

## BRUNSWICK COUNTY

# Softball inspections now part of game

By Adam Wagner  
StarNews Staff

WINNABOW — When a softball is hit hard enough that it flashes past Arnulfo Musgrove on the pitching mound before he can even see it, alarm bells start ringing in his head.

"I know off-hand when a bat is hot," Musgrove said. "When you're up there pitching and you never see the ball, it's just scary."

In the world of competitive adult softball, cheating is all about the bats. Players can roll them, speeding up a process that breaks down the bat and makes them more powerful over time. Or they can take a lathe and shave the inside of a composite bat to wear it down, adding the additional pop.

"The more pliable a bat



**At adult softball games this fall in Brunswick County, employees will begin testing bats to make sure they have not been tampered with.**

ADAM WAGNER/STARNEWS

is, the harder that ball then comes off that bat," said Toby Baccante, director of the Wilmington Softball Association. "There's a level where that becomes very, very dangerous."

After years of complaints and seeing evidence on social media that players in

its leagues were tampering with bats, the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation department bought three testing machines that cost about \$800 apiece.

"Do we know there are hot bats out there? Yes. But

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# SOFTBALL

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did we have any way to test it? No," said Aaron Perkins, the department director.

Before this fall's men's and women's seasons, the county will place every bat in the machine, which grips the bat in a vice and makes sure its compression is at an adequate level. Perkins said bats will be retested during set days near the middle and end of each season to make sure they haven't been altered, while players will also be able to request that opponents' equipment be checked.

The Wilmington Softball Association has used the machines since the spring of 2014. Baccante said keeping the games fair

and safe were factors that led to testing — but so was the bickering among teams convinced their opponents were cheating.

"It can make a night of softball very miserable if all people are doing is complaining about everything," Baccante said.

In Wilmington, bats are checked each spring and affixed with a sticker saying they've passed. This season, the league will begin spot checks to make sure bats haven't been altered since their first test.

When the Wilmington league began testing, between 3 and 5 percent of bats failed. Today, Baccante said, between 5 and 7 percent of bats fail. It is not uncommon, he added, for brand new bats to barely pass the test.

"Bat makers are trying to stay on the edge, making sure people buy their bats," Baccante said, "so they make them as hot as they can."

Coaches in Brunswick County chose the testing route over an option that would have seen the Parks and Rec department purchase a set of six bats that would be the only ones used during games.

Shortly after captaining the Bomb Squad to its fourth straight Brunswick co-ed title Tuesday evening, Larry Smith said he prefers testing instead of only being able to use county-provided bats.

"I like a certain feel in my hand," Smith said, "and you like to swing that bat when you're warming up instead of just walking

up there and grabbing a strange bat out of somebody's hand."

Musgrove added that, if the county limited play to a certain number of bats, those bats would naturally go through the same process would-be cheaters try to simulate.

"If you take six bats and you let 12 teams hit with them, you get into game two or three and those are gonna be some hot bats," Musgrove said.

Musgrove is skeptical about the testing, though. If someone wants to cheat, he said, they will find a way.

"What's made it a big deal in Brunswick is a lot of these guys see it as competing, not cheating, because there's a shaved bat somewhere on just about every

team out there," Musgrove said.

Smith said the initial reaction to the change was negative, with many players wondering why it is necessary. As they've had more time to think about it, though, the reaction has calmed down.

"Whatever makes the game safer," Smith said. "People gotta get up and go to work in the morning. Nobody wants to see anybody get hurt."

As he walked away, the scent of his cheap victory cigar lingering in the air, Smith turned and called out a smile creasing his face.

"Just so you know," he said, "I don't have a lathe." — Contact Adam Wagner at 910-343-2389 or Adam.Wagner@StarNewsOnline.com.