

Don't Fear the Wood

by Bob Totterer



In 2011, River Valley Baseball took a major step in its program by launching its first wooden bat league. The results were very encouraging - so much so that we will offer these leagues again in the AA division of 13u and 14u. As in 2011, we will subsidize that program with a number of brand new wooden bats - six for each participating team.

That should help assuage one of the fears that parents and coaches have voiced - i.e., that wooden bats break and greatly increase the expense of such a program. Hopefully, you have read the article, *The Word on Wood*, which may be accessed through the baseball page of this website. In it, I detail some of the many positive aspects of a return to wooden bats. The article also indicates that several wooden bats may be purchased for the price of one high-performance bat, making the point regarding cost rather moot.

After watching several of the wooden bat contests last season, and after consulting with players, coaches, parents and the umpires that worked the games, it became clear that the principal aim of such a league - to better train young baseball hopefuls - was well served. Pitching and defense were elevated in importance, as they should be. One manager remarked that his infielders received more work than ever before and actually turned multiple double plays in several games. That's a good thing. That's a very good thing.

Because of the nature of the instrument, the wooden bat is a bit of an equalizer. Pitchers need not fear a hitter's unnatural power caused by the so-called trampoline effect of high-end metal or composite bats. They likewise need not fear the cheap "handle hit", which is still an issue with BBCOR bats. Therefore, they can better learn to pitch by changing speeds and spotting the ball, rather than trying to throw it past the hitter or rely on breaking pitches, which pose a serious threat to young arms.

The game itself is much more interesting with wooden bats, as offenses must contemplate putting on plays and moving runners, rather than sitting back and waiting for the next bolt of lightning to strike. As I mentioned in *The Word on Wood*, a player's offensive stats in a wooden bat league are much more realistic than those logged in metal bat leagues. An added bonus is the fact that the pace of the games themselves is much quicker. The highest percentage of full, seven-inning games were played in RVB's wooden bat leagues last summer. And, not least in importance, the kids love swinging the same kind of stick their Major League heroes swing. That's a good thing, too. Furthermore, nearly all wooden bats conform to the new BBCOR and BPF standards.

So why do some parents and coaches fear the wooden bat? If they value the instruction and development of their young players, they probably don't. However, it is sad to say that many amateur coaches and parents are more focused on league championships than they are the real task at hand. High school is looming out there, mom and dad, just a few summers away. When your young man gets there, you will wish that he had honed a good swing - something best accomplished with a wooden bat. You will also wish that he had better learned to pitch, play defense and execute offensive plays - three more healthy bi-products of wooden bat leagues.

So don't fear the wood. It is actually your best friend as you groom your young players for the higher levels of the game. Wood leagues are better than a tournament, since players must train with wood all summer, rather than just a week or two. And you know what? The first time your son hits one on the screws with a wooden bat and drives it into the gap, you won't be able to pry it out of his hands.