



INTERVIEW

NATHAN BULA, owner, Nathan Bula Farms LLC

By Joe Kertzman, managing editor, *Badger Common/Tater*

NAME: Nathan Bula

TITLE: Owner

COMPANY: Nathan Bula Farms, LLC

LOCATION: Adams and Marquette Counties, WI

HOMETOWN: Grand Marsh

YEARS IN PRESENT POSITION: 18

PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT: Woodside Ranch for 1 year

SCHOOLING: Western Technical College (WWTC), La Crosse, for agribusiness and science technology, graduating with an Associate Degree in 2006; and Adams-Friendship High School, 2004 graduate

ACTIVITIES/ORGANIZATIONS: Potato Industry Leadership Institute graduate and previous Adams County Farm Bureau Board member

AWARDS/HONORS: Recognized as Top 10 Young Farmers by Wisconsin Farm Bureau; 2015 World Champion Bow Fisherman; and 2012 Wisconsin Bowfishing Association (WBA) Bow Fisherman of the Year

FAMILY: Son, Tate, 4 years old

HOBBIES: Shooting billiards and snowmobiling

A fourth-generation potato and vegetable grower,

Nathan Bula of Nathan Bula Farms LLC, Adams, Wisconsin, carries on his family's farming tradition.

Nathan's father, Gary, son of George and Mae Bula, was born and raised on Bula Potato Farms, in Antigo. Nathan's mother, Lynda, daughter of Edward and Marilyn Fisher, was also a generational potato farmer. Her grandpa, Lonnie Powell, raised spuds in Langlade County.

In 1970, Gary began sharecropping with another farmer in Plainfield, and two years later, he and Lynda bought land in Grand Marsh and started their own operation.

"On the home farm here in Grand Marsh, I'm only the second generation. Dad and Mom built Gary Bula Farms, Inc. from the ground up," Nathan says. "I am fourth generation at least in the states. My great grandpa probably farmed potatoes with his own dad in Poland, but we don't know that."

"Mom and Dad started Gary Bula Farms from their own sweat equity," Nathan continues with a sense of pride.

"From my understanding, Dad did some rental agreements in Plainfield, and then wrote Mary Rashke a letter asking to purchase her home farm," he relates. "It's cool. We got the letter back recently."

"Mary's daughter kept the letter and framed it, so it's really neat to have my dad's handwritten letter of intent to purchase Mary Rashke's home farm," Nathan says.

KEEP FARMING & NEVER QUIT

"Mom and Dad had some good

Above: Nathan Bula says his son, Tate, wanted a ride in the truck, so they drove around the shop yard. "Tate loves air horns," Bula relates.



years farming. They worked hard, raised a lot of chipping potatoes, and had a trucking business for a while," he continues. "My parents are workaholics. They keep farming and never quit."

Nathan says their work ethic has allowed him to do what he does on both Gary Bula Farms and his own operation, Nathan Bula Farms. He says he inherited his work ethic, capabilities, and drive to succeed from his parents.

"They had some bumps in the road and hard years like everyone else," he admits, "but they dug in and worked through it."

The youngest of four, Nathan explains, between his brother, Bryan, sister, Tammy Garz, oldest sister, Jodi, and his parents, they farm roughly 9,600 acres in Adams and Marquette counties and 4,300 acres in Missouri.

"I co-manage Gary Bula Farms and I have my own farm on the side," Nathan explains. "We farm as a whole, and my parents do the same with my other siblings."

"My first year of farming on my own was 75 acres that my parents allowed me to rent," he adds.

"That has been the family history of allowing the kids to start a little farm on the side and grow it, and

Above: Nathan Bula is the Lenco operator for Gary Bula Farms, and runs planters, the irrigation system, and the combine/harvesters.

obviously still work on the home farm," Nathan relates. "They

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definitely 'put down pavers for me to step on.' Yet, my focus is on Gary Bula Farms, and my own operation is secondary."

Do you have fond memories you can share of growing up on Gary Bula

Farms? I've been working for my dad and mom since I was little. I started farming under Nathan Bula Farms 18 years ago, but simultaneously went full-time after college for Gary Bula Farms over the past 16 years.

Left: Father and son time includes Nathan (left) and his dad, Gary Bula, in the tractor. "He's making sure I know what I'm doing," Nathan says.

Right: It was a long day of harvesting spuds on Nathan Bula Farms LLC, in late August.

Just being able to drive big equipment and run a windrower on our farm in Benton, Missouri, traveling every summer when I was young, there are a lot of memories down there.

I learned a lot about ag there. Otherwise, I was in school and involved in football, wrestling, and golf. I helped with harvest at the Missouri farm, and had a lot of firsts there, like operating a windrower, harvester, and potato trucks.

In Missouri, we've grown potatoes, corn, beans, seed corn and various other crops over the years. We used to do cotton, purple-hull peas, and milo, but now it's chipping potatoes, corn, soybeans, and seed corn.



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Nathan Bula operates the Lenco following windrower operators Joey and Louie.

We bought the operation in Missouri 39 years ago. Back then, it was a 12-months' supply of chip stock to Frito-Lay and whoever else was in the game at the time.

We had storages and could store enough potatoes until May each year. We started digging down there in June and July, and up here in August.

It fulfilled a need to be a year-round supplier and the want for my dad to be a full-time farmer. We still grow chip stock down there, and there's still a need for it, but we've reduced acreage of potatoes.

At what age did you start working the farm, and in what capacities?

I was 11 years old when I started running a piler in Missouri, quite young but capable. The next summer, I was allowed to run a windrower. An old gentleman, Ernie, ran the harvester. Together, we were slower paced, which was great for learning. By 16, I was running harvester down there.

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"He is an employee morale booster, our farm mascot, and the farm clown. He makes everybody's day when he comes around the farm and talks to them all."

– Nathan Bula referring to his four-year-old son, Tate

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Interview. . .

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Did you always know you wanted to be a full-time farmer? Yes, since I was little, I didn't have a want or need to do anything else.

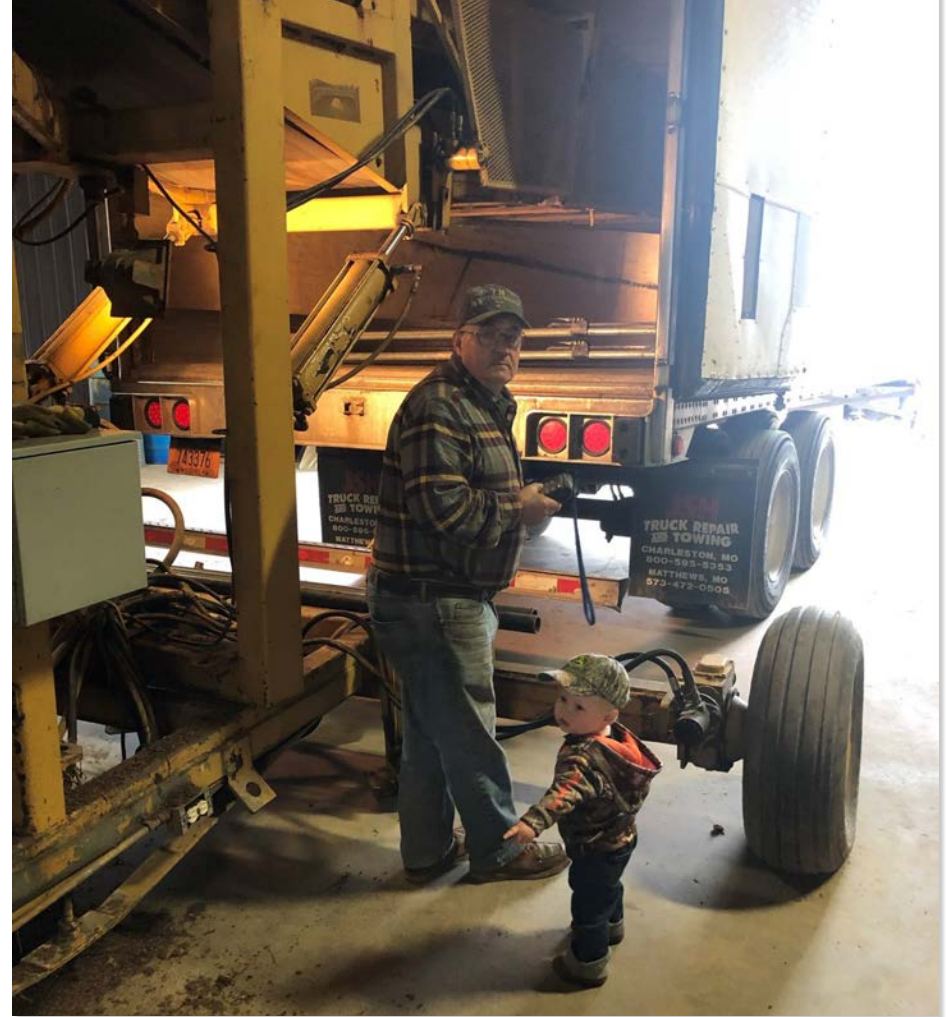
How many acres of potatoes do you grow, and for who? Are they fresh market or for processing? As of right now, I raise 1,177 acres on my own farm, including 255 acres of Caribou, Burbank, and Silverton potatoes.

I grow for Alsum Farms & Produce, as well as McCain's and Bushman & Associates. McCain's is processing, and everything else is fresh.

I also grow corn, soybeans and 250 acres of green beans for Razorback Farms, with my rotation being corn, soybeans, green beans, and potatoes.

Do you own your own equipment or share with your dad? We share with the family, so between me, my dad, and my brother. I mainly use my dad's equipment, but I have a few tractors, trucks, and implements.

Do you have your own employees? No, I sub-lease my dad's employees who help me out on my acreage.



Gary has 16 full-time employees here in Wisconsin, four full time in Missouri, and we bring in H2A workers, four who do a full season

and upwards of 30 during harvest.

You told me that, even though your son is only four, he's a big part of the farm. What did you mean? He is an employee morale booster, our farm mascot, and the farm clown. He makes everybody's day when he comes around the farm and talks to them all.

He wants to help in the shop or field, gets in there with a hammer or wrench and holds the flashlight. He talks on the radio all the time and remembers everyone's name.

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Above & Left: Nathan Bula says when his son, Tate, visits the farm, he makes everybody's day and talks to them all. In the first image, Tate is shown with his grandpa, Gary Bula, getting ready to load red potatoes into a truck for Alsum Farms & Produce, and in the second picture, grandpa and grandson check out the chipping potatoes headed to Backer's Potato Chip Company in Fulton, Missouri.



Nathan Bula's son, Tate, (right) is shown loading his first potatoes with the Lenco, at the ripe age of 3 ½ years old, and then, (left) digging Burbanks in Marquette County.

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Tate has a great memory. If someone wasn't feeling the best when he last saw them a few months ago, he asks them how they're feeling now. He has a super memory and can recall it at any time.

He's the light of my life and of the farm. Obviously, Tate is my drive for wanting to grow potatoes and vegetables and continue farming, and maybe pass down the farm to him if he so chooses.

He's my fuel now. He's why I keep doing what I do, day in and day out. It makes work a lot easier with him being around the farm. He drives in the tractor with me a lot and adores potato farming.

He knows tractors and hillers, Lencos, and what a tractor is. We even named our new potato warehouse after him, Tate's Warehouse. He has his name and imprints of his feet and hands in the concrete.

He's the youngest grandchild of my mom and dad; they have 14 grandchildren, I do believe. It's hard to get a picture of me without him in it.

Have you expanded Nathan Bula Farms over the years? I started on the fresh side of it and expanded in acreage when I went more into processing, but now my percentage of fresh market potatoes is greater than processing.

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Got mom out of the office to do some row marking in front of our potato planters and Boss man himself Mr. Tate showed up to supervise her at the end of the day

Opposite Page: Tate rides shotgun as his dad, Nathan Bula, harvests potatoes. **Above:** The embedded photo caption written by Nathan Bula says it all regarding this photo of his mom, Lynda Bula, with her grandson, Tate.



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Corn and soybeans have also increased in acreage, with me renting and buying farms when they become available and if it makes sense for our processes.

How about equipment and technologies—anything new or evolved since starting on your own?

Just GPS technology as well as some newer equipment over the years. We run a lot of John Deere GreenStar guidance, our bread and butter.

We've also made improvements to become more accurate and precise with fertilizer applications and other practices on the farm.

Was planting delayed due to weather this year, and how do you think that will affect harvest? I think that will affect harvest in the yield department. It was delayed, yes, and at this time [early May], I usually have all our crop in the ground, but we're halfway right now, so two weeks behind.

I think it will hurt the size profile and yield potential at the end of the year. I'm hoping for sunny days and cool

nights, and maybe I will be pleasantly surprised.

Do you and your dad stagger harvest so you can help each other? Yes, we harvest as a whole. So, when that field over there is ready or if we're into this bin now, that's what we harvest.

I rent a bin from Dad and Mom, so when it's time to put into my bin, we come to my farm.

McCain's is storage direct, and Bushman & Associates is direct off the field to their packaging plant. August is usually Bushman harvest, and in the middle of September, it's into our potato storage.

We go to what field or variety is ready. If we're doing Burbanks, we farm as a whole and then go to Silvertons. We separate our hundredweight, but not our timing. Whatever's ready to go, and that fits into the time slots we have, taking into account weather, obviously, that's what we dig.

We farm so many miles away in different directions, from Castle Lake

Above: In this parting shot, a planted field of red potatoes is shown early one beautiful but mostly cloudy morning.

to Marquette County, and almost all the way down to Wisconsin Dells, stopping just north of Highway 21.

We harvest for quality of crop, putting good potatoes away first. We farm as a whole and work as a whole. You wouldn't know, being on my farm, that there's a difference between my operation and my dad's.

Have supply chain issues with fertilizers and equipment hurt you, and in what ways? Parts have become hard to find. You have to plan much further out for parts, which has become a big challenge in recent years.

As far as fertilizer prices, we can get it, but we have to pay for it. Cost is a hard pill to swallow, but we all swallowed it. Hopefully it works out with higher commodity prices and we're just working with higher prices overall.

Our return on investment is down

from what I've seen last year, not as good per acre, which is scary for the future, because equipment costs are only going up and have not shown to falter. We're not keeping up with replacement costs of equipment.

What do you hope for this

season? As far as the growing and harvest times, I hope for sunny cool days and a smooth harvest ... and big yields. High quality and big yields, that's every farmer's dream. Timely rains would be very nice throughout summer. With our sandier soils, we need frequent water.

How about for the future of your

farm? I farm for the future. Hopefully Tate wants to take it over, and once he's in the saddle, he can control the reins with my guidance. **BC'T**

Right: The Bula crew was pushing late to get harvest done in August 2021.



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