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Marion youth's diamond dreams revisited

Buhler overcomes vision loss to be a world champ

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Zach Buhler had big dreams on the baseball diamond.

The shortstop and sometimes catcher was already on the radar for high school and college coaches, and his plan was to put in the hard work necessary to reach baseball's highest level.

Sometimes life throws curveballs to people, and as a 12-year-old preparing to finish his little league career in Marion and move on to the next level of competition, life threw Buhler the toughest pitch in his young life.

"I went to the doctor just for regular check-up and found out that I had detached both retinas and had a giant tear in one of them," said Buhler, who is now 19. "Over the next few days, I saw some more doctors and ended up having surgery in Detroit. But it just got worse from that point."

Buhler said he thinks the problem with his retinas were genetic as he couldn't recall anything that would cause such trauma to his eyes.

One thing was certain, Buhler's baseball career was cut short with his visual

impairment.

"I was super crushed," Buhler said. "I had some college coaches talk to me and the high school coach talked to me and they told me they were looking forward to seeing me play. I had some people tell me I could go far if I worked hard. When I found out I couldn't play, it tore me apart."

Last winter, Buhler had another life changing experience when his mother learned about the sport of goal ball, a game similar to soccer that is part of the Paralympics coming up in Rio in just over a month.

Buhler made a friend through goal ball who was also a member of the Indy Thunder beep baseball team and about five weeks ago he met coach and general manager, Darnell Butler, who invited him to practice.

Now, Buhler is not only part of a world champion in beep ball, he is considered as one of the top six hitters in the sport.

The best part for Buhler is he playing baseball and competing again.

"He was coachable, but when I talked to him in Fort Wayne, I told him we could use him but it might be next year," said Booker, who formed the Indy Thunder in 2000, of his first meeting with Buhler. "I invited him to come down to practice and sat him down and told him nothing is given, he had to earn it. When I first saw his swing I knew he'd played baseball. And he rose above a lot of our veterans."

Buhler added, "When I first started learning (beep ball), the coaches were telling me I wouldn't get any playing time. I showed off what I could do and hit like I knew how. My natural instincts and athleticism came in handy and after the first practice I had people telling



PHOTO PROVIDED BY INDY THUNDER
WORLD CHAMP: Zach Buhler, 19, of Marion, takes a pitch at a pitch during the recent Beep Baseball World Series in Ames, Iowa. Buhler's Indy Thunder team captured the world championship.

me I should start."

He didn't start right away. The Thunder had been playing together since January and with the World Series coming up in Ames, Iowa, Butler wanted to stick with more experienced players.

But Buhler's talent eventually made it impossible for him to not play.

"The only way I see Zach going is up," Booker said. "He just has to put in the time. He was a pleasant surprise because his hitting was off the charts. He's got speed and power. He's one of those players that has to be on the field. I have nothing but high praise for the kid."

Buhler batted an incredible .613 in the world series. He sparked a rally that led to a comeback win over cross town rival Indy Edge in one game. He was named to the all-offensive World Series team after the Thunder won the title.

Booker said even better days are ahead for Buhler.

"He just started five weeks ago, he's not even scratched surface of his ability," Booker said. "He can still get better, he didn't even have a full rookie season. But he worked hard for the

three weeks leading up to World Series and he's definitely earned everything he's got. He needs to work on his defense, but give him a full season he'll do it on both sides of the ball.

"Right now Zach is a beast. When he gets his defense down, he'll be a monster."

There could be a conflict on the horizon, though, as Buhler is moving to Fort Wayne in October to become a part of the goal ball residency program of the USA National team and begin training for the 2020 Paralympics in Tokyo.

The programs essentially put athletes through Olympic style training sessions and practices daily. The team will also travel throughout the USA and internationally to compete in tournaments.

But Buhler envisions being able to play both sports.

"It works out really well because goal ball ends in

June and the World Series isn't until the end of July," Buhler said. "I can play with the Thunder on week-ends. The only time I can't will be if I'm traveling. I explained to coach (Booker) that I should be able to do both."

Booker certainly hopes that is the scenario.

"I hope he's with us for years to come," Booker said. "Zach has power to all fields and speed. He is one of the best six hitters in the world right now."

Buhler isn't about to rest on his newfound laurels.

"I thought I did alright but I didn't think I was worthy of being on the all-offensive team," Buhler said. "I had a couple of people tell me I was going to be one of the greatest batters in the world."

"That just makes me want to work harder. It was super exciting and humbling. I've only been playing a little over a month so it is a huge honor."