

Sports

&CLASSIFIEDS



THE BALTIMORE SUN

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 2019

Baseball

Nats clinch wild card

Nationals sweep doubleheader against Phillies to clinch an NL wild card, capping turnaround for team that was 19-31 in May. **PG 3**



HIGH SCHOOLS

A SPECIAL DAY, GAME OF SOCCER

Maryland school hosts nation's first youth blind soccer game in Parkville

BY GLENN GRAHAM

With the blue sky and comfortable temperature on Tuesday, the afternoon was already ideal for a soccer game in Parkville.

On cue, there were team introductions, supportive applause from an enthusiastic crowd, the playing of the national anthem, and excited but nervous players.

Moments before the opening kick, The Maryland School for the Blind coach Timothy Taylor proclaimed just how much more special this day and game was as he closed his opening remarks: "Welcome everybody to the first ever youth blind soccer game in America!"

The historic game was three years in the making. The MSB Bees became the first school in the country to form a team in 2016 and their opponent, The Virginia School for the Blind Chiefs, is one of two



KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN

The Bees' Jefferson Palacios, right, who scored the game's first goal, battles the Chiefs' Robert Lyons for the ball in the first half on Tuesday.

in the country that have since followed.

Tuesday's game successfully met the high expectations that were anticipated when the Bees started their program. The game had camaraderie, competitive play, good sportsmanship and achieved its top goal of the players having fun.

"This gives them an opportunity to play a regular sport that kids who are not blind or visually impaired are doing, so they can go home and say 'Hey I can play soccer' and they can have a conversation

See **SOCCER**, page 5



KENNETH K. LAM/BALTIMORE SUN

Maryland School for the Blind Bees team members march onto the field for the first ever competitive blind youth soccer match in the U.S., playing the Virginia School for the Deaf and the Blind Chiefs.

SOCCER

From page 1

with a friend that also plays soccer," Taylor said.

"They jumped right on board. It makes them feel like they can do the same thing their sighted peers can do. They love it."

Bees forward Jefferson Palacios-Machado made history with the first goal two minutes into play, teammate Tyler Hoppe scored later in the 15-minute first half and played excellent defense to lead the home team to a 2-1 victory over the Chiefs.

"It's pretty cool," Hoppe said. "I didn't expect to play as well as I did and it felt great. It means a lot. We've been practicing hard and they've been organizing it. It's awesome. Sorry, I'm not saying a lot of descriptive words, but this is just awesome and that's all I can think of."

Andrea Raye, whose son, Andre, 17, was having fun and playing hard for the winning Bees, said much the same as she was videoing all the action from the sidelines.

"It's amazing. It's so great to see the kids out here playing and enjoying sportsmanship and learning new skills. This is good. This is good," she said. "I think with being part of the team, Andre has further developed social skills, he's been able to bond with the kids like he wouldn't do on a normal basis. And just being part of a team and working together – it feels great. It's been a real good experience."

Former MSB school president Dr. Michael Bina came up with the idea to field a team – blind soccer has long been

played internationally – and Taylor jumped at the chance to spearhead the new program.

The game is 5-vs.-5 with four blindfolded field players and a sighted goalie who not only defends the goal but also directs his teammates. The ball is weighted and has ball bearings to produce a jingle sound. Players are required to say 'voy' when going for the ball to alert other players about their position.

The school hosted a six-week training session in 2017, has practiced three days a week and officially became a varsity sport when other schools in the country began fielding teams.

The MSB soccer field – 40 by 20 meters with kickboards along the sides to keep the ball in play – is the first and only full-size regulation blind soccer field in the country.

Qualik Ford, who turns 18 on Wednesday and also participates in wrestling, track and field, goalball and cheerleading at MSB, has enjoyed adding to his busy plate.

"I just love participating and being a part of a team because we're always lifting each other up and working together to get to an end goal," he said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity where I'm just like 'Wow, I'm so happy to be a part of this and so grateful for everyone that put it all together.'"

Last year, the school teamed with the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes and the International Blind Soccer Federation to host the inaugural North American Blind Soccer Training Camp for coaches and players to learn the fundamentals. The goal is to grow the sport and ultimately field a national blind soccer team that can compete in the Paralympics.

The U.S. currently doesn't have a team, but Taylor is optimistic that will change. During introductions, he noted the crowd may well be watching future Paralympic athletes.