

Sports

Local beep baseball team heads to Hall of Fame

By **Stephen Tobey**

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The players on the Association of Blind Citizens Boston Renegades beep baseball team come in all shapes, ages and sizes.

There are college students and retirees. Some have played baseball, beep baseball or the traditional version, before they joined the team. Some have not. They have different kinds of visual impairment.

They play for the same reason most amateur athletes play a team sport.

“I’ve always been active,” said Joseph Yee, who has been playing for the Renegades since 2014. “I heard about the team. At the time I was busy with work and couldn’t play, but my time freed up and I began playing. It was fun.”

On Aug. 18, members of the Renegades visited the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York for its Beep Baseball Bash.

The day included a demonstration of the game, a movie about the Renegades called “The Renegades: A Beep Ball Story” and an appearance by David Wanczyk, the author of the book “Beep: Inside the Unseen World of Baseball for the Blind.”

The Renegades practice in Watertown and have 17 players, plus 20 volunteers. Three of the volunteers, Rob Weissman, Ron Cochran and Jason Lenicheck, who are all 1988 graduates of Acton-Boxborough High School.

“We all played baseball together at A-B,” Weissman said. “We all wanted to be part of a team again.”

Each of them has several years of volunteering with the Renegades under their belts. Weissman has been a volunteer with the Renegades since 2003. Cochran has volunteered since 2006 and Lenicheck, has had two stints, from 2004 to 2015 and 2017 to this season.

Weissman and Cochran also helped start beep baseball in Lowell in 2000.

Beep baseball is played by teams of six players, who are all in the field. The games are six innings, with three outs. Each batter gets four strikes.

The ball is a 16-inch softball with a part from a decommissioned payphone providing the beeps. While all the players are legally blind, everyone wears a blindfold to level the playing field.

One major difference between beep baseball and the traditional game is that the pitcher is on the same team as the batter and his job to get the batter to hit the ball.

“Their job is to groove the ball,” Weissman said. “The top pitchers have the ball put in play 80 to 85 percent of the time.”

The pitcher’s job is not without its occupational hazards.

“The pitcher puts his life on the line,” Weissman said. “There are two kinds of pitchers, those who have been hit in the [groin] and those who will be hit in the [groin].”

The pitcher and catcher are among the volunteers. Other sighted volunteers, called spotters, direct the fielders to the ball and the runners toward the bases.

“It was super scary, trying to run at full speed in the field,” Yee said. “The spotters really help.”

Said Weissman, “They give the guys the ability to feel 100 percent safe.”

The Renegades typically play teams in Rochester, New York and Long Island, as well as New Jersey. The Renegades finished fifth of 22 teams in the most recent World Series in Wisconsin.

One of the Renegades’ players, Christian Thaxton, hit .897, going 26 for 29, in the World Series. Thaxton, who played baseball for Redlands Community College in Oklahoma, has his bat in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

“Chris said to us, he loved the team camaraderie,” Weissman said. “He loved the competitiveness of it.”

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