

Fit for the crease

Daniel Swaine of Chase Cricket tells **Charlotte Mackaness** how he hit on a career sweet spot when he swapped missile construction for bat-making. Photographs by **Jake Eastham**

WORKING in an atomic weapons establishment might seem an unorthodox background for a cricket bat maker but, given the missile-like deliveries of some fast bowlers, the training could come in handy. Daniel Swaine, master bat maker at Chase Cricket, undertook a seven-year apprenticeship with the Ministry of Defence and became a precision engineer before a chance meeting in a pub drew him to the more benign world of cricket.

“I got to know former England player Robin Smith, the then owner of Chase, because we shared the same local. I wasn’t enjoying my job and was curious to see how bats were made so Robin suggested I spend a couple of Saturdays at the workshop,” recalls Swaine.

“I loved it and after two weekends’ work I was offered a full-time job. I didn’t hesitate. There’s no formal or certified training to make cricket bats by hand; it’s just a question of going in at the bottom and learning.”

Close to half-a-million bats are sold in the UK every year. The majority of these are mass produced in India. “There are only about 20 or so individuals in the country who make bats by hand in a manner similar to us,” explains Swaine. “I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to learn the art.”

Swaine has been master bat maker at Chase for seven years. He and his wife bought the company five years ago when Robin Smith relocated to Australia. “Our workshops are at Dummer Down Farm on the beautiful Dummer estate in Hampshire. It’s a very special place. There is a huge variety of wildlife, including red kite, which nest on the farm. You never tire of the view.”

There is also a liberal scattering of willow trees. Although they may add to the charming outlook, the trees have been planted to harvest. “The plan is to cut them down in 10 years’ time. In the meantime, we source willow from a handful of English suppliers. There are 180-odd types of willow, four of which you can make bats with. The very best, which we use, is *Salix alba* ‘Caerulea’. Cheaper bats from



Chase cricket bats (above) are made by Daniel Swaine (right) from the finest willow

overseas tend to be made from Kashmir willow, which is heavy and rather brittle.”

The willow arrives at the workshop in large clefts from which the blade is cut. “Seeing a hunk of wood transformed into a high-performance bat is incredibly satisfying. What makes a handmade bat special is the time and attention given to manipulating the wood to get the very best performance and longevity from it,” he explains.

“We’re always looking for the straightest grain possible. It has a pleasing aesthetic and makes the bat more durable. Another crucial stage in ensuring strength and performance is pressing the bat. Willow is twice as soft as pine so as the bat is pressed you hear all sorts of creaking and crushing. This creates a hard crust that protects the bat. The soft wood under the crust compresses when you hit the ball and then springs back. There shouldn’t be any reverberations; an expertly pressed bat feels like a well-strung tennis racket.”

A mallet is used as a gauge during the pressing stage. “Basically, once there are no divots we know the bat has had enough. However, if you create too much of a crust the bat will be too hard, which has a detrimental effect on the recoil. Knowing where the line is comes with lots of practice,” Swaine reveals.

Most of the shaping is done by hand with rasps, knives and saws that the earliest bat



makers would recognise. “It’s very physical work – all hands and eyes. I don’t need to go to the gym to work out my arms and shoulders,” jokes Swaine. “There’s a lot of repetition and checking. It wouldn’t appeal to everyone.”

The completed bats, which are sanded by hand to a glass-like finish and polished with beeswax and Hampshire chalk, are sent around the globe, from Norway to New Zealand. Bespoke clients visit Swaine at the



workshop. “It helps us to determine exactly where the sweet spot on the bat needs to be.

“Someone who likes to play off the front foot and drive will typically have a low sweet spot, whereas to play spin off the back foot the sweet spot is in the middle of the bat. It’s not unheard of for top players to get 50 or so on the board and then change to a bat with a different sweet spot for when they open up and really start playing their shots,” he explains.

According to Swaine, one of the most satisfying parts of his trade is making bats for children. “It’s wonderful to watch them progress

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through the various sizes and then on to their first adult bat; it’s a lovely thing to be part of.”

Swaine’s cricketing career is limited to opening for Dummer Cricket Club on Sunday afternoons. “I enjoy my cricket, although there is a certain pressure. If I don’t make an impression, I can’t blame the bat,” he laughs. ■

Contact Chase Cricket at Dummer Down Farm, Dummer, Hampshire RG25 2AR, visit www.chasecricket.co.uk or call 01256 397499 for details.