

Blind batter aims to get others back in the game

Jim Haug jim.haug@news-jrnl.com

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Willie Scales started losing his vision in 1998. Desperate **for** a cure, he traveled to **the** renowned Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, but a corrective treatment could not be found.

Facts

If You Go

WHAT: Beep Baseball practice and game, open to **visually impaired** and sighted

WHEN: July 12, batting practice is 8:30-10 a.m., and game is 10 a.m.-noon

WHERE: Soccer fields at Port Orange City **Center**, 4625 City **Center** Drive, Port Orange

COST: \$2 to cover rent of ballfields

MORE INFORMATION: Willie Scales at 386-341-8104 or wwss41@att.net

Why Scales went blind is still a mystery. **The** sudden loss of vision came as a shock.

“I was a very active person. I organized a couple of softball teams. I ran a swimming pool **for the** city. I was doing all that stuff, but then in a week’s time, I could not even walk outside to get in my car. That’s devastating,” said Scales, who now lives in Port Orange, but formerly lived in **the** Grand Rapids, Michigan, area.

Some 16 years later, Scales will be returning to Rochester, but this time more than ready **for** hard knocks.

And as it turns out, hard ball.

As a member of team from Athens, Georgia, Scales, 54, will be competing in **the** 2014 Beep Baseball World Series, an adapted sport **for the visually impaired**.

It is a rough and tumble game.

“You really have to pad up **for** it,” Scales said. “You do a lot of diving on **the** ground. **The** ball will roll to your body and you have to get control of it.”

Scales has overcome adversity before. When he lost his job as a car salesman after going blind, he went into business **for** himself, starting a car lot called Willie’s Auto Finance. After his business was featured on **the** Hallmark cable channel, “I could not keep a car on **the** lot,” Scales said.

When his business folded during **the** recession, Scales moved to Florida and is currently looking **for** work.

Scales also is trying revive local interest in beep baseball, organizing a team called **the** Daytona Bats, with about 10 to 15 players.

He is building on **the** legacy of another local beep baseball team, **the** Florida Sandspurs, that went to **the** World Series when it was in Denver in 2003 and that also challenged members of **the** Volusia County Council to a game at Jackie Robinson Stadium, according to **the** News-Journal archives.

Ronee Silverman, **the** executive director of **the Center for the Visually Impaired** in Daytona Beach, which sponsored **the** original team, believes **the** Sandspurs became too much of a commitment **for** players.

“One of **the** issues was that **the** coach insisted on (practice) every week. A lot of people weren’t able to do it. That’s kind of why it fell apart,” Silverman said.

Scales wants to do many of **the** same things, challenging community organizations, such as firefighters and police, to games of beep baseball.

He also encourages **the** blind and **the** sighted to play together in mixed teams with **the** sighted putting on blindfolds when they participate. By game rules, only **the** catcher and **the** pitcher are allowed to see.

The team plays most Saturday mornings at **the** ballfields at Port Orange City **Center**. He often gets more female players than men. Scales is very welcoming.

“I wouldn’t care if I had two or three teams. I’m trying to get people out of **the** house. Let’s do something,” Scales said.

The call to play is especially pertinent **for the visually impaired**, who suffer from a higher rate of diseases related to **the** sedentary lifestyle, said Matt Simpson, **the** membership and outreach coordinator United States Association of Blind Athletes, based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. “It is hard to provide exact data, but there’s definitely a higher rate of obesity, diabetes because of **the** lack of opportunities **for** blind and **visually impaired**,” Simpson said in a telephone interview.

Simpson noted that “70 percent of kids in public schools who are blind, **visually impaired** or disabled miss out on physical education curriculum. They don’t get involved with PE classes. Many kids don’t get any access to any recreational physical activity or competition.”

Carlos Montas, 31, a beep baseball player from Ormond Beach who has been blind since birth, said beep baseball “shows **the** rest of **the** public that blind people can enjoy (physical) recreation.”

Montas occasionally goes to a school **for the blind** in St. Augustine to play goalball, a reverse form of dodgeball adapted **for the visually impaired**. Scales also participates in rowing at **the** Halifax Rowing Association.

Among adaptive sports, beep baseball offers **the** rare opportunity to run across an open field.

“When is a blind person going to feel **the** wind in their hair and really run? They can’t,”

Silverman said.

“That’s what a lot of people in beep baseball have said. ‘Wow, that’s what it feels like to run,’”

Silverman said.

Making a hit is a matter of timing, players said.

“When you get one hit, which happens 20 percent of **the** time (on average), it feels really good,” said batter Christopher Dixon.

Besides whacking **the** ball, there are more intangible rewards.

Daniel Marsh, 28, an employee of both **the** Port Orange YMCA and **the** city of Port Orange’s recreation department, got involved at Scales’ invitation. He is a sighted player .

“It really makes you feel fortunate to help out,” Marsh said.

Cutline: News-Journal/JIM HAUG

Willie Scales has been working to bring back beep baseball to Daytona Beach.ytona Beach.