

Blind Sox Fan Gets MLB to Even Game

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Like any true Red Sox fan, Brian Charlson attends as many games as possible and listens to the rest, play by play, on the radio. But when it came to reading stats, his blindness sometimes got in the way.

Not any longer.

At the urging of Charlson and fellow advocates, Major League Baseball rolled out a series of accessibility features this week on all league and team websites aimed at making statistics, ticketing, and other information fully accessible to the visually impaired.

“Blind people are big fans of baseball”, said Charlson, who is Director of Computer Training Services at the Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton. “It’s a sport where the play by play can make sense to a blind person. You’ve only got the pitcher, batter and fielder. With only three people to keep track of at any one time, it is a lot easier to keep track of than say, football.”

Charlson, who lost his sight at 11, has long struggled to access information on league websites. In 2008, Charlson and a low-vision friend went on a baseball tour, attending eight games in six cities over eight days.

They used the Internet to plan their entire trip, from hotels to tickets to transportation. However, they were often met with websites that were not easily navigated by the visually impaired.

“We looked at all the websites of all the teams, we purchased our tickets either online or got the phone number and called when the online ticketing system didn’t work for us,” he said. “We booked our hotels online, and when the Net let us down we used the phone. That’s partly how we learned what worked and what didn’t work.”

After Charlson and several blindness advocacy groups approached Major League Baseball last year with their complaints, they were surprised find their suggestions not only welcomed, but fast-tracked.

“We’ve never experienced that, where we didn’t have to hold someone’s toes to the fire,” he said.

The features, which were announced Wednesday, are the result of a joint effort between Major League Baseball Advanced Media and the American Council of the Blind, Bay State Council of the Blind, and the California Council of the Blind.

Charlson accesses the internet using text-to-speech software that reads the links and makeup of websites he visits. Web developers take each piece of information on a site — links, pictures, video — and embed HTML descriptions that Charlson’s software can see and read aloud. Now, Major League Baseball websites have a small feature that is virtually invisible to sighted users but that gives Charlson everything he needs to take advantage of the wealth of information on the sites.

“It’s what’s called a zero pixel gif, that’s too small for you to see it because it’s just a dot,” Charlson said. While the dot is inaccessible to traditional point and click users, Charlson’s software finds the information and reads it as a link, allowing him to access features.

“Our goal is not to have separate but equal, but to have universal access,” Charlson said. “This gives me navigation of the website, without them going out and modifying their entire structure to meet my needs. There are ways to create solutions for the blind that do not add complexity for the sighted.”

As the league developed solutions, Charlson said he got goosebumps as he began to follow and interact with his favorite team like an average fan — even voting for the All-Star Game for the first time.

“This past year was the first time I could read the stats on all the players; all of it was accessible,” he said. “Although I didn’t agree with all the All-star selections, I felt like a part of it for the first time.”

Charlson hopes the effort will lead to other professional sports and organizations improving their user interface for the vision-impaired.

It’s exciting that MLB has joined with us in this effort, hearing what the blindness community needs to take full advantage of this wonderful thing that is baseball. They are setting the stage for other sports to do likewise. Next season I’ll be asking the NFL, and I’ll say, ‘See what MLB can do? You don’t want to be outshined by the MLB.’ – Brian Charlson, blind Red Sox fan