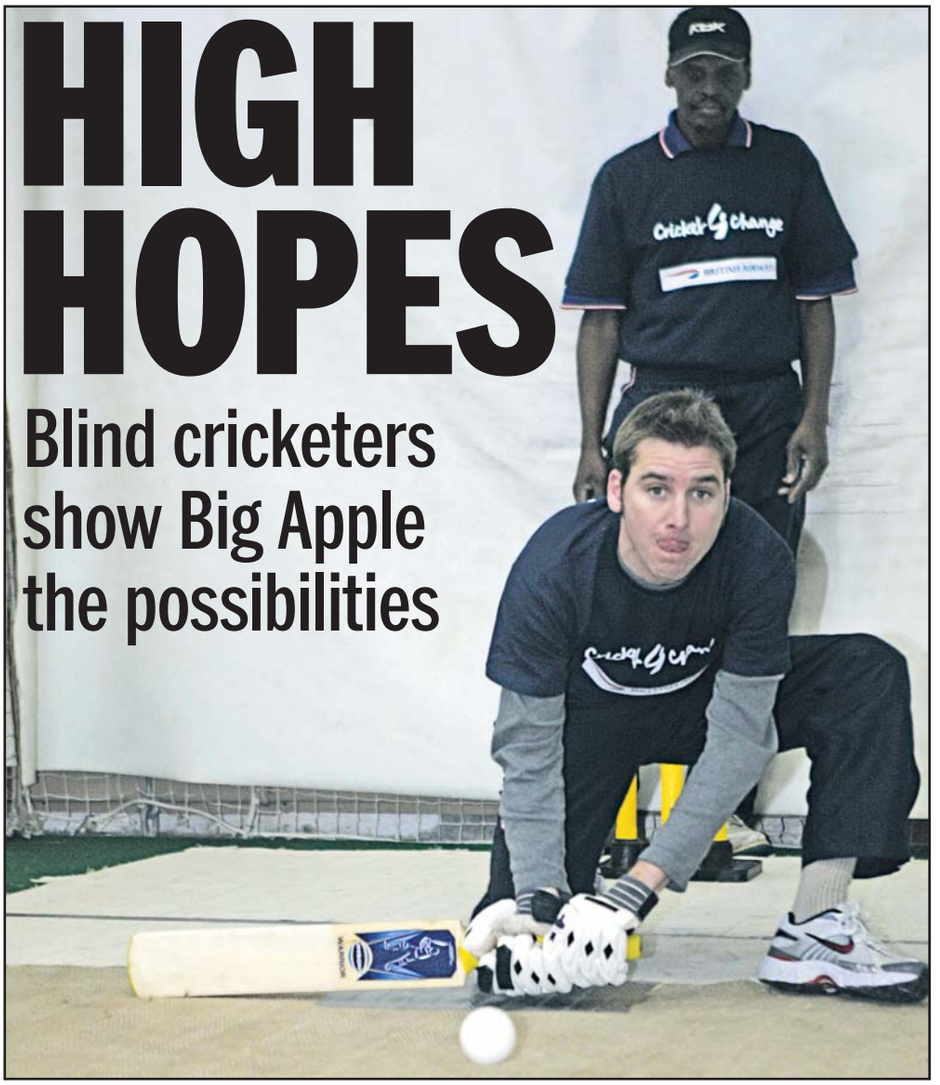
HIGH HOPES

Blind cricketers show Big Apple the possibilities



UK's Andy Dalby-Welsh gives demonstration of blind cricket as part of Cricket for Change, an organization promoting awareness of the sport. Photo by Robert Mecea

BY MARK LELINWALLA
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TUCKED INTO a dead-end street on E. 88th and Ditmas Ave. in Canarsie and surrounded by abandoned car parts from nearby auto shops and junkyards, the New York Indoor Cricket Club is easy to miss.

But once you enter the facility, finally geting past the bumpers, doors and headlights, and on one Sunday morning an entire rusty engine rotting on the sidewalk, you're bound to witness something unforgettable: Open the door, and there stands Andy Dalby-Welsh, a clean-cut 31-year-old bowler standing in the middle of one of three cricket cages housed in the club.

He takes two small steps, as if he's consciously marking his position, and prepares to bowl (cricket's equivalent to baseball's pitching).

"Are you ready?" he yells, his wispy English accent filling the air.

"Yes, I'm ready," the batsman hollers back.

Instead of using the traditional overhand delivery, where the ball takes a mandatory bounce, Dalby-Welsh rolls it on the ground underhanded. As soon as it leaves his fingertips, he looks up with a blank gaze, his ears closely following a rattling noise emitting from the ball. A volunteer retrieves the ball and places it back in Dalby-Welsh's hand.

This is not your typical cricket match and Dalby-Welsh isn't your typical cricket player.

Dalby-Welsh is blind.

As a 20-year-old college student, he was diagnosed with Leber's Optic Neuropathy, a rare genetic disorder that affects central vision.

"Obviously my family carried it, but nobody else in my family suffers from it," says Dalby-Welsh. "My right eye went immediately, the other a couple of months later. I was registered blind. It was pretty surreal."

He can't see the ball, or the batsman standing before him, who is also blind. Dalby-Welsh follows the game through the noise coming from the ball, which sounds much like a baby's rattle.

"I love it," says Dalby-Welsh. "It completely changed my life. I want to give people the opportunity I've had in this game."

Dalby-Welsh traveled to the U.S. as a part of England's Cricket for Change charity that runs the largest disability cricket program in the world and has helped spread the sport's awareness throughout impoverished areas in places such as Sierra Leone and Rwanda.

This day's match was a demonstration, but if things go well, it's only the beginning for blind cricket in the United States.

Cricket for Change hopes to bring the U.S. into the blind cricket fold by May and, in conjunction with the USA Cricket Association, plans to reach out to blind schools across New York City over the next several weeks to gauge interest in the sport.

If the group is able to recruit and develop about 20 players before the 2011 Blind Cricket World Cup, which is tentatively scheduled for June of next year with the UK as host, it's conceivable that the U.S.'s fledgling team could join Australia, England, India, New Zealand, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa and the West Indies for the tournament.

"We've never worked in the U.S.," says Andy Sellins, Cricket for Change's program director. "If it does capture the imagination here, it could easily become the best in the world. The budget for Sri Lankan blind cricket is probably $1,000 a year. The U.S. could be whatever it wanted to. The sky is the limit."

Gov. Paterson is certainly in favor of developing the sport. "As someone who has lived his entire life with a visual impairment, I know very well how important it is to empower those with disabilities," Paterson wrote in a letter posted on his Web site late last month. "The promise of America is the promise that every person can participate fully and equally in our society. Blind cricket can help make that promise real for countless New Yorkers and Americans."

To reach full potential locally, players and coaches need to first understand the differences between blind cricket and regular cricket.

■ The sport consists of three categories of players: B1 for totally blind, B2 for partially blind and B3 for strong visual impairment. Each team consists of four B1 players, four B3 players and three B2s.

■ B1 bowlers and batsmen are led to their spots on the field by teammates or coaches.

■ Backup runners must run in place of B1 players.

The ball is the same size as a regular cricket ball and just about as hard, but it's the ball bearings inside that produce a sound when the ball moves.

Before rolling the ball toward the batsman, the bowler must yell, "Are you ready?" to which a batsmen must reply, "Yes."

"The same way you and I got hand-eye coordination, they've got hand-ear coordination," Sellins says. "They're constantly listening to noises and sounds in a way you and I aren't trained to do.

"People have a misconception of vision impaired and blindness," adds Sellins, who has full vision but formerly coached blind cricket in England for 10 years. "They say if you're blind your other senses must compensate, but they don't unless you train them. You've got to train them."

Memory is also important, says Dalby-Welsh.

"If you're told to stand in one place, you've got to mentally remember where you're supposed to be standing," he says. "Your memory and the hearing are crucial."

Since Dalby-Welsh still has a flicker of peripheral vision but no central vision, he's categorized as a B2 player.

"I can see shapes – that's about it," he says. "I can't read text. If you were to walk away I couldn't recognize you from anybody else."

Although it took him a few years to come to grips with his blindness, Dalby-Welsh persevered with the help of cricket.

He learned of a local county club that had a blind cricket team in his hometown of Brighton and "gave it a go," as he says.

He immediately fell in love with the sport, especially the bowling aspect of it, and was soon invited to play for England's national team. He got so good, so fast, that he bowled for England in the Blind Cricket World Cup of 2002 (in India) and again in 2006 (in Pakistan).

For the past two years, he's been a coach for Cricket for Change, instructing and encouraging blind and visually impaired players all around the world. His efforts with the charity have taken him to Rwanda, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Tanzania and the Caribbean, helping him to win the prestigious 2009 Pride of Britain Award, which is given to the most courageous, selfless people of the country.

"Cricket completely changed my life," says Dalby-Welsh, who married a full-sighted woman last year. "I have a fantastic job and I hope I get the opportunity to change young people's lives and give them the same opportunities I've enjoyed."

One of the spectators watching the demonstration in Brooklyn was Lloyd Jodah, a Jamaica, Queens resident who has helped promote regular cricket on a grassroots level both locally in New York and nationally via his American College Cricket Spring Break championship.

Blind cricket hit close to home for Jodah, whose older brother, Colin, is legally blind due to complications of diabetes.

"It's really very inspiring," says Colin, a former player on Guyana's national field hockey team. "I didn't think it could be done."

Cricket for Change wanted to not only inspire and spark the interest of possible players in New York, but coaches, too.

"Many times blind people are told, 'You can't do this, you can't do that,'" says Adam Hall, the program's development manager. "But we as coaches are telling them, 'You can do this, you can do that, you can hit the ball.' It's very powerful. You'll be giving them life skills."

If anything, playing cricket can provide a sense of normalcy.

"If a blind person takes it up it becomes something that's very important in their life," Sellins says. "It gives you something to train for, it gets your name in the paper, it's something to talk about to girls.

"Blind people can be seen as a burden, where parents are worried, 'What's going to happen to my child?'" he continues. "But this confidence is life changing."

Such inspirational words have the U.S. ready to jump in.

"We're confident of starting in New York," says Clifford Hinds, a USACA rep, "and that it can grow quickly – very quickly."