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Brian Shulman Merges Video Games and Sports into Teaching Tool

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Some kids would rather play video games than study. Brian Shulman has come up with a sports-oriented way for them to play computer games and learn at the same time.

Shulman, 39, gave up a successful position as president of sales for a health care technology firm in February 2001 to start a company called Learning through Sports.

Shulman, who walked on as a punter at Auburn University and worked his way to the top of the depth chart, was a captain of the Tigers' 1988 SEC championship team.

His idea of designing sports-based computer software to help kids do better in school started 4½ years ago. Shulman's 5-year-old son, Tyler, who easily understood football terms and statistics, found reading boring.

Shulman created a computer football game using his alma mater's colors and mascot to get Tyler fired up about reading. Correct answers meant first downs, which gave Tyler the motivation he needed. As Tyler progressed, Shulman enhanced the content, adding more features.

"I saw other kids like mine, who were kind of bored," Shulman said. "I was convinced if you gave children something tangible they could relate to, like sports and video games, they would concentrate better."

Shulman also thought schools could benefit from his concept.

He spent hours on the Internet researching reading requirements and sank a lot of his savings into his new venture. He persuaded individuals and companies like Golden Flake and Chick-Fil-A to provide financial support. Shulman's biggest recruit was the Southeastern Conference. In 2002, he met with Commissioner Mike Slive and his staff and subsequently, a partnership was formed.

"What intrigued us was that a former SEC student-athlete and successful businessman had a vision to create software and was able to communicate the impact that software would have on elementary-aged students," said Mark Whitworth, SEC associate commissioner.

The SEC's financial support enabled Shulman to accelerate the development of his Kids College software. The software emphasizes reading and math skills. Shulman had given Kids College its ultimate test by providing CD-ROMs of the program to teachers like Betsy Rogers at Brighton Elementary and Susan Nelson at Hueytown Elementary.

"Once I helped them sign on, they plunged in," said Nelson, the school's media specialist and technology director. "I had to pry them from the computers and force them out of the lab."

"This program will motivate kids when nothing else will," said Rogers, curriculum coordinator at Brighton Elementary. "The more a student practices a skill, the higher his achievement."

Nelson used Kids College math software 30 minutes a day for four weeks last November. Ninety-six percent of students who participated scored higher on the math portion of last year's SAT than they did in 2003, Nelson said.

Today, the SEC estimates that more than 1.5 million elementary students nationwide are using Kids College software as a tool to improve academic skills while competing in football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, gymnastics and other sports.

One is Darryl Marshall, a Hueytown fifth-grader who is confident he will score well on this year's standardized tests. He has focused on the material by keeping his eye on the ball.

Darryl struggled with prime and composite numbers when he started playing Kids College computer football, he said. But not any more. Players must answer questions correctly to move down the field. The more Darryl knows, the more fun the game becomes. As questions get tougher, he says, the rewards get better.

"Once you pass a certain level, you get to pick the play you want to run," he said. "I've had to study in the textbook to help me get in the end zone. At first it was hard, but now it's easier. Practice makes perfect, you know."

Shulman's enthusiasm for young learners led the conference to develop the SEC Education Initiative. The SEC underwrote additional development of Kids College and distributed 15,000 CD-ROMs to schools and libraries in the nine states where its universities are located. It featured Kids College in its televised promotional advertising. The conference has committed about $400,000 to the project so far, Whitworth said.

Once Kids College became available through the Internet, more than 1,000 schools nationwide registered to use the software.

In December, Slive saw Kids College in action for the first time during a visit to Hueytown Elementary.

"My recent visit provided a significant opportunity to spend time with teachers and students, understand the challenges they face," Slive said. "It is our goal to help develop a solid academic foundation in the young people we are reaching that will ultimately result in a college degree."

Learning through Sports is a for-profit enterprise that grows as it receives more financial backing. The company has a positive cash flow with no debt, which Shulman considers great for a 4-year-old company.

The best incentive for Shulman is hearing from educators who say the program is making a difference.

One call was from Susan Patrick, director of the office of educational technology for the U.S. Department of Education. Patrick happened upon Kids College during a visit to Poway Unified School system near San Diego.

"I was on an elementary school site visit, looking at a Title I, low-income school that had bolstered its standardized test scores," Patrick said. "I passed a group of students who were on seven computers, completely absorbed in reading and math activities."

On closer examination, Patrick found the software program had been created by Learning through Sports.

"These children, among the most challenged students, had succeeded in improving their learning through this program," Patrick said. "His program seemed to really be helping them learn. It was inspirational." On the Net www.learningthroughsports.com. kbryan@bhamnews.com