

# Goalball levels the playing field for blind, sighted athletes

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Goalball is a sport designed for blind and visually impaired athletes, where two teams of three players rely on their sense of hearing to track and block a ball with bells inside as it is rolled across the court to score goals.

Hello Gophers and Gopher adjacents, my name is Owen McDonnell and welcome to yet another episode of In The Know, a podcast dedicated to the University of Minnesota.

As you probably know, the 2024 Paris Olympics took place this past summer. For me, the Olympics are always something I look forward to. I love watching Katie Ledecky break records swimming or see Suni Lee flipping through the air in her floor routine. But something I think goes sort of under the radar during the Olympic season are the Paralympics and just adaptive sports in general.

If you aren't sure what adaptive sports are, they are essentially sports that have been modified to allow athletes with disabilities to compete and play in sports. These sports include sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, fencing, curling, you name it. It's pretty inspiring to see athletes play these sports at such a high level during the Paralympics.

Now, what you may not know is that these sports can be played right here at the University of Minnesota. Last year, a friend of mine asked if I was interested in joining him for wheelchair basketball for a class. I thought it sounded fun so I went, and let me tell you, it was a workout. Almost more of a workout than regular basketball. My forearms were burning, my legs were tired, and I was just gassed by the end of it. It was honestly a blast.

Another adaptive sport that can be played here at the U is a game called goalball. It was something I hadn't known about before looking into it, but it's a game designed specifically for blind or visually impaired athletes.

The game consists of two goals with a large court in between. Two teams roll a ball across the court in attempts to score against the opposing team. The obvious catch however, is everybody's blindfolded.

Pablo Contreras, a manager of the goalball club here at the U, explains in depth how teams coordinate and play.

**PABLO CONTRERAS:** The idea of a goalball is you got three players on a court. On each side of the court, there's three players, so six players total actually, and there's a center player. That's the person that's doing most of the defense coordinating. They can hear it.

So it's all auditory. You're essentially blindfolded, and the center on each team is supposed to technically be like, "Hey, like left side." Or "Right side," you know, basically depending on where they hear the ball on the other end of the court and, you know, where it could be

coming from.

**MCDONNELL:** Goalball was also not recently created. Contreras says the game has a history going all the way back to World War II.

**CONTRERAS:** After a bunch of veterans went blind, and I don't know this, the full story off the top of my head, but I guess, you know, they needed something to do. So they somehow invented goalball through all of that, you know, through their, you know, just need to move around and you know, even though they were left blind and stuff and disabled.

**MCDONNELL:** Contreras, who started playing goalball in 2019, is currently a student at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, but he played for the goalball team at the Minnesota State Academy for the Blind. He and a few U of M friends decided to make a club here which started in the fall of '22.

**CONTRERAS:** The U of M told us, "Hey, you know, we'll host you guys, but we want to have two events first to see if there's any traction." So the first event obviously was huge. You know, there was a huge turnout. The second event, same thing, you know, quite a few people showed up.

And eventually after that, they decided to buy us all the gear. They decided to buy us the goal nets. And yeah, eventually we established official practice every other Saturday during the semester.

**MCDONNELL:** Contreras and the two other managers of the club traveled to go play in a goalball tournament last year. He says that the team was not originally created with competitive play in mind. It was made to just hang out with some friends.

**CONTRERAS:** Honestly, at first, it was just kind of, you know, like, the boys and I just wanted to toss some balls, you know, just chill, you know, just kind of like, you know how a group of boys would get together to play basketball or whatever.

Just, you know, we kind of wanted to do something similar, but obviously, since it's an adaptive sport, we would have to like reserve a time because in the in the sport, you kind of have to be quiet. You know, the audience can't like talk or like, you know, it's not like a game where like, you know, you're being all loud, and there's music in the background, like the room has to be sort of silent.

But yeah, no, eventually we kind of were like, all right, well, you know, we're, we've been at it for about over almost two years, over two years, actually. We just kind of decided like, "OK, this is a team." That's how we went to our first tournament last year.

**MCDONNELL:** Although considered an adaptive sport, goalball does not really "adapt" a different sport to be compatible with visually impaired athletes. It really is its own game. It's unique. Contreras says that is a big reason as to why sighted people should try the game

out.

**CONTRERAS:** Even though you can compare it to, you know, other sports, it's pretty much its own thing. They have like wheelchair fencing. They have wheelchair tennis. They have sitting volleyball, you know, wheelchair basketball. You know, they have like all these different sports, adaptive sports, but, you know, goalball is just kind of its own thing, you know. It's unique to the blind community in general. I think that it would be a good chance for people to be on the same playing field as us, you know, because obviously, like, they adapt football.

They adapt all these things for, you know, visually impaired people too, but, I would, you know, if I were a person who was fully sighted, you know, I would imagine it would be more of like a pretty, I don't want to say humbling experience, but I mean, you would essentially be just one of us. You know, in that sense, like what, when you're on that court, you know, you got that blindfold on, you don't see anything.

We don't see anything. All you use is like your ears. And all you do is just kind of like literally play it by ear and by feel and it would be kind of a cool experience for anybody to try. And even if they don't ever play it again, you know, they can at least say like, "Hey, I've played, you know, a sport that's like literally, there's no other kind, like no other sport like it."

**MCDONNELL:** My interview with Contreras alone was enough to convince me to go and watch them play goalball during their next practice. As Contreras said before, the team hosted open gym practices for anybody every other Saturday. Lucky for me, there was a practice coming up that weekend!

When I arrived at the Rec Center gym to see the game, I found a sizable group of people ready to play goalball. I chatted with some regulars who frequently played on the team before the games began. Majed Alhuwayri, another manager of the club team and Human Resources and Industrial Relations student here at the U, has been playing goalball since elementary school.

**MAJED ALHUWAYRI:** I'm an international student from Saudi Arabia. I think, I've been playing goalball since I was almost in elementary school, since my vision loss or my vision issue as a visually impaired or blind, since birth.

I've been playing it since then. I started my journey coming here to the U.S. and starting here to do my undergrad. That's where I realized like, "Oh, I want to kind of start goalball," and I started playing again here.

**MCDONNELL:** Alhuwayri, who spoke with the Daily last semester about his disability, is obviously a veteran compared to most when it comes to the game. He says the skills he thinks are particularly important to improve at goalball are mostly mental.

**ALHUWAYRI:** I think you don't really need a lot of skills much then need to be like mentally there. You need to be focused, try to use your listening because even if you can see or not see, it doesn't matter as long as you try to listen where the ball coming from. The ball has like bell inside it.

It's gonna make sound. I think listening and being like understanding where you at and being there at the moment. That's I guess the most higher skill.

**MCDONNELL:** There are three positions for each team — left wing, center, and right wing. Center is like the point guard or your quarterback of goalball. They are calling shots, letting their team know what side of the goal the ball is headed toward.

They also do the brunt of the saving, as they need to guard both center-left and center-right. The wings respond to the center and protect the edges of the goal. Oftentimes, the wings are the ones who throw the ball at the other team.

**ALHUWAYRI:** In terms of what my best position, I think I usually like to play as a center, but not my best, to be honest.

I think sometime I play better in wings, but my favorite, as I said, it's kind of center. But I play all of them since, as I said, I've been playing since like elementary school for a while. And I played in a lot of group, like when I was in college back in Saudi Arabia, I played for the university team for one year before me coming here.

**MCDONNELL:** Once the games began, I quickly understood what Alhuwayri meant when talking about the skills you need. The ball, which has beads inside, would roll and make noise. Teams would then call out who has the save. Then, people would hurl the ball back toward the other team, causing them to dive in an attempt to make a save.

I'll be honest, the game looked really fun. Imagining myself completely blind with a ball that — note, is three pounds — speeding at you was sort of a scary thought. But still, watching the game made me kind of want to play sometime.

So I did.

I suited up in the goalball gear, which consisted of kneepads and a blindfold. I found my way to my position, put my blindfold on, and from the moment forward, I was blind like the others playing.

The game was a blast. The first few throws at me were a bit scary, hearing the ball quickly approaching me was more daunting than you might expect, especially since my spatial awareness was a bit out of funk as I couldn't see anything.

Let me tell you, these guys were good. They saved almost everything I threw, except for one throw that I actually scored on. I was making dives in attempts to save the shots with my teammates then quickly retreating to my position to get ready for another throw.

I would wait for the referee to give his, “Quiet, Play,” call, knowing the ball would come flying at me in a moment. In the end, we ended up winning the game! It was a lot of fun, but also really tiring. During the match I had to call timeout to take my blindfold off and wipe sweat out of my eyes. Why don’t you just listen to me here post game.

**MCDONNELL:** All right, post goalball game and I am winded and I’m also not out of shape. So yeah, it’s a workout. That is a workout. I am going to get some water right now. Wow.

**MCDONNELL:** Yeah, the game was no joke. Sidenote, my legs were super sore the next day in places they have never been sore. Anyway, it was really cool being on the same playing field as the other players, given they were visually impaired and I wasn’t. I asked Alhuwayri what advice he would give to sighted players to get better at the game.

**ALHUWAYRI:** I would say for for our folks who sighted and we had actually a lot of people who were sighted and never played before, I would say my main advice is don’t be afraid to experiment. Don’t try to think about your eyes, but try to think your other senses. Think as think, think of it as like any other games that you have to kind of guess.

Because there’s a lot of games even like in other places where you have people speaking, you have to guess for example who spoke or stuff like that, probably you have seen these kind of games and like TikTok and all that, but basically you have to realize that you have other senses you can rely on without thinking I have to see where I’m at and picturing where you, in your like your mind. It’s basically like when you kind of trying to give someone direction when you give someone direction to any location.

You’re not going to tell them like, “I can’t see the end of the street.” You already know what’s at the end of the street, and you’re going to kind of direct them to there.

**MCDONNELL:** Alhuwayri’s tips were definitely something to keep in mind as I played. However, I wasn’t the only sighted person playing. Evan Newcombe, a Recwell referee and sophomore at the University of Minnesota, talks about his experience playing goalball as a sighted person. Fun fact, I also reffed a game which had me saying “Quiet, Play” and chasing after stray balls to return to the players.

**EVAN NEWCOMBE:** My first time playing was two weeks ago. And, like, as soon as I put on the blindfold, I found myself, like, just reaching in front of me to just, like, get some reference of where I was. And when I was standing up, there really wasn’t anything to hold on to except the goalpost when you were right by it.

Yeah, so on the court, there's a small area with a few ticks taped to the ground where you can feel. And so, once I was on the ground, I could feel those ticks and it gave me somewhat of an idea of where I was.

**MCDONNELL:** I definitely had a similar experience of not knowing really where I was on the court. Newcombe also says that it can be hard to know exactly where the ball is going to hit you if you are making a save.

**NEWCOMBE:** Almost a basketball court length away from you and they're hurling a ball at you. And you kind of just sprawl your body out according to like the sound and you've got to be ready for impact. And sometimes, like, I could hear the ball coming towards me, and I think it's coming right towards my hands and then it'll just hit, like, my ankles or my knees while I'm sprawled out horizontal.

And so it's definitely a surprise when the ball gets to you, but it actually did feel really good when I would, like, square up and get the ball right into my hands. It felt pretty good, but it was not common. It usually went right past me or hit some side of my body that I wasn't even expecting.

**MCDONNELL:** Newcombe and I were definitely the worst players on the court. He says he thinks there are major differences between sighted players and blind players, besides the obvious.

**NEWCOMBE:** Probably, I think the biggest thing would be the maintenance of just figuring out where you are at all times. Like to me, it felt like I was always like, spending energy on just figuring out where I was, and I was always touching the ground.

And when I'm watching other people, like, when I'm not playing a game and I'm watching them, they don't look like they're having that experience at all. They're just chilling in their spot, and it seems like they're always in the right spot, and sometimes I'd find myself, like, running into my opponent.

I mean, not my opponent, my partner in the center, when I was supposed to be on the wing. Yeah, positioning, it's just like, something that you always have to pay attention to, more so for a sighted person.

**MCDONNELL:** Even though I was out of my league playing against the regular goalballers, I still felt like I learned a lot. I met a bunch of people and learned a lot about their life experiences, which is vastly different than mine or other sighted people.

And that was something that Alhuwayri also thought was important. He says to not be afraid to ask questions to blind folk to learn more about how their disability affects their lives.

**ALHUWAYRI:** My biggest, I guess encouragement for people is to come there and ask us questions. I said there is a lot of around like three main leaders and there's Evan who help us from the rec center.

Feel free to ask the main leader Josh, Pablo and me, myself, Majed about blindness. Anything you have in mind, because otherwise, if we don't ask questions about each other and get to know each other more, we're not going to have easy time interacting with each other.

**MCDONNELL:** For me, I learned a lot about not only how to play goalball, but also about some wonderful people who do not let their disability stop them from doing what they want to do. I encourage everybody to go check out goalball or wheelchair basketball here at the U. It's a unique experience that you can only understand once you try.

This episode was written by Owen McDonnell and produced by Kaylie Sirovy. Thanks a lot for tuning into this episode, and remember, if you have any questions, comments or concerns, be sure to let us know at [podcasting@mndaily.com](mailto:podcasting@mndaily.com).

Again, thank you for listening to this episode of In The Know. Ski-U-Mah.