

# Playing baseball in total darkness



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(Photo: Perry Reichanadter/For The Star)

Standing at home plate ready to bat, Imran Ahmed drops to his knees, his elbows in the dirt.

The sun is beating down. Sweat drips off his forehead. It's a bright spring Saturday morning.

But 30-year-old Ahmed is on the ground grasping in total darkness, trying to line the tip of his bat up to the far edge of the plate.

Rising, he gives the pitcher a hint of where he will swing. He shows him that swing again.

Then Ahmed stops. He stands ready. And he listens.

"Here we go ... ready ... pitch," the voice calls out.

Ahmed has no idea where the ball is, but he swings anyway. And it's money. He hits a long line drive. He takes off running, his arms flailing in front of him.

He is running into darkness. Trying to drown out the sounds of buzzing traffic, kids squealing in the park, birds chirping, even the sounds of teammates cheering him on.

He is running toward the beep that blares from first base, a tall, padded base. His arms make contact and he tackles the base – before a fielder can scoop up the ball that he hit. The beep is silenced.

Score.

Ahmed smiles. Blind since birth with a rare condition called Leber Congenital Amaurosis, he knows. His teammates know. The coaches know. The family watching know.

What happens on the fields where the Indianapolis Thunder Beep Baseball team plays is nothing short of miraculous.

They play baseball in darkness.

## Baseball in a different light

The Thunder is made up of blind and visually impaired players ranging in age from 16 into the 50s. The team had its opening day outdoor practice April at Broad Ripple Park.

The team, Indianapolis' only all-local beepball club founded in 2000, hasn't ever won a beepball World Series. But this year, they think, may just be their year.

They've compiled a roster of solid hitters, fast runners and a pitcher whose job is, perhaps, the most important.

"His goal is not to beat us," Ahmed said. "His goal is to aim at our bat."

That's one of the big differences between beepball and traditional baseball. The opposing team doesn't pitch. Darnell Booker, associate head coach for the Thunder, pitches to his own team.

The job is critical. Booker must watch where his batters swing and then be adept enough to hurl the ball where the batter has shown him he will swing.

"It's like target practice," said Booker, who pitches with one good eye.

At age 14, playing around with his friends and a BB gun, Booker was shot in the right eye. He went blind in that eye, but sees 20/40 out of his left.

He went on to become a star at beep baseball and, in 1990, won a World Series with the now-defunct Indianapolis Eagles beepball team.

"Sidestep to the right for me," Booker tells a player as the team practices. "Back off the base a little bit. Show me that swing again. OK. Let's do this. Do it one time for me."

"Here we go ... ready ... pitch." The same words are yelled out before every pitch. They have to be.

"When players hear 'tch' they should already be swinging," said Elysia Castetter, a volunteer with the team. Until a surgery in 2000, she was severely visually impaired and played beepball. She now sees 20/30 out of both eyes. Beepball is a coed sport, though most of the Thunder's 14 players are men.

As Booker pitches to half of the Thunder team, the other half is across the field, practicing defense. Balls also are equipped with speakers that beep. When the ball is hit, players in the field chase after the moving beep and scoop up the ball.

If they do so before the batter makes it to a base (there are only first and third bases in beepball) that batter is out. If they don't, the batter scores a point.

The root of the sport is the same as baseball. But there are differences.

Batters get four strikes instead of three. After a hit, either the first or third base starts beeping. Batters don't know which base they will run to until they've made a hit and hear the beep. There are three outs per inning and six innings per game.

And all the players wear masks over their eyes, except for the pitcher and catcher. Those masks even the playing field between those with impaired vision and those who are blind. In beepball there is no level of sight loss required to make the team, only that a player's vision is impaired.

But really, most of the players in beepball are already on similar ground. Most can't play the sports others can play.

Their world is fuzzy at best.

### **Leading by example**

Ron Brown was a 17-year-old high school student in 1973, a standout athlete. He had just finished a basketball game and was walking home, across a field.

Gunshots rang out. A man was shooting from a window. Brown was hit and, in an instant, he went from 20-20 vision to blind.

"I thought life as I knew it with sports was over for me," said Brown, now head coach of the Thunder.

Life had certainly changed. One of the first painful lessons Brown learned was that many of his friends couldn't deal with his blindness and stayed away — perhaps out of sadness, perhaps out of ignorance. But Brown found solace making new friends, members of the National Federation of the Blind.

There was life after blindness, they assured him. There were sports after blindness and Brown found his in beep baseball in 1983. He became a standout athlete again.

In the world of beepball, he was known as Downtown Ron Brown.

"I used to knock it out of the park," he said. "I ain't gonna lie."

Brown was on the 1990 team with Booker that won the World Series. He is in the National Beep Baseball Association Hall of Fame.

He sees great promise in his 2015 team, though he knows the struggles they face.

"The toughest thing is once you go into the blindfold," he said. "Going totally into the darkness."

Many of the beep baseball athletes have some light perception, some glimpses of sight. In this baseball game that advantage is taken away.

"There is tripping, falling, colliding on the field," he said. "Concussions have happened. It's not an easy sport."

### **Finding their way**

Out on the field, Toby Gregory has fallen to the ground. He is playing outfield at Saturday's practice and has heard the beep of a ball hit toward him. He crawls on all fours reaching, grappling to find the ball.

Gregory, 38, is legally blind. Like others on his team, he hasn't always been blind.

His myopic nerves were crushed in a car accident when he was a student at Pike High School.

"I was an athlete in high school," he says with sadness. "And since I lost my vision, this gives me a chance to be competitive. Some would say a little t competitive."

Gregory is hard on himself. He is Castetter's boyfriend. As she talks beepball, he walks up after an at-bat he's not happy with.

He leans up against Castetter.

"What?" she asks him.

"I suck," he says.

"No," she tells Gregory. "You did just fine."

### **The newcomer**

People of sight take for granted little things that players on the Thunder can't.

Take Corey White, 16, who walks up to home plate but can't see the bat being held out to him. He almost gets stabbed by it.

"Whoa, whoa," yells Booker. "Watch it, man."

White stops, reaches for the bat and starts showing Booker his swing.

White, a student at Pike High School, is visually impaired in his right eye, seeing 20/70. It's his second year of beepball. He played for the Chicago Comets last year, a team that came in 5th in the World Series.

The Thunder see this newcomer as one of their stars. As they should. White hits the ball and zips toward the beeping base.

He plays corner for the Pike High School football team. But he doesn't play baseball for his school.

"I like beepball better," he said. "You hit the bases and I like to tackle."

Tackle he does. Over and over at Saturday's practice, White hits and runs and tackles the beeping bases.

"Good run, Corey," yells Brown.

White rips off his mask as he walks back. He can see out of his left eye. He can see the smile on Brown's face.

He is one of the few players who can see the joy on this field. But he is far from the only player who feels it.

"They go out and they give it their all," said Brown. "They play their hearts out."

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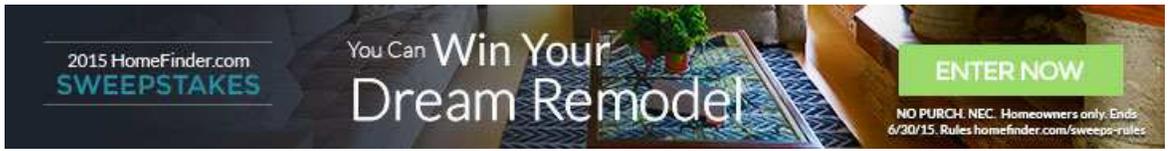
### **Thunder events**

May 2: Third Annual spring dance at the Moose Lodge from 6 to 9 p.m.

May 5: Indy Thunder night with the Indianapolis Indians

Info on Thunder team events and fundraisers: <http://thunderbeepball.org/> (<http://thunderbeepball.org/>)

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