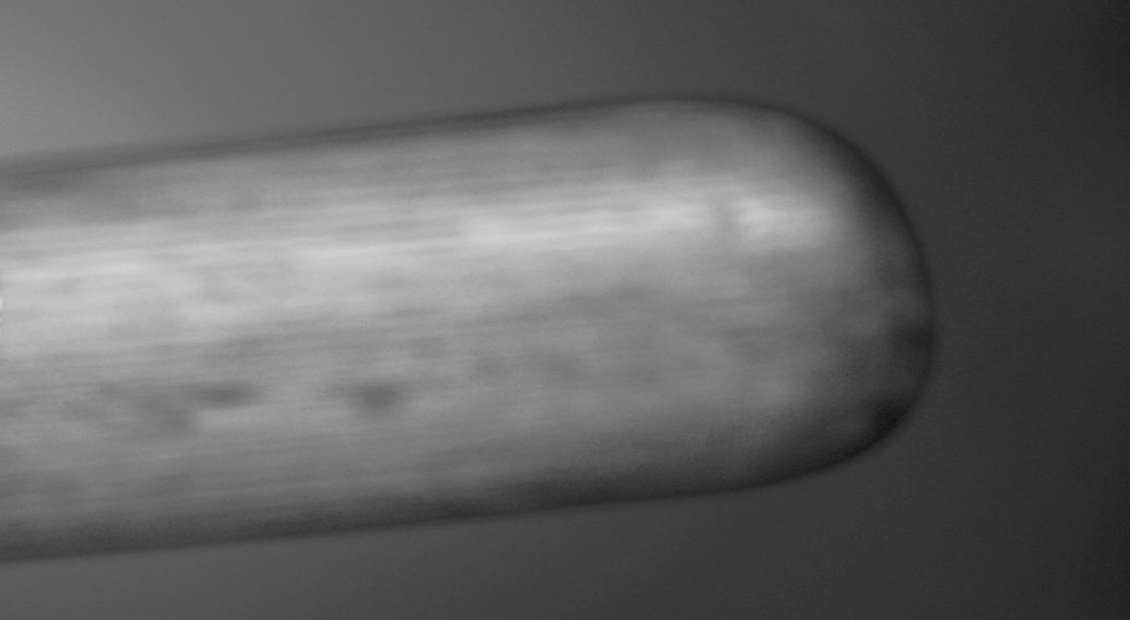


The Crack Of The Bat



Is Back In The SCL

Class B Teams Join Class A In Return To Wood Bat Baseball

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Among the amateur baseball leagues across the state, the South Central League is in a unique position when it comes to the newest change to the sport. That change? All wood bats, all the time.

A decision last November by the South Dakota Amateur Baseball Association (SDABA) means that all 10 teams in the SCL will now use wood bats. Prior to the change, instituted for this summer, Class B teams used aluminum bats — meaning 9 of the 10 South Central teams did so.

The decision could result in significant changes to the high-scoring ways of the SCL, in which 16-15 and 15-14 outcomes were all too common.

"It may level the playing field a little bit, at least in my view," said Larry Anderson, the commissioner of District 6, which encompasses the SCL. "Those teams that had the thumpers, if you play good defense against them now, it might change the outcome of some of those games."

"It might not be as interesting to watch, but I guess we'll have to develop some fans of pitching and defense," he joked.

The vote from the state commissioners was a 3-to-1 margin, Anderson said. In the case of the SCL, the intent was to be uniform; to bring all 10 teams on the same level.

The one team not to use aluminum bats under the old format was the Yankton Tappers, the lone Class A team in the SCL.

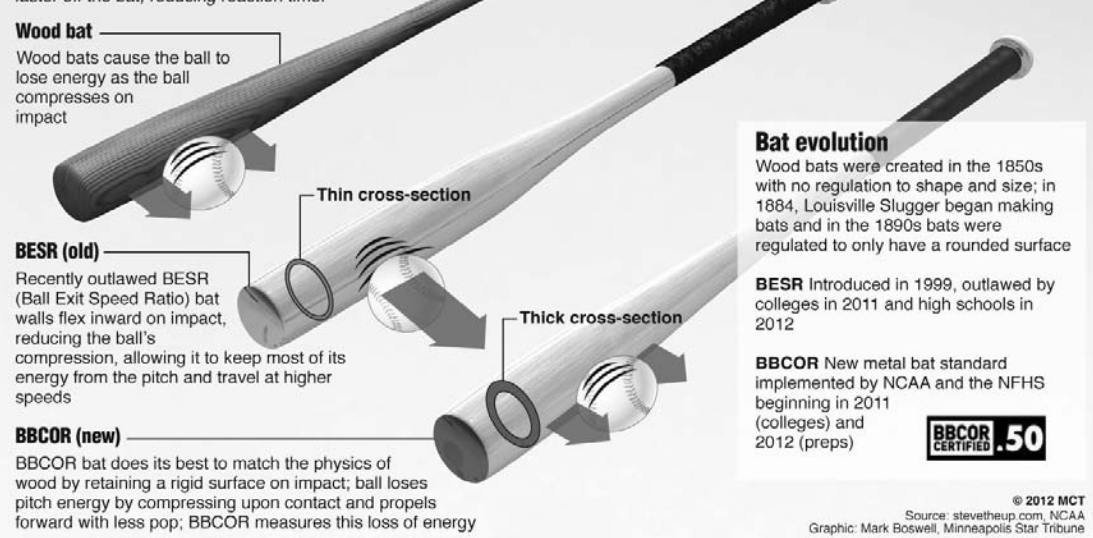
"I really felt bad for our pitchers," co-manager Ross Heine said. "They could be throwing a gem, but give up a couple bloop hits that probably shouldn't have been hits with wood bats, and the game is completely turned around."

That's where things will likely be different in the SCL, starting this season.

Four teams averaged at least 10 runs a game in 2011, led by the Irene Cardinals (12.8). In regular season action, 70 percent of the games last season featured one team scoring at least 10 runs and five games in which the 20-run mark was reached.

New bats simulate the old

After aluminum baseball bats were introduced in the 1970s, injuries and even deaths increased. The high speeds the ball erupts off the hollow-core aluminum or composite bats are due to the "trampoline" effect of the metal as they bounce the ball faster off the bat, reducing reaction time.



A comparison between the older "BESR" aluminum bats, the newer "BBCOR" bats and wood bats. South Dakota Class B amateur baseball teams will switch to using wood bats beginning this season. Class A teams, like Yankton, made the switch several years ago.

Proof that scoring was abundant, 45 percent of the regular season games were decided by 10 or more runs.

In short, wood bats might halt some of those numbers, according to Crofton manager Carl Schieffer.

"You'll see the biggest change in home runs, they won't change the game near as much as they have before," Schieffer said.

"There are some of those powerful teams that basically relied on that to win games."

"That'll hurt them now," he added. "They'll have to change their entire approach."

The term "small ball" figures to become a staple of the amateur baseball lexicon under the new rules, as game action will transition toward pitching and defense.

"I grew up in the wood bat area, and it's a different brand," commissioner Anderson said. "You'll have to learn to play small ball. Balls that usually flew out are going to stay in."

Naturally, that will take some adjustment, Irene manager Kendall Johnke said.

"You have to be more men-

tally sound, you can't just swing at anything and wait for a home run," Johnke said. "It's something that'll be fun to try, I think. It's a better style of the game."

In last year's SCL regular season, there was one game decided by scores of 2-1, 3-1, 4-1, 4-2 — the closest thing to a "pitchers duel" in the league.

Though teams like Yankton and the Scotland Highlanders are filled with younger players, teams such as Irene and the Tabor Bluebirds will once again be led by veterans. That may in fact help those older teams, Tabor manager Gary Kortan said.

"With the veteran hitters we have, I don't think it'll be a huge change for us, the ball just won't go as far," Kortan said. "We understand that you still have to put the good part of the bat on the ball. Some of the younger hitters in the league will probably

struggle a little bit."

Another of the key reasons why the SDABA moved to all wood bats was safety, Anderson said.

He recalled a "scary" situation at last year's state tournament in Mitchell where a pitcher from Sisseton took a line drive to the face and had to leave the game.

"I was talking to the umpire after the game, and he said he was scared to even go out to the mound," Anderson said. "Luckily the guy survived without any major injuries, but it shows that it can happen."

Crofton's Schieffer said he didn't think such occasions have happened as much as others would believe; that line drives are part of the game, no matter the kind of bat.

WOOD BAT | PAGE 11

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