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Equipping young base- and softball players

Badly fitted equipment can have a negative effect on a young player and adversely affect his enjoyment of the sport – which might even result in him not continuing to play, the sport losing out on a player and the trade losing out on a customer. It's also important that his equipment *grows* with him. As a responsible retailer, it is part of your job to inform the parents how to match the equipment to the child.

To find the best fitting length of the bat, ask the child to stretch an arm out horizontally to the side. Measure the distance from the centre of the player's chest to the tip of his outstretched finger tips: the bat should not be longer than this distance.

The bat's weight is indicated by the minus or drop weight in brackets, in a length to weight ratio between 10-13.5, which represents how many ounces a bat weighs compared to its length. For example a 27" (-10) bat weighs 17 ounces and a 27" (-12) bat weighs 15 ounces.

The higher the minus number, the lighter the bat. A light bat is good when facing a slow and accurate pitch, which is more commonly seen in the younger age groups.

Pitches, however, tend to get faster and harder as the pitcher ages, which means that the batsman needs increasingly heavier bats as he ages to counteract the ball speed. The heavier the bat, the more power it delivers to the ball upon contact. Heavier bats are also harder to swing, so it's important that the player is comfortable with the weight.

The ideal weight of the bat in the end comes down to the size and strength of the player: the bat should be easy to control and swing.

Baseball bats

The bat should be smooth and round, no longer than 2.61" in diameter, and it should be one solid piece of wood that has not been coloured. The bat end may have an indentation (up to 1 ¼" in depth, 1-2" in diameter) that has no foreign substance added.

As the player ages, it's best to gradually increase his bat weight, generally no more than 2 ounces (+/- 57g) at a time. Too sudden an in-

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crease can affect the player's ability to hit, reduce confidence and negatively impact on his batting form. The weight, however, will rely in the end on the player's own ability.

Generally, look at these ballpark figures:

- Little League 2 ¼" baseball bats:
 - o 7 years and younger: 24-26" length with (-13) to (-12) drop;
 - o 8-9 years old: 26-29" length with (-13) to (-10) drop;
 - o 10-11 years old: 28-30" length with (-13) to (-10) drop;
 - o 12-13 years old: 29-32" length with (-10) to (-9) drop.
- Pony League (13-14 year old) 2 5/8" baseball bats:
 - o 7 years and younger: 24-26" length with

- o (-12) to (-10) drop;
- o 8-9 years old: 26-29" length with (-12) to (-10) drop;
- o 10-11 years old: 28-30" length with (-10) to (-8) drop;
- o 12-13 years old: 29-32" length with (-9) to (-5) drop;
- o 14 years and older: 31-34" length with (-3) drop.
- High school/college 2 5/8" baseball bats:
 - o 14-15 years old: 31-33" (-3)
 - o 16 years and older: 32-34" (-3)

Typically, the taper is about 1" in diameter, but different age groups will prefer different overall lengths and barrels. Generally, for the youth group, look at up to 33" long and 2.25" in diameter.

Softball bats

In softball, swing speed is more important than bat mass, so lightweight bats are preferred. They are also, however, more expensive.

The younger the child, the lighter the recommended bat. Older children that have more powerful swings can handle more weight in the bats, in the range of (-8) to (-10).

To complicate matters in softball, there are two different playing and pitch styles:

- Slowpitch is the most common form of softball. As the name suggests, the underhand ball is pitched slower and with a higher arc.
- Fastpitch is the closest to baseball. The ball is pitched using a windmill style with a low arc and underhand balls are thrown hard at a distance of up to about 14m.

Fastpitch: The following is a rough guide for the length of a fastpitch bat, based on the age of the player:

- 10 years old and younger: 24-27"
 - 14-15 years old: 26-28"
 - 15-16 years old: 28-31"
 - 16-17 years old: 30" and more
- Fastpitch bats, which are marked as such, have big barrels.
- Recommended fastpitch 2 ¼" softball bats:
- 7 years and younger: 24-26" length with (-13) to (-10) drop;
 - 8-9 years old: 26-29" length with (-13) to (-10) drop;

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- 10-11 years old: 28-31" length with (-13) to (-8) drop;
- 12-13 years old: 29-33" length with (-12) to (-8) drop;
- 14 years and older: 31-34" length with (-10) to (-8) drop.

Slowpitch bats have a 2 ¼" barrel, are generally 34" long, and weigh 26-30 ounces with the weight incrementing in 2 ounces with a very select few models in 29 ounces. A bigger player who likes to smash the ball will tend towards a heavier bat in the 28-30 ounce range.

Slowpitch bats are grouped into balanced and endloaded bats:

- **Balanced:** the weight is evenly distributed throughout the bat. This tends to be the most common choice of softball slowpitch bat and players who want to generate a lot of bat speed, such as contact or base hitters, prefer this type of bat due to its smoother swing and added control. A balanced bat has a lower M.O.I. (Moment of Inertia) than its endloaded counterpart, because its weight is distributed evenly – and the lower the M.O.I., the faster the bat can be swung.
- **Endloaded:** the weight is distributed towards the end of the bat. This type of bat is usually used by big power hitters and players who are already able to generate high swing speeds, without the aid of the bat's design. The high swing speed combined with the added weight in the barrel results in more distance.

Gloves

Soft- and baseball gloves are very similar. The main difference between the two is the size of the glove and the design to accommodate the different sized balls and different pitching styles – a softball ball is bigger. A player can use a softball glove for baseball, if required. He cannot, however, use a baseball glove for softball.

Make sure the glove fits your customer snugly. It should not be too tight and should have enough room around the hand for the player to also wear a batting glove. Younger children are better off with gloves with soft leather that is easy to manipulate.

Batting gloves: By wearing a batting glove underneath, the player protects the inside of the outside glove from dirt, as well as salt on a sweaty hand, which can deteriorate leather.

Batting gloves also help to ease the *stinging* sensation caused by vibrations of a lightweight bat when the ball is hit slightly off-centre and during practice in cooler weather. The batting gloves also help provide more grip and control on the bat, and help avoid scrapes on the hand when sliding on the basepaths.

The glove is worn on the player's non-dominant hand, which frees up his dominant hand to retrieve and toss the ball. If he is a right-handed player he will wear a glove marked *regular* on his left hand and if he is left-hand-

ed he'll wear a *full right* glove on his right hand.

There are several types of gloves, each with their own characteristics to best suit a position. An amateur player is, however, not likely to just play in one position for the entire season and may play several positions. It is therefore good to know that it's possible to use most types of baseball gloves for any position.

- **Catchers' mitts** are heavily padded with a deep *basket* pocket, are very strong and durable, and come with an open or closed back. The catcher is most susceptible to injury, so pay careful attention that there is enough padding and that the glove fits comfortably.

The Official Baseball Rules state that catchers' mitts may not be more than 38" in circumference and no longer than 15 ½" from top to bottom (including lacing, leather bands or facing attached to the outer edges). The space between the thumb and finger section may not be wider than 6" at the top and 4" at the base, with the web no wider than 7" across the top and 6" from top to base.

- o Youth size: up to 31" around;
- o Adult size: 32" around or more.
- **First base mitts** are well padded and have multi-fingers. The long fingers help the player catch throws, while keeping his foot on the base.
 - o The glove or mitt may not be longer than 12" and not wider than 8" across the palm.
 - o The space between the thumb and finger may not be wider than 4" at the top, nor wider than 3 ½" at the base.
 - o The web may not be longer than 5".
- **Fielding gloves** may not be longer than 12" or wider than 7 ¾".

o **Infield gloves** are ideal for faster manoeuvrability. Infield players play with a light-weight glove with shallower pockets.

> Middle infielders prefer gloves with a strong open I-web, H-web or trapeze web between the thumb and fingers.

The size of the infielder's glove is dependent on the player's preference, but typically:

- > Second basemen use an 11-11 ½" glove;
- > Shortstops prefer a larger glove, up to 11 ¾";
- > Third basemen like an even larger glove, up to 12", to accommodate hard fast and foul balls.

o **Outfield gloves** give the player a better reach and feature deeper pockets for catching strong balls. Outfielders also prefer a closed web design between the thumb and fingers.

Baseball glove sizes

The age of the infield player will also play a role in recommending the size of the baseball

glove.

- Typically **infield** baseball players use:
 - o 8-13 years old: 10 ½"-11 ½" glove;
 - o 14 years and older: 11-12" glove.
- The average **outfield** baseball glove size is:
 - o 8-13 years old: 11 ½"-12 ½" glove;
 - o 14 years and older: 12-12 ¾" glove.

Softball glove sizes

As is the case with baseball, the player's position also makes a difference when recommending the right softball glove size. With softball, however, there is an additional factor: the pitch speed.

- **Slowpitch** outfield gloves have larger webbing and pockets to ease catching. Because the ball is larger than the one used in fast-pitch games and batters tend to hit balls toward the outfield.

For players aged 14 years and older:

- o **Infield:** 12-12 ¾" glove;
- o **Outfield:** 12 ½"-14" glove.
- **Fastpitch** batters tend to hit more towards the infield than outfield, and infield glove pockets are deeper.
 - o **Infield** glove guidelines:
 - > 8 years old and younger: 9-10 ¾" glove;
 - > 9-13 years old: 10 ½"-11 ½" glove;
 - > 14 years and older: 11 ¾"-12 ½" glove.
 - o **Outfield** glove guidelines:
 - > 8 years old and younger: 10-11 ½" glove;
 - > 9-13 years old: 11 ½"-12 ½" glove;
 - > 14 years and older: 12 ¾"-14" glove.

Helmets

The helmet should:

- fit comfortably without squeezing the head;
- be easy for the player to remove;
- not move when the player moves his head;
- not be able to fall forward and cover the eyes.

Parents should be discouraged from buying a helmet that the child will *grow into* as the head does not grow that much.

Baseball helmets: The back, top and sides of the baseball player's head should be covered by the helmet, as well as at least one ear.

If only one ear is covered, it should be the one facing the pitcher (i.e. the left ear for right handed batters, and right ear for left handers).

The benefit of the one-ear-covered helmets is that the player's ear is protected and he is better able to hear the umpire with his uncovered ear than if it was covered.

To find the correct helmet fit, measure the circumference of the player's head at its widest point.

Softball helmets: Softball helmets are solid one-piece helmets with foam padding on the inside and face guards on the front.

For the ladies with longer hair it's possible to get a ponytail batting helmet, which allows room for the ponytail. This means a more comfortable fit.