

A Coquitlam craftsman who has been turning wood for 30 years began creating wooden baseball bats in 2008. Now, Bruce Campbell makes 500 a year...

Crafting wood bats, one at a time

By Gary McKenna
THE TRI-CITY NEWS

In an era of mass production, Bruce Campbell's workshop is a throwback to another time: a man, his tools, a single purpose.

Ankle-deep in sawdust and wood shavings, the Coquitlam craftsman spends much of his spare time in his garage turning bulky pieces of lumber into finely tuned items, from bowls and furniture to boxes and sculptures.

These days, his most popular creation is more practical than decorative: the wooden baseball bat.

Campbell makes close to 500 sticks a year and said most of his customers are looking for a certain intangible quality that comes with using handmade products that cannot be replicated by machine alone.

"Something that is made by hand feels different than something that is made by machine," he said. "Some people call it a warmth. Some people call it an energy. Some people think of it as the feel of the maker being transferred into the material as they work."

"Those are people's way of trying to explain why something that is made by hand is simply more enjoyable to work with."

Not that it's an excruciatingly slow process. Campbell takes an average of 20 minutes to turn a block of wood into a bat, although he can make up to four an hour when dealing with larger production runs.

He has supplied everyone from young athletes starting out to older players with an eye on the major leagues. Currently, he is working through an order of 50 clubs for a person who wants to give them away as gifts for his business clients.

There are even a few Major League Baseball players who use Campbell's bats, although he would not divulge their names and noted that pro athletes can only use his products during practice.

"For us small boutique bat makers — and there's a few around the country — the baseball leagues have a bit of a problem with us and it all comes down to liability," he said. "For me to make bats so they can be used in an official game, I need to carry \$30 million in liability insurance. I'm here to tell you that I can't do that."

Campbell got into wood turning 30 years



PHOTOS BY GARY MCKENNA/THE TRI-CITY NEWS



ago after he found a lathe under the floor boards of the garage of the first home he bought in Calgary. After about a decade of fiddling with the machine on his own, he signed up for a workshop with Richard Raffan, a well-known wood turner who helped popularize the craft in the 1970s.

"He basically turned me into a wood turner," Campbell said. "Before that, I was a wood butcherer."

With the tools and a developing talent, he began turning professionally, spending the majority of his time making and fixing furniture along with bowls and other products.

But in 2008, Campbell was approached by a man who worked in the



lumber business who had two sons who were active baseball players. He began making bats for the family, identifying the best types of wood — Campbell mainly uses ash — along with the proper length and weight (a bat always weighs three ounces less than its length in inches).

He mostly works by feel but if a player has

an exacting set of specifications, he will use calipers to ensure precise measurements. Once the bat is turned, he sprays the end with lacquer and adds his imprint on the wood.

Campbell believes that hand-crafted items, like his baseball bats, are gaining in popularity and that more people are turning away from mass-



Top and middle left: Using both power and hand tools, Bruce Campbell works on turning a rough piece of wood into a baseball bat. Middle right: Using a power sander, he smooths out some of the rough edges at the ends of his bats. Bottom left: Some of the tools he uses while turning wood. Bottom right: Campbell compares the raw wood with the almost-finished product.

produced products.

"If you take one of my bats and three commercially made bats and you lay them on a table and cover them with cloth, I will find my bats every time," he said. "That is because when I put my hand over top of it, it gives back."

"That is the energy of the maker."

gmckenna@tricitynews.com