



National League MVP Bryce Harper by Richard Sullivan; opposite, Sullivan in his studio [Sarah Davis Photography]



PITCH-PERFECT PAINTINGS

*Former pro pitcher Richard Sullivan
combines a love of baseball with artistic talent*

BY PAM WINDSOR

Watercolor portraits showcasing some of the greatest names in sports line the walls and fill the drawers of Richard Sullivan's art studio in Louisville's Portland neighborhood. Nolan Ryan, LeBron James, Muhammad Ali—just to name a few. There are nearly 100 completed works, all capturing a specific moment in time on the court, in the ring, on the track and on the baseball field.

Sullivan's love of baseball runs deep. It began on the Little League fields of Louisville and took him to the minor leagues, when he was drafted by the Atlanta Braves. Today, with his playing days behind him, he's sharing his love of the game on canvas. And with every painting, he adds depth and emotion he pulls from his own experience.

"It's why I love sports so much, because there's so much emotion—the intensity of what you're going through," he explains. "I want to paint the moment when it matters and the moment that it's all on the line."

His devotion to baseball began when he was a small boy. His father remembers Richard playing the game

alongside twin brother Matthew.

"We encouraged them to start Little League when they were probably 5 years old, I think," recalls Gary Sullivan. While Matthew played for a few years before losing interest, Richard stuck with it.

"He was good at it. He was just a natural from the beginning. We used to play catch in the front yard, and I had to tell him not to throw it so hard," Gary says with a laugh. "He was throwing as hard as he could almost every time he threw the ball."

Those were early indications of a future left-handed pitcher. And as Richard got older, he got better. After Little League, he played travel baseball, then went on to play for Ballard High School.

"Baseball's pretty much all I did sports-wise. I did it year-round," Richard says. "I loved it!"

Despite his preoccupation with baseball, his mother says that looking back, there were signs he also had a talent for art.

"It started showing up in elementary school, and he was in some of the exhibits they did in



Vivid, intense colors are characteristic of Sullivan's Derby watercolors

“I DON’T THINK I’D EVER GIVEN MYSELF THE CHANCE TO BE GOOD AT PAINTING.”

middle school,” notes Debra Lively. “Then, he took art at Ballard. He was in several of the art recognition exhibits there.”

Still, everyone knew it was baseball that would get Sullivan into college. Interestingly enough, it was an art school with a baseball program that came calling after he had played in a college showcase game in Tennessee.

“The SCAD scout was there, and Richard had put down that he was interested in graphic arts,” says Lively, referring to the Savannah College of Art and Design in Georgia. “Once Richard saw the SCAD curriculum and those art classes, he just lit up.”

Even so, there were questions about whether an art school might be the best choice for someone focused on a baseball career. In the end, Sullivan decided it was.

At SCAD, he excelled in baseball. Athletic Director Doug Wollenburg, the school’s head baseball coach at the time, describes Sullivan as a young man with a real talent and an exceptional work ethic.

“He was unparalleled. He was one of the top three or four baseball players I had in my time as head coach

at SCAD,” Wollenburg recalls. “He was a left-handed pitcher who also hit and played first base for us. People sometimes forget what he provided and contributed to the team offensively as a position player.”

Sullivan’s dedication paid off. He began getting outside attention.

“During my junior year, I was doing really well, and people started to notice me,” he says. “At first, one or two scouts came to my games, then three or four, then five or six, and then at the end of the year, 15 or 20 scouts were at my games every time I pitched.”

That was in 2008. Baseball’s amateur draft drew closer.

“Draft day was the most stressful day of my life,” he remembers. “It was so intense. I didn’t know if it was going to happen. What if it doesn’t? Then it finally did, and I thought, ‘All right, I can do this.’”

Richard was drafted in the 11th round. It was a dream come true.

“I just tried to get better every day, just focus on the small things,” he says. He did well at the professional level.

“Once I got to Double-A, I had some really great games. I pitched a complete-game shutout, and one of

the highlights was being invited to the exhibition game.”

During spring training, the Braves had two exhibition games with the Minnesota Twins at Atlanta’s Turner Field. “They brought up 10 minor league pitchers, and I was one of them,” Richard says.

He was nervous beforehand, describing it all as a little surreal, but once he ran up to the mound, he kicked into action and performed extremely well.

“I got the win that night in the 10th inning,” he says. “I was so proud to be in that position. It was a great experience.”

Sullivan played in the minor leagues for nearly five years, but somewhere along the way, things begin to shift. He still loved the game, but something was different.

“I knew something needed to change,” he says. “It wasn’t fun anymore. It was just a grind. I wasn’t going to quit, but I knew something needed to happen.”

When he was released by the Braves in 2012, it came almost as a relief.

Richard went back to school and took a summer class. But then, still not sure he was completely finished with baseball, he went to Boston for pitchers training during the winter. He

got picked up by an independent team in southern Illinois. He played for a season before he finally knew he was done with baseball. He went back to SCAD to get his degree.

“It took me two to three years to make that decision,” he admits, adding that deciding to leave baseball was one of the hardest things he’d ever done. “When you do something your entire life and your whole life is surrounded by that, it’s how you define yourself. I didn’t know who I was after that.”

At SCAD, he eased back into art.

“I found watercolor. It was so natural. I didn’t have to think about it; I just did it,” he says. “It wasn’t easy, but my mind clicked with it. I don’t think I’d ever given myself the chance to be good at painting.”

Richard began doing regular portraits at first. But then, with so many of his friends and former teammates still playing baseball, he began doing sports figures and sharing them on social media.

Along the way, he studied the work of other artists and eventually developed his own style. He describes it this way: “It’s loose; it’s fast, but I want to put the emotion into it.”

In 2014, he got his first break as an artist when the National Baseball Hall



Sullivan in his studio: above, with a finished painting of baseball legend Willie Mays; top right, researching images online; right, contemplating a work in progress

“IT’S MY CONNECTION WITH BASEBALL THAT HAS TRIGGERED EVERYTHING.”

of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, accepted one of his pieces into its permanent collection. The work is titled “Braves vs Cardinals, 1964.”

“I think his watercolor work is wonderful,” notes senior curator Tom Shieber. “There’s an ethereal quality to his art that evokes a lot of emotion. It’s as if Richard’s artwork is a representation of our wispy memories, not quite tangible and yet still vibrant.”

Soon afterward, a painting Sullivan had done of Atlanta Braves Hall of Fame pitcher Tom Glavine got some attention on Facebook, and Glavine’s wife purchased it. He was thrilled and saw it as another sign to keep moving forward.

Then, he had pieces accepted at the Louisville Slugger Museum and the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center in Little Falls, New Jersey.

“The fact that he was able to reinvent himself in the way he has is so admirable,” says David Kaplan, director of programs at the Yogi Berra Museum. “He was playing baseball professionally and now making a living as an artist. Looking at his artwork, you wouldn’t know he’s a former player; you’d think he was just a classically trained artist.” And yet, he adds, Sullivan’s background as a player has given him a keen eye for movement and players’ actions.

Last summer, *The Washington Post* commissioned Sullivan to do a painting of the Washington Nationals’ Bryce Harper for its sports page after

Harper won the National League’s Most Valuable Player Award in 2015. Harper’s team later bought the painting, had Harper sign it, and then auctioned it off at an annual fundraising gala for \$18,000.

Richard looks at every success as an incentive to stay on course with his art. While making a living as an artist poses its own set of challenges, his decision to pursue sports art has proved to be a good one.

“I think it’s an incredible niche he’s carved out for himself,” notes Lively. “He’s been able to combine the two loves of his life.”

Wollenburg agrees.

“Richard obviously had a nice professional career playing for the Braves, but for one reason or another, he was rerouted. It’s a strong testimony for him that he came back and finished his degree. He has tremendous talent, obviously, but at the same time, he’s working hard, and I think that same work ethic that I saw—whether it was in the weight room or out on the baseball field with him hustling—carries over into the career he has now.”

For Richard, that hard work means continuing to paint and build his reputation, while considering what projects to tackle next. He’s also co-founder of an art agency with fellow SCAD graduate Kate Moore.

The Sullivan Moore agency currently handles 17 illustrators whose work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Rolling Stone*, *Smithsonian* magazine



A painting entitled “Mound Visit” is one of many pieces inspired by Sullivan’s love of baseball



Sullivan was drafted by the Atlanta Braves in 2008



A Louisville native himself, Sullivan pays homage to sports great Muhammad Ali

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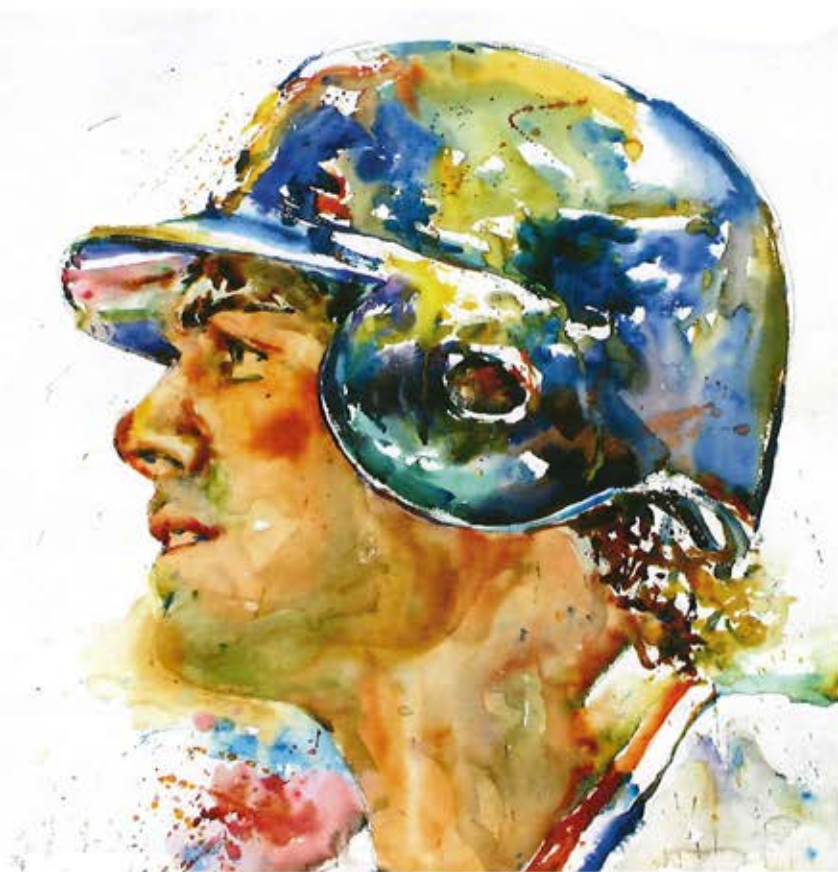
and *The New Yorker*, among other publications.

Richard plans to look for ways to take his baseball work closer to the fans, perhaps by selling prints in stadiums and other venues. It's a way to share with others the game he loves, and the sport that has given him so much in life.

"It's unbelievable," he says. "If baseball wasn't there, if I was painting portraits of celebrities and had no connection with them, nobody would know who I am. It's my connection with baseball that has triggered everything." —



To view more of
Sullivan's artwork, visit
richardsullivanillustration.com



Top, a portrait of Dale Murphy; above, a work from Sullivan's racehorse series