

# Road Warrior Sports' own Ryan Lotito speaking about the debate over wood bats vs metal

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3 Yanks stop Jays;  
Mets blanked by Cubs

8 Penguins knot series  
with Devils, 4-1

## Sports

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# Still going *batty*

*While the debate rages over whether aluminum bats are good or bad for the sport, the CSI baseball team has been able to sample the advantages of both this season*

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ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Nobody's enjoying Wagner College's run toward a possible Northeast Conference baseball championship more than Tom Weber, a former player who's in his 14th season as an assistant coach at his alma mater.

Call it a labor of love or loyalty, or both, but the mortgage troker keeps finding his way back to Grymes Hill when it's time to break out the bats and balls every season.

It was a bit surprising, then, that the low-key Weber would approach a reporter this week to sound off on issue that has been gnawing at him for far too long:

The use of high-performance aluminum bats and how it affects baseball, particularly the skyrocketing scores of a typical college game.

"For one thing, we've bred a generation of pitchers who are afraid to throw strikes," said Weber, who a few days earlier had watched Wagner and Quinnipiac combine for 15 home runs in an NEC double-header. "You get kids who throw 75 pitches in four innings and 90 percent of them are breaking

balls off the plate.

"Aluminum bats have altered the game, and not for the better. Games are longer, hits are cheaper, and I really think the use of wood bats would bring back suspense to the game."

Aluminum or wood?

For a generation of young baseball players, there hasn't been any choice. Aluminum long ago replaced wood as the preferred bat, more for economic reasons than anything else. But a recent debate — the NCAA has mandated new standards for aluminum bats because of safety concerns — seems to have everyone talking about reversing field on a practice that began nearly three decades ago.

Ask any pitcher and he'll tell you.

Often, a good inside pitch — one that would jam a batter

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CSI's Ryan Lotito takes a couple of swings with his bat of choice, a wooden model.

ADVANCE PHOTO  
IRVING SILVERSTEIN

## Bats

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using a wood bat — is sent sailing into orbit in the aluminum-bat world. Because the sweet spot on wooden bats is minuscule compared to that of metal bats, batters have to earn everything they get.

"I've seen 5-foot-6 second basemen hit the ball 420 feet," said University of Connecticut sophomore catcher Brian Esposito, a pro prospect out of McKee/S.I. Tech. "You have little guys absolutely crushing the ball. It's really ridiculous.

"The truth is that most players prefer wood bats. You have to rely on strength and bat speed, and it puts more strategy back into the game to score runs.

"We refer to the aluminum bat as a magic wand. You just wave it around and it does magic."

Pro scouts call it something else, and not in pleasant terminology.

"We're all in favor of going back to the wooden bat," says Pleasant Plains resident John Hagemann, a long-time regional director of scouting for the Atlanta Braves. "If a kid hits the ball out of the park at 400 feet with aluminum, it probably would be a 325-foot fly ball with wood. When we're grading a hitter on raw power, it's the marginal player who's going to be hurt by using aluminum.

"We can't depend on aluminum bats. Have you ever picked one up? It's so light to handle that it almost feels like a weapon. You can understand why the little guy can pop the ball out of the park."

Then there's the matter of the quality of the game.

Last spring's championship game at the College World Series produced a 21-14 score, a nationally televised contest that brought the aluminum vs. wood debate alive again.

"If you like pitching, you can forget about it," said College of Staten Island coach Bill Cali, whose club has been required to use wooden bats while playing a handful of New Jersey Athletic Conference (NJAC) teams this season. "The aluminum makes hitting the ball too easy and the games drag on. Just look at the earned run averages."

The first time Cali took his Dolphin club into the cage for batting practice with wooden bats, it dawned on him that many of his players had never used anything but aluminum.

"We had to get everybody together and explain about the (bat) labels and grain and all the things we took for granted as kids. Hey, even a lot of today's coaches are young enough never to have used wood."

Hagemann said he remembers watching a spring game between



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CSI player Ryan Lotito holds an aluminum bat, left, and a wooden one.

Columbia and Ohio Wesleyan where they used wooden bats. The 5-4 game took only 1 hour, 45 minutes to complete.

"It was nicely played at a crisp pace," he said. "There were maybe a couple of broken bats, but the point is it was a pleasure to watch that baseball game."

The NJAC took the bold stance last fall of becoming the first conference in the country to require that all opponents use wood or more durable wood-composite bats. Other NCAA Division III conferences are using wood in league play and switching to aluminum for non-conference games against schools who wouldn't switch.

The NJAC's decision was the product of an NCAA advisory board's recommendation last summer that the current lightweight aluminum alloy bats could be considered dangerous. Especially, for pitchers who must react quickly to balls hit hard back to the mound, a task made more difficult by the speed of a ball coming off an aluminum bat.

"There's a pitcher at St. John's, Pat Collins, whom I drafted out of high school and is draft-eligible again this year," said Hagemann. "He took a line drive off his leg and was out about a week."

"When we talk about this issue, we have to consider the injury factor to the pitcher."

Complicating matters is both the cost and availability of wooden bats. An aluminum bat that can last two seasons costs around \$160, while wooden bats, while not nearly as costly, break easily and need to be replaced more frequently.

"There's just not enough bats to go around," said Esposito, who used wooden bats in a summer league last year and is signed to play this summer with a team in

the elite Cape Cod Baseball League, which went to wood in 1985. "The pros get the good wood, and the quality for the rest isn't the same. There's a very small supply of good wood around."

There are legal issues, too. Easton Sports, one of the major manufacturers of aluminum bats, filed a \$267 million lawsuit against the NCAA, charging restraint of trade over the new standards which are due to take effect in August.

And, according to a Los Angeles Times report, there are about 150 Division I coaches under contract to bat companies, who pay them up to \$80,000 and provide free bats to their teams.

All of which carries no significance to a player like CSI senior outfielder Ryan Lotito, who's hoping for a shot at a professional career. He's a fleet-footed baserunner with a strong arm and keen awareness of the impact of aluminum bats.

"I prefer wood because if you have ambitions to move on to the next level, you have to show your skills with wood," said Lotito. "I use wood in batting practice and in the summer (with a team in the Atlantic Collegiate Baseball League, sponsored by Major League Baseball).

"Aluminum takes away a lot of the game; things like bunting and stealing, things that might be to my advantage. You see coaches just sitting back and letting guys go up there and swing away, looking for the long ball."

"It's a truer game when you're using the wood."

It's that truer game that Weber misses, even while celebrating Wagner College's success this spring season.

"If it cheapens the game," the coach said, "then I don't care for it."

**"It's a truer game when you're using the wood."  
-Ryan Lotito**

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