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Good with wood: Stanford's Piscotty excels without metal bat

By Mike Nesper | *Peninsula Clarion*

For many collegiate baseball players making the trip north to play in the Alaska Baseball League, trading in aluminum bats for wood can be a difficult. Not for the Peninsula Oilers' Stephen Piscotty.

"Steve has a swing that translates to wood," Oilers hitting coach Dan Lemon said Wednesday as the team took batting practice prior to hosting a game against the Anchorage Glacier Pilots.

Solid mechanics, too, play a major role in Piscotty's success with wood.

"When you have a guy that's that sound, it translates," Oilers head coach Dennis Machado said.

As of July 11, Piscotty led the Oilers with a .344 batting average and a .448 slugging percentage. In 96 at-bats, he has 33 hits, including seven doubles and a home run, and just seven strikeouts.

"Right now I'm seeing the ball really well," Piscotty said. "My timing is right on."

Piscotty played in a wood bat league last summer, so the transition period from aluminum only lasted a few days, he said. Piscotty said he prefers wooden bats because they force batters to be more precise.

"You can get away with more with an aluminum bat," he said. "I really like using a wood bat. It makes sure all your mechanics are in line."

"He's a quality hitter," said assistant coach Jake Silverman, who serves as third base coach. "Quality hitters don't get fazed."

Whether the opposing pitcher is hurling fire or relies on off-speed junk, Piscotty is comfortable in the batters box, Silverman said. And it all stems from preparedness.

"He has a good plan at the plate," Silverman said.

That plan begins with the first pitch of every at-bat.

"I like to swing in an 0-0 count," Piscotty said.

Piscotty said he takes each at-bat pitch by pitch.

"I'm just worried about hitting the ball hard," he said.

Piscotty is always looking for a fastball.

"It's my favorite pitch to hit," he said.

But being able to react to off-speed pitches is crucial, an area of the game in which Piscotty excels.

"He's able to make adjustments swing by swing and at-bat by at-bat," Machado said.

"Steve's a high-character individual with a lot of athletic ability," Lemon said. "He handles all kinds of pitches."

When working on Piscotty's swing, Lemon focuses on maintaining good posture and a quality bat path. But his job is made easier because Piscotty's game needs little tweaking.

"He was very good before he got to us," Lemon said.

The 6-foot-3, 190-pound 19-year-old typically bats third for the Oilers.

"In the three hole, you need someone that's consistent day in and day out," Silverman said. "You want your best quality hitter in the three hole."

Being third in the lineup, Piscotty's job is to bring in runs. With Ryan Gebhart and Tyler Grimes -- each with on-base percentages of .400 or better as of July 11 -- batting ahead of Piscotty, he's had the opportunity to also lead the team in RBIs. Piscotty's 19 RBIs tied him with Patrick Wisdom for most on the team as of July 11.

"We've put him into a position to drive in runs," Machado said. "That's what we want from him. His job is to get them home."

As a true freshman, Piscotty hit in the Nos. 3 and 4 slots most of his first season with Stanford University. He batted .326 with 36 RBIs and a team-leading 17 doubles in 56 games.

"I feel very comfortable there," Piscotty said of batting third.

"The role that he had at Stanford is a testament to him as a baseball player," Machado said. "He is beyond what most freshmen are when it comes to the game and how to play it."

Though Piscotty possesses natural athleticism and strength, perhaps his best attribute is intelligence.

"He's a very smart baseball player," Machado said. "You can have all the skills in the world, but if you don't know how to use those properly, they won't do you any good."

Piscotty's smarts are evident in his base running. After receiving a sign, should something occur to alter that plan, Piscotty reacts quickly -- and wisely -- to the situation, Silverman said.

Take the Oilers' June 18 win over the Athletes in Action. Down a run with two outs in the bottom of the ninth inning, Piscotty hit an RBI single to tie the game at 4. When AIA threw home in an attempt to tag out the runner, Piscotty advanced to second base, putting the potential game-winning run in scoring position. After a base on balls by Joe Kohan, Wisdom ripped a walk-off single to score Piscotty and give the Oilers a 5-4 win.

"He's a quality, smart baseball player," Silverman said. "He can think on his feet."

Piscotty said he stresses competing at a high level every game.

"If you play hard, you run hard, the game will reward you," he said.

Piscotty, who was drafted out of high school by the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 45th round, said his goals include winning a College World Series title and playing professional baseball.

The latter is a likely possibility, Machado said.

"His game is gonna keep developing," he said. "He's gonna be playing baseball for a long time."