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BATTER UP: Father, son team up on major league pitching simulator produced in Milford (video)

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MILFORD — With a name like Battersby, you're almost obligated to go into baseball.

Father and son Greg and Adam Battersby, for instance, have spent more than a decade focused just on the batter's box — that tiny area of chalk and chutzpah where baseball games are won or lost.

The result is a high-tech pitching simulator produced in Milford that is used by half a dozen major league teams. All three area teams — the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox and New York Mets — use ProBatter simulators; so do the Cincinnati Reds, Pittsburgh Pirates and Cleveland Indians.



“Dad built the batting cage in our backyard, and we had a two-wheel pitching machine,” Adam Battersby, 31, recalls. “You couldn’t really learn how to hit an inside pitch from that.”

That was back when Adam was a teenager, growing up in Westport. Dad Greg, a patent attorney and part-time coach, decided to invent a pitching machine that better replicated real pitching, with consistency.

“Adam was an exceptional scholastic baseball player, but he was used to seeing the same pitch over and over again in the batting cage,” Greg Battersby said. “Real pitchers don’t pitch that way. They change speeds. They change location. I came to the realization that there had to be something better out there.”

Greg consulted with a series of engineers to develop ProBatter, amassing 13 U.S. patents and 20 international patents along the way. The machine initially cost about \$100,000, but now sells for \$45,000.

“It was designed from scratch. It can throw any pitch a human can control, using three independently spinning wheels,” explained Mike Suba, ProBatter’s vice president of engineering. “We’ve been able to throw well beyond 100 mph.”

It’s a combination of animation and actual batting. Touch screen software allows users to pick exactly which pitches they’ll see, as well as the velocity. Then a

pitcher's image appears on a screen and a real ball shoots out of a hole in the display screen.

"With a generic pitching machine, once you put the ball in, you just wait," Adam Battersby said. "You can't get into a rhythm.

"This is more like a real game situation. You're seeing cutters. You're seeing splitters. Catchers can use it to practice blocking and framing," he adds.

ProBatter was set to make its first big presentation at the 1999 Major League Baseball winter meetings, Greg Battersby remembered. Things got a bit tense when the simulator was damaged en route to the event.

"We were still working on it an hour before the presentation," he laughed.

At this point, there are roughly 300 ProBatter simulators in operation. Customers range from youth league organizations and batting cage businesses to college programs and professional teams.

"We had a gentleman in upstate Connecticut buy one for his garage to help the local Little League team," said Adam Battersby, now president of the company.

The Yankees have five ProBatter simulators. Adam Battersby says the fact that ex-Yankee Jason Giambi bought one for his personal use several years ago may have helped spark the Yankees' interest.

"Every team, and every player on a team, is different in terms of training," Adam Battersby said. "Some want to work only on curve balls. Some want to be using different mixes of pitches."

Of course, not every hitter is comfortable with a simulator.

Adam Battersby recalled talking with ex-big leaguer Albert Belle, who scoffed at the simulator and asked, "Did Babe Ruth have one of these?"

No, but Adam Battersby figures time is on his side as more people in baseball become comfortable with the technology. In the meantime, he and ProBatter are branching out beyond baseball.

"We recently came out with a new cricket machine," he said.

As for Greg Battersby, inventing the simulator has led him down a number of unexpected paths. For instance, there was the time he helped install a ProBatter machine at Shea Stadium, and "felt like I was 9 years old, when I walked out of the tunnel and saw the field."

Even more surprising has been the emergence of his son as a businessman. What began as a way to teach Adam to hit curve balls somehow became a lesson in how to run a small company.

“That’s been the icing on the cake,” Greg Battersby says.

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