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Baseball for the Blind comes to Connecticut in game Saturday

By **JESSE LEAVENWORTH**
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A blindfolded Andrew Landolphi runs at a recent practice of the Connecticut Chargers. (Joseph Landolphi)

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Sensations of baseball — the smell of glove leather and grass and the crack and clunk of bat on ball — will be threaded through the game when teams from Connecticut and New York City play on Saturday.

Most players, however, will see nothing.

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This is Baseball for the Blind, or B4B, a relatively popular sport for visually impaired and blind people in Italy and other countries, but still emerging in the U.S. The game in Franklin pits the Connecticut Chargers against the New York Lions.

Chargers coach Joseph Landolphi is a 16-year-old senior at Parish Hill High School in Chaplin. His team of non-vision-impaired friends will be blindfolded, except for the second baseman, the only sighted player that rules allow. The Lions are blind and visually impaired people from the five boroughs.

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Landolphi is organizing the game for his credited high school community service project. He said he was introduced to B4B by his great uncle, Don Landolphi, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native who has had a life in baseball.

Landolphi, 80, coached the Brooklyn College team, was assistant coach for Italy's national team in the 1970s and held several other coaching jobs in that country and the U.S. He said he first saw Baseball for the Blind in Florence, Italy, in 2006.

Immediately intrigued, Landolphi said he volunteered to help the coach and has been involved ever since in coaching and promoting the game, currently with the Lions team. Asked if players get the same joy from B4B as sighted players, Landolphi said, "More."

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"Try running a straight line with your eyes blindfolded," he said of the hardest part of the game, the run from third to home. "When they accomplish that, they are so excited. It's just a wonderful experience for all of them."

THE FIELD

The defensive field of play is the area of left field beyond the separation rope between the second defensive base and the third base foul line. The offensive bases correspond to the ones used in normal baseball. First base is sound activated, second base is the first batter's goal, third base and home base can be reached by runners following a hit made by one of their teammates.

Home plate, for the runner, is an imaginary line of 13 feet positioned on the home base-first base alignment. The center of this line corresponds to the home plate vertex. The home run line is defined by dashed lines.

The defensive second base is 13 feet away from the left field from the original second base.

THE GAME

The ball is a regular hollow rubber ball with six holes on its surface and two holes placed inside balls inside which help players finding the ball.

The pitcher (P) puts the ball in play by tossing it in the air and hitting it in order for the batted ball to be called "IN PLAY". It must go beyond a rope which starts from the left corner towards first base (1B) of the second defensive base (2DB) and go to the third base (3B) foul line after having bounced at least one time before it.

The batter-runner (B) attempts to reach second base (2B) after his landing or getting at second base (1B). Once a safe hit hits the second base (2B) before the sighted defensive player (SDP) positioned on the second defensive base (2DB), catches the throw from the blind defensive player (S, G, T, R, B).

The batter (B) is allowed three swings and if the catcher does not put the ball in play or fails to hit, for the first swing, it is a strike out.

The runner (R) on second base (2B) advances to third base (3B) at home plate (HP) on successive batted balls.

Runners (R) can leave the base (2B, 3B) only after the umpire has called the batted ball "FAIR" and this occurs at the moment the ball properly lands, surpasses the rope.

When a runner or batter-runner (B) or batter (B), the runner (R) must touch the base. If he does not have to maintain contact.

The batter-runner (B) and the runner (R) can try to reach an "extra base" only after the blind fielder (S, G, T, R, B) has taken the throw to the sighted assistant (SA).

The time spent by the sighted assistant (SA) in order to remove the ball and return to the batter's defensive base (2DB) corresponds to the time runners have to make to the "extra base".

A run is scored when the runner (R) crosses the home plate (HP) (13 feet). The center of this line corresponds to the home plate vertex and this base is continuous towards the right side along the first base foul line.

If the ball batted in left territory levels beyond 220 feet, it is considered a home run.

The sighted defensive player (SDP) may field a ball hit toward himself, as long as it maintains contact with the second defensive base (SDP). Long time batter-runner (B), in this case, is considered a foul ball. If there are other runners (R) on base at the time, they must return to their respective bases before the play can begin.

Elimination at second base (2B), third base (3B), and home plate (HP) occurs when the sighted player (SDP) positioned at second base (SDP) properly receives the throw from a defensive player (S, G, T, R, B) prior to the runner (R) reaching the base.

If a ball batted in left territory goes over the line between second base (2B) and third base (3B) on a FLY, the batter is automatically declared "OUT" (it's called FLY OUT) for safety reasons and the ball is ruled dead. If there are other runners (R) on base at the time, they must return to their respective bases. Games are normally played in 7.0 innings.

LEGENDA:

- Fair territory
- Home plate target line
- Base
- Sound base
- Ground ball
- Blind fielder's throw
- Base running
- Home on line

TEAMS

Each team consists of 5 blind players, the sighted player and one sighted defensive assistant. These two sighted defensive player and assistant can serve as base coaches at second and third base when the team comes to bat. They use wood or plastic clappers in order to raise the runner.

UMPIRES

- 1B: first base umpire
- 2B: second base umpire
- 3B: third base umpire
- HP: home plate umpire

OFFENSE

- 1B: first base assistant
- 2B: second base assistant
- 3B: third base assistant
- B: batter
- R: runner

DEFENSE

- MA: mound assistant
- SDP: sighted defensive player
- S: blind base
- G: shortstop
- T: left fielder
- R: batter-runner
- B: right fielder

(Courtesy of Lorenzo de Regny)

Invented in Bologna, Italy, in 1994, the game is distinct from Beep Ball, also designed for visually impaired and blind people and played more widely in the U.S.

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Some of the rules in B4B:

- Unlike Beep Ball, there is no pitcher or catcher. The batter grips the rubber ball, palm down, and releases it while swinging the bat with the other hand.
- A fair ball is only between second and third bases. A fly ball beyond the line between second and third is an out, so players always try to keep hits low. An official shouts out "Fair!" ("Valido!" in Italian) to alert the batter to run. Three strikes or three foul balls is an out.

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wooden paddles to guide the runner to that spot. A clapper also is used at third base, but home plate has no sound alert, hence the difficulty in scoring a run.

- The only sighted player on a six-player team is the second baseman, who must catch balls from fielders and tag the base before the runner gets there. To avoid collisions, separate runner's and fielder's bases are used.
- Bells inside the perforated ball help fielders track it. Typically, fielders must drop to the ground to stop hit balls with their bodies, then scoop and throw to second base, where the fielder is shouting, "Two! Two!" to guide the throw.

When he first saw B4B at the field in the Bronx where the Lions practice, Joseph Landolphi, an infielder and pitcher for his high school team, said, "I was like, 'How is this even possible? I can't even comprehend this.'"

A blindfolded Connecticut Chargers player waits for the throw.

But he figured that forming a team and arranging a game would be a good senior project, so he rounded up some friends and they hit the field with

acknowledged. Players had to learn to hit the ball only to the left and to listen carefully to both field and run.

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At Monsignor Scanlan High School in the Bronx, the Lions have played the school's blindfolded softball and baseball teams, Don Landolphi said. But due to lack of opposing teams, they usually practice and play each other, so team members, comprising a range of ages, male and female, are excited about the game in Connecticut, he said.

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The Landolphis said they want to raise awareness of the sport, eventually create a B4B League in the U.S. and enter a team in the Paralympic Games. Currently, countries that have teams include Italy, Cuba, France and Germany.

Hosted by the Franklin Lions Club, the game is free and all are invited. Play is set to start at 2 p.m. at the Franklin Senior League Field, 211 Pond Road

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