

A Thought on Today's Bats
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In the book *Field of Dreams*, there is a great line that speaks to our national pastime. "The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time."

Baseball has served as my own timeline too, from my youth when I first learned the game, to my years in college and professional ball, and to the past 34 years, where I have taught the game to hundreds and hundreds of student athletes.

With my retirement from high school coaching earlier this year, I understand and appreciate the constant presence baseball has had in my life – and in our country. But I also recognize the game has changed over the years – and players have changed over the years.

As an educator and coach, it was my responsibility to ensure that young men at my high school and on my summer league teams learned the fundamentals of the game, had fun, and played with a smile on their face, and were coached in a manner that protected them from injuries.

The National High School Baseball Coaches Association (BCA) is based upon this philosophy, and for the past 14 years has provided services and recognition to baseball coaches that promote and represent high school baseball. As educators and coaches, our members share the enthusiasm players have for the game and the work ethic it takes to succeed on the field and in the classroom. We know that at the high school level, academics are the first priority for every student. At the same time, we know that a student's safety in the classroom and on the field must be constantly monitored.

From my playing days to my coaching days, one major change for amateur baseball was the introduction and now broad acceptance of aluminum bats. Like every player and coach from my generation, I initially viewed the aluminum bat with some skepticism. It frankly, was not the way I learned the game and not the way professional players played the game.

But 31 years after aluminum bats were first accepted and adopted by the NCAA and every amateur baseball league in the nation – including high schools – I can conclusively state that I was wrong about my skepticism on aluminum bats. Aluminum bats, which were initially developed because wood bats were breaking so frequently, have been a positive development for the amateur game. There is simply not enough high quality Northern Ash or Maple trees available to produce the number of wood bats amateur and professional players and leagues across the world would need to play the game.

The introduction of the BESR (Ball Exit Speed Ratio) aluminum bats in the past six years has further improved the aluminum bat by capping performance to ensure today's aluminum bats perform no better than the best Northern White ash wooden bats.

One of the best measurements for determining the impact of BESR bats is the NCAA's Division 1 Baseball Statistic Trends. In 2004, the batting average for the 285 D-1 teams was .291 – the fifth year in a row that the average was below .300. At the same time, scoring was down to just over 6 runs per game and home runs per game were 0.77. In other words, these were good, balanced baseball games with

pitching, hitting, and fielding contributing equally to a team's success. In fact, the offensive baseball statistics of collegiate games played with aluminum bats were similar to Major League games.

Before the introduction of BESR bats, it could be argued that the collegiate games were out-of- balance. Offenses, and particularly the home run, were becoming dominant in college baseball; but now, there are fewer home runs per game in college than there are in professional baseball.

Another measuring stick for the impact of aluminum bats is the safety statistics of the game according to amateur associations – from the NCAA down to Little League. Injuries at the collegiate level are down and baseball is characterized by the NCAA as one of the safest sports played by college athletes – men and women. Little League, PONY, and Babe Ruth Leagues have also reported fewer injuries for players in their leagues. Injuries do and will happen at all levels of play, including collisions and sliding incidents, but overall the game of baseball is a consistently safe sport. There are injuries from batted balls too; whether off infield hits or come-backers to the pitcher. However, there cannot be a division between batted balls up the box off wood bats versus aluminum bats. It is interesting that when a ball off of an aluminum bat hits a player, it is the bat that caused it. But when a player gets hit by a ball off a wood bat, it is just part of the game.

The final measuring stick on the impact of aluminum bats is the one that dates me as a player and coach. I played with wood bats my entire life, but all my coaching years were spent with players using aluminum bats. You can do the math, but amateur leagues have used aluminum bats for 31 years. Every major league player honed their skills using aluminum bats.

Young people today have more athletic entertainment, and leisure choices that they did 30 years ago. Soccer, lacrosse, hockey, and alternative sports like skateboarding are growing in popularity. At the same time, it seems too many children are getting their exercise with joysticks and television set game boxes. Baseball coaches have had to change our methods of teaching over the years; long gone are the days kids would be happy to shag flies during batting practice. We now have skill stations with rotations, drills, and constant engagement and activity. The aluminum bat contributes to the success of amateur baseball and has helped make the game more exciting and appealing for young people.

As coaches and educators, we need to teach the game of baseball as well as other skills that contribute to the lives of young people- like teamwork, hard work, and fair play. We also must ensure a safe learning environment. People who claim that aluminum bats are a safety risk and are not beneficial to the game of baseball need to spend more time on the field and more time with young people. After reviewing the facts, I believe most people will conclude and agree that aluminum bats are not a safety risk compared to wood bats and that their contribution to amateur baseball has been positive.