

Making the grade

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Scott Bullett: a slacker's worst nightmare, a high school guidance counsellor's best friend.

Before the former Major Leaguer fills out a lineup card for one of his development teams, he studies the players' report cards. Prospects on the Bullett Proof Prospects had better dedicate at least as much time to maintaining their academic average in the classroom as they do to raising their batting average on the field.

"Believe me, if they're in trouble at school for low marks, they're in trouble here," Bullett said as he gestures to the

batting cages and pitching mounds at his indoor training facility at the Niagara Regional Exhibition grounds.

Players can be suspended for "two days, two weeks or longer" if they let their marks slide and begin thinking of themselves as "athlete students" rather than "student athletes."

Grades are important at the one-time Welland Pirates outfielder's baseball academy. It prides itself as being a finishing school for players who want to take their game to the post-secondary level at colleges and universities in the United States.

"We want to make sure that when they (college recruiters) come up here, our players have the grades and the smarts to show up academically."

Bullett, who spent parts of four seasons with the Pittsburgh Pirates and Chicago Cubs in an 18-year pro career that included stints in Taiwan, Mexico and Japan, knows from his network of contacts in the game that grades matter to pro scouts, too.

"How a kid does in school tells you a lot about what kind of player he is -- and what kind of players he will be. If he isn't dedicated to his school work, he won't be dedicated to the game of baseball."

Though he attended Glenville State University in his native West Virginia on a basketball scholarship, Scott Douglas Bullett's life has been dedicated to baseball on a full-time basis since he signed a minor league contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1988 at the age of 20. His desire to play

at the pro level didn't begin to wane until three years ago when he was completing his third -- and final -- season in the Mexican Professional Baseball League.

"Man, there were days I was getting up when I was hoping it would rain. It was dry as a bone outside and 95 degrees," he confided with a laugh.

Bullett also decided to retire in 2006 because he was feeling homesick for his adopted hometown of Welland, the birthplace of his wife, the former Nancy Gauthier and the home of their three children: Scott, 16; Brianna, 13; Abby, 6. "It was time to go home and spend time with the family, watch the kids grow up." Since his "baseball school" became a year-round development program three years ago, Bullett has also watched a lot of other people's kids grow up on the diamond as players and, just as important to him, away from the field as responsible young men.



That's how the teacher was taught by his father back in Martinsburg, W. Va., and these are the life lessons he's now sharing with his family and with his extended family -- the Prospects. Along with instilling the desire to make education a life-long pursuit, that "there's more to life than playing sports" is a lesson Tom Bullett stressed to his seven sons and two daughters. "Dad wanted us to be good citizens." And to Bullett's father, who coached minor baseball, "good citizens were people who gave something back to the community."

"He said it didn't matter what you gave back -even picking up trash along the side of the road would make a difference for the better."

Since a baseball school that opened in the mid-1990s as an off-season training facility became a year-round development program, Scott Bullett hasn't had too many of those Mexican mornings when going to the diamond was the last thing on his to-do list. "Are you kidding, man," he said with a hearty laugh, "I still have the drive for baseball, only now it's all about the kids." "I'm walking my dog in the mornings always thinking about how I can help this kid to get better and help that one improve to the next level."

Scott wasn't the only Bullett to shoot to the top in professional sports. His sister Vicky Bullett played professional basketball in the WNBA and is now an assistant coach in that league with the Washington Mystics. "And she owes it all to her brothers -- playing against us made her better," Bullett, the baseball player, said with a laugh as he shares a family joke.

This year Bullett Proof Prospects will be fielding four teams -- under 13, under 14, under 16 and under 18 -- that will be playing May to August with home games, usually on weekends, at Welland Stadium. In addition to defending their championship in the Buffalo-based Boys of Summer League and seeing action in an elite eastern Canada league based out of Toronto, the under 18s -- "The Big Boys" in Bullett's parlance -- are scheduled to compete at two tournaments in Ohio and one each in Indiana, Michigan and western New York. The goal of these showcases is two-fold: to let the Prospects see top-flight competition and to let pro scouts and college recruiters see the Prospects hitting and pitching against top-flight competition. This year's under-18 roster includes Geordan Dennahower, a Grade 11 student at St. Michael Catholic High School in Niagara Falls and a right-handed pitcher who can also play first and third. This will be his second season at the Welland academy and he has yet to question what Bullett, pitching coach Mike Simpson and infield instructor Rob Bland have taught

him. "These guys know what they're talking about." Dennahower said he can also understand why grades should matter so much to baseball players. "You need intelligence in this game. It's a thinking man's game because you need to know what to do on every play," the Niagara Falls resident said. Hailing from Canada, by the way, isn't necessarily a strike against his players and those in development programs across hockey country, according to Bullett, who finds this is especially true of college recruiters. "You'd be surprised how many scouts come to Canada because we stress academics," he said. "With our kids they don't have to worry as much on how they'll do in the classroom."

Spoken like a coach whose player just got a good report card.