You are on an indoor athletic court and you can’t see. It is quiet. Suddenly, you hear a ball, with three bells on the inside, coming at you at nearly 40 mph. Your teammates are relying on you to stop it from going into the net. That is the sport of goalball.

“For any fan of team sport, goalball is addictive,” says Jake Czechowski, head coach for Team USA Women’s Goalball. “It is something you need to experience … to see it live.” Spectators often become enamored. “The first time I watched the sport at the highest level, it blew me away.”

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPORT

Goalball was invented by Austrian Hanz Lorenzen and German Sepp Reindle in 1946 to assist visually impaired World War II veterans with their rehabilitation. The sport is wildly popular in Europe and is not a derivative of a mainstream Olympic sport.

It is played indoors on what is the size of a standard volleyball court (9 x 18 feet). A soccer-style net runs the full width, providing a wide goal area.

Every player wears opaque eyeshades (sometimes called blindfolds) at all times, ensuring fair competition. “Eyeshades level the playing field for all athletes,” Czechowski said. “It is a piece of equipment that equalizes everything.”

Amanda Dennis, a two-time Paralympian (2012 and 2016) for Team USA and a member of Disabled Sports USA’s Elite Team, agrees. “Goalball puts you on an equal playing field as everyone else,” she said. “I was used to seeing something, but goalball takes it all away.”

Hashmarks and tactile string or lines help players orient themselves on the court.

HOW TO PLAY

Teams of three (six players total) take the court. The objective is to take the ball and roll or throw it past the other team into the goal, according to Matt Boyle, head coach of the USA Men’s Goalball Team. One player is typically in the center, either up front or towards the back, and then another player on the left and right sides of the court. “Players typically spread out evenly,” Boyle said.

“Individuals can either play all positions or focus on just playing one position.”

Boyle stated that goalball games aren’t long by nature – two 12-minute halves with a 3-minute halftime. “In real time, it takes only 45 minutes to an hour to play a game.”

The ball is the size of a typical basketball, but is not pressurized. It is a heavy, three pound rubber ball that doesn’t bounce. Three bells are inside that serve an auditory purpose. Of course, there has to be silence so the ball can be heard. The ball has to be tossed or thrown on the ground, underhand style, similar to bowling or softball.

A score results when the ball makes it into the opponent’s goal. “The essence is just throwing and blocking,” Czechowski said. But, “it is an aggressive, fast-paced game.”

Offensively, there are a lot of ways to throw the ball, which primarily involves strategy.
and technique. During a game, there is a lot of action, a lot of throws, according to Czechowski. “There is typically around 95 throws per game.” There are also a lot of rules, including a 10-second rule to release the ball.

Defensively, most players use their body to stop or block the ball. “It is the opposite of dodgeball,” Czechowski said. The evolution of throwing techniques have also resulted in an enhanced defense.

To try the sport for yourself, Mark Lucas, executive director of USABA (United States Association of Blind Athletes), suggests contacting one of the 20-30 club teams (men’s and women’s) that currently exist across the country. In addition, a handful of Disabled Sports USA chapters offer goalball as one of the sports available.

A number of schools for the blind also offer the sport to their student athletes. If none of those are options in your area, do what Dennis did and start your own team. Unlike some sports, the nice benefit of the sport to individual athletes is the fact that not a lot of expensive equipment is required. Besides the player’s eyeshades, knee and elbow pads are needed and chest protectors and/or hip pads are available options that are encouraged as well.

**COMPETING AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL**

USABA has entered into a partnership with Turnstone Center for Children and Adults with Disabilities, a chapter of Disabled Sports USA located in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to develop the Goalball Center of Excellence. This is the first full-time resident program for Goalball athletes. “Athletes come to live and train in Fort Wayne,” said Mike Mushett, chief executive officer of Turnstone.

Turnstone’s Plassman Athletic Center, a 125,000-square-foot facility, has a dedicated gym/court for goalball, meaning it has the standard surface utilized by the sport (only such court in the United States). In addition, the athletes have access to a high-performance fitness facility beside it as well as athletic trainers and fitness instructors for strength and conditioning. The athletes live together in two modular homes, one for the men’s team and one for the women’s team. As a result of these developments and other undertakings at Turnstone, the facility became an official Paralympic Development Training Site in May 2018, the seventh such designated facility in the country.

**June 28-July 10, Turnstone will be hosting its first international competition centered around goalball, as well as judo. This event is an international qualifier for the 2020 Paralympic Games in Tokyo, Japan. “For the U.S. teams, being able to qualify for the Paralympics on your home turf would be exciting,” Mushett said. If they aren’t able to do that, they will have one more chance to try and make the Paralympic Games at the Parapan American Games in Lima, Peru, later this summer.**

Since the 2016 games in Rio, the men’s and women’s teams have been rebuilding. Both Czechowski and Boyle are new to their head coaching positions. The men’s team has a lot of veterans that have been on the national team before. “We have a lot of talented players here in the U.S.,” Boyle said. Young talent also pops up at the club level. “I find new talent through club teams,” he said. “It is the easiest way to find them.” Boyle also finds that talent is becoming more concentrated, locating to a specific town or club.

Club teams are also the biggest pipeline for the women’s team. “We have a nice blend of veterans with leadership and experience mixed with some up and coming talent,” Czechowski said. One of those veterans is his wife, Lisa, who has played with the national team since 1998. “We have also added new athletes since the last Paralympic Games. Our player pool is approximately 8-10 athletes. But at some point, we would like to get that up to 18 ... maybe in five plus years.” Only six men and six women are chosen for tournaments though.

**FIND A TEAM**

The great thing about goalball is that it is a competitive team sport, offering blind athletes with all the benefits team sports provide. Teamwork and communication are paramount to success. “I love the team sport aspect,” said Dennis, who was on the bronze-medal winning team at the 2016 games in Rio. “You are not alone.”

It is also important to note that at the local club level (as well as school sport level), each team is allowed one sighted player. Therefore, goalball is a great way to bridge adaptive sports and able-bodied sports, according to Czechowski. “You can immerse everyone, promote inclusion, and bridge divides,” he said.

In addition to Turnstone, you can find other DSUSA chapters that feature goalball at [https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/chapters/location-map/](https://www.disabledsportsusa.org/chapters/location-map/). More resources are also available through USABA at [https://www.usaba.org/sports/goalball/](https://www.usaba.org/sports/goalball/). Lucas states that it is the goal of USABA that every child has a goalball in their hands as early as 3 or 4 years old. “It really helps with auditory and tactile sensory.” He also wants kids ready to play beginning at 5 or 6 years old.

Organizations, schools, coaches, and others interested in learning more about the sport can get a copy of “Goalball Guidelines,” a free manual that is available through Disabled Sports USA and the Athletics for All task force. Visit [https://athleticsforall.net/goalball/](https://athleticsforall.net/goalball/) for more information.