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Man vs. Machine

Huskies Use State-Of-Art Device

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Posted: 4/2/07

It's January, it's 20 degrees outside, J.O. Christian Field is covered in snow and you're looking for a place to perfect your swing. So what do you do?

Well, you might have to move to a more baseball-friendly climate, but all a UConn baseball player needs to do is open the door to the school's Batting and Pitching Facility, more commonly known as "The Barn." Housed in The Barn is UConn's secret weapon, a machine that allows its players to get some quality at - bats - even in the middle of winter.

In 2004, the baseball team bought a ProBatter Professional Pitching Machine, which in layman's terms, is a batting cage. But this piece of equipment is far from your neighborhood batting cage.

The ProBatter projects a virtual image of a pitcher onto a screen. The life-size pitcher goes through its windup and right at the point when a pitcher would release the ball, one comes out of a hole that's cut into the screen. So as opposed to a metal arm scooping up a ball and hurling it at you like at a typical batting cage, this machine simulates the real motions of a pitcher.

"There's no substitute for the real thing," said baseball head coach Jim Penders, "but it's as close as I've ever seen to the real thing."

"It's a great tool, it's a super tool," he said.

Manufactured by ProBatter Sports, located in Milford, the pitching simulator cost \$76,000 and is rare in both college and professional baseball. According to February's edition of ESPN the Magazine, the Yankees, Indians, Red Sox, White Sox and Mets all just purchased one this past offseason. Penders said the team raised the money through the Dugout Club and said the University of Maine is the only other school with the ProBatter on its campus.

"They can use it any time of day, 24 hours a day," Penders said. "It's great before a series if we know what the opposition has for stuff; we'll program the computer to throw that stuff."

While your local batting cage can consistently put a fastball in the middle of the zone, the ProBatter offers the Huskies a true test, as it has the capacity to throw nine pitches right to a desired location.

So when a Husky finds himself struggling with that changeup low and away, he can head to The Barn and tell the ProBatter to throw changeups low and away. The simulator can also throw fastballs, sliders, cutters, curveballs and sinkers to a total of nine locations.

"I think it's a great tool," said senior co-captain and shortstop Dennis Donovan. "It especially helps with the offspeed stuff; curveballs, sliders."

"Because any coach can throw [batting practice] and throw fastballs, but he can't give us the curveball."

The machine can throw the ball up to 100 m.p.h., and the batter can select to face either a righty or a southpaw. And, with Shea Stadium in the background, the virtual pitcher will even throw from the stretch if that's what the hitter desires.

As for his first time facing ProBatter, Donovan said it was an interesting feeling.

"It was a good experience," Donovan said. "It's kind of tough to get used to at first, but after a couple times its nice, it helps a lot."

And as far as going back to the real thing after facing the virtual pitcher, Donovan says you don't even miss a beat.

"It's pretty much the same thing, the only real adjustment is seeing a real human up there again, but it's as life-like as it can get."

ProBatter is also used by catchers to practice receiving and framing pitches. Pitchers themselves can also utilize it, as they can practice pitch sequences without actually having to throw a pitch.

Penders and Donovan gave ProBatter very high praise, but the machine can't be perfect - there has to be something to dislike about it, right?

"The curveballs are too hard to hit ... for me at least," Donovan joked.

OK, on second thought, maybe there is nothing to dislike about the simulator. For three years now ProBatter has helped the Huskies keep their bats warm - even when Mother Nature says everything should be frozen.

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