

TRANSCRIPT – YOUR POSTAL PODCAST – MAY 2016

Diedre Tillery: Welcome to *Your Postal Podcast*. I'm Diedre Tillery. With May in full bloom, ballparks across the country are open for business and America's pastime is in full swing. Today we'll hear from an artist and former player who transforms beat up old baseballs into works of art which pay tribute to the unique ways the game creates a bond among friends, families and communities. Later, in our postal news roundup, we'll share news about new stamps celebrating the 100th anniversary of another uniquely American institution – our National Parks.

Every year, the major league uses an estimated 160,000 baseballs over the course of its 162-game season. If you add in other professional, amateur, college, high school and youth leagues, the number increases by multiples.

But what happens to those baseballs when they've outlived their useful life? Pete Nowacki has the story of Nathan Rueckert, whose own love for the game has provided artistic inspiration, which he distributes around the world via the Postal Service.

(Sound effect of crack of the bat, roar of the crowd.)

Pete Nowacki: There's nothing pretty about the life of a baseball.

Every day, they're hit with sticks, dropped on the ground, kicked, stepped on, rubbed with mud, spit on, and worse. They end their useful life covered in nicks, cuts, scrapes, dents, bruises and every stain imaginable.

Yet Nathan Rueckert sees the beauty in all that. In every beat-up old baseball, he sees a story and a little slice of Americana.

As artist, founder and owner of The Baseball Seams Co., Rueckert, a Sioux Falls accountant by day, gives old baseballs new life by meticulously slicing them apart and reworking them into pieces of art often patriotic, inspiring or deeply personal.

Nathan Rueckert: I call them "America's Game," because I think that baseball and America will always be intertwined and juxtaposed together, and I think baseball, when people think of it, it's a lot more than just a game. It reminds them of their past, their childhood memories of Dad in the yard, playing catch in the yard. Of, you know, just those days of innocence, those summers when you'd play outside till the street lights come on. I think people just thinking back to those days when they see my artwork, that kind of imagery resonates with them.

Nowacki: Rueckert grew up a ballplayer, culminating as a relief pitcher at Truman State University in Missouri. It was there that his "a-ha" artistic moment struck, 14 years ago.

Following the events of 9-11, Rueckert was deeply moved by America's swell of patriotism and the role the 2001 World Series played in helping the nation regain some small sense of normalcy.

Rueckert: For some reason I thought of, that an American flag, that the old tattered baseballs cut up, the red seams of the baseballs would look like the red stripes of an American flag. And so I tore up a couple of baseballs and crafted kind of what I was picturing in my head; the wavy red stripes, you know out of the seams of the ball, then the wavy white stripes of the flag out of the white strips of leather from the ball. And the first one I made was absolutely beautiful.

I wasn't thinking initially that I was going to embark on some sort of business venture, but it quickly morphed into that, just after people saw the power of the image, combining baseball and America.

Nowacki: He copyrighted the image, put together a website and before he knew it...

Rueckert: While I was still a college student, I was selling art prints and t-shirts to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, out in Cooperstown, New York – just a dream come true.

Nowacki: Every ball tells a story – no matter how old, beat-up, waterlogged and battered. No matter how many rounds of batting practice.

He's been given balls by special request – balls that were used in war zones that are practically black from overuse. He's created custom pieces that bring memories of loved ones and friends back to life. In 2003 he filled an order from a White House staffer given to President George W. Bush.

Rueckert also credits another American icon, the Postal Service, with helping his business to grow and reach customers in all 50 states.

Rueckert: It's really more than a service, it's a relationship and that's what I really value with what I have, at least with my mailman here and I hope it resonates a lot with other people too.

Nowacki: Rueckert recently began his most ambitious project to date. "America at the Seams" will collect 50 baseball-related stories, one from each state. Stories of hope, healing and inspiration. Baseballs accompanying each story will be the raw material for each state's piece in a five-foot flag-themed map of the U.S.

Rueckert: I see this as a once-in-a-lifetime, iconic piece of artwork that you know, really I hope people are talking about for years and years to come. Just all these different, powerful stories blended together with one common theme that, you know, baseball is more than a game.

Nowacki: For more information about "America at the Seams" and The Baseball Seams Co., go to: <http://baseballseamsco.com/>.

For *Your Postal Podcast*, I'm Pete Nowacki.

(Sound effect of song Take Me Out to the Ball Game)

Tillery: And now for our news roundup: The U.S. Postal Service recently previewed its stunning pane of 16 National Parks Forever stamps in a collection that celebrates the National Park Service on its 100th anniversary. The stamp pane includes stamp images featuring existing art or photography representing the regional diversity of the National Park System.

The first-day-of-issue ceremony will take place at New York City's *Jacob Javits Center* at 11 a.m. on Thursday, June 2nd, as part of World Stamp Show – New York 2016, the world's largest stamp show, which only takes place in the United States once a decade. Dedication ceremonies will also take place at or near almost all of the national parks associated with the stamps. You can share your thoughts about the stamps on social media by using the hashtags **#NPSStamps** or **#NPS100**.

To see and pre-order the National Park Forever Stamps, go to store.usps.com and click on “Forever Stamps.”

Thank you for listening to this edition of *Your Postal Podcast* – and a reminder: We love hearing from you. Please email your comments or story suggestions to us at: YourPostalPodcast@usps.com. And please visit our archives to listen to previous editions at ***YourPostalPodcast.com***.

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