

## Sports

# Keeping them in the game

Beeps get those with visual impairments back on the field

By Tom Petrini  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

WOBURN — The Boston Renegades loudly cheered for their teammates at the Beast of the East tournament, but fell silent when Joe McCormick of Beverly stepped into the batter's box. They knew he needed to hear the sounds of the game.

McCormick placed his bat on the ground and used it to measure his distance from the plate, got in his stance, and told his coach he was ready for the pitch. The pitcher and catcher shouted their cadence — "Set, ready, pitch!" — and the beeping softball was tossed.

McCormick cracked a line drive, sprinted full speed down the line, and dove into the buzzing tackling dummy before the fielders could recover the ball made from recycled pay phone parts.

The Renegades won the tournament and are once again the Beast of the East in beep baseball, a modified version of America's pastime that allows visually impaired players to hit a pitched ball, run to a base, and play in the field while blindfolded.

Joe Yee of Medford, 46, had never run full speed until the Renegades' coaching staff showed him how when he joined the team five years ago.

"When we're practicing the running, it's such a safe environment," said Yee, a senior systems engineer at Harvard Management Co. "They first had me go slow, which really helped, and then they had me



Shawn Devenish of Salisbury (above) gets caught in the wires from one of the bases, which emit a buzzing sound. At right, Guy Zuccarello at the plate.



PHOTOS BY BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

go at full speed, and when I tagged that base at full speed it was just amazing."

The Association of Blind Citizens sponsors the Renegades, the only athletic team for blind adults in Greater Boston. They're one of the top teams in the National Beep Baseball Association, finishing second at the World Series last year. Head coach Rob Weissman, 46, is a business analyst at IBM Bluemix who has been a part of beep baseball since 2000.

According to Weissman, players who come to the team with partial sight generally

pick up the offensive side of the game more quickly because coaches can show them the finer points of swing mechanics. Totally blind players typically have an easier time learning defense because they are more used to moving around and locating objects based on sound without being able to see.

There are just two bases — first and third — that resemble football tackling dummies. When the batter hits a ball tossed from about 15 feet away by their coach, one of the bases starts buzzing and the race is on. If the batter touches the base before one of the fielders

possesses the ball, it counts as a run. If a fielder gets to the ball first, the batter is out.

No experience is needed to join the team. "We're always looking for volunteers and other players, anyone who wants to come out and get involved," said Shawn Devenish of Salisbury, 24, a physical education instructor at Triton Regional High School in Byfield, where he played football, wrestled, and ran track as a student with limited vision.

Christian Thaxton was a high school star who played two seasons of college baseball in Oklahoma before he lost his vision and had to drop out of school. He thought he would never again play the game.

"Coming back out here and finding the Renegades, and them graciously taking me on to the team, it was getting a part of my life back," said Thaxton, 24, who moved East to attend the Carroll Center for

the Blind in Newton and now lives in Watertown.

While Thaxton has been helping his teammates with their swings, they have been helping him with his defense and his adjustment to blindness. Thaxton said having a tight-knit group that knows what he's gone through has been a huge bonus. Now studying at the University of Massachusetts Boston, he can reach out to a teammate and say, "I'm struggling with this aspect of school, how did you deal with that?"

Joe Quintanilla of Medford, 41, has been with the team since it was founded in 2001. "When I went to the first practice, I learned about how it all works and fell in love with it," he said. "At the age of 24, I could finally play baseball, hit a ball that's actually being pitched to me."

The Woburn Host Lions hosted the Beast of the East

tournament, providing food, volunteers, travel accommodations for visiting teams, and money to defray the cost of attending. Teams from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania competed.

"It is a humbling game, more so than even golf," said Frank DiMauro, a member of the Lions, who has donned a blindfold to play in beep ball scrimmages against the Renegades. "Just to be able to hit the ball took me seven years."

The Renegades, who won the tournament for the seventh time, will return to the Beep Baseball World Series July 23-30 in West Palm Beach, Fla.

"We've been knocking on the door for years," said Quintanilla, who is in his 17th season with the team. "We're here, and we're not going away."

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## NOTEWORTHY

MICHELA AGRESTI  
SWAMPSCOTT

The defender for the FC Stars of Mass. soccer club is competing at the Chinese Football Association International Under-16 women's tournament with the US team. The 15-year-old Swampscott High star has committed to play at Boston College.



KEVIN BETTENCOURT  
PEABODY

The former Peabody High star will be inducted into the Bucknell University Hall of Fame on Nov. 3. A four-year basketball starter who is now the head coach at Endicott, he scored 19 points in a first-round upset of Kansas in 2005, the Bison's first NCAA win.



MATT TABOR  
WESTFORD

The Arizona Diamondbacks selected the Milton Academy graduate with the 82nd pick in Major League Baseball's First-Year Player Draft. The 6-2, 165-pound righthander, who has been clocked in the low 90s, agreed to a \$1 million contract.



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