

The (Baseball) Life of Reilly

The Intercounty Baseball League's home-run king hopes to one day trade his bat for a firefighter's axe

BY PHIL ANDREWS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

Lauren Scapinello's home has an interesting spare bedroom – particularly for someone who didn't grow up with any significant interest in baseball.

Framed jerseys of former Major League Baseball legends Pete Rose and Jose Canseco dominate one wall of this basement room. Another has racked wooden bats on display. They adorn a spot beside a plaque – fashioned in the shape of a home plate.

Another wall features framed and mounted newspaper articles about an Intercounty Baseball League player. Shelves of game-marked balls set off another. Many of the red-stitched leather spheres have wood-grain-patterned paint tattoos left by bats.

In a corner are two wooden cubicles that appear wrested from a baseball locker room. Clustered at the foot of those stalls is a thicket of bats – some labelled with dates and game details. At the forefront is a gleaming, unmarked, gold-plated bat.

That doesn't even get to the closet, where

dozens of baseball jerseys – from an array of teams and different leagues – form a multi-coloured, hanging curtain.

"It's in the back room. So, it's OK there," says Scapinello, 36. "It's wonderful – as long as he keeps it there, it's fine."

"He" is Scapinello's husband. That's Sean Reilly.

If you're unfamiliar with the name, put it this way: Reilly is the Intercounty Baseball League's version of Babe Ruth. Except unlike the rotund Ruth, this home-run champ – the Intercounty League's all-time leader – is a chiselled Bunyan of a man.

In fact, given his long, multi-location impact on the semi-pro league's records, maybe a better metaphor would be Crash Davis, the fictional minor-league home-run king played by Kevin Costner in the baseball cult film "Bull Durham."

Last season, playing for the Kitchener Panthers, Reilly was the Intercounty League's most valuable player for the fourth time since 2011. And, earlier this year, he was listed as one of the Intercounty's 100 all-time greats in celebration of the league's centennial anniversary.

Scapinello, a lifelong resident of Guelph who works as a medical administrator in Student Services at Conestoga College's Doon Campus, met her husband-to-be in 2005. It happened when she tagged along with her best friend to the home of that chum's boyfriend. The boyfriend was a housemate of Reilly's and a fellow member of that year's Guelph Royals team in the Intercounty League.

Reilly, who turns 41 in June, looks back with amusement at how the game he is married to played into him finding the woman he married – a spouse who is not a fanatical follower of his sport.

"Lauren really doesn't know much about the game of baseball," he says. "But she learns. And, she's a good sport."

She certainly is. Since they met – the couple married in 2011 – Scapinello has variously supported her partner's passion to play and to star in the Intercounty loop. It is a commitment she has upheld even as Reilly left Guelph to play in Barrie, then Toronto, then, for the past four years, in Kitchener.

"Since the beginning, it's always been

Sean Reilly holds a baseball bat and a firefighter's axe as he poses on the front porch of his Guelph home with his wife, Lauren, son, Aiden, and daughter, Ryenn. Reilly, the Intercounty Baseball League's home-run king, will play for the Guelph Royals this season while pursuing his other passion – a career as a firefighter.

baseball,” she says. “It’s something I sort of adapted to – because it wasn’t actually a sport that I was interested in at the beginning.”

Scapinello admits it has been “trying” at times to support Reilly’s commitment to the game, especially since the arrival of their children, Aiden, 6, and Ryenn, who will turn two in the middle of May. Scapinello says her family helps out “a ton” with the kids when baseball demands call Reilly away.

However, the whole baseball thing is manageable, she says. It comes with a schedule. Calendars can be developed. Planning can help make the season – as well as the workout-saturated off-season – go more smoothly.

She’s also quick to point out that baseball gives to the household as well.

“I couldn’t imagine life without baseball now,” she says. “Baseball just makes (Sean)

happy. If he’s had a stressful day, he’ll go to baseball and he feels better.

“And I also love what he’s bringing about baseball to our son. I can see him sometimes coaching him and that’s always been Sean’s sort of dream – to bring his kids out or start coaching them. In the future, if he’s not a player, he’ll be in a coaching position. So, I feel like it’s always going to be in our lives.”

Reilly almost retired about 13 years ago. That would have ended a career that began in earnest when he was drafted by Major League Baseball’s Minnesota Twins in 1995. He was a pitcher back then and, at six-feet, 180 pounds, a “skinny rail,” he says. Those days are over. He’s since morphed into a ripped bodybuilder-esque figure carrying about 230 pounds. Sometimes more.

The big-league dream fizzled after two

minor-league seasons with the Twins farm club in Fort Myers, Florida. The experience began poorly with an elbow injury to his throwing arm – before he even pitched in his first pro game – and went on to include plenty of times when, Reilly says, “life pretty much sucked.”

He points out that he was a teenager with a job – baseball – and competing against men, often with a lot more bulk and experience. Plus, he was a long way from his Hamilton-area home and support network.

Reilly returned to Canada and accepted an invitation to come out for the Hamilton club in the Intercounty League the next summer.

The experience revived his love for the sport. It also delivered a locker-room lift from peers he had more in common with and an attachment to the teamwork and camaraderie he found in the venerable, elite, Ontario baseball circuit.

He dropped pitching to play every day and to return to batting. That was something he had enjoyed prior to going pro, with some success, but little power. His hitting picked up, though he wasn’t a slugger.

In 2004, he was part of the Guelph Royals when the team won the Intercounty championship, a win Reilly describes as “awesome” and “amazing.” Yet, within a year, he was pondering an early exit from the league.

“I just felt sluggish. I kind of wasn’t really into it,” he says. “Then, I made a choice.”

The choice was to follow the example and guidance of a Guelph teammate – Kyle Leon, who was, in the words of Reilly: “really into fitness and nutrition.” The men started going to the gym together and Reilly started to see a difference.

“When you start seeing those results, it kind of motivates you,” he says. “And you

GREATEST OF ALL-TIME?

Sean Reilly can make a claim to be the greatest player in the 99-year history of the Intercounty Baseball League. Below are some of his career statistics to back up that argument. His all-time Intercounty rank in each category is in parenthesis.

Reilly career totals

Home runs – 177 (1)
Hits – 882 (1)
Runs Batted In – 719 (1)
Doubles – 147 (1)
Walks – 340 (3)
Games played – 695 (4)

Other key stats

League MVP awards – 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017
First team all-star selections – 12
League batting titles – 2015, 2017
Seasons played – 20

Source: Herb Morell, IBL statistician

keep going and going, and I found that as I got in better shape I was performing better on the baseball field. You know, I just wanted to push myself to see how far I could get. And, you know, that’s when a few of the records kind of came tumbling down.”

Reilly says he started working out six days a week – twice a day – and planning and preparing healthy meals, a week ahead of time.

“I also grew up. I matured,” he says, adding that the arrival of kids and day-job demands have seen him cut back on his workout regimen and strict eating routine. He even allows himself a bit of McDonald’s and “the odd slice of pizza.”

These days, he says, he probably “only” gets to the gym three to five times a week.

Dave teBoekhorst, who has played with and managed Reilly for several years – and will do so again, in Guelph this summer – says Reilly has made huge sacrifices over a

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20-year career.

TeBoekhorst says it's not just the commitment to a workout regimen, but also the summer vacation time and other family time given over to baseball.

"Your summers are sacrificed. When a lot of guys are jumping on the Sea-doo and going to the cottage, that's our bread and butter time for going to the ballpark," teBoekhorst says.

Reilly is proud of his "man cave." He says every house he's lived in has had one. And when he speaks of the cave in the home where he and Scapinello reside, in Guelph's south end, he's not speaking of its baseball grotto/display case of a spare bedroom. He's speaking of another basement space – a rustic, Texas-styled saloon, a bar replete with mounted longhorns.

But that's not the only noteworthy décor. Just as prominent is a firefighter axe and helmet displayed large on its focal wall.

"Right now, my focus is on firefighting," says Reilly, who is pursuing a career in the field with the same, well, fire, that he has given for years to baseball.

He has taken courses to be licensed to drive fire trucks. He has taken specialized medical classes and courses in the craft of firefighting itself. In 2015, he graduated from the Texas A & M Fire Engineering Program in College Station.

"For me, it's a natural progression from baseball to firefighting because they're so similar when it comes to the locker room and the teamwork. So, I'm really hoping that that works out," says Reilly, who currently works as an electrical apprentice. That followed an almost 10-year stint as a Sleeman Breweries employee, including years as a beer-keg delivery driver.

"I would love for him to become a firefighter," says Scapinello. "He's got such a passion for it, and I know he would do a fantastic job. We're crossing our fingers and hoping that will come true soon."

The husband and wife appreciate that



Sean Reilly, then a Kitchener Panther, celebrates a 2015 home run as he rounds the bases.

PHOTO BY ANNIE SAKKAB

landing a full-time firefighting job could do what decades of Intercounty League opponents have failed to do: knock him out of the game.

He may have to interrupt his baseball schedule this season on a few occasions as he says he recently signed on with the Puslinch Fire and Rescue Service. This involves being on call and available to respond to emergencies as needed but he hopes to be able to tweak that schedule to limit the loss of baseball time.

So, as he finds a way to swing fire duty and swing a bat as often as the schedules of the dream job and the baseball worlds permit, the Intercounty League's greatest batter is also facing reality.

"I haven't said it officially. But, playing-wise, there's a good chance that this will be my last year. If this unique opportunity with Guelph didn't come up this year, I don't even know if I would be playing this summer," says Reilly.

The Guelph "opportunity" is at once simple and complicated. A year after the Royals club folded in mid-season, a new



Sean Reilly played four award-winning seasons with the Kitchener Panthers, cementing his place among the best players in Intercounty League history.

ownership regime has built the foundation for a robust team reboot in 2018. It has brought in several ex-Royals stars as players and teBoekhorst to manage – all individuals with Guelph connections – to try to revive the franchise.

"This year is a little bit different," says Reilly. "I want to win a championship. . . . The last time I won a championship was 2004 with Guelph. That's a feeling I'm not ever going to forget. I would love to do that again – especially here. So, I mean, it's going to be a tough road and obviously I'm just glad to be part of getting this team back on track."

Scapinello is looking forward to this summer and getting out to more games. It will be easier now that their youngest child is a bit older, she says, and with Reilly's home games being, well, close to home – for a change.

"I actually enjoy the fact that he's back (playing) in Guelph so people can know his skill level and how good of a player he is. I feel like not enough people in this community know about it," she says.

A few of Reilly's old Royals jerseys hang among those in the closet of his below-ground baseball bedroom. Also visible is one of the caps he wore when he played for the club. Its brilliant blue has faded to dull. It's stained. It looks shrunken to sizes too small to fit his head. And, yet, it's a valued artifact.

Reilly can see the end of his playing days – the end of adding record-breaking souvenirs and trophies to his trove of such items.

"I love being around the guys in the locker room," he says. "When it's all said and done, that's probably going to be the part that I miss the most. I mean, those relationships you build and those memories, those are some of the best memories of my life."

Scapinello says she worries about when Reilly walks away from playing in the Intercounty League.

"I feel like he would miss it tremendously. I'd worry about his mental health a little bit. You know what I mean – like that's his love," she says.

"He's always got to be part of some kind of team. I know that when the IBL does end and he does start coaching his son or something like that, he'll definitely also find some men's league or something to play in, which I'm happy for him to do."

Until then, the family will look forward to hearing from Reilly's full-time fire department applications and ponder what the ninth inning of his long baseball career might hold.

"You know, hopefully we'll get those fans back and give us the support that we used to have," Reilly says. "When I first came into the league, Guelph used to be a place to be. I remember when I was with Hamilton and we would come into Guelph, there would be 2,000 people there. That atmosphere was electric, and it just seemed to slowly wear down year after year.

"I'm confident that with getting those old players back that the fans are going to start to come back again."

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