

EXHIBIT 11
DATE 2.17.05
HB 5BB



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2-20-05

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West: Patch's death adds fuel to bat debate

Ed West

Jeff Ballard would love to see the day that American Legion baseball players are using wood bats full-time.

In the wake of the death of Miles City pitcher Brandon Patch, Ballard wonders if the game could be made a little safer. Patch died early Saturday morning in a Great Falls hospital, a few hours after being airlifted from Helena where he was hit in the head by a batted ball in Friday's game between Miles City and Helena.

While Ballard knows that Patch's life might not have been saved even had a wood bat been in use, he still believes the game would be better if wood would make a comeback.

"I've thought that for a long time," said Ballard, who played for the Billings Scarlets, then later at Stanford University and for the Baltimore Orioles and Pittsburgh Pirates in the major leagues.

"I've been hit (on the mound) and it isn't fun," Ballard said. "(Pete) Incaviglia hit me in the neck with a line drive at 110 mph and that was with a wood bat."

Ballard believes that players are so strong today from Legion age on through college that the velocities produced by metal bats put pitchers at a greater risk.

"We're talking about a rare occurrence (death), but it's out there," Ballard said. "I think it needs to be looked at. I've seen pitchers take a line drive off their face and it's scary to see. It's pretty bad for the batter, too, and it isn't his fault."

However, there is no conclusive evidence yet regarding the safety issue.

The Baltimore Sun ran a story earlier this year about the physics of metal and wood bats. A paragraph from that story states, "Although researchers are closer to understanding the physics of hitting, they haven't settled the debate over whether metal is more dangerous than wood."

Money, integrity issues

There are economic issues, of course.

*chain w/ heavy bats
lighter faster, swing*

"Aluminum bats aren't cheap," Ballard said. "They can cost up to \$300. That's a lot of wood bats."

However, metal bats don't break as often and last longer than their wood counterparts.

"My feeling is (wood) would cost a little more," Ballard said.

Carol Halland, a commercial team representative at Universal Athletic Service, said that metal bats generally sell from \$100 to \$300 apiece. Wood bats are about \$50 to \$100 each. Composite bats, which are layered wood with a composite material over them, are generally a bit more expensive than wood, according to Halland, but last longer.

Halland also said that obtaining large quantities of quality wood bats would be questionable.

Another issue is the integrity of the game.

"I think the game would be better," Ballard said. "Initially, the pitchers would dominate while the hitters got used to the wood bats. When you hit with a wood bat, you have to be more efficient with your swing. I think it would make the games quicker."

*quicker games - now they've changed
game's m under 2 hrs.*

Change is unlikely

The NCAA, the American Legion and National High School Federation have adopted regulations in recent years regarding the specifications of non-wood bats.

"They've deadened the bat," said Jim Quinlan, the national director of American Legion baseball. "The sweet spot is a little bit bigger, but the ball isn't coming off any faster (than wood bats)."