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The mettle to make wooden bats

Tom Ventura's idea turned into a hobby, which turned into a business that caught on with baseball players.

By MIKE LOWE, Staff Writer

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John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Tom Ventura was making toys and doo-dads, saw a piece of wood ... and born was the idea of wooden bats that's become what he calls "a fun little business."

BIDDEFORD — A couple of years back, Tom Ventura was working at his father's wood-turning shop in the Lincoln Mill Park when an idea struck him.

"I was making little toys for kids and some doo-dads for my house," he said. "And I saw this piece of wood and thought, 'Maybe I can make a baseball bat out of that.'"

"So I made a little bat for Dave Sharland — he had been my friend for a long time — as a gift."

Well, Sharland, an assistant baseball coach at Thornton Academy in Saco, liked his gift so much, he showed it off to the rest of the staff at the high school.

"We're always looking for ideas to make our kids better hitters," he said. "So we asked Tommy to make some more for us."

These days, about a dozen wooden bats hang in the equipment shed attached to the home dugout at Thornton's baseball field. The Trojans use them for batting practice.

"There are smaller sweet spots on a wooden bat than a metal bat," said Trojans Coach Greg Paradis. "You're not going to get away with mistakes. You really have to focus on your swing."

And Ventura's little hobby has become an integral part of his family's business. Over the last two years he's made and sold about 200 wooden baseball bats. He has made bats for players in the Twilight League, the Bay League out of Bangor, the Southern Maine Men's Baseball League, youth leagues, high schools and college teams.

Some of his customers play in men's leagues in Boston.

"You know, I was just messing around and decided to give a bat to a friend," said Ventura. "Some people got wind of it, we've got displays in a couple of stores, and it's become a fun little business."

His bats are made of ash (\$60) or maple (\$75), with maple the most popular. "I prefer ash," said Ventura, "but a lot of people turned on to maple bats because of Barry Bonds. That's what he used to hit all those home runs."

Ventura, 28, used metal bats when he played baseball at Thornton and later at the University of Maine at Farmington, along with Sharland. When he got out of college, he taught history for a year at Thornton, coaching at Saco Middle School as well. Then his father, Mike, who began Ventura and Son Woodturning 25 years ago, asked him to come work for him full time.

The company specializes in staircases and hand rails, as well as historical replications. It's working on a project for the John Quincy Adams historical park in Quincy, Mass.

Tom Ventura, meanwhile, is working on an order of 10 youth bats for a local man who wants to give them as gifts. He's also got an order from a local barber, who wants the bat dyed with the red-and-white barber pole stripes.

That one will be hung on the wall as a decoration. Most of his bats are used, at least in batting practice. In addition to Thornton, he's sold bats to the coaches at Bonny Eagle (his wife, Hilary, teaches at Bonny Eagle Middle School and sold some of his bats at a school auction) and



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

Tom Ventura starts the process with a lathe that in about an hour's time will produce a wooden bat. Ventura makes the bats as part of the family business, Ventura and Son Woodturning, at the Lincoln Mill in Biddeford.



John Ewing/Staff Photographer

The process nears an end with the sanding down of the bat as it turns on the lathe. Ash bats are sold for \$60 and maple bats for \$75.



John Ewing/Staff Photographer
With chips flying, the wooden bat starts to take shape. The bats can be custom-made and painted with a team's colors.

Biddeford. He made bats for Colby College last year.

Brian Morrison, a Thornton graduate who will be a senior at UMaine-Farmington this year, has bought several bats from Ventura. He uses them in the Bay League and in batting practice. He also uses them during the fall season, slowly switching over to metal.

During the spring, Morrison will use metal bats because, he said, "the sweet spot on a metal bat is a lot bigger, the metal bat is usually lighter and you can hit the ball farther most of the time. With a wooden bat, you hit the ball off the handle and there's no way you get a hit. With a metal bat, there's still a chance you'll get a hit."

But Morrison likes to use the wooden bat in the fall because it prepares him better. "You really have to focus more on your hitting," he said.

Nate Laliberte went to school with Ventura and played college baseball at Babson. He now plays in Boston in the Yawkey League and the Boston Amateur Baseball League. He uses only Ventura bats and has acted as a salesman of sorts for his friend. He has convinced several teammates to buy Ventura bats.

"Tommy makes me maple bats, good hard wood," said Laliberte. "A lot of times the biggest issue when you buy bats is that you don't want to get bad wood. We're just men's league players and the last thing we want to do is spend money on a bat and have it break right away. We're not great hitters and we're more than likely to hit the ball on a bad spot.

"Tommy gets quality wood, good hard stock."

Ventura hand-picks all his wood. He spent much time researching the best wood and the best grains for bats. As he recently explained how he would cut into a maple plank, he pointed out the different grains. On one edge the grain was wavy with a knot in the wood.

"That wouldn't make a good bat," Ventura said.

On the other side, "The grain is straight, so that will work pretty good," he said.

The best bats are made from the edge of the plank because, Ventura said, that's where the grain is the tightest. Bats that will just be used for display, or for youth players, are mostly made from the middle part of the plank.

Ventura will cut his plank into several pieces, then cut each piece into an octagon.

He'll place that on his lathe and hand-turn it into a bat. When he has big orders, he has several templates to make sure each bat is cut properly.

Overall, he said, each bat takes about an hour to make.

He also dyes each one, depending on the school. Bats for Thornton are dyed maroon and gold; for Biddeford, orange and black; for Bonny Eagle, green and white; Colby College, blue and white.

"Whatever color you want, we can dye it," he said.

His mother, Jean Ventura, will write a player's name (or anything else) on the bat, if requested.

While he has four distinct models (including a fungo bat for coaches and a youth bat that costs \$35), Ventura will also custom-make a bat. Some players like a thinner barrel, others like a thinner handle.

Travis Adams, who will be a senior at St. Joseph's College in the fall, has used Ventura bats in the Twilight League and in batting practice in college. "I've swung a lot of different wooden bats," said Adams, "and I really like these. The ball just jumps off the bat."

In fact, said Adams, "It almost feels like I'm swinging a metal bat."

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