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Psychologist examines doughnut dangers

A&M professor studies batting phenomenon

By NADJA SABAWALA
Of The Battalion Staff

Doughnuts are a problem to those on a diet, but they may be even more of a hazard for baseball players, according to research done by Texas A&M psychologist Dr. Wayne Shebilske.

Swinging a bat weighted with a leaded "doughnut" immediately before stepping up to the plate in a game may actually damage the performance of an average player, Shebilske said.

The heavier weight causes the hitters to exert their muscles more than when they swing their regular bat.

Using the lighter bat at the plate, the warm up with the weighted bat allows the muscles to swing the bat around faster, a possible advantage for power.

In actuality, however, the extra weight causes the muscles to be at an optimum potential point for only a short period of time. The advantage declines rapidly, causing unpredictability in the swing, he said.

"Before you get to the point of fatigue," Shebilske said. "You get to the opposite, or potentiation. So the after affect of working the muscle in this way is to make the muscle more responsive, that is, you send the very same message to the muscle, but it responds more vigorously.

"The bat does come around faster, but there's a disadvantage in that these potentiation effects decay."

"Your brain is always telling you how to swing the bat," Shebilske said. "But after the weighted bat, your bat's doing different things depending on where in the decay function you are."

The decay could occur within a minute after using a weighted bat, depending on how long the muscles have potentiated, he said.

"If you get someone who's looking for the first or second pitch, that's great," Shebilske said.

"But during later pitches, you're somewhere in the decay function, maybe you've already decayed — you can't predict exactly how your bat will come around on any given pitch."

Research begun with a study of players at the University of Virginia and later at A&M, suggests that players would be better off recalibrating their normal swing while in the on-deck circle so they can make sure they have their regular swing patterns rather than modifying the swing with the heavier bat.

This recalibration is what separates stars from superstars by correcting many game conditions that can change a batter's swing, Shebilske said.

Factors such as batting in the bottom inning with bases loaded, crowd noise and even the weather can affect how a player mentally and physically steps up to the plate.

Players that can perform "in the clutch," or under stressful circumstances, he said, are exceptional.

They have learned to compensate for factors that influence the flow of adrenaline in their system and affect their muscles.

"These players use feedback to change exactly what their muscles will do for any given command," Shebilske said. "They can adjust quickly to the situation."

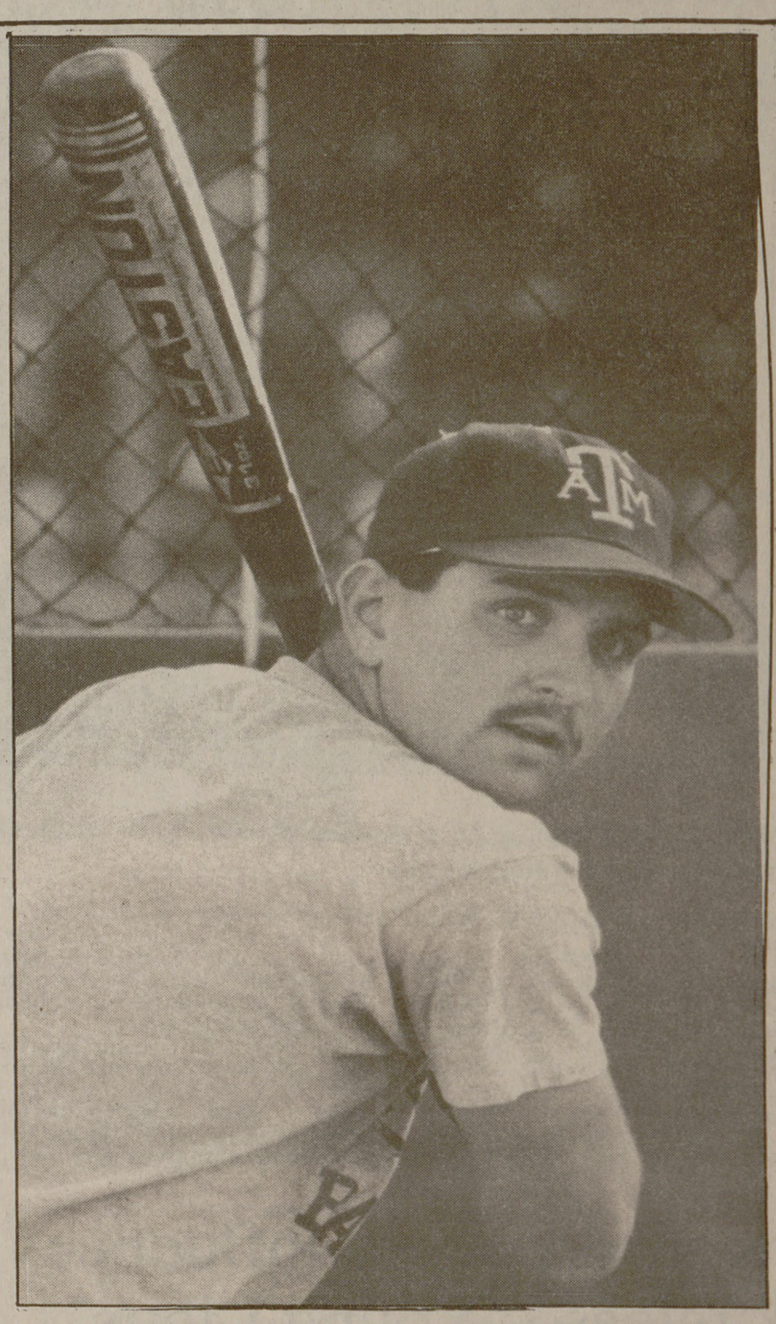
"As you're ready to step into the batter's box you want your muscles doing what you brain is telling them to do without any conscious effort," he said.

"If you train your body to pay attention to natural feedback that is available, your brain will compensate for any momentary disturbances."

Available feedback includes the way the bat feels in the player's hands or the amount of pressure that puts on the hands, Shebilske said.

A stereotypical routine where the batter swings at a stationary target off to the side and noticing where the bat comes through also could be a type of feedback, he said.

Shebilske said players can be trained in the laboratory using artificial feedback — ultimately learning to control their bat better by using natural feedback.



Battalion file photo
Batters could be hindered by warming up with a weighted bat.

Cowboys open camp at St. Edwards

AUSTIN (AP) — For the Dallas Cowboys, trading California's Thousand Oaks for a hilltop of twisted oaks at St. Edward's University is an opportunity to save money and enlarge its Texas fan base.

For St. Edward's, this might be the best shot at stardom since the tornado of 1922 tore the top off Holy Cross Hall.

For years, the biggest summer commotion on campus has been the incessant buzzing of cicadas, chattering bugs that take up residence on the virtually vacant South Austin hilltop.

But St. Edward's, a private Catholic school, is prepared to trade placidity for publicity, eager to welcome a new swarm of athletes, media and sports fans for the 3½-week Cowboys Summer Camp.

The school hopes for attention in Texas, regionally, even nationally, on the sports pages and broadcasts. And it hopes fans who come to see the Cowboys will see something else: a pleasant campus and promises of a quality education for their children.

St. Edward's has gone rah-rah over the Cowboys. Chain-link fencing corrals 208,000-square feet of fresh sod. Dormitory rooms have been renovated for the players, staff and media. Rows of bleachers, portable toilets and concession stands await the autograph hounds.

"The reason we're doing this is not to make money, because we're not doing that, but so that more people will hear about us. A lot of people have never heard of us before," said John Lucas, vice president for enrollment and student services.

A new campus directory sign has been strategically erected near the football field, and the bookstore has stocked up on new T-shirts: St. Edward's University — Home of the Dallas Cowboys Training Camp.

In daily meetings, the university staff has scrutinized details down to whether the players might prefer daily, as opposed to weekly, linen service. There have been discussions on the number of water fountains and restrooms to erect near the field, the size of hospitality tents, what to serve VIP guests for breakfast. St. Edward's is determined to put on a good show.

Quite an undertaking for a school that last fielded a football team in 1939.

The school's literature notes that St. Edward's was founded in 1885 by the Very Rev. Edward Sorin, "who founded Notre Dame."

Although many graduates in the school's 105-year history have excelled in their professions, St. Edward's comes up short on names of note. "No Walter Cronkites. Not many people are household names," says Brenda Thompson, director of public relations.

Claims to fame?

"Knute Rockne was here one time," suggests Dave Dickson, vice president for financial affairs.

Lucas suggests the Cowboys' arrival will be the biggest news to come out of the campus since the school admitted women, in 1966.

"St. Edward's is like a lot of other small schools," Lucas says. "We think we do a lot of extraordinary things, yet we don't get attention commensurate with those accomplishments. This is a major opportunity for the university. We're doing it because we think it can help us tell the message about St. Edward's."

Caruso named to marketing pos

From Staff and Wire Reports

Texas A&M announced Wednesday that it has named former Elmhurst basketball coach Mike Caruso as assistant to the director for marketing and promotions.

Caruso will work in all areas of athletic promotions and marketing for A&M and will also serve as color commentator on the A&M Basketball Radio Network for all Aggie home games.

He had been a graduate assistant in the A&M Athletic Department for the last two years, working on a doctorate in physical education. Caruso holds a masters degree in physical education from the University of Nebraska-Omaha and a bachelors degree from Creighton University. Before coming to A&M in 1987, Caruso served as head basketball coach and assistant athletic director at Elmhurst College from 1981-87. At Creighton, he was an assistant basketball coach.

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