

# NCAA Takes Measures to Drain Power From Bats

Officials were concerned about the amount of scoring and the potential for injury in college baseball games.

By JOHN ZHU  
Staff Writer

Something about aluminum bats has always irked baseball purists, whether it is the loud ping generated when one of these metallic bastardizations catches hold of a baseball or the bloated scoring that has accompanied the resounding pings.

**Today's Game:**  
Elon at UNC  
3 p.m.  
Boshamer Stadium

The ping will continue to be a thorn in the side of purists at college games this season. But if a new NCAA bat regulation serves its intended purpose, at least the scoreboard won't be as much of an aggravation.

Taking another step to bring offenses under control, the NCAA approved a standard in September to make metal bats perform more like their wood counterparts. Under the new regulation, the exit velocity of a ball hit by non-wood bats cannot exceed 97 mph, the highest average exit speed obtained in tests with Major League Baseball-quality, 34-inch, solid wood bats.

The exit-velocity standard, which went into effect Jan. 1, comes on the heels of regulations implemented in 1999 that reduced the bat diameter and the difference between the bat's weight and length.

"Basically technology has taken over and made making a bat a completely different thing," said Ty Halpin, liaison to the NCAA Baseball Rules Committee.

"It was the feeling of our committee that the game was being changed drastically by how hard you can hit the ball and how fast it gets off the bat. The 1998 World Series championship game was 21-8. That's more a football score than a baseball score. Not that we're trying to take offense out of the game, just curb it."

North Carolina baseball coach Mike Fox applauded the changes. Fox, who played at UNC from 1976-78, noted that today's bats generated much more power than the first aluminum bats, which were introduced while he was in high school.

"I think moving the distance of the mound, or something like that, would probably be a little too radical," Fox said. "I think something had to be done about the bats, and this is the most logical."



DTH/JEFF POULAND

Some of the UNC baseball team's new bats rest against a batting cage during practice at Boshamer Stadium.

The numbers back up the NCAA's concerns about the imbalance in the game. Offensive statistics in Division I have steadily increased since the NCAA switched to aluminum bats in 1974. In 1998, Division-I teams set records in batting average, runs per game and home runs per game. Their collective ERA jumped to a record 6.12 that year, the first time the number had surpassed 6.00.

After teams in the 1998 College World Series hit 62 home runs to shatter the previous record of 42 (set in '96), the NCAA limited bat diameter to 2 5/8 inches and reduced the weight-length ratio from five units to three (meaning a 34-inch bat can't weigh less than 31 ounces).

"Two ounces doesn't sound like much, but day after day it has an impact," Fox said. "I think the weight of the bat probably had more of an impact on the small-

er type of players who had to get the bat through the zone against a lively fastball."

Those changes resulted in a slight decrease in the 1999 offensive output but not enough for the NCAA to stop experimenting with the bats.

Dr. Bryan Smith, a member of the Baseball Research Panel, which recommended the exit-velocity standard, said player safety also was a factor. Smith, who is UNC's head team physician, said balls hit with metal bats before the new regulation often reached 105 mph, creating excessive risk to pitchers and fielders.

"There's a certain degree of risk one

takes when playing baseball," Smith said. "It's now more within that expected risk."

The NCAA has imposed a three-year moratorium on regulations so it can collect data on bat performances. The committee also set up a laboratory at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell to test and certify bats from manufacturers.

As of Jan. 31, 48 bat models had been certified for the 2000 season. Five models used last year were also approved, but they must carry a "BESR (Ball Exit Speed Ratio) Certified" sticker to be legal.

If UNC's performance in the season-opening Disney Baseball Blastoff was any indication, curbing the exit velocity won't necessarily curb the scoring. The Tar Heels tallied 26 runs in three games en route to a 3-0 start, and Fox and his players said they had not noticed any significant difference in their bats.

"The difference isn't that drastic," UNC outfielder Tyrell Godwin said. "If you're a home run hitter, you're going to hit them out with these bats, too."

Of course, the bats aren't solely responsible for the increasing offensive fireworks.

"You've got to realize it doesn't matter if it's wood, aluminum or plutonium. If they can't hit it, it doesn't matter," UNC pitcher Derrick DePriest said. "If you're a good enough pitcher, you can throw it where they can't hit it no matter what they have in their hands."

That has been part of the problem. With many top high school hurlers opting for the Major League draft, there aren't enough pitchers in the college game who can put the ball where the batters can't hit it. That, along with stronger hitters as a result of better conditioning programs, has contributed to fewer pitches landing in the catcher's mitt and more balls touching down beyond the fence.

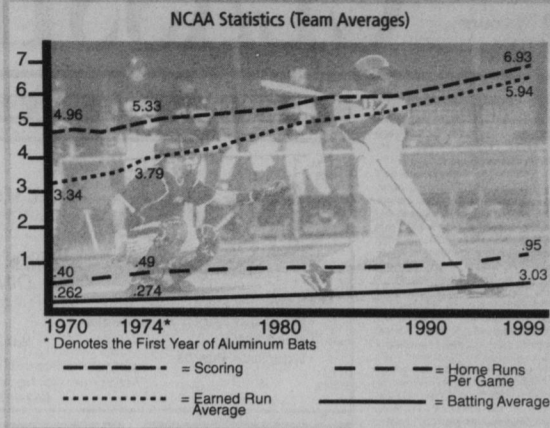
Besides, even with a new exit-velocity standard equaling that of the best Major League bats, players said aluminum still clearly outperformed wood.

"They're toned down a lot, but wood's wood," UNC catcher Dan Moylan said. "To hit with a wood bat, you've got to be strong and compact, and you've got to be mechanically sound. With the metal bat, you can get away with some flaws. That's the difference. They're not even close to wood bats."

Halpin said manufacturers and

## Heavy Metal

The NCAA has enacted new regulations on aluminum bats to try to decrease the velocity of batted balls and slow down the offensive explosion that has occurred in recent years.



SOURCE: NCAA

coaches had been cooperative in meeting the new standards, partly because they had more time to prepare for the change than before the 1999 season.

The Tar Heels, however, did not receive their new bats for this season until last month, although the models they used last year were certified for this season.

"One day they come in and say,

'You're going to use these bats,' and two weeks later there's a vote, and we change over," Godwin said. "It's kind of frustrating because you never know approaching the season what you're going to be using. You want to have everything in order."

The Sports Editor can be reached at sports@unc.edu.

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