

Game for visually impaired offers competition, camaraderie

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On a hot, sunny Tuesday morning, spectators at the Mary & John Geisse Soccer Complex set up folding chairs along the foul lines. They took shade under pop-up canopies, with coolers full of water and sports drinks nearby. They were waiting for a baseball game to begin. And then they heard it: a loud beep. An X-treme player slapped the ball down the third-base line and took off running, while the outfielders scrambled for the beeping ball, hitting the ground hard. The batter tackled the base. Safe. The crowd erupted. This was no ordinary game. It was a Beep Baseball World Series matchup between the RHI X-treme and the Indy Thunder, two rival Indianapolis teams. "They take it serious as a heart attack," said National Beep Baseball Association President Dan Greene.



Demieli Wright of the RHI X-treme gets a hit and scores a run during a game against the Indy Thunder. The X-treme won 14-4 Tuesday during the Beep Baseball World Series in Indianapolis. / Michelle Pemberton / The Star

This week, 16 teams from across the U.S. and one team from Taiwan are competing in Indianapolis for the beep baseball world championship. Beep baseball is a modification of baseball for the blind and visually impaired. The ball, which is similar to a softball, emits a beeping sound so players can follow it. The rules are similar to baseball, although players can run down the first-base line or the third-base line after they hit the ball. The bases are tall vinyl cylinders that make a buzzing noise; players run toward the sound and often tackle the base, toppling it over. Meanwhile, fielders dive for the ball and try to touch it before the batter reaches base. Players don't use baseball gloves, and everyone is blindfolded to keep the playing field even. Spectators stay quiet until each play is made so that players can hear the beeping ball. Meryl Merriweather, 61, watched the players hitting line drives and diving for the ball and said she was inspired.

"I think they're lying to us," she joked. "I think they can see." For Ron Brown, beep baseball helps keep his competitive spirit alive. Returning home from a basketball game one night when he was a high school senior, Brown was wounded by a gunshot and was blinded. "I thought my life was over in sports," said Brown, who plays for the Indy Thunder. "I thought life was over in general after I lost

my vision." Now 55, Brown has been playing beep baseball for 29 years. He will be inducted into the Beep Baseball Hall of Fame during a ceremony this weekend. Tuesday marked the first time the two Indianapolis teams faced off. The Thunder began in 2000, and the RHI X-treme is playing its first season.

Thunder manager Darnell Booker said the teams have a healthy rivalry. "We're rooting for the Thunder first," Booker said. "But if we don't do well, we're rooting for the X-treme." Both teams agree that playing beep baseball has created a family within the blind community. "I've always been competitive," said Steve Michaels, who plays for the X-treme. "Honestly, what it's done for me, I've met so many good blind people across the country." The teams travel to play in tournaments three or four times a year. Players meet and keep in touch, so the game is as much social as it is physical. Players say the blind and visually impaired are athletes just like sighted people.

"We're not always walking around sad because we lost our vision," Brown said. "I say we lost our vision, not our mind." At the end of the game, a 14-4 win for X-treme, both teams lined up to trade hugs and handshakes, the X-treme's red jerseys mixing with the blue-and-white striped jerseys of the Indy Thunder. The X-treme won this round, but neither team could dwell on the outcome. They still had two more games to play.

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