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Wellesley Little League returns to metal bats The Boston Globe

Cites study that shows wood may be no safer

By Matt Rocheleau
Globe Correspondent / November 25, 2009

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The Wellesley Little League has decided to abandon wood bats and return to metal bats, eight years after a severe head injury suffered by a Wellesley High pitcher led several leagues in the region to switch because, according to some, balls don't come off wooden bats quite as fast.

Wellesley Little League officials made the move back to the metal bats after learning that some specialists believe neither bat type is safer than the other, said the league's safety commissioner, Patrick Doyle. The league's board voted unanimously in September to allow metal bats for the 2010 season, hoping the players, aged 12 and younger, would have more fun hitting with the new bats.

"The overriding reason was to afford the kids a better Little League experience," said Doyle. "[With wood bats,] if you don't hit the ball on the sweet spot of the bat . . . the bats in many cases break, and the ball doesn't go anywhere. The kids don't have that feeling of achievement like they did anything."

Metal bats are often made of aluminum, and some players like them because they are generally lighter so the player has a faster bat speed. Many Little Leagues use metal bats, but the debate over metal vs. wood has still continued at many levels of baseball, sparked in part by the Wellesley case.

The ban was initiated in 2002 after a line drive off an aluminum bat struck Wellesley High sophomore Bill Hughto in the head during the 2001 season. The impact severed an artery, causing a dangerous blood clot on Hughto's brain. He spent five days in the hospital and recovered, but later stopped playing baseball.

After the accident, Hughto's father and other parents called for a switch to wooden bats. The Wellesley Little League and the Bay State Conference, which includes Wellesley High School and 11 other area schools, banned aluminum bats the following season and have used wood ever since.

The pitcher's father said he is surprised and angered that the town's Little League would reverse its move to wood bats.

"[Aluminum] bats hit the ball harder, so those kids are in greater peril," said Richard Hughto, an environmental consultant from Wellesley. "They're deciding to put some kids in danger so some kids can get more hits . . . [With aluminum bats,] players will hit the ball more often and the good hitters will hit it that much harder" toward the pitcher's mound, which is 46 feet from home plate as opposed to 60.5 feet from home in professional baseball.

Nearby Natick is one of a handful of Little Leagues in Massachusetts that use wood bats.

State Representative David Linsky, a Natick Democrat who spent 10 years coaching a Natick Little League travel team, said the league moved from aluminum to wood nearly two decades ago primarily because of safety

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concerns, but also because “the kids learn to be better hitters.”

“In Natick, we view wooden bats as a safety issue, and we think it makes for a better game,” he said. “It takes more skill to get a hit with a wooden bat than a metal bat.”

In explaining their decision to return to aluminum, the Wellesley Little League subcommittee cited a 2007 report from Little League International that found the speeds at which a ball leaves a wood vs. a metal bat after contact are roughly the same.

“We basically say that for the most part, they are pretty even,” said Steve Barr, spokesman for Pennsylvania-based Little League International.

Also, aluminum advocates point to records that show since the early 1960s, six of the eight fatalities in Little League were from balls struck by wood bats. The two metal bat fatalities occurred in 1971 and 1973, before implementation of modern youth bat standards.

However, injury and fatality rates increase for players after the Little League level because the older players throw faster and hit harder. A Montana family sued Louisville Slugger and won \$850,000 last month, according to the Associated Press, for the 2003 death of their 18-year-old son in an American Legion baseball game after he was hit by a line drive off an aluminum bat.

The league’s officials feel that injuries are a rare, unfortunate reality of any sport, Doyle said, though they try to prevent injuries. He said they are also cautious not to become so safety-conscious that it takes away from the whole reason for playing the sport.

Additionally, the metal bats, which do not break like wood bats, have an average useable lifespan of two to three years, and though they cost more up front, they can be more cost-efficient in the long run.

However, “cost was a very, very minimal concern of ours,” said Doyle. ■

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