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Melissa Hoyt, accidental inspiration

Beep beep beep.

Melissa Hoyt stands at the ready, bat in hand.

Beep beep beep.

The pitcher yells, "Ready ... set ... pitch."

The beep beep beep gets closer as Melissa takes a swing.

Melissa is a first baseman/rover – and the only female player -- for the Boston Renegades, a beep baseball team. Beep baseball is an adaptive version of the sport for the visually impaired.

The cause of Melissa's blindness is related to her mitochondrial disease. She has Complex 1, 2, and 3 deficiencies, negatively impacting the function of her electron transport chain and her ability to make cellular energy. Her list of symptoms is long and varied: reflux, migraines, asthma, GI issues, dysautonomia (which, for Melissa, means temperature intolerance, breathing issues, and other POTS symptoms), motility disorder, muscle spasms, weakness, thyroid problems, and fatigue.

Renegades coach Rob Weissman said Melissa questioned why someone was interested in doing a story about her. "She's an inspiration for what she's overcome and for her outlook," he says.

But Melissa doesn't think of herself as an inspiration. She just goes about her daily business and doesn't expect any recognition.

"I'm not a stat magnet for the team," she says. "I missed a lot of time over the years because of Mito. But when I get frustrated that I'm not having good stats on the team, I have to remember there was a time I didn't think I could continue to play.

"Even with all the uncertainty of living with this progressive disease, people shouldn't give up hope. If there's something you want to try, try it," she says, doling out inspiration without even realizing it.

Weissman admits that Melissa struggles. "She's never had a full season where she hasn't been hospitalized. She's always struggling with something but she pushes through it. It doesn't let it stop her. She's never 'woe is me.'"

With that being said, Weissman won't allow Melissa to push herself past her limits. She sits when she needs to sit; she won't play in hot and humid weather; she will stop doing drills when they get to be too much.

"She knows her limits; we know her limits," he says.

"Melissa is limited in what she can do physically," the coach continues. "But she gives you everything she can. She's just one of the guys."



Melissa has been asked how she can play baseball with so many pressing medical issues. "I do what I can on the field. There are times I feel fine but I also have to schedule my day around practice." As games ramp up, the team practices twice a week.

"There was a time when I questioned whether to keep playing," she says, noting she missed the entire 2014 season after reconstructive ankle surgery. "I had a lot of time to think."

She entered the 2015 season with a new attitude. "After years of missing time, if I go back and don't have fun or my body is yelling at me, I need to think about this. But I went back and had more fun. There was a level of being grateful that I could be out there. It made me enjoy it more.

"Mito is messing with me ... but I'm out here. How many people can say that with as many medical things as I have."

There she goes again with that unintentional inspirational talk.

Weissman says Melissa always tries hard and loves the game. "I love having her as part of the team. Everyone pulls for her to succeed."

As Mito patients know all too well, Melissa has to budget her

energy. And since the team has to travel around the country to play its games, energy management becomes even more important. “I have to pay more attention to certain details than anyone else on the team,” she says.

“I have to micromanage my day to day anyway, so when we travel I have to plot it out carefully. Where can I make sure I’m resting? What can I do during the week before we travel? Having Mito makes it more challenging.”

As an example, the Beep Baseball World Series is going to be held in Florida in August. The heat and humidity will be unbearable for Melissa. The team is trying to work out a plan where she could come for part of the week.

The first two years Melissa played for the Renegades, she didn’t have her Mito diagnosis yet. “Entering the third season, I knew I had Mito but I didn’t understand what it meant for me,” she says, noting she had never heard of mitochondrial disease until then. But she was relieved to know that all her symptoms were actually connected.

“I knew if I pushed past my limit, it would affect me. I wasn’t listening to my body then. I learned to listen to my body.”

Melissa played soccer and basketball as a child, but as her sight deteriorated, sports were out of the question. So she became a sports fan. She was decked out in her Red Sox gear at a subway station back in 2007 when she was approached by a Renegades coach, who invited her to a practice.

That first practice was a mixture of feeling intimidated yet still thinking “this is pretty cool,” Melissa says.

The Renegades provide a social aspect for the team members. Melissa has friends on the team to turn to when she gets frustrated. “When I’m down on myself for the health stuff, I have people who help keep me going. I text them, I vent to them. Even having their energy helps. It gives me an extra edge.”

When she’s not playing baseball, Melissa volunteers on the Patient and Family Advisory Council at Massachusetts General Hospital, the Community Emergency Response Team in Brookline, and Rare New England. She wishes she could work, but managing doctor appointments and ever-present health challenges keeps her from doing so. She hopes to do more volunteering. She lives independently with her guide dog, Harkin, just outside of Boston.

Despite her challenges, Melissa is living life to the fullest. “Don’t let people tell you that you can’t do something just because they don’t think you can. Don’t believe you can’t do it. Try it anyway! Don’t lose hope.”

In another pearl of inspiration, she adds, “Surround yourself with people who bring you light and encourage you and help you keep going. The light comes from within, but you need people around you who lift you up. Everyone needs such people, but it’s that much more helpful with health that is so uncertain.”

About beep baseball



Beep baseball provides a good opportunity for the blind and visually impaired to either get to be competitive again after vision loss or experience a competitive sport for the first time, says Boston Renegades first baseman/rover Melissa Hoyt.

“While maybe a little unique in its nature, it’s great that the awareness and popularity of it is growing,” she says.

Renegades coach Rob Weissman says his team has a range of vision loss, from totally blind to legally blind. Some of the Renegades players have lost their sight due to disease, such as diabetes and mitochondrial

disease.

Because of the variations in sight, all the players wear blindfolds so no one has an advantage.

Hitting, especially if you've never done it before, can be a lot of work as you have to learn timing and everything that is involved to hit the ball well, Melissa says.

The players must listen carefully to their own pitcher, who is sighted, and his cadence. "He will say ready, set, pitch. We have to figure out when to swing," Melissa says. The coaches will give feedback after each pitch and the players will then adjust. In beep baseball, hitters get four strikeouts instead of three.

If a player gets a hit, he or she must run to base as fast as they can.

According to the Renegades website, there are only two bases to prevent a runner from colliding with a defensive fielder. The batter does not know which base will be turned on. The bases are 5-foot-tall padded cylinders. When the ball is hit, the base operator activates one of the bases. The runner must identify the correct buzzing base and run to it before a defensive player fields the ball.

So, unlike regular baseball, where there's a visual to run to first base, "we have to listen for which base goes off audibly and run to the one making the noise. Our ability to hear it and line ourselves up with it are among the important factors of our base running," Melissa says.

The players also trust the coaches, who will yell instructions if a player is running outside of the baseline.

Six players defend the field and have territories, or zones, to cover. When the beep ball is hit, players scramble to the ball while a spotter yells out the zone number the ball is headed to.

"Your communication has to be good," Melissa says.

Players often use their bodies to stop the ball and once they have the ball, they lift it into the air. If the batter touches the base before a fielder can pick up the ball, his team scores. If the fielder gets the ball before the runner gets to the base, he is out.

There are six innings in beep baseball.

The Boston Renegades are volunteer-run and funded through donations and grants.

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