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## **America's pastime for blind athletes Sound-based variation of baseball allows sightless to become sluggers**

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DURHAM -- Though he couldn't see it, Keith Edgerton was ready for the ball that came whizzing into left field and landed, beeping, a few feet ahead of him. Or at least he thought that was where it landed. He scrambled for a moment, groping in the direction of the muffled beeping until he found it, grabbed it and held it high.

"Out!"

The umpire signaled the save, according the rules of Beep Ball, and the Durham Sluggers Beep Ball team was one step closer to their 9-0 victory over the Triad team in the first game of the North/South Carolina Beep Ball Tournament at Herndon Park on Friday.

"I love to run," Edgerton said after the game, but "it's hard to hear the ball sometimes when the speaker's in the ground." But that doesn't stop him from playing whenever he can, as he has been since the 1990s. After the tournament he headed to Houston for the Beep Ball World Series to play with the West Coast Dogs from California.

This game of baseball for the blind was created by telephone engineer Charley Fairbanks in 1964 when he put a circuit and a telephone speaker in a softball and other sound units in traffic cone-like bases.

"These are not poor blind people, they're athletes," said Cookie Jones-Peele, coach of the Triad Beep Ball team and regional commissioner. "This gives them a chance to show off."

Jones-Peele has been coaching Beep Ball in High Point since 1986 when a team member told her their coach was leaving and the team wouldn't be able to get to the tournament. Jones-Peele had been working with the Lions for some time, and had a love for the blind,

so she jumped at the opportunity. At the game Friday morning, she said the teams were evenly matched in skill.

"Luck is a big part of this because they're all talented," she said.

The bases, which used to whistle, now give off a buzzing sound to avoid confusion with the ball's beeping. There are two bases on a Beep Ball field -- one down the left side and one down the right from home plate -- and the umpire chooses which one the controller will activate when the ball is hit. The diamond is split into seven sections where the outfielders stand, waiting for a sighted spotter to tell them to which section the ball is headed. The batter proclaims whether he is left-or-right-handed and the sighted pitcher lets him know when he's tossing the beeping ball underhand toward the plate.

The most common problem with the game being sound-based on Friday was that, being near the airport, the teams had to call a time out every time a plane flew over or a large truck drove by.

Though most players are blind, some are partially or completely sighted, so everyone but the pitcher and spotters must wear blindfolds during play. Regardless of their level of sight, they all play hard.

Glenn Permar, 55, who has been playing for 34 years, was once hit in the face by a line drive and broke three ribs diving for a ball.

"Defense can be kind of rough sometimes. We love it good enough to deal with the pain and keep on going."

Permar did say that the sport could use more publicity and more players. All but two of the Durham Sluggers are over 40.

"We're getting old to be playing on the ground like kids," he said, laughing, "and it hurts a little more every year." But he's not giving up any time soon.

"As long as I can be productive, I'll be out here," he said.

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