

THE BAT DISEASE

Throughout the last 20 years, aluminum bats have slowly taken control of college baseball, transforming it into a distant descendant of its professional counterpart



JEREMY FURTICK
Sports editor

Twenty-four years ago, the sound of wood bats cracked the silence of mid-afternoons in March on just about every college campus in America. Along with the smells of freshly cut grass, hot dogs and popcorn and the sight of the American flag flying over the ballpark, the sound of the old Louisville Slug-

ger baseball coach to realize the continued improvement in ball reaction off these bats will lead to more injuries to defensive players.

"It's almost impossible for the pitcher, the third baseman playing in or the first baseman holding a runner on to protect themselves if a batter hits the ball just right," Johnson said. "I'm standing down at third base, and I know I'm getting a year older every season, but I move further and further away.

"With a runner on second I'm probably 75 feet away from home plate, and if a guy turns on one, I could get hurt."

According to the NCAA Injury Surveillance System, baseball has remained the safest sport in terms of frequency

of injuries, but Bill Thurston, baseball coach at Amherst College in Massachusetts, says the issue should not be whether or not baseball is as safe as other sports, but if the traditional game was safer than today's.

Thurston, the NCAA Baseball Rules editor, said he has noticed a trend in the injuries over the past few years. "With the high performance aluminum bats used in the past three years, I have heard of more injuries via the batted ball than in my previous nine years as the NCAA Baseball Rules editor," Thurston said.

In regards to another issue clouding the current aluminum bats in use, Thurston completed a study last fall comparing players' statistics from their NCAA seasons to those from their competition in the Cape Cod Summer League, which requires the use of wooden bats.

Ninety Division I hitters with at least 70 at bats in the Cape and 60 pitchers with at least 25 innings pitched were included in the study.

Thurston's results, although by no means hard scientific evidence, did show an astounding difference in the performances of batters and pitchers from their college seasons to the summer league. Batting averages dropped from .339 in regular NCAA games to .232 in the Cape, while the slugging percentage fell from .551 to .325. During the NCAA season, 35 hitters batted over .350 and 70 hit over .300, but in the Cape only five players managed to hit over .300. Pitchers' ERA fell from 4.89 to 2.79 and increased their strikeouts per nine innings by more than five.

Johnson said these findings were no surprise to him. "As a coach out on the field, I can see the difference each year when players pick up a new, more powerful bat. There's no question about the difference they are making," Johnson said. "Players laugh because the ball comes off so easy and so much further and quicker. We have .250 hitters hitting .310 only because they are using an aluminum bat. They wouldn't be able to do that with a wood bat."

Another issue aluminum bats have given rise to is college baseball's role as a learning ground for players on their way to the professional level. College players who spend three or four years honing their skills in preparation for a shot at the majors have to completely relearn to play the wooden-bat version of baseball.



BRAD GRAEBER/THE BATTALION

signaled the winter awakening of our National Pastime to baseball-hungry fans. But if you happened to prove your campus field over the season, you'd be in for a two-decade, all-familiar "ping" has replaced one of baseball's most sacred sounds. Aluminum bats were reduced to collegiate baseball in 1974 in order to solve some problems facing the Great me. Wood bats were being insanely expensive for collegiate programs, while their use had been putting a large dent into the supply of bat-suitable wood. The NCAA needed an alternative, and the aluminum bat seemed to be the answer. Sure, this alteration to America's most unaged sport didn't sit well with traditionalists, when the argument was completely examined, it was obviously something that had to be done. So college baseball became an aluminum-bat game, but I doubt if anyone ever expected a rule change to alter the face of the sport like it has.

The situation is relatively simple according to Texas A&M Coach Mark Johnson. He said he believes the use of aluminum bats in college is necessary because of the phenomenal costs of continuously replacing wood bats. He said the problem is in the technology and development of the aluminum bats currently in use — they have had a negative impact on the game itself. Johnson said college baseball is suffering from standpoints of safety and integrity by using current arsenal of bats available to it. Safety is an obvious issue concerning the aluminum bat. It doesn't take a seasoned colle-

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