

# Beep Baseball team Indy Thunder win third straight title

**Andrew Hussey, Indianapolis Star**

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*(Photo: Andrew Hussey/IndyStar)*

**UPDATED, Aug. 6:** The Indy Thunder were driven by the opportunity to get golden rings.

Saturday, they won their third consecutive Beep Baseball World Series.

“We just have a really good program,” Thunder coach Darnell Booker said. “Our mindset is championship or bust. We can cement ourselves with this three-peat because it’s very rarely done.”

The Thunder didn’t lose a game on their road to the championship game, dominating their opponents. The closest game before the championship was an 18-6 victory over the Bayou City Heat in the semifinals.

In the championship game, the Thunder lost the first game 19-10, but since the tournament was double-elimination, came back in the second game and won the title.

In the last three seasons, the Thunder are 67-3.

“I know it’s a niche sport, it’s nothing major,” Booker said. “There’s no college, there’s no pro, but I tell everybody, ‘This group is amazing. Just give us a chance and we’ll produce.’”

The Thunder don’t play baseball by sight.

Instead, by using timing and hearing, this group of young and old plays the sport in a way specifically designed for them. The Thunder play Beep Baseball, a version of baseball for blind and visually impaired players. Thunder players range in age from 14-57.

“I like it because it allows me to feel like I’m part of a team,” Thunder player Erik Rodriguez said. “There’s a lot of individual sports we can do, but it’s nothing like being part of a team.”

And that team has the chance to cement its place in Beep Baseball history. The Thunder are the reigning back-to-back World Series champions and begin their quest for a third straight title Tuesday in Eau Claire, Wis. The championship will be Aug. 5.

For a lot of the players on the Thunder, this is their one chance to play baseball.

Volunteer spotter Lisa Wright has three sons playing. They played baseball until their vision deteriorated to the point they had to stop.

“Socially it helps,” Wright said. “It just gives them an opportunity they otherwise wouldn’t have.”

In Beep Baseball, everyone wears a blindfold and the pitcher and the batter are on the same team. Each batter gets four strikes. The pitcher and batter work so their timing is in sync, allowing the batter to get a hit.

“The best hitters are consistent because the pitcher and the batter work together,” said Thunder coach Darnell Booker, who has been involved in Beep Baseball since 1985, after a BB gun accident caused him to lose sight in his right eye. “That’s where the long hours come in from January, February and March when they are practicing a lot of hitting.”

Six defenders are spread out among numbered zones in the field. Once the ball is put into play, sighted spotters call out the zone and that player goes for the ball. If the defender gets the ball before the batter makes it to the base, it’s an out. If the runner first makes it to the base 100 feet away, that’s a run scored.

There are only two bases – first and third – and the operator decides randomly which base the batter has to run to. A sound tells the runner which base to go to. There are no runners on base or walks; the batter either scores or is out.

Booker, who played for another champion Beep Baseball team in 1990, founded the Thunder in 2000 as a recreational team. In 2001, they joined the National Beep Baseball Association and quickly developed into one of the top 10 teams in the world. They broke through for their first title in 2016 thanks to an influx of talent.

“It’s impressive to see the level of effort everybody on this team puts in on this team,” Thunder veteran Adam Rodenbech said. “We have a lot of athletes and I think it really shows how much we care about one another the way that we all play together, the way we get along off the field. It’s really like a family.”

For most of the Thunder, the team is a second family. Nearly everyone on the roster believes this is why they have done so well; chemistry built by hours together on and off the field.

These are platitudes uttered in every sport but they have a deeper meaning in a competition that requires the players to be blindfolded. They must have total trust in one another and intricate communication.

“This is more than a game to us,” Zach Buhler said. “We would take a bullet for each and every one of our teammates. It’s a real bonding experience and

we've grown as a family.”

The family atmosphere spills over to practice. With the volunteer contingent needed for the Thunder to run smoothly, practice is a lighthearted environment with family and friends present to watch hitting drills.

Just days away from the World Series, the Thunder are confident, yet aware of the task ahead. They know the other 21 teams are gunning for them.

Rodriguez said this is the best version of the Thunder to date and Rodenbech believes this team is on the brink of a dynasty, though there's work to do if the Thunder want to approach the seven consecutive titles earned by the Austin Blackhawks from 1992-98.

The third title is something they dream about.

“That would be cool, but I'm kind of running out of fingers to put the rings on,” Thunder player Tyler Rodriguez said.

Booker said he knows other teams are planning for them, but said his team understands what's at stake.

“I told our team, ‘If someone's going to beat us, they're going to have to take it from us,’” Booker said. “That's easier said than done.”

*Follow IndyStar sports reporter Andrew Hussey on Twitter at @thehusnetwork.*