A High Price To Pay

Composite Sticks Generate Costs, Controversy

by **Dave Starman**/National Columnist

Rules enforcement has eliminated some of the hacking and whacking in college hockey, but trying to legislate all stickwork out of hockey is probably like hoping soft-money contributions to political campaigns go away.

However, a new issue has arisen regarding slashing and the time-honored tradition of the hack and whack. It is not injury, it is not penalties. It is breaking your one-piece composite stick in the process.

These sticks are the subject of an NCAA inquiry regarding whether to eliminate them from NCAA play. According to the 2006-2008 Ice Hockey rule book, the Rules Committee would "like to explore the elimination of one-piece composite sticks. Rationale: These type of sticks break frequently and the committee is concerned that this creates potentially dangerous situations on ice."

Traveling through the conferences for CSTV, this topic has generated strong opinions from college coaches. There is ongoing debate on the value of composite sticks.

As one equipment manager joked recently, "They last twice as long, but cost four times as much." Some would argue that their durability does not outlast that of wood sticks or the two-piece shaft/blade combo, and that is part of the argument to steer players away from them.

The other is financial.

"Our stick budget is obviously the biggest single component of our overall equipment budget," said Colgate head coach Don Vaughan. "Initially we thought that the composites would be at least comparable to the wooden stick, the message being that they would last a little longer. We are finding out that is clearly not the case."

Princeton coach Guy Gadowsky, who had the privilege of having former Flyers coach Ken Hitchcock as a volunteer assistant during the NHL lockout two seasons ago, learned more than just X's and O's from the former Stanley Cup winner.

"There are some NHL teams that will not allow their players to use a composite stick when they are killing a penalty because they break at the most inopportune times," said Gadowsky. "We have seen some huge goals scored in the NHL and NCAA where the sticks of defensemen have given way in front of the net."

There is a prevailing thought that going back to wood, or going to shafts and blades, would not only save money, but also cure that dreaded breakage problem. Even if it could be scientifically proven that one type of stick outlasts the other, the fact remains that if you break 18 composites a season or 24 woods a season, it's cheaper to break more woods.

Could an extra $50,000, a number tossed out by many coaches spoken to for this piece, not be put to use somewhere else?

Recruiting would be the place that it would be best served. One of the things coaches say is that they only recruit in certain areas because it is not a financial reality to hit others. There are great players in those areas, but financially it doesn't work.

Two CHA programs, which will remain nameless, would love to better recruit the Northeast and its rich talent pool, but they just can't afford to do it. Would it help smaller schools in the ECACHL or Hockey East spend more time in the USHL or Western Canada?

"The big issue is budget," said Miami's Enrico Blasi, who just came off four years on the rules committee. "I know the manufacturers are not happy about looking at this or seeing this type of debate. It is an area where everyone needs to take responsibility. We can't grow the game when everyone can't afford to play and that is where we are getting to."

On that note, Dartmouth coach Bob Gaudet likened some of the decisions the coaches have to make regarding equipment to that of a CFO overseeing the budget of a Fortune 500 company.

"I think if we went back to wood it would take some burden off schools financially," said Gaudet. "We went to one particular stick company this season for financial reasons. Dartmouth men's hockey is my business, and I have to run it that way. When you add up the costs of composite sticks for the season for 25, 26, 27 players, that really adds up because the budget wasn't built for that."

Gaudet is not alone in that area. It was only a few years ago that the stick budget was based on less expensive equipment, like shafts and blades or one-piece wood. The stick budgets were a fraction of what they are now.

Thinking back to my three years in the Central Hockey League with Macon as an Associate Head Coach, where the equipment budget was part of my job, the thought of buying 144 dozen composites (we bought that many woods in 1997-1998) would have put us out of business.

Where coaches have noticed the biggest difference in the stick debate is in skill development. Wooden sticks have a dulling quality about them, a little give on the blade that makes pass reception a lot easier. The composites are lively, and coaches have seen a major change in players' ability to handle passes.

Also, shooting is an issue. While players can now shoot harder and get the puck off quicker because the sticks are lighter, accuracy is now a bigger issue than ever. Unlike the Europeans, where hand skills are ingrained at an early age, North American kids still seem to be enamored with the sounds of pucks rocketed off sticks that hit the glass. Hitting the net has never been more of a challenge.

The elite player has mastered this issue. As Gadowsky pointed out, "Steve Yzerman didn't seem to have a problem puckhandling and shooting with a composite." However, even an elite-level kid like Michigan's Jack Johnson has his accuracy issues.

In a two-game series against Miami at Yost Arena earlier this season, Johnson fired five shots wide from the tops of the circles. Giving "the manchild" the benefit of the doubt that he might have been shooting once or twice to avoid hitting a defender's shin guards, that is still too many shots off target for someone who can contribute goals or shots that produce goals.

Take this another step further. If the sticks allowed players to get shots off quicker, and they lasted longer, then why are so many point shots still getting blocked? Why are perimeter shots getting blocked? The one-timer is the hardest shot to have blocked because the puck is gone as soon as it gets to the shooter. How many college kids, especially incoming freshmen, have a good one-timer?

You don't see many collegians with that one-time ability. With the exception of Minnesota's power play last season — Phil Kessel, Ryan Potulny, Danny Irmen, Alex Goligoski, Chris Harrington — all of whom could one-time it, it's rare that you see many power plays display that shot as a tactical weapon among the five players on the ice.

Minnesota Golden Gophers TV analyst and former coach Doug Woog said to me that "so many kids these days don't develop the one-timer until they get to the NCAA because they break so many sticks practicing them, and that costs money." That's very true in leagues outside Tier I and Tier II Junior A, where players are still buying their own sticks in the U.S.

One father at a recent junior practice mentioned to me that he makes his kid take wood sticks to practice for shooting drills. His son, a defenseman, probably shoots between 100-200 pucks a practice and he told me he simply could not afford to have his son break a $190 stick each week in practice, let alone one a game due to the slashing and other aspects of a junior game.

OK, revisit the durability issue. If the composites were more durable, this argument would be voided somewhat. But when taking a one-timer, the amount of force coming down on the middle of the stick — its weakest point because it's hollow and there is no support to that area — is often too much for the stick to hold up. That breaking point weakens quickly, and there goes your $190 stick.

For the chance to develop one of the best weapons in hockey, it would seem to make sense to use a cheaper wooden stick, because the return on your investment is actually greater. Break four woods and you are still in better financial shape than breaking one composite, and have probably use them way longer.

"Remember," said Harvard head coach Ted Donato, a longtime NHL player, "those woods are almost like fiberglass composites themselves. That's not your grandfather's wood stick anymore. Wood sticks are lighter than they used to be."

Speaking of "your grandfather's wood," or in this case their dad's wood sticks, two of the NCAA's elite players last season used wood, just like their Hall of Fame fathers. Denver's Paul Stastny and Patrick Mullen have used woods since they were kids. Stastny is in the NHL now with the Avalanche and is still scoring.

Some of college hockey's coaches have recently spent time at the NHL level where the skill level is the highest in the world. Walt Kyle, now at Northern Michigan after spending the past few seasons as an assistant with the New York Rangers, remembers a time in practice where the composite stick made a big impact on a little guy.

It is the first day these composite sticks came out and Theo Fleury got on the ice. He skated a bit, got warmed up, and started shooting pucks. He comes back over to Kyle and said "Walt, someone is going to kill someone with this thing one of these days."

"It changed the philosophy of a shot because these guys knew they could rip the puck harder than ever," said Kyle.

"I was winding up my career just before the composites came out. I was using a shaft and a wood blade and I thought there was a lot of upside to that. You could feel the puck better," said Vaughan. "With the composites, the guys feel like they can shoot the puck harder. To me, it's about control and being able to handle the hard pass. You see a lot of pucks bouncing off sticks."

Boston University head coach Jack Parker, he of the 700-plus wins and 30-plus years of experience feels that the NCAA rules committee must be cognizant of the next level in

making this type of decision. While the NCAA game is still different than the NHL game, it is closer in design than it has ever been. That has to be factored in to any decisions.

"I wouldn't want to do anything the NHL doesn't do," said Parker, who has twice been offered the position of head coach of the big-league Bruins in Boston. "However, these sticks are breaking at inopportune times. With a wood stick, you know it's about to break. You can tap it on the ice and hear it; it sounds different. A baseball bat is similar."

Parker also sees it from the perspective of the stick companies.

"The quality of what we get from our stick company is fabulous, our guys love it," said Parker. "I'm not trying to put the composite companies out of business when I say this, but I think it makes a lot of sense to go back to a wooden stick, to me."

As a coach, you challenge yourself to make every player better. Your elite players have different challenges than your foot soldiers or grinders. Look at a player like former Maine Black Bear Jon Jankus. Jankus usually played a third-line role but improved every year, especially his hand skills. He was a guy who probably improved his goal totals because he knew where to be, had a quick release, and was well-coached.

That third- or fourth-liner who wants more ice time needs to do things to earn that time, and scoring would help. To score you have to be able to take a pass under pressure, corral it, and fire a shot.

"There are many third-line guys or fourth-line guys who would sit with you and tell you that they can score more goals because of the composites because they can shoot the puck harder," said Rand Pecknold, head coach at Quinnipiac. "What happens is that they don't handle the puck well enough in front of the net or they get a good hard pass and it bounces off their sticks. From a coaching perspective I really think it hurts some players."

The challenge to coaches when it comes to their seventh through 12th forwards is to get a 12-goal guy to score 20, a five-goal guy to get 10, and so on. The stick usually has very little to do with it, with the exception of where the player decides to shoot. Watch some of the great goal-scorers and where they score from. The key to scoring is finding open space, and the faceoff dots in the offensive zone are usually a place where good goal-scorers go to get passes because they always seem to be open.

Watch a puck battle in the corner, and watch the dots. Open space! However, if you're there and you can't control the pass or hit the net, it doesn't matter how open you are.

That is the message coaches are telling their players, some of whom do not seem to listen.

Michigan State's Rick Comley added to that sentiment.

"I don't think there is any reason to have it. It breaks too much, and it's difficult to receive passes. Certainly it helps your shot. Anyone who picks it up will shoot better, but you have to be able to receive a pass to shoot the puck."

Quinnipiac's attempt to steer players away from the composites has nothing to do with money. Pecknold says the program is well-funded, and that players are free to use what they want.

"We had a kid who scored 18 with a shaft/wood blade combo. The next year he went to the composite and scored 10 or 11. He didn't have as many shots on goal either. I saw that he was struggling to handle the puck in tight spots. I tried to talk him out of using the composite, but he didn't listen and his production dropped."

Image is everything, as displayed by the many me-first, chest-pumping, end-zone dancing or slam-dunk gyrations shown by athletes at all levels now. Hockey is no different, and the use of composites, like the use of the blue tukks used by Wayne Gretzky in his Oilers' days, is done because that's what the kids see at the level ahead of them.

"In the NHL, the best league in the world, not everyone uses a composite," said Comely. "That stick isn't the answer to everything. In college hockey, it's a buzz thing. Kids see it in the NHL and want to use it here."

Break it down further. In lacrosse, different positions use different length sticks. In hockey, would it make sense to choose a stick by position?

"I think a lot of our players don't need to use the composite stick," said Michigan's Red Berenson. "Particularly our defensemen or players that just think it will improve their shot. But they don't score anyway. I'm old-school but I'm also receptive to new ideas and for things that are going to be for the good of the game. The question is, are these sticks good for the game?"

Whether the stick is good for the game, or the players who play with it, is still open to debate, but what isn't is that that stick guarantees you success. There are those with the shaft/wood blade that do well, and there who use the composite who are also successful.

However, it seems in talking to 20 or so coaches at the NCAA level, the consensus is that outside of the high-end players, like North Dakota's T.J. Oshie, Michigan's T.J. Hensick, Boston University's Peter MacArthur or Harvard's Jon Pelle, the two-piece is a better option.

"We have a picture in our dressing room of Joe Thornton from last season," said Ohio State coach John Markell, an extremely skilled forward during his NCAA and professional career. "He led the NHL in scoring, and he uses a shaft and wood blade. Ryan Smith of Edmonton, another great player, also uses the two-piece stick. I'd rather have something that allows me to handle the puck better than get off the big bomb. I mean really, how many chances to you get to get that big shot off anyway?"

As Boston College coach Jerry York pointed out, schools started using aluminum bats to replace wood because it was cheaper and lasted much longer. However, we now see a debate on those bats, as kids are getting hurt due to the velocity of the ball coming off the bat — especially the pitchers, who are essentially defenseless.

It is the hottest topic in amateur baseball: whether to ban aluminum bats.

How this shakes out, and the financial ramifications that go with it, will play out in the next two seasons. However, should the composite be banned, it might not change the financial landscape.

As Kyle said, tongue in cheek; "If they ban the composites from NCAA play, the wood stick companies will just raise prices and it won't make any difference."