



Selecting a hockey stick

Advising your customer when selecting a field hockey stick that is well balanced, comfortable, the right size and complements his or her position, style of play and role in the team, is critical for the enjoyment of the game. Or it could turn into an extended nightmare if the customer ignores the advice of the hockey experts and makes the wrong choice.

The most important factors when selecting a stick are balance and weight, the length of the stick, flexibility and stiffness, shape of the stick, toe design, durability, and the type of player they are (beginner, intermediate, advanced or professional).

Balance and weight

Let your customer get a *feel* for the stick. It should be well balanced and feel comfortable in the hands. Depending on preference, the weight may be evenly distributed throughout the length of the stick, or concentrated in the stick's toe or head. The weight in the toe should not be so much that it limits the stick speed when playing the ball.

A basic test, to test the weight of the stick, is to ask the customer to hold it in the left hand, level with the shoulder for 30 seconds. If the player can do this with relative ease, the stick should be the right weight.

As a general rule, forwards prefer a lighter stick for better control and movement, while defenders seem to prefer a heavier stick for extra hitting power. In the new synthetic sticks with their stiff shafts weight no longer adds hitting power – but this preference from the wooden stick days seems to have endured. Beginners should choose a light stick, which is well balanced. The heavier the stick, the slower the player's reactions will be.

Field hockey sticks range in weight from:

- Light: 510-540gm or 18-19oz.
- Medium: 540-625gm or 19-22oz. Most players will use a stick in the medium range.
- Heavy: 625-737gm or 22oz to FIH maximum 25.9oz.

Length of stick

• The common junior sizes are 28, 30, 32, 33, 34 and 35 inches. For junior players the stick should roughly reach the hip joint of the player - that is at the bottom of a trouser pocket (not up to the player's waist). The head of the stick must rest on the floor and lean against the leg of the player. The "butt" of

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the stick (top end of the stick) must meet the hip bone of the client. The tendency is for junior players to take sticks that are too long for them which makes it difficult for them to develop their skills.

- At senior level the choice of length of the stick depends on the player's personal preference and is influenced by factors such as the player's height and his playing style. As a general rule, men tend to use a 37.5 or 38inch stick and women a 36.5inch stick.
- Comfort and balance are obviously important so make sure the player is able to pick up or swing the stick without a concerted effort. When a senior player measures a stick and the "butt" of the stick does not measure up to the hip bone - comfort, feel and balance come more into play.
- Defenders usually like a longer stick to assist them in tackling while strikers may like a short stick. An accomplished player will know his personal preferences, but a school level

or less experienced player will need more guidance.

The following is a general guideline as to which length of the stick is correct, based on the height of the player:

- Players of 130cm and shorter tend to use a 30inch stick;
- Players between 130-137cm prefer a 32inch stick;
- Players in the 137-145cm-bracket opt for 33 inch sticks;
- Players between 145-153cm will be better suited to a 34inch stick;
- Players between 153-160cm, should use a 35 inch stick;
- Players between 160-170cm, rather choose a 36inch stick;
- Players between 170-178cm tall select a 37 inch stick;
- Players of 178cm and taller prefer the 38inch stick.

Flexibility and stiffness

A beginner is better off with a flexible stick with a softer feel that absorbs shock as they are easier to play with. Flexible sticks tend to be more durable than their stiffer counterparts. A beginner would therefore not benefit from paying more for a top end stick.

Advanced players may opt for a stiffer stick for increased power. In the more advanced stick ranges, the shafts are generally stiffer, which means the sticks hit the ball harder. The materials that stiffen the shaft, however, tend to give the stick a harder feel, which can sometimes make the stick a bit more difficult to play with.

The art in selecting a good synthetic stick is therefore to find a stick that hits the ball hard, but also retains feel on the ball that is appropriate for the player concerned. This is achieved by using superior moulding processes and materials and also by changing the lay-up of the sticks (where the different materials are placed in the stick).

- Forwards who shoot at goal, or defenders who hit the ball over long distances, tend to put more emphasis on choosing stick that generates the maximum possible power.
- Players who often receive the ball in tight areas put more emphases on control and feel even if it means sacrificing a bit of power.
- A player that flicks short corners, or throws long overheads out of defence, would benefit from having a stick that has the curve later in the shaft and has a thinner head. **To p40**

South African hockey market



Retaining the interest of the relatively large number of junior hockey players, especially at school, for adult clubs, is one of the focus points of the 2010 Strategic Plan of SA Hockey (www.sahockey.co.za).

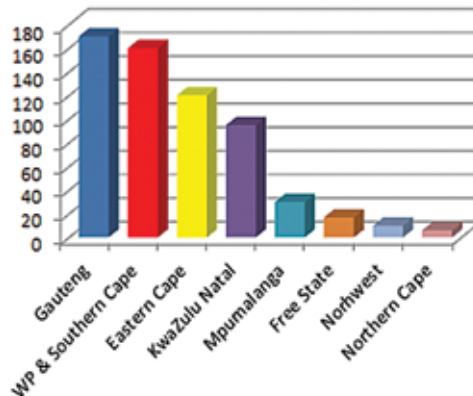
They plan to do this through partnerships between clubs and schools, by conducting regular club development workshops and by giving support grants to clubs.

According to the report, there were about 60 000 high school and 50 000 primary school players affiliated to SA Hockey in 2008. Fewer than 10 000 junior players were affiliated to clubs.

This, however, only represents registered players. According to sport participation figures compiled by BMI Sportinfo for Sport & recreation SA* in 2007, there were about 183 400 junior (below 18) hockey players in SA. They unfortunately do not indicate how regular, and at what level these players participate.

BMI further estimates there are more adult (above 18) players than juniors – namely 203 000, which indicates that they might count casual recreational players, who could have played once a year and would not necessarily buy new equipment. The sharp drop in player

Teams per provincial affiliates



numbers after they leave school is one of the biggest concerns in the Strategic Plan.

There are 110 teams at tertiary institutions affiliated to SA Hockey (this would not include all the hostel teams at a specific university) and just over 600 adult teams at provincial level.

At tertiary level, most teams are in Gauteng – namely 42, representing 35 Southern and 7

Northern – followed by the Western Province (23), Eastern Cape (19) and KwaZulu Natal (14). The provincial affiliations of club teams show the same geographical strengths: Gauteng the biggest (about 170 teams), followed by WP and Southern Cape (160), Eastern Cape (120) and KwaZulu Natal (95).

Facilities, like artificial turfs, are also concentrated in these regions. Gauteng has the most artificial turfs (namely 22), followed by KwaZulu Natal (17), WP (14) and Eastern Cape (11). The fact that more than half of the 76 artificial turfs are at schools (46), further indicates the importance of the schools market. There are 12 at universities, 10 at provincial level and 8 at clubs.

Growing hockey participation in the under-developed regions, is another priority identified in the Strategic Plan. They aim to create partnerships between schools and local government to build facilities in under-resourced communities, adopt a single approach to junior and youth hockey development, and start a national youth high performance and talent identification programme and national drives to roll-out their coach education programme.

* Figures reported in 'A case for Sport and Recreation', published by the Department of Sport & recreation SA. October 2009. Contact tersia@srsa.gov.za for a copy.

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These sticks however tend to be more difficult to perform other shots with (such as hitting the ball) and should therefore only be used by players who have the skill level to handle them.

Materials

Fibreglass: A basic reinforcing material that adds strength and durability. Fibreglass reinforcement also helps to prevent wear and fibreglass sticks are more flexible than carbon or graphite.

Carbon (or graphite): One of the most effective stiffening materials. The more carbon in a stick the stiffer it will be (also see p69). The added stiffness allows for increased hitting power for experienced players. However, in cold temperatures, a stick with carbon tends to transmit the shock from the head, through the shaft up to hands. Players should consider playing conditions, such as temperature when selecting a stick.

Kevlar® (or Aramide): Adds strength while dampening the vibration to the hands. The more Kevlar in the stick, the less shock is felt, yet the fibres still allow for flexibility and a smooth *feel* of the ball when hitting and receiving. Kevlar is a man-made organic fibre produced by DuPont used in a wide variety of applications such as bullet-proof vests, tyres, fibre optic cables and sporting goods.

Dyneema®: Added over the stiffening and strengthening materials at the base of the

shaft for impact resistance. Dyneema is a polyethylene fibre characterized by its high impact strength and high energy absorption qualities.

In order to improve durability sticks are sometimes wrapped with aramide weave around the head and lower shaft of the stick. These fibres help protect the stick against impact and abrasion at the bottom. If a stick is well constructed one does not move up in the range for durability but rather for performance.

The curve

The size and position of the curve in the shaft is the personal preference of the player. FIH rules specify that the curve in the shaft must be limited to a maximum of 25mm.

- Most players use a shaft with a moderate curve (20-22mm) in a medium position that is easier to hit with, while better players tend to favour a bigger curve (25mm) to assist with their aerial skills.
- Players who drag flick or throw a lot of over-heads use a stick that has a very low curve position and big curve, as well as a thin head.
- Sticks with the Mid bow, with the optimum point in the mid-section of the shaft, enhances ball control and are generally used by the average player. The L-bow is favoured by the player who likes to flick the ball from the corners as the optimum point of the bow is in the ideal position for the *drag flick*.

Toe design

Different toe designs provide specific performance for forwards, mid-fielders and backs. The toe design influences how different players strike the ball. There are four basic toe designs.

Shorti: Is the most common toe length, and is usually used on offense. It helps the player quickly turn the stick over the ball and is designed for balance, manoeuvrability and control.

Midi: The most popular and appropriate shape for beginners and midfield players. About a 1cm longer than the Shorti, it provides a larger hitting surface. It makes flicking, receiving, and reverse play more comfortable.

Maxi: Popular with defensive players. It combines a larger receiving area with the hitting power of a Midi head.

Hook has a J-shaped construction, a larger stopping surface for receiving and defensive work and is particularly good for grass surfaces.

Know their level

When recommending a stick it is of paramount importance to be aware of which level the customer will be playing at. Is the potential purchaser a beginner, junior or senior scholar, a club player, a senior provincial or a national player?

- The beginner might opt for a low budget, wooden or painted wooden stick;
- The school or junior club player might choose from a budget priced wooden to junior or intermediate composite stick;
- The junior provincial player could do worse than select a junior composite or intermediate senior composite stick, while the senior provincial player usually prefers the intermediate to top end composite, specialized sticks, for example, the drag flick;
- At national level, the top-end composites and specialized sticks are the preferred choices.