Cricket Bats

A number of parents have asked me for tips in relation to what cricket bat to purchase for their son and how to look after the bat after it has been purchased. I have pulled together the information below which might be of some use.

Please note that the biggest mistake you can make in purchasing a bat is to buy a bat that is too big or heavy. A bat that is too big or heavy for a young child is highly detrimental to that child's game. You will find a size chart set out below.

Materials & Manufacturing

Materials

Cricket bats are carved from willow, which is a naturally fibrous wood. Each cricket bat manufacturer will seek to select the best woods for their products to ensure high standards and overall product quality. The two types of willow used for bat making are English Willow and Kashmir [Indian] Willow.

English Willow: This is a soft, fibrous timber. This type of willow is the preferred choice for the majority of bat manufacturers due to its high performance effect when striking the ball. Regardless of type however, willow will become damaged and prone to breakages over time. The cricket bat can become scarred, bruised and dented due to the nature of the game and the frequent high intense impacts of the ball hitting the cricket bat.

Kashmir Willow: Kashmir willow comes from India. This is largely utilised by cricket bat manufacturers as a substitute for English Willow. The Kashmir willow is regarded as a harder wood and in comparison to English willow does not have the same performance effect i.e. a player will not experience the same "sweet spot" when striking the ball, although grade one Kashmir willow is perfectly suitable for young children.

Design Features

In addition to materials and size specifications, you should also consider the following design features when selecting cricket bats:

Covered or Uncovered Face

The uncovered look means that the grain of the cricket bat is showing, whereas the covered look means that the blade of the bat is not immediately showing (although you may be able to see the blade through transparent protective coating). Each of the above will appear differently on cricket bats, but most importantly of all, you should note that the bat's performance will not be hindered. Protective coating (anti-scuff) is, on balance, advised in most cases in order to add maximise protection to the face of the cricket bat. This should prevent additional moisture being absorbed into the wood, as well as to help bind surface cracks together.

The Number of Grains on the Bat

There are many views surrounding grains on a cricket bat. Generally speaking though, the number of grains on a cricket bat is something that can be left to the discretion of the individual. The number of grains will often differ from bat to bat. A cricket bat between 6 and 12 grains is a good indicator of quality willow. Cricket bats with 6 grains, for example, are likely to be slightly softer than 10-12 grains and therefore take longer to knock-in and reach optimal performance initially. However, please note there are some extremely good premium range bats with lower grains.

Willow Grade

- Grade 1+ [A]

highest quality of English willow, historically used for the manufacturer's sponsored players, but increasingly being rolled-out to top end bats for the public across specialist stores. The grains are straight and even, the wood unbleached and there should be minimal to no marking or discolouration on the bat face.

- Grade 1 - G1 [A]
  top quality English Willow. Good straight grain structure and unbleached with minimal marking or discolouration in the face.

- Grade 2 - G2 [B]
  Unbleached English Willow with some irregular grain patterns and some blemishes/colouring across the blade.

- Grade 3 - G3 [C]
  Usually unbleached English Willow with irregular grain pattern and some marking and discolouration in the blade.

- Grade 4 - G4
  English Willow usually bleached and often non oil with a covering to the face of the bat.

A Toe Guard

The toe on all cricket bats can be vulnerable to breakages. It can be better prevented through fitting a toe guard. Many cricket bats now come with a toe guard already attached. A cricket bat is designed to strike the ball 6-8 inches up from the toe, in the centre of the blade. When batsmen face "Yorker" deliveries at the toe end, the impact of a moving bat meeting the speed of the ball can be very high, thereby causing the wood to dent or split. As a result it would be advisable to fit a toe guard to reduce the risk of breakage.

A Natural Finish

This is similar to an uncovered face, with the willow not covered by an anti-scruff cover or face tape. Most of the top-end bats offer this natural, traditional finish. Some of the lower grades of willow maybe bleached to artificially replicate the colour of high-quality willow.

The Pick-Up

When you are trying a cricket bat, position yourself in your normal stance as you would at the crease. Then simply pick the cricket bat up as you would as if the bowler was about to deliver the ball. When you pick the cricket bat up, note how the bat feels in your hands, i.e. is it light? Is it heavy? Where is the balance of the bow? Is it a lower middle or a higher middle? More generally can you hold the cricket bat in one hand, when stretched out in front of you?

When trying out cricket bats, it would be advisable for you to wear a pair of batting gloves. That way you gain a reliable insight into how the cricket bat actually feels in your hands. It would also be advisable for you to practice some shots without a ball, to see if you can use the bat effectively.

Sizing

Please use the following cricket bat size chart as a rough guide to cricket bats sizing on the basis of height, but be aware that strength is an equally important factor. Only ever select a cricket bat that that you can comfortably hold at arm’s length horizontally in front of you for at least 10 seconds.

Cricket Bat Size Chart				
Bat Size	Approx Age	Height of Batsmen (feet)	Bat Length (inches)	Bat Width (inches)
1	4-5	to 4'3"	25 3/4"	3 1/2"
2	6-7	4'3" - 4'6"	27 3/4"	3 1/2"
3	8	4'6" - 4'9"	28 3/4"	3 3/4"
4	9-11	4'9" - 4'11"	29 3/4"	3 3/4"
5	10-12	4'11" - 5'2"	30 3/4"	4"
6	11-13	5'2" - 5'6"	31 3/4"	4"
Harrow	12-14	5'6" - 5'9"	32 3/4"	4 1/6"
Full SH	15+	5'9" - 6'2"	33 1/2	4 1/4"
Full LH	15+	over 6'2"	34 3/8"	43/4"

Purchasing Decisions

Points to Consider Prior to Purchase:

- What cricket bat have you used before?
  This is a question worth bearing in mind as you may want to choose the same cricket bat manufacturer again or maybe you have a loyalty towards a certain brand. Decide whether you were happy with the last cricket bat you purchased in terms of quality, personal performance and overall satisfaction. If you are satisfied then maybe consider purchasing a cricket bat from the same bat manufacturer.

- Growth as a factor.
  It is worth considering growth as a factor. When your child is growing quickly selecting a cricket bat is a whole lot harder. If this is the case, it would be advisable not to spend large amounts of money on a top end cricket bat that could potentially only be used for half a season. There are typically very good sales at this time of year so you should seek those out to minimise cost. I tend to purchase two consecutive sizes of the same bat if I see a good deal.

- How serious are you as a cricket player?
  The level you are playing at will determine how frequent you will be using your cricket bat. If you are playing in the A team, you will probably be netting and playing multiple times a week against high quality, quick bowling, with a hard ball. Therefore you may well require a high quality cricket bat.

- **Boys that are playing soft ball cricket should not purchase an expensive bat as it makes little performance difference – concentrate on the size and weight.**

Preparation and Maintenance

Preparation and maintenance is the key to a long bat life. Once you've purchased your cricket bat, the next step is to prepare it for action and then maintain it. Preparation comes in two phases: (1) Oiling and (2) Knocking it in.

Part 1: Oiling Your Cricket Bat

- Using a soft rag, apply a light coat of oil to the Face, Edges, Toe and Back of the cricket bat. AVOID getting oil on the splice of the bat as it may undermine the glue holding the handle and blade of the bat together!

- Avoid over oiling the cricket bat.

- After the coat of oil has been applied, leave the cricket bat in a horizontal position to dry over night.

- On the next day, apply a second coat, following the same directions as the first one. Leave to dry.

- After oiling the cricket bat, the next phase begins - Knocking In

- Try and oil your bat regularly to keep the fibres of the wood supple and prevent the face of the cricket bat cracking.

- If applying anti-scuff oil only once, very lightly.

A number of cricket bat manufacturers indicate that over half of the bats sent back to them for repair, have not been sufficiently oiled or have in turn been over oiled. A balance needs to be struck, with a light coating as the main instruction provided by bat manufacturers.

If the cricket bat you have just purchased has an anti-scruff cover, the face will not need oiling. However the back of the cricket bat will need oiling.

Part 2: Knocking Your Bat In:

After purchase, all cricket bats should be knocked in to prepare them for use in competitive matches. The edges, toe and blade of the bat all need to be sufficiently knocked in, as these areas face large amounts of impact from the cricket ball, therefore making them vulnerable to breakages and damage. Knocking your cricket bat in is an effective way of ensuring that the bat has been compacted enough to prevent impact damage. As the knocking in process is a very important aspect of preparing your cricket bat for action, it cannot be rushed and must be done carefully. Knocking your cricket bat in is effectively ensuring that the wood of the bat is compact as the fibres are compressed and knitted together. Consider the following steps when knocking in:

- Using a hardwood bat mallet, gently strike the face and the edges of the cricket bat, simulating what the ball would do in a competitive game situation.

- Repeat the above on multiple occasions, gradually increasing the power. Use the same method as above to round the edges of the cricket bat, but be careful. Avoid using too much power to begin with as this could result in unnecessary damage. Note: Do not hit the edge directly with the mallet, gradually round the cricket bat off. It is important to knock the edges of the bat in as they can often be vulnerable to damage during competitive matches and net play.

- After 2-3 Hours of knocking the cricket bat in, you can take it to the nets and hit some short catches using an old ball. If seam marks or small indentations appear on the face of the cricket bat, it would be necessary to return to the first step.

- After continuing to knock the cricket bat in and completing some close catching sessions, you could try the bat in your normal net practice.

- After a few net sessions, your cricket bat should be ready to use in a competitive match.

Added Protection

After knocking your bat in, you may wish to add a protective cover to the cricket bat. This should be positioned and fitted approximately 3-5mm from the toe of the bat, with the cover running up the face of the cricket bat and finishing just below the bat

manufacturers labels.

What about pre-knocked in cricket bats?

Bats that come "pre-knocked" in or "pre-prepared". This means that the manufacturers have employed some special machinery to compress the bats and mimic the "Knocking-in" process. However all manufacturers will still recommend cricket bats be knocked in for a short duration. Knocking the face in further will be beneficial in developing the cricket bats overall performance.

Top Tips

- Inspect your bat regularly for any signs of damage or dryness due to a lack of oiling. This way you can utilise preventative measures before your cricket bat breaks.

- When in the nets, ensure that the bowlers are using high quality cricket balls; this will avoid damage being caused to your cricket bats.

- Avoid getting the toe of the bat wet during matches and net practice.

- If cracks appear on the face and the edges of the cricket bat, sand them out and apply a covering of oil.

- Too many people, store their cricket bats and other pieces of cricket equipment poorly. Your cricket bat should ideally be stored in the shed or the garage where the willow can absorb moisture in a natural environment. Avoid leaving cricket bats in the car, as during the summer months temperatures can rise substantially which can dry the bat and reduce the presence of moisture. You should also avoid storing your bat close to radiators, fires and in airing cupboards.