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## Sullivan went Headfirst into second job

Ex-Padres prospect remains involved in baseball with top-flight camps

By Lisa Winston / MLB.com

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Former San Diego Padres Minor League pitcher Brendan Sullivan was never your typical pro baseball player.

So it stands to reason that his business, Headfirst Sports, is not your typical "baseball camp."

Sullivan, now 34, defied most of the "jock" conventions from the beginning. Born and raised in Washington, D.C., he was that city's 1993 Gatorade Player of the Year as a senior at St. Albans, where he played for four years.

For college, though, he eschewed the east coast in favor of Stanford University, where he not only led the Cardinal in saves en route to the 1995 College World Series, but graduated -- yes, graduated -- in three years with a 4.0 GPA and a double major in economics and political science.

A submarine-style reliever in the true sense of the word (or, as they call it, a knuckle-scraper), he was drafted by the Padres in the 26th round in 1996 and began his pro career that summer on the mound for Idaho Falls in the Short-Season Pioneer League.

Sullivan enjoyed an outstanding season in 1998, when he posted a 1.44 ERA and collected 21 saves while logging 81 innings between Class A Advanced Rancho Cucamonga and Double-A Mobile. He spent the next two summers producing less-impressive numbers at Triple-A Las Vegas before the Texas Rangers released him after a Spring Training stint in 2001.

Sullivan retired and returned home to Washington, but he was not left searching for his next challenge. In fact, he'd laid the initial groundwork for Headfirst Sports back in his Idaho Falls apartment during that summer of '96.

"I Xeroxed my baseball card a few times and made up a mini-flyer on my computer to give private pitching lessons," he recalled, adding with a laugh that this was in the era before laptops, something that might seem inconceivable to today's athlete.

For the next few off-seasons Sullivan ran the fledgling company before shutting down with the approach of Spring Training.

"Each season the word would have spread a little more," he said. "We started with private instruction and then small groups and then we'd rent out facilities and do small clinics."

By 2001, Headfirst Sports had built enough clientele that it seemed worth keeping it going year round. With that, Sullivan brought in his partner Rob Elwood as a full-time employee prior to heading off to Spring Training in Florida with the Rangers.

Coincidentally, that also happened to be when Sullivan's playing career ended.

Now, eight years later, Headfirst Sports has established itself as the preeminent sports camp in the Washington, D.C. metro area. It was recently named one of the Top 50 Camps in the country by *Sports Illustrated for Kids*.

From private pitching lessons in the winter, the program has now expanded beyond baseball to soccer, basketball, lacrosse and other sports, as well as dance and cheerleading. It offers summer camps, clinics and teams and skills programs for all ages and ability levels, as well as tutoring and classes.

According to the unofficial "mission statement" of sorts on its website, Headfirst was founded on "the philosophy that the playing field may serve as the best platform for some of life's greatest lessons. Leadership, teamwork, preparation and maximized effort are a few key principals upon which the Headfirst mentality has been built."

"We've certainly grown beyond private instruction and even beyond just sports," Sullivan explained. "I look at



Former Minor Leaguer Brendan Sullivan skipped law school to build his baseball camps. (Headfirst Sports)

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us as an educational organization that uses sports to develop positive qualities in kids."

Also emphasized is the importance of education. One of Headfirst Sports' cornerstone programs is the Headfirst Honor Roll camp, where student-athletes have the opportunity to participate in showcases attended by coaches from the top academic colleges.

Participants are invited not only based on their skills on the diamond, but their aptitude in the classroom.

"It's probably not that unique anymore because everyone's trying to copy what we did, which we take as a compliment," Sullivan said.

"We started it years back at a park down in Fort Pierce, Florida, and now we're doing it in five locations across the country with kids who are hardworking with collegiate baseball dreams tied directly to their academics."

One thing that Sullivan believes may have been stirring up even more excitement and enthusiasm among his charges has been the arrival of their own hometown baseball team, the Washington Nationals.

"You see kids show up with Nationals jerseys, Nationals caps," he said, "talking about how they're going to the game that night."

But as a city resident who works not only with suburban and high-rent district kids but also in the inner city park and recreation programs, he knows there is still a lot of groundwork to be made.

As Headfirst approaches its first full decade (counting back from its year-round inception in 2001), there are still goals Sullivan would like to achieve.

"I would really like to have a bigger presence in the parts of D.C. that need more of what we offer, such as quality sports programs and an academic element mixed in," he said. "I'd love the opportunity to grow into the city that I love rather than further out into the suburbs, to work in the wards of the city that have traditionally been underserved."

So where does Sullivan see himself down the road? Well, there is one place he definitely doesn't see himself, and that's taking the law school route he once thought was in his future.

He'd deferred his acceptance to Georgetown Law out of Stanford for several years before deciding to give it a go at night after he retired. But Sullivan "dropped out" after six months of trying to work during the day and pursue his degree at night.

"Going was the second-best decision I ever made," he said. "The best decision I ever made was to get out."

So what about a front office job in baseball? One of his best friends from St. Albans, Josh Byrnes, is the GM of the Arizona Diamondbacks. One of his best friends from college, A.J. Hinch, is the Diamondbacks' Director of Player Development.

Is a spot in the front office something that might suit him as well some day?

"I would never say never," he admitted. "Developing talent is developing talent, whether it's a 12-year-old trying to grow up or a 19-year-old learning a slider."

For now, however, any thought of life after Headfirst is definitely taking a spot on the back burner.

"Those guys have great jobs," he said. "But they don't have a better job than I do."

*Lisa Winston is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

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