

Beep ball: An eye-opener

■ The game might be different, but the passion remains the same for legally blind ballplayers

Baseball coaches constantly encourage their players to keep their eye on the ball. For athletes playing for the Boston Renegades, it wouldn't make much difference — they all are legally blind.

The Boston Renegades are sponsored by the Association of Blind Citizens and play a sport called beep ball. Because the athletes are without sight, the rules are different than traditional



Brett Rudy

baseball. For starters, most noticeably, there are buzzing bases and beeping baseballs.

There are just two bases: first and third. Each is a padded cylinder 100 feet from home plate. The bases contain sounding units that give off a buzzing sound when activated. The batters do not know which one will be activated until they hit the ball. Then, they must identify the correctly buzzing base and run to it before the beeping ball is fielded by a defensive player. If the ball is fielded cleanly before the runner reaches the base, he's out. Otherwise, it is a run.

Rob Weissman (Waltham, Mass.) joined the Renegades as head coach a decade ago, and has been working with people with disabilities since college. Because he has sight, the 42-year-old coach also does the catching for the team.



▲ In beep ball, batters such as Joe McCormick (above) are blindfolded, and baserunners — such as Joe Quintanilla (right) — score a run by reaching the beeping base before the ball is fielded.

"From a game standpoint, one of the main differences is that you gotta be quiet," Weissman said. "When someone hits a ball, you can't cheer and scream — and that is not natural for somebody. You need to be dead silent so the batter can hear the base, and the player can hear the ball. That's about the biggest difference between the two games that you'd see as a sighted person."

At the plate, batters are blindfolded



and get four strikes, and there are no walks. Batters are pitched to by one of their own sighted teammates. The ball is 16 inches in circumference, the same size as a slow-pitch softball. As the ball is being released, the pitcher says, "Ready ... pitch" to give the batter a

chance to swing. A ball must be hit 40 feet to be a fair ball.

On the diamond, fielders are coached by sighted spotters who convey a number to them based on where the ball is hit. For instance, a "four" call means the middle player will move laterally right while the third baseman will move laterally left.

"From a coaching standpoint, it really challenges your communication skills," Weissman said. "One thing I learned really early on is that you don't need to yell to be heard since the field is so silent. You can just talk at a normal level, and they can hear you across the field."

Blindfolding the batters helps level the field and eliminate any competitive advantage among players with different levels of vision loss.

"You are always suspect when you see guys with giant Coke-bottle lenses and they are walking around just like you and I would be," Weissman said, "but when you go under the blindfold, everybody is on the same playing field. The blindfold is the great equalizer."

Many Renegade players were not blind most of their lives, and several were excellent athletes who had played varsity baseball before losing their vision.

Tim Syphers (Watertown, Mass.) played ball for Watertown High School, and 2013 marks his rookie season with the Renegades. Syphers was a client at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Mass., when one of the coaches invited him to work out with the team. Tim explained how loss of his sight impacted his involvement in sports.

The Tee eighth

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ening game

"I remember one of the times before I knew I was legally blind, I was throwing a football around with a buddy and I couldn't catch the darned ball," said Syphers, now 24. "It was depressing. It was sad. I just thought I needed glasses. When I found out I was legally blind, I thought sports were gone forever. When I met Rob, it was like a weight had been lifted. Something physical was back in my life."

Joey "Wrong Way" Buizon (Somerville, Mass.) lost his vision when he was 17 shortly after playing for Somerville High School. Initially, doctors thought he had Leber's Hereditary Optic Neuropathy, which causes sudden onset of unilateral painless blurry vision, followed within two months by the same symptoms in the other eye. To this day, doctors aren't exactly sure what his affliction is, but his nickname proves he hasn't lost his sense of humor about it.

"In beep ball, when one of the bases go off, you really don't know which one — that is one of the challenges of the sport to keep it competitive," said Buizon, now 30. "So one time, when the bases went off, I went to first base, but really, the other base was going off. I went all the way down the wrong line. From then on, they've called me 'Wrong Way.'"

Joe McCormick (Melrose, Mass.) first heard about the team from Wrong Way while interning at the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind. McCormick, 20, played ball through Little League, and played varsity soccer in high school. He lost his sight three years ago, gradually, over the course of a year.

"I was a senior at Malden Catholic and one day was in our robotics lab and went to look through a PVC pipe," he said. "When I went to look through, I thought there was a cap on the end. But there was no cap."

"I found out it was a disease called Leber's, and basically they said I had days to weeks to months before I'd lose vision in my other eye."

Joe lost vision in his second eye dur-

ing graduation week of high school.

"My initial fears were loss of independence, and not being able to drive," McCormick said. "I love driving. But sports was also a big thing. I was so used to going out after school playing Frisbee or pickup basketball."

After finding the Renegades, I knew this game was for me. I could compete at

the same level as everybody else."

Aqil Sajjad (Cambridge, Mass.) is originally from Pakistan and currently a student at Harvard who has played with the Renegades for four years. Aqil was 10 when he had retinal detachment in his first eye, and 16 when it hit his other eye. Back in Pakistan, he had mainly played cricket.

"For a while I didn't play any sport," said Sajjad, now 33. "This is the first time I've played a sport since losing my eyesight. People had introduced me to blind cricket, but it was so different from sighted cricket that I just said, 'Forget it. I'm not gonna play this.' When I started playing this

game, that was when I prepared myself that it would be different than sighted baseball."

And a different game it is.

"Apart from the fact that the ball beeps, the pitcher is on the same team as

the batting side," Sajjad said. "The pitcher is sighted and tries to put the ball in the exactly in same spot. Your goal is to swing your bat exactly in the same spot with exactly the same timing. It's about muscle memory and consistency of your swing. At home, you swing, swing and swing so that you have that muscle memory on the field. This is different from sighted baseball, where you are looking for the ball with your eye and the pitcher is trying to get you to miss the ball. Here, the pitcher and you work together."

Brett Rudy is the founder of the Boston Amateur Baseball Network.

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Watch original video interviews with players: bit.ly/boston-renegades

Beep Series

Beginning July 30, the Boston Renegades will attend their 12th consecutive Beep Baseball World Series in Columbus, Ga.

If you would like to join the team as a player or volunteer, visit www.blindcitizens.org/reneade.

NUTRITION

Sports drinks help fuel performance

Dehydration can be a player's fiercest opponent, yet proper hydration can be a baseball player's secret weapon to improve performance and reduce the risk of injury.

This makes perfect sense since 76 percent of muscles, 74 percent of the brain and 83 percent of blood are water. Performance diminishes with dehydration.

At 1 percent dehydrated, a player is thirsty, speed and strength begin to decline and it becomes more difficult to regulate the body's core temperature. At 4 percent dehydrated, a player's performance is decreased by 20-30 percent, and at 6 percent dehydrated, a player may experience weakness, headache, fatigue, irritability, cramping, chills and blurred vision.

Due to the length of games and the sun and heat, players are at an increased risk of dehydration. Pitchers and catchers, in particular, should pay careful attention to hydration. Added equipment, exertion and time of play all contribute to higher sweat rates.

The best way to guard against dehydration is to drink fluids well in advance of a practice or game and to rehydrate at every break in play.

While water is crucial and the recommended drink for athletes, sports drinks are beneficial after 60 minutes or more of practice or game time, especially when sweating. When a player sweats, it's not only water that is lost; sodium is lost as well. That affects the balance of other electrolytes: potassium, calcium, magnesium and chloride. Sports drinks help replenish lost fluids and restore electrolyte balance.

There are plenty of brands and different versions from which to choose. Some may be more appropriate than others for certain athletes or in different scenarios, but consider the following information to help you choose.

■ Availability: Some teams have contracts with a certain brand and that may be what is provided, or a coach or parent may decide what is provided in the dugout or on the team bus.

■ Taste and tolerability: Too much sugar or a carbohydrate concentration that is too high may result in diarrhea, nausea or cramping. Diluting the sports drink with an equal amount of water

or alternating between water and the sports drink may solve this issue.

■ Effect on performance: The goal of using a sports drink is to enhance performance, not to hinder it. If a sports drink makes a player feel sick to his stomach, sluggish or wired, then water would be a better choice.

One 20-ounce bottle of Gatorade Thirst Quencher Lemon Lime and one 20-ounce bottle of Powerade Lemon Lime contain similar amounts of calories, sodium, sugar, potassium and carbohydrates, whereas the Gatorade G2 Series contains the same amount of potassium and sodium with less sugar and fewer calories.

Carbonation is made bubbly by infusing carbon dioxide gas into a beverage. Considering that our bodies work hard to eliminate CO₂ as a byproduct of our breathing in oxygen, why would we want to tax our body's further by drinking it? Our recommendation is to drink noncarbonated water and sports drinks before, during and after any athletic exertion.

Energy drinks such as Red Bull, Rock Star and Monster are carbonated beverages that contain caffeine and other stimulants, including guarana and ginseng. The effects of energy drinks are often detrimental to performance. The stimulants increase heart rate and blood pressure in an athlete who already is doing that on a ballfield. Caffeine is a known diuretic, which can increase the risk of dehydration. Side effects include nervousness, restlessness, irritability, muscle tremor, headache, GI (gastrointestinal) distress and increased heart rate. The bottom line: Energy drinks should not be consumed.

Baseball players who want to play and feel their best should drink plenty of water before a practice or game. When a player is actively sweating and has been playing for 60 minutes or more, it is appropriate to have a sports drink such as Gatorade or Powerade.

Hydrating adequately and properly most definitely impacts a player's performance. **b**

Julie Nicoletti is a certified sports nutritionist, registered pharmacist and the co-founder of Kinetic Fuel, a performance-based nutrition company in Massachusetts. At Kinetic Fuel, Nicoletti and Jules Hindman have worked with hundreds of high school, collegiate and professional athletes and teams to optimize performance through nutrition. Learn more at kineticfuel.net.

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