NCAA LEADS CHARGE IN NEW BAT REGULATIONS

By Bill Ballew

If first impressions prove to be a harbinger of things to come, there could be some significant changes taking place this season in college baseball. In fact, every level of the amateur game could be affected, thanks largely to the new requirements and specifications for non-wood bats in NCAA-sanctioned games as well as the prep level, as specified by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), the governing body of high school baseball.

The changes are centered on the manner in which bats are approved for play. While most bats with aluminum barrels that met requirements in the recent past should not be affected, only a few of the 2010 and earlier composite models will be legal this spring. The reason for that alteration is based on the new testing protocol known as the Bat-Ball Coefficient of Restitution (BBCOR), which is expected to decrease the performance level of non-wood bats to the point where they produce results similar to models made of wood.

College coaches across the country noticed a significant drop in power productivity during fall practice while swinging BBCOR bats for the first time. TCU head coach Jim Schlossnagle went so far as to suggest the college ranks "will be playing a different game in the spring," with defense and the ability to play the short game on offense musts for any team hoping to have successful seasons.

"Our ballpark is already one of the best pitcher's parks in all of college baseball," Schlossnagle said. "With the new bats, the ballpark factor just increased a bunch. Honestly, I thought the bats that we played with last year were just about perfect for college baseball. I didn't see too many cheap home runs with those bats so I am not in favor of making the changes that were made. I think we have to be careful about trying to become a professional-style game. College baseball, at least in our part of the country, is very popular, and although it is the same sport, college baseball should still be unique, in my opinion."

Many coaches echoed the comments of Schlossnagle; others were more welcoming of the change. Gary Ward, the assistant baseball coach at New Mexico State and the former long-time head coach at Oklahoma State, is never shy about expressing his opinion. Considered by many to be among the foremost hitting instructors in the game, Ward feels the change will be positive for college baseball.

"I like the new bat; I'm an advocate of it," Ward said. "I don't want to go to the professional game, but I like the game with wood. (The composite bats) have created rotational hitters with a huge pipe in their hands. Not anymore. Now there's going to be a much greater need for precision in terms of making contact. It's going to require coaches to teach hitting more, and it's going to reward those who are able to put the barrel of the bat on the ball."

Putting the barrel of the bat on the ball has not always been a necessity, dating to the debut of aluminum bats in the early 1970s. Before that, inventors had tried for years to create a non-wood bat that would not break. As far back as June 1924, William Shroyer of Dayton, Ohio, filed a description and diagrams of a proposed metal bat that received patent number 1,499,128 with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. Shroyer produced detailed layouts of a durable bat that "would provide the lightness, springiness and resiliency of the current wood construction" and included a threaded aperture located in the head of the bat where additional weight could be inserted into the barrel if desired by the hitter. Despite his thorough preliminary work, there is no indication that Shroyer ever produced even a sample of his idea.

In the mid-1940s, at Washington State College, coach Jack Friel supported the creation of a non-wood baseball bat due to the Pacific Northwest's abundant resources for the production of aluminum. Samples were created in the light metals laboratory in Pullman, with an article in the Spokesman-Review on July 20, 1944, reporting, "Magnesium baseball bats with a metallic ping will be on the market this fall." Yet not unlike Shroyer's patent, little became of the idea.

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It was not until 1970, when Worth entered the fray, that a major sporting goods manufacturer started to produce aluminum bats. Two years later the company introduced the first one-piece design as well as the first Little League aluminum bat. Those innovations led to the advent of the first official NCAA-approved aluminum bat in 1974, a model known as the "Tennessee Thumper." From there it didn't take long for the "ping" of the bat to be heard throughout the collegiate ranks as well as most other amateur levels. Schools loved the cost savings associated with not having to replace broken wood bats on a frequent basis. Hitters became infatuated with the larger sweet spot and added power found with metal. Pitchers, meanwhile, felt forced to shift their approaches by employing the outside part of the plate more often than the inner half.

Innovation in the performance of aluminum bats started to become noteworthy in 1986 when Worth introduced the first Titanium bats that promoted a 10 percent increase in hit distance. The first graphite composite bat arrived on the market three years later and brought with it the term "trampoline effect" to describe its enhanced performance by using metals that created bats with thinner walls. In essence, the metal absorbed the impact of the baseball before redirecting it with greater velocity, much like a child jumping harder and higher on a trampoline.

Even with the claims of greater performance, most advances made involving the top-shelf products during the first two decades of aluminum bats were generated using an alloy designated Cu31,

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which was an aluminum, zinc, magnesium and copper blend more commonly known as 7050 and supplied by ALCOA. Since 1995, companies have engaged in the "build a better mousetrap" mentality by trying any and all approaches to give non-wood bats more juice. Most attempts involved using advanced alloys that kept the walls of the barrel as thin and the bat as lightweight as possible, all of which combined to produce additional bat speed, trampoline effect, power and distance.

Not surprisingly, the manufacturers proved proficient at creating bats with potent power. Combine the new-and-improved sticks with more players taking advantage of recent advances in strength-training programs and the result was a College World Series in 1998 that nearly made a mockery of the sport. Records fell faster than raindrops while 62 home runs were smashed and new benchmarks for batting average, runs and hits were established. In the championship game, Southern Cal outlasted Arizona State, 21-14, to set a single-game CWS record for runs scored, all of which led members of the media to deem the style of play "gorilla ball."

The NCAA took notice, and determined that the bulk of the blame centered on the bats. The statistics supported that assertion. During the 1998 regular season at the Division I level, records were established for batting average (.306), runs per game (14.2) and home runs per game (2.1). Earned run averages ballooned to a record-setting 6.12. The NCAA responded by working with manufacturers to reduce the potency of the bats in hopes of making the metal models perform more like wood. Barrel sizes were reduced by 3/8 of an inch (to a maximum of 2-5/8"), and the "three-and-three" rule was instated that required the weight of a bat to be no less than three ounces lighter than its length. For instance, 34-inch bats could weigh no less than 31 ounces.

Other alterations were made as well during this time by incorporating some formulas that enabled the institutions of higher level to live up to their reputations. While receiving assistance and recommendations from numerous physics professors and other intellectuals, the NCAA developed the Ball Exit Speed Ratio (BESR) test in an attempt to measure the performance of baseball bats. Using various measurements, the newly created standard determined the ratio of the ball's exit speed to the combined speeds of the pitched ball and swung bat. The tests employed light gates, high-tech cameras, computers and other measuring devices and were conducted on every bat approved for play at the high school and NCAA collegiate level at the Baseball Research Center at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, beginning in 1999.

The BESR achieved its designed goal by slowing the speed of the ball off the bat, which reduced the power output. Home runs fell from 62 at the CWS in 1998 to 17 in 2004 (which represented the lowest total in Omaha since 1982), with Cal State Fullerton winning the national championship that year while hitting one home run in six games. In fact, offensive numbers fell across the board during the 2000s. Batting averages remained steady at .291 from 2003 to 2007, with the .290 norm in 2005 the lone exception. Runs-per-game dropped by two full tallies, to 12.2 in 2007, compared to 1998. Home runs also decreased, falling as low as 1.36 per game in both 2006 and 2007.

Yet those trends started to change, beginning in 2008, when batting averages rose to .296, and to .302 in 2009. Runs climbed upward by more than 1.5 per game between 2007 and 2009, and home runs increased by .56 per game. The reason, once again, centered on the potency of the bats. It was during this time that composite bats debuted in baseball. Used in softball for many years, composite bats have a metal shell that contains woven layers of carbon fibers, resin and glue inside the barrel. Most composite bats were BESR certified since they met the approved specifications upon leaving the factory.

Alan Nathan, a physics professor at the University of Illinois since 1977, is an expert in the field of baseball bats. In an article titled "Comparing the Performance of Baseball Bats," he wrote, "The technology of making a modern high-performing bat is aimed primarily at improving the trampoline effect. For aluminum this is achieved by developing new high-strength alloys that can be made thinner (to increase the trampoline effect) without denting. The past decade has seen the development of new composite materials that increase the barrel flexibility beyond that achievable with aluminum, giving rise to a new generation of high-performing bats."

The problem with composite bats is their performance improves over time. In new composite bats, the resin and glue between the fibers are brittle and rigid. As composite bats start the "breaking in" process, which takes in the neighborhood of 500 hits, the glue and resin break up, making the bat more flexible. Added flexibility increases the batted ball speed, increasing rates as high as an extra 10 to 15 percent. Ironically, composite bats are "hottest" right before they break because the pressure within the barrel and the overall potency have been maximized.

The NCAA was asking questions as the statistics started to increase, then became more than a little curious when accusations of a process known as "bat rolling" entered the picture during the 2008 College World Series. "Bat rolling" is a compressing process using pressure generated by nylon or hard rubber rollers that speeds up the break-in period of a composite bat. During this rolling process, the fibers are stretched and the resin and glue are broken down evenly throughout the barrel, making the bats more flexible while increasing the trampoline effect. Bat rolling also helps eliminate dead spots, which increases the size of the sweet spot and makes the bat's performance more consistent with additional pop, regardless of the point of contact with the baseball.

Companies offering this service claimed bat rolling was legal because it simply sped up a process that would happen anyway. The NCAA disagreed. In a memorandum sent to athletic directors, compliance administrators and head baseball coaches in May of 2009, Jim Paranto of the NCAA Baseball Rules Committee referred to Rule 1-12-b that states, "Any bat that … has been altered or flattened so as to affect the distance factor or cause an unusual reaction on the baseball shall be removed from the game."

The NCAA policed the situation while trying to create a better measuring method by taking a sample of composite bats slated for use in the 2009 College World Series and executing BESR certification tests. Thirty-one bats were declared illegal. Without question, balls were being hit harder and farther than ever before. The alarming increase in the performance of composite bats over time led the NCAA Playing Rules Oversight Panel to approve the NCAA Baseball Rules Committee's recommendation to place a moratorium on the bats for the 2010 season. On August 17, 2010, the NCAA confirmed that beginning January 1, 2011, all bats must be approved using the Batted Ball Coefficient of Restitution (BBCOR) test, which includes an Accelerated Break-In (ABI) process. The BBCOR measures the "bounciness" of the ball-bat collision. An ABI simulates heavy use on a bat while ensuring it remains consistent without exceeding the BBCOR standard throughout its lifetime.

According to Nathan, who is also a member of the Baseball Research Panel that recommended changes in the bat-related tests to the NCAA, non-wood bats outperformed wood bats, which have virtually no trampoline effect, by between five and six percent under BESR testing. Under the new BBCOR standard, that five or six percent has been reduced to one-half of one percent, which all but eliminates the trampoline effect in non-wood bats.

One other contributing factor to the changes is the Moment of Inertia test. This standard prevents bats from having most of the weight near the handle, which generates faster bat speed

The bottom line is, for 2011, approved composite bats will have a rectangular label that says "BBCOR certified .50" in order for umpires to easily identify them. The .50 "reaches the NCAA's intention to maintain its non-wood standard using available scientific data and as nearly as possible achieving wood-like performance in non-wood bats." In other words, the .50 standard represents the highest allowed level of trampoline effect in a non-wood bat, which, according to the NCAA, is "slightly higher than the best available wood bats in our database." While officials with the NCAA say player safety was the primary reason behind the new standard, less offense, a greater emphasis on pitching and faster games are likely byproducts of the change.

Other organizations are following the NCAA's lead. On July 7, 2010, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) Baseball Rules Committee announced that it too would require bats to pass the BBCOR performance standard. The 2010-11 school year will be one of transition, meaning that all BESR standard aluminum bats as well as wood and BBCOR bats are legal. Composite bats that meet the BESR standard and the ABI testing are also approved for play. Through January, the BESR composite bats deemed legal include the DeMarini CF4, DeMarini Vendetta C6, Louisville Slugger TPX Dynasty, Louisville Slugger TPX Triton, and Combat's Backbone AB, BIAB and B2AB models.

compared to bats weighted in the barrel. Under the new guidelines, a minimum Moment of Inertia for various lengths is also part of the approval process for new bats. According to Nathan, the Moment of Inertia (MOI) in many ways translates into how a bat feels in the hands of the hitter. MOI figures are relatively well known for softball bats due to the history of executing the test, but those figures had not become public for baseball bats through January of 2011.

The question being asked by many amateur players centers on the advantage of non-wood bats over wood. While the new BBCOR bats will have less pop than the BESR bats, the fact is metal bats remain easier to control than wood bats. As a result, while batters may not generate additional power with the metal bats compared to wood, there is the possibility of making consistent contact more often.

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"While the handles and taper are important components of the bat, the area that we recognized as more susceptible to abuse is the barrel," said Elliot Hopkins, NFHS liaison to the Baseball Rules Committee. Hopkins said the new standard will make the performance of non-wood bats more comparable to wood bats, adding, "It's also expected to minimize risk, improve play and increase teaching opportunities."

On August 27, 2010, the Little League International Board of Directors placed a moratorium on the use of composite bats in the junior, senior and big league divisions of its organization, beginning with the 2011 season. Four months later, on December 30, 2010, the organization expanded the moratorium on the use of composite bats to all of its baseball divisions, including models with 2 1/4-inch barrels in addition to 2 5/8-inch barrels. As with the NCAA and NFHS, bats with wooden and aluminum metal/alloy barrels are not subject to the moratorium, regardless of the composition of the handle.

"The decision to place the moratorium on composite bats in Little League's baseball divisions is based solely on the fact that scientific research showed that composite-barreled bats may exceed the performance standard that is printed on the bats, after the bats had been broken in," said Patrick Wilson, vice president of operations at Little League International.

All of this isn't to say that composite bats are going the way of the dinosaur. According to Nathan, bat manufacturers are capable of reducing the trampoline effect in composite bats. If successful, which will be determined by the BBCOR testing, revamped hollow composite bats will be seen on NCAA-sanctioned collegiate diamonds as well as other amateur levels.

In the meantime, the most likely result of the new standards is a reduction in the number of home runs hit. Several observers also believe safety will be increased significantly. Kurt Kemp, the Atlanta Braves' director of player development, served as an assistant coach at Oregon State for 14 seasons and shudders to think about the consequences of a baseball striking a pitcher hit with a high-performance bat by the bigger and stronger players of today.

"There have been times when it seemed that performance in the bats took precedence over safety," Kemp said. "I believe this is a good move, because there are plenty of guys at the college and high school level capable of hitting the ball very, very hard. I understand the cost concerns regarding the use of wood at the amateur level, but I'm for any type of changes that brings the performance of metal bats closer to wood."

Time will tell if a decrease in run production and other alterations affect the game at the high school and college levels. Chances are the results will be positive until new technology necessitates new testing. Meanwhile, the ebb and flow that defines the battle between the pitcher and hitter will continue as the central point of the American pastime.

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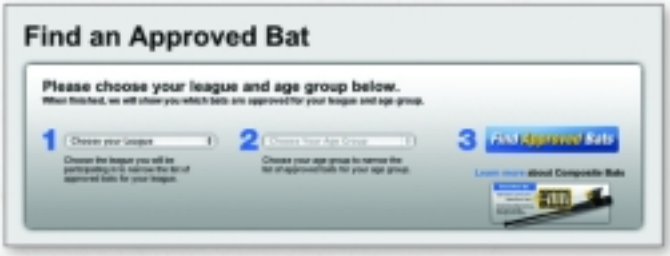

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WHAT IS BBCOR?

BBCOR measures the "bounciness" of the ball and bat, or the "trampoline" effect, instead of the speed of the ball after it is batted. Whenever a bat hits a ball during a game, the ball actually compresses by nearly a third.

A pitched ball holds a lot of energy that you can see in the spin and speed of the ball. With solid wood bats, much of that energy is lost as the ball compresses at impact. The batted ball speed gets a lot of its energy from the bat. With hollow-core aluminum or composite bats, the thin walls "give" a little, and the ball distorts less and retains its pitched energy and adds to it the power of the bat speed. That's why non-wood bats hit balls faster.

The loss of energy at collision is what BBCOR measures. The less energy lost, the faster the ball speed after it gets launched off the bat.

A simple way to think of BBCOR is to jump up and down on a hard floor. It takes a lot of energy in your legs to get off the ground. The floor doesn't help at all. Contrast that feeling by jumping on a trampoline. Even with very little energy from your body, you will still get a bounce because that energy isn't being absorbed by the trampoline. Instead, the trampoline is flexing with the impact and then "bouncing" back to its original shape, thus launching you higher into the air.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR BASEBALL?

According to their own explanations of the new standard, both college and high school governing bodies want all bats to have the same performance factors as the best wood bats. While it may still be cost effective to purchase alloy bats that will last longer than wood bats, it won't necessarily make you a better batter. You'll have to swing faster and more accurately to get the same hits as before.

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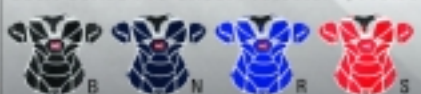

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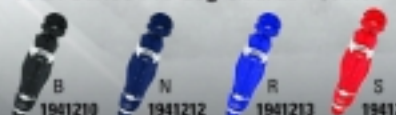

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B. 1828111 Navy
C. 18281216 Light Blue
D. 1828124 Gold
E. 1828125 Orange
F. 1828126 Forest

BAT BAGS

Wilson Pudge On Wheels

$99.99
Sz: 36.5"L x 14.5"W x 11"H.
1970200 Black/silver

Built by Eastbay

Eastbay Player's Bag

$19.99 Sz: 35"L x 9.5"W x 18"H.

A. 45893011 Black/black
B. 45893021 Scarlet/black
C. 45893031 Orange/black
D. 45893041 Forest/black
E. 45893051 Navy/black
F. 45893061 Royal/black
G. 45893071 Purple/black
H. 45893081 Maroon/black

Mizun Vintage Wheel Bag

$69.99
Sz: 12"L x 35"W x 13"H.
A. 13681510 Black
B. 13681512 Red
C. 13681514 Navy
D. 13681516 Royal

Rawlings Player Preferred Bag

$49.99 Sz: 35"L x 18.5"W x 11.5"H.

A. 48934582 Scarlet
B. 48934581 Black
C. 48934583 Orange
D. 48934584 Dark Green
E. 48934585 Navy
F. 48934586 Royal
G. 48934587 Purple

BATTING GLOVES

Franklin Carbon Fibre II Batting Gloves

(MEN'S) $39.99 Sz: S-XXL

A. 10119011 White/white
B. 10119013 White/red
C. 10119014 White/orange
D. 10119015 White/gold
E. 10119016 White/green
F. 10119017 White/navy
G. 10119018 White/royal
H. 10119019 White/purple
I. 10119111 White/maroon
J. 10119020 Black/grey
K. 10119010 White/black

Nike Diamond Elite Edge Batting Gloves

(MEN'S) $19.99 Sz: S-XL

A. 10302008 Black/orange
B. 10302041 Black/royal
C. 10302075 Black/red
D. 10302101 White/black
E. 10302005 Black/gorge green
F. 10302007 Black/sundown
G. 10302066 Black/team maroon
H. 10302001 Black/black

Built by Eastbay

Franklin Tectonic Pro Batting Gloves

(MEN'S) $29.99 Sz: S-XXL

A. 1060311 Pearl/white
B. 1060313 Pearl/red
C. 1060314 Pearl/orange
D. 1060315 Pearl/yellow
E. 1060316 Pearl/forest
F. 1060317 Pearl/navy
G. 1060318 Pearl/royal
H. 1060319 Pearl/purple
I. 10603111 Pearl/maroon
J. 1060310 Pearl/black

Nike Diamond Elite Pro Batting Gloves

(MEN'S) $39.99 Sz: S-XL

A. 10305100 White/black
B. 10305103 White/red
C. 10305104 White/royal
D. 10305105 White/navy
E. 10305107 White/purple
F. 10305108 White/green
G. 10305160 White/maroon
H. 10305068 Black/orange
I. 10305064 Black/pewter

The Tectonic Fit System uses outer surface "plates" that keep the protection of leather but allow movement without bunching or constricting fit. Made with Pittards Digital Cabretta sheepskin leather.

The Cabretta leather wraps up over the pinky, thumb and index finger for a clean connection on the bat. A stretch gusset over the thumb joint keeps the flexibility.

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EASTBAY.COM/FIELDERS-CHOICE

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Proud Partner of the BATWARS