

Colleges

CWS 'good baseball' replaces 'gorilla ball'

Teams give up power for all-around game

By Andy Gardiner
USA TODAY

A decade of unchecked offense that threatened to make a mockery of college baseball reached its zenith June 6, 1998, when Southern California defeated Arizona State 21-14 in the championship game of the College World Series.

The teams set a record for runs while combining for nine home runs. LSU hit eight in one game during the swatfest in Omaha that produced a record 62 blasts over the walls of Rosenblatt Stadium and set CWS benchmarks for batting average, runs and hits.

When the 2005 CWS begins Friday, it is unlikely the eight schools battling for this year's crown will come within 40 homers of that mark.

Since 1998, restrictions on the dimensions of the aluminum bat, a shift away from the long-ball philosophy of the 1990s and a more sophisticated approach to building a pitching staff have joined to reduce home runs in the regular season and especially at the CWS.

While baseball's best teams rely less on the home run, the most recent winners have dismissed them almost entirely from their championship arsenal. USC slammed 17 homers in its six-game run to the 1998 title, but Cal State Fullerton won last year's tournament hitting one in the same span. Rice hit two in six games while taking the 2003 title, and Texas had five in four games in 2002.

"Our game has shifted to where you're seeing less of those pure power hitters at our level. Top teams are winning with pitching, defense and manufacturing runs," Georgia Tech coach Danny Hall says. "In my mind, this direction is going to continue, and that's good baseball."

Gorilla ball

What the college game offered in 1998 was decidedly *not* good baseball. Aluminum bats, which had replaced wood in the college game in 1974, were so potent they made Babe Ruths out of banjo hitters.

Division I regular-season records were set for batting average (.306), runs a game (14.2) and homers a game (2.1). Pitchers were touched for the highest earned-run average in NCAA history (6.12).

"The bats were performing at a level that was changing the game, and there was real concern for its integrity," NCAA director of championships Dennis Poppe says. "Home runs had really jumped since the early 1990s, and 'gorilla ball' became a trend."

The No. 1 disciple of this approach was LSU under coach Skip Bertman, now the school's athletics director. He led the Tigers to five titles from 1991-2000 with lineups jammed with home run threats.

"It's very much like football; if you have a quarterback who can drop back and throw, that's what you do, and if you have a running guy, you do that," Bertman says. "In baseball, if you have hitters who

Power differential

College World Series champions from 1998-2004 and the number of home runs they hit en route to the title, with number of games they played:

Southern California (in 6 games)	1998	17
Miami, Fla. (in 4 games)	1999	4
LSU (in 4 games)	2000	9
Miami, Fla. (in 4 games)	2001	9
Texas (in 4 games)	2002	5
Rice (in 6 games)	2003	2
Cal State Fullerton (in 6 games)	2004	1

Source: USA TODAY research
By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY

Bye-bye long ball

Scoring and home run trends at the College World Series:

Year	Gms.	Runs	HRs/gm.
1998*	14	225	16.1
1999	14	164	11.7
2000	13	161	12.4
2001	13	200	15.4
2002	14	178	12.7
2003	16	185	11.6
2004	15	165	11.0

* CWS records for runs and home runs

Opening matchups

The College World Series opens double-elimination play Friday in Omaha and runs through June 26 or 27 (times p.m. ET):

- Friday's games**
No. 7 Florida vs. Tennessee, 2, ESPN2
No. 3 Nebraska vs. Arizona State, 7, ESPN2
- Saturday's games**
No. 1 Tulane vs. No. 8 Oregon State, 2, ESPN
No. 4 Baylor vs. Texas, 7, ESPN

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can go long, you go long. But I don't think it was a philosophy of gorilla ball. The bats were too high tech."

In response to the 1998 season and CWS, the NCAA worked with leading manufacturers to restrict the bats. A bonus to reducing homers was slowing the speed of the ball off the bat, which was a safety issue for pitchers and infielders.

The barrel was reduced by 3/8 of an inch and the "three-and-three" rule was instituted where the difference between the length and weight of a bat could not exceed three. (For example, a 34-inch bat had to weigh at least 31 ounces.)

"The bottom line was to get the aluminum to perform more like wood," Poppe says.

Home runs a game inched down in 1999 and fell almost in half at the

Series. The numbers in Omaha rose slightly in 2000 and 2001 but have dropped every year since. The 17 homers in 15 games last year were the fewest since 1982.

"It's been a lot healthier since the bat has been reined in," says Texas' Augie Garrido, who has a total of four CWS titles at Cal State Fullerton and Texas. "In hindsight I can say it's a much better game now."

Pitching and creative offense

Texas' title in 2002 was keyed by Huston Street, who saved all four victories. Rice reliever David Aardsma had two wins and a save for the 2003 champion Owls. Fullerton closer Chad Cordero allowed only three hits in six-plus innings for the fourth-place Titans the same year.

That all three have reached the majors has not been lost on high school prospects.

"Coaches are managing staffs more like major leaguers now, training guys in setup and closer roles," Garrido says. "When kids see Huston Street and Chad Cordero go to the majors so quickly, the players you're trying to put in those roles accept it more willingly."

Fullerton coach George Horton won last year without Cordero but believes in a perfect world every coach would groom a closer.

"Our first choice, and I think many coaches feel the same way, is to have one of your three top pitchers to hand the ball to at the end of the game," he says.

Regular-season batting averages have dropped to .291 since 1998, runs are down to 12.2 a game and homers to 1.5. While the national regular-season ERA has remained stable at around 5.40 since 2001, the more structured staffs of teams advancing to the CWS have sliced that number each season, from 7.14 to 4.52.

"Pitching has become so good in college baseball that the guys who hit home runs can't hit them against the best pitching," Rice coach Wayne Graham says.

Horton says the pendulum has swung away from gorilla ball so completely that his staff lobbies against the home run.

"We sometimes coach the slugger out of our guys to make them more complete hitters," he says. "Our point is to cut down on strikeouts and poor at-bats."

Even the best college programs lose the five-tool star out of high school to the pros. The tool they are most willing to sacrifice is power.

"It used to be you could just recruit a slugger, but now I won't recruit a guy purely for power," Graham says. "If he can't hit for average and have some athleticism, I won't look at him."

The only players in this year's CWS in the top 20 in home runs a game are Florida's Matt Laporta (sixth at 0.39) and Arizona State's Jeff Larish (17th at 0.32). Tulane (12th at 1.26) and the Gators (17th at 1.20) are the lone top 20 teams.

The prototypical offensive college player in this year's field is Nebraska third baseman Alex Gordon, the No. 2 overall pick in this year's

Major leagues continue to go with the grain

If you're watching the College World Series, you'll probably notice a bit of baseball not seen in the majors: the use of aluminum bats. Though Major League Baseball prohibits the use of aluminum bats, they are used by colleges. Many experts say metal is why college players hit better than they could in professional baseball. A baseball hit off an aluminum bat can reach about 100 mph as it passes the pitching mound, about 60 feet from the batter. That is about 10 mph faster than off a wooden bat. How the different materials match up:

Aluminum 446 feet vs **Wooden 378 feet**
Aluminum 98 mph vs **Wooden 88.5 mph**
0.4 seconds vs **0.444 seconds**
 (The risk of serious injury is greater if the pitcher can't react fast enough.)
 The ball was thrown at about 66 mph during controlled experiments; pitch speeds typically reach 90 mph.

The "bounce" of aluminum bats
 The aluminum shell compresses and springs back, like a trampoline. Less energy is lost, so the ball goes farther.

No "give" in wooden bats
 The ball compresses against the solid bat. Energy is lost when the ball expands.

Aluminum shell
 Gives bat a lower "swing weight" for faster response and speed.

Sweet spot

Aluminum 107 mph

Wood 97 mph

Solid wood
 Gives bat a greater "swing weight" for slower response and speed.

Metal and wood equally sweet
 The sweet spot is the area about 4 to 7 inches from the end of the bat. Hits in this area generate the fastest balls and minimize vibrations transferred to the batter's hands.

A "crack" is better than a "ping"
 While an aluminum bat makes a distinctive "pinging" noise, a wooden bat "cracks." Although the sound of a wooden bat makes no audible danger, the "ping" of metal can reach a dangerously high decibel level. The sound of aluminum:

Location	Sound Level (decibels)
2 feet from bat	100 decibels; hearing damage begins at 90 decibels
Pitcher's mound	75 decibels, sound of a coffee grinder
Center field	60 decibels, sound of a normal conversation
400 feet away	57 decibels, sound of a dishwasher

Sources: Dan Russell, associate professor of applied physics, Kettering University; Tom Irvine, vibrationdata.com; Joseph "Trey" Crisco, adjunct associate professor, Division of Engineering, Brown University; Louisville Slugger
 Reporting by April Ummering; graphic by Karl Gelles, USA TODAY

Lewallen, Buttry named Honda winners

From staff and wire reports

Softball pitcher Krystal Lewallen of NCAA Division II Northern Kentucky and track standout Missy Buttry of Division III Wartburg (Iowa) were announced Wednesday as winners of the Honda Award, signifying the nation's best college female athletes in their divisions.

The honor is based on the results of balloting among 1,000 NCAA member schools.

Lewallen, a junior, was 32-1 in leading the Norse to the Division II World Series. Along the way, the team set an all-division record with 55 consecutive victories.

Buttry, a senior, finished her career last month with national titles in the 1,500 and 5,000 meters that paced the first women's team sport title in school history.

No word from FSU: Florida State released no new information Wednesday concerning troubled quarterback Wyatt Sexton. Assistant athletics director Rob Wilson said he couldn't even disclose whether Sexton is still hospitalized.

The favorite to start for the Seminoles next season, Sexton was taken to the hospital by Tallahassee police Monday after he was found acting strangely in the middle of a residential neighborhood street and telling officers he was "God."

Head coach Bobby Bowden is on vacation, Wilson said, and not expected back in the office for about three weeks. Sexton is the son of FSU assistant Billy Sexton. Wilson has said the senior Sexton will have no comment.

Briefly: North Carolina tailback Ronnie McGill will have surgery Fri-

day after tearing a chest muscle while lifting weights. The junior-to-be is expected to need 4-5 months to recover, according to a statement from the school. He began last season as the starter but was slowed by an ankle injury and finished third on the team in rushing. ...

Tommie Frazier, who quarterbacked Nebraska to national titles in 1994 and '95, was hired Tuesday as coach at Doane, his first head coaching job in college football. Doane is an NAIA school in Crete, Neb., with an enrollment of a little more than 1,000.

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