Nation.

"It's amazing how it happens. Most of the time, it's done on off days. Someone comes in on a tour group and they just drop them on the ground. It happens frequently."

Five years ago, Marilee Comerford of Marshfield sneaked in a baggie with some of the remains of her father, Jay Lintner, to a game at Fenway .

"I just pulled it out of my bag, looked around, and sprinkled a couple of pinches of ashes under my grandstand seat," Comerford said. "Right in with the spilled popcorn and other detritus. That way, when we come here, it feels like my Dad's spirit is here, too."

Marilee met her husband, Paul, a South Boston banker, at Fenway Park. He wants his ashes scattered at Fenway, too.

"On the base path," he said, "rounding third and heading for home."

But that's not going to happen, at least not officially.

"If somebody wants to do it, they're going to do it," said Paul Comerford. "How can you stop it?"

Three members of Fenway's security staff, who said they were not authorized to speak publicly, confirmed the practice and said they have taken no action.

"The first time I saw it was after a game, and a guy leaned over the first row," said one security member. "It freaked me out. I said, 'What are you doing?' and the guy said, 'I traveled thousands of miles from so-and-so to do this. This was my father's last wish.' I just told him, 'Do what you need to do.' "

The scattering of ashes poses no health risk, according to an expert in cremation.

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"The body is heated to 16,000 degrees," said Michael Flynn, director of F.J. Higgins Funeral Home in Roslindale. "Any bacteria is destroyed."

Some Red Sox players say the scattering of ashes is OK with them.

"It's not sacrilegious, by any means," said reliever Mike Timlin. "Doesn't bother me a bit. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Others have issues with it.

"It's kind of freaky knowing you're diving into somebody's grandpa," said center fielder Coco Crisp.

It's not for everyone

Part of the allure of having ashes scattered at Fenway is the timelessness of baseball's oldest cathedral - sacred turf to Red Sox Nation. In reality, the field changes every day. It was dug up and renovated after the 2004 season, and before each game, the grounds crew grooms the field with new dirt.

"People think this is the same dirt as Ted Williams dug his cleats into," growled one grounds crew worker. "That's a joke."

But it's the spirit that lives. On a warm April day, Red Sox legend Johnny Pesky, 88, sat in the box seats a few rows behind the Red Sox dugout to watch Manny Ramírez take batting practice. True, it's not the same dirt that Jim Rice, Carl Yastrzemski, and Williams strode upon, but it's the same exact spot.

Pesky, though, dismissed any suggestion of having his ashes scattered at the Pesky Pole in right field.

"I'm going into the ground next to my bride," said Pesky, who was married for 60 years to Ruth before she died in 2005. "If other people want to do it, that's their privilege.

"I think it's a compliment to the ball club that a guy would want to do that. I have a lot of love for the Red Sox, and come to think of it, that wouldn't be a bad idea.

"I think [former clubhouse manager] Johnny Orlando is here." (According to the book, "Tales from the Red Sox Dugout," Williams scattered Orlando's ashes in left field, in accordance with his will.)

'It gives me peace'

Major League Baseball does sell urns. For \$799, your loved one's ashes can be placed in an die-cast aluminum urn, complete with the logo of your favorite team and mounted on a

home plate. Yankee urns are the largest seller, followed by the Red Sox and Cubs, according to the manufacturer, Eternal Image.

The scattering of ashes at sporting venues is not just a Fenway phenomenon, either.

The Yankees don't allow it, but fans do it anyway in Yankee Stadium's famed Monument Park while on tours. Wrigley Field considers it on a case-by-case basis. The Friendly Confines are reportedly the final resting spot for both former Cubs manager Charlie Grimm and folk singer Steve Goodman, who wrote, "Go Cubs Go," a song played after Cubs victories.

In other venues, fans have resorted to desperate measures.

In May 2002, a package of ashes that was dropped from a plane hit the roof of Safeco Field in Seattle and opened on the field, prompting a tour evacuation and hazardous material scare. In 2005, a fan ran onto the field during a Packers-Eagles game at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia and scattered his mother's ashes before being arrested for defiant trespassing.

"This is for you, Mom," said Christopher Noteboom as he made the sign of the cross and surrendered.

The Broatches say they, too, were willing to risk arrest, before Lucchino invited them to Fenway,

"Gavin, my older brother, was going on the field no matter what with the ashes," said Kierran, smiling under his Red Sox cap. "My brother was determined to do this."

Good things have been spawned from the Sox' generosity.

There is the annual Britton John Broatch Memorial Wiffle Ball Tournament - to be held this year July 12 (thebjbtournament.com) - that funds two scholarships for high school seniors. The only stipulation is that the student be a Red Sox fan. The Broatches also raise money for the American Red Cross, the Salvation Army, Oxfam, Americares, and other charities.

Cydney Broatch still lights a candle for her son every night. She says the Sox saved her life and never asked for anything in return.

"It gives me peace, because my other sons have peace and I know that helps them," she said. "We'll always be tied to the Red Sox."

"We always have a smile on our face when we see Fenway Park. We know Britton is there.
Part of him is alive there."

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