



Bat out of Hell

Bucking the NCAA, Rutgers–Newark’s baseball team goes to bat for wood. by Bill Glovin

no one can pinpoint the exact moment when baseball ceased being the national pastime, but it may have been around the same time that the aluminum bat was introduced. After artificial turf, the designated-hitter rule, and major league scoreboards that play commercials between innings, the demise of the wood bat in college baseball is the latest sacrilege to send baseball’s inventor, Abner Doubleday, spinning in his grave.

The main issue is safety. Aluminum bats have become so powerful that Rutgers–Newark baseball coach Stan Hyman compares them to loaded guns. From the start, aluminum bats—an innovation introduced exclusively into amateur baseball—caused snickering among purists as baseball scores began to resemble football scores. But aluminum was more than a sneaky plot to tip the scale in favor of a high-scoring offense. For schools with limited budgets, aluminum bats provide an economical alternative to brittle wood bats, which crack and require frequent replacement. What no one predicted was that manufacturers would use titanium and other alloys to improve their product to a level that even the NCAA thinks is unsafe.

“Forget for a minute that aluminum completely and absolutely distorts the game,” says Hyman. “Aluminum bats have gotten increasingly lighter and thinner over the last several years. A well-hit ball flies off an aluminum bat at 118 miles per hour. Pitchers and third basemen have become sitting ducks.”

The NCAA agreed in an August 1998 letter signed by executive director Cedric Dempsey. The letter recommended that its member baseball programs be aware of the danger of metal bats and described the NCAA’s efforts

WHEN COACH HYMAN ASKED PRO TEAMS TO DONATE A FEW BATS, HE NEVER EXPECTED TO END UP WITH THE MOST VALUABLE COLLECTION OF WOOD BATS IN COLLEGE BASEBALL.

to create a new standard for bats by 2000. In the meantime, the NCAA offered a set of temporary guidelines for modified aluminum bats, including the requirement that no bat should produce a ball-exit velocity that exceeds 93 mph. "The letter was analogous to Chrysler saying that it had found a defect in one of its cars, but that you should continue to drive it until the company got around to taking corrective measures," says Hyman.

Last fall the New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC)—the Division 3 organization that includes Rutgers' baseball teams on the Newark and Camden campuses—voted to exclusively use wood or wood-composite bats. Fred Hill, head coach of the Scarlet Knights in New Brunswick, a Division 1 program, thought that the move to wood bats in the Big East and conferences throughout the country was a fait accompli. "I'm from the old school," says Hill, who has more than 600 college coaching wins. "I was looking forward to using wood again."

But last January, Easton Sports, a manufacturer of aluminum bats, subpoenaed the NJAC in a \$267-million restraint-of-trade lawsuit against the NCAA. "Since we were the rabble-rousers, they thought they could scare us," says John Adams, director of athletics at Rutgers-Newark and vice president of the NJAC. "It seemed ridiculous, since none of the schools in our conference has a bat contract with Easton."

A month later the NCAA threw its members a curve when a new letter arrived. This one stated that the NCAA had decided to eliminate the 93-mph exit-velocity provision. In addition, it informed members that aluminum-bat manufacturers had agreed to indemnify the NCAA and its schools against injury damages from the use of the bats. (Adams calls that claim "legally questionable.") Soon after, the American Baseball Coaches Association voted to adhere to these provisions and use metal. But the NJAC, arguably the best Division 3 baseball conference in the country, decided to buck the NCAA and remain faithful to their commitment to wood.

The decision proved to be a financial strain for the Rutgers-Newark program and its players, most of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds. The wood-composite bats supplied by the program—33 ounces and above—are too heavy for many of Hyman's players. Purchasing their own lighter, regular wood bats sets players back \$30 each time one breaks, cracks, or splinters, a routine occurrence in the cool weather of their fall and spring seasons.

Looking for a way to ease the financial burden on his players, Hyman wrote to every professional baseball organization, asking them to donate a

wood bat or two. The response was overwhelming. Within two weeks, a flood of prime, white ash bats from major and minor league teams came pouring into his office. Among the contributors: the Detroit Tigers, the Philadelphia Phillies, the Toronto Blue Jays, the Durham Bulls, and the Tulsa Drillers. All the bats had the major league symbol and team name inscribed on them; many also had the name of a major league player etched on the barrel. Hyman says the bats are worth from \$200 to \$300 each.

"Professional baseball would love to see college baseball move exclusively to wood," says Hyman. "Their scouts do not get an accurate picture of a player's ability when metal bats are used." As a coach, Hyman believes that wood bats force athletes to learn "small ball," fundamentals like bunting, hitting to the right to advance the runner, and laying off an inside pitch. "With a metal bat," he says, "inside pitches go for doubles."

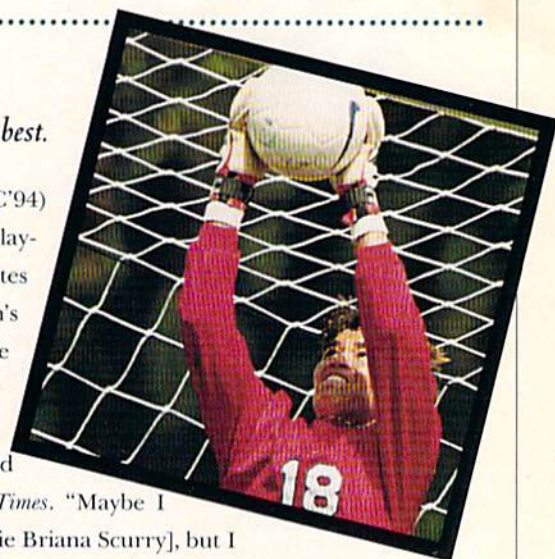
Scarlet Raider team statistics show an enormous discrepancy between wood and metal. In 1998, metal helped the team hit a combined .310, but contributed to pitchers giving up more than six runs per game. This year's team, wielding wood, hit .259, and pitchers cut their earned-run averages in half. Says Hyman: "Take Brian Dena, our All-American first baseman, for example. In 36 games last year he hit 15 home runs, drove in 69 runs, and hit .442. This year he had no home runs, drove in 25 runs, and hit .356." Metal, says Hyman, changes everything about the game.

The plot thickened when postseason play became

She's a Champ

Saskia Webber backs up the world's best.

The fact that Saskia Webber (DC'94) didn't get even a minute of playing time when the United States women's soccer team won the Women's World Cup this past summer didn't take away from the experience: "If I never become No. 1, I can retire and say I've done everything I could," the 28-year-old backup goalkeeper told *The New York Times*. "Maybe I couldn't be better than Bri [starting goalie Briana Scurry], but I was good enough for me." Webber, who won the starting job for the national team in 1993 and has played off and on for the squad since 1991, earned the backup spot in 1998 after impressing coach Tony DiCiccio at training camp. "I was just happy to be there, and it showed in my soccer," says Webber, who once won a Ms. Rutgers bodybuilding competition. At Rutgers, Webber's prowess in the nets led to her being named the country's top goalkeeper in her senior year.



IT WAS HARD TO MISS WEBBER ON THE SIDELINES DURING THE WOMEN'S WORLD CUP—HER HAIR WAS SPRAY-PAINTED RED, WHITE, AND BLUE.



an issue. Rutgers–Newark and Kean College, under consideration for the ECAC tournament, petitioned the conference to play tournament games with wood or wood-composite bats. Their petition was denied, and both teams followed the NJAC mandate and withdrew their teams from tournament consideration. But

regional tournament games with wood bats, but William Paterson, a college world series contender, capitulated and competed with aluminum.

The postseason conference split embarrassed NJAC officials and coaches. Adams says that he and his colleagues will consider sanctions ranging from reprimands to suspensions against the conference members that reneged on the agreement. "We had stuck together all year on the grounds that aluminum bats were dangerous, but some of our members sold out to the prospect of postseason glory," says Adams. "But what would those institutions tell a parent if a kid had gotten seriously injured?" Adams didn't feel any better when he recently saw a story in an NCAA newsletter that praised the NJAC defectors for making a righteous decision.

The issue still has a way to go before it's resolved. Despite the modifications made to the aluminum bat this year, statistics continued to be inflated in almost

every category. An NCAA seven-member panel of experts, including physicists and engineers, was expected to issue a report on the modified bat in July. But at a June press conference, the NCAA announced it was postponing the date of the report to January 1, 2000. In addition, it indicated that wood and an 80-mph exit-velocity speed would be the two parameters used to establish the new guidelines. For the fall baseball season, the NCAA instructed its members to continue to use the modified aluminum bat.


Insiders believe that the move to wood or wood-composite bats is inevitable and that the NCAA is simply delaying the shift to accommodate Easton and other large aluminum-bat manufacturers; many companies are already retooling their operations. But the NJAC isn't prepared to wait; it will continue to go to bat with wood this fall. Says Adams: "The bottom line is that the NCAA has put all of its constituents in a very precarious and potentially litigious situation. It's sad that this whole sordid mess comes down to dollars and cents." □

Aluminum bats

completely and totally distort the game," says Coach Hyman.

five days later, four conference members under consideration for the NCAA regionals—the College of New Jersey, William Paterson University, Montclair University, and Rowan University—decided to break ranks and pursue postseason play. Three of the schools convinced their opponents to play their






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