

High tech for hitting

Baseball players using \$45,000 pitching machine to lift production at plate

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Rockies shortstop Clint Barmes has had his share of big hits in his career, including a walk-off, two-run homer off San Diego closer Trevor Hoffman on opening day in 2005.

But on this winter day, preparing for spring training, Barmes was facing an altogether different beast. A 96-mph fastball sizzled down the pipe. Barmes barely got a piece of it.

"Wow, that's bringing it," he said.

An 84-mph slider cut with scalpel-like precision.

"Nasty," Barmes muttered.

Every pitch was wicked, yet every pitch was a strike. It was an inhuman display.

The name of the beast on the hill? The ProBatter Professional PX2, a \$45,000 pitching machine installed this year at the HitStreak baseball center in Centennial. In an era when players download and catalogue their at-bats on an iPod, the ProBatter pitching simulator represents cutting edge technology for use during practice time.

"We think it's the closest thing you can find to the real thing," HitStreak owner Scott Vatter said.

Barmes, sweat rolling down his brow, agreed.

The baseball shoots out of a hole in the screen. The computer program can be set to simulate a right-handed or left-handed pitcher throwing from the full windup or the stretch position. It also can simulate a softball pitcher's delivery.

The simulator delivers pitches at speeds between 40 mph and 100 mph, in increments of 2 mph, all with pinpoint accuracy. A special catcher's sequence is included for training catchers to block pitches in the dirt.

The New York Yankees and Cleveland Indians have had systems installed at their stadiums. The Boston Red Sox and New York Mets have had units installed at their spring training sites. The Yankees' Jason Giambi and the Indians' Trot Nixon purchased machines to work out on during the offseason.

The Rockies have no plans to buy the machine, but Barmes would like them to consider it.

"It's very realistic," he said. "It really works your hands and you have to really stay on top of it. The off-speed stuff moves really well."

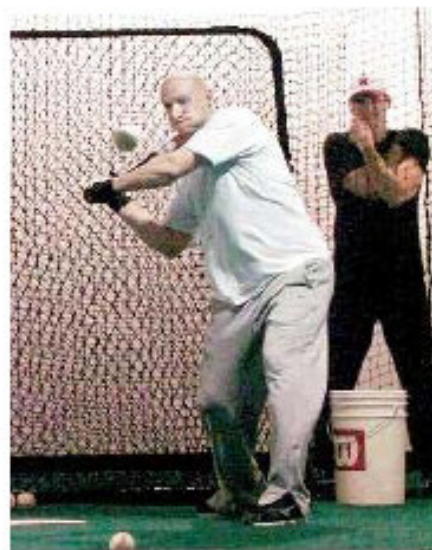
Barmes' only qualm was the inconsistent lighting inside the HitStreak complex.

"Outside, you can pick up the spin of the pitch better," he said. "In here, the pitch is right on top of you."

Vatter - who played high school baseball at Rangeview and college ball at Northern Colorado and later coached at Gateway High School - hopes the PX2 will draw in baseball players from all levels. On the day Barmes took his cuts, several high school players were at HitStreak, trying to get a jump on the spring season.

Vatter has installed four cameras around the pitching simulator, allowing batters to analyze their swings from four angles.

"Our target market is age 13 and up, and I'm taking a new approach," Vatter said. "One of the biggest needs of serious baseball players is live pitching. At the high school level, you don't get it. This allows them to practice against the closest thing they're going to find."



Rockies shortstop Clint Barmes has become a big fan of the ProBatter Professional PX2, an expensive pitching simulator installed this year at the HitStreak baseball center in Centennial. (Post / John Lebya)