

SPORTS

The Read Option: Buzzball takes old-time football game to the next level

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Brett Favre was back in action on Tuesday night in Nixa.

So was Edgar Bennett. And Ickey Woods and James Brooks from the old-school Cincinnati Bengals.

It's not the typical throwback sense when it comes to pro football ... just another gathering of the Southern Missouri Pro Buzzball League.

If Buzzball doesn't ring a bell from your childhood, maybe it should. It's the electric football game where the players are on little green bases, and after being lined up in formation on a metal field, you flip a switch and the vibration sends the players on their way.

When the base of a defensive player touches the base of the ball-carrier (determined during the play), it's a "tackle."

There are passes, kickoffs, field goals, interceptions, and in some leagues and rules, fumbles. And unlike many of the entry-level games where players spin in circles as the game vibrates at ear-splitting decibels before it's all tossed aside by Christmas afternoon, this league features fully-working, realistic models and game play.

The local Buzzball league is believed to be the only one in Missouri, and organizer Paul Bartels believes the next-closest one is in Chicago. Game nights are every Tuesday night at Bair's All-American Sports Grill in Nixa, and the group is planning a tournament for April 11 at Bair's.

The tournament will have a \$20 entry fee, with some of the proceeds to benefit Nixa Parks and Recreation, to help youngsters who want to participate in athletic programs but may not have the resources to pay the entry fees.

The most common brand name that young fans become acquainted with is Tudor Electric Football. It was under the Christmas tree for many fans in the pre-xBox and PlayStation era and usually came with a couple of teams — often the Super Bowl teams from the previous year. Other teams were available for purchase through a catalog.

But this is not your childhood version of electric football. The boards often are custom-made, with special-made tops that are painted to look like actual NFL team fields, with the same end zone designs and everything. And participants often have several teams, with home and road uniforms, to choose from.

The custom boards can cost \$150-\$200 if you can buy them at cost, or \$300 retail. A good-quality set of team players — without the green bases — can run as much as \$200.

"This is definitely a labor of love," said Steve Williams, the owner of Crosstown BBQ in Springfield and whose San Francisco 49ers team took on Bartels' Green Bay Packers team in a battle for NFC supremacy on Tuesday night.

"It's a passion that I've had since I was a kid. The problem is just trying to find somebody to play, and that's always been the problem."

Williams has been playing for 45 years. In the past, it came down to him often driving to Kansas City to play marathon weekend sessions with a friend. He would go up and they would play 12 hours at a time for three days straight, deciding entire seasons, playoffs and the Super Bowl. Statistics were kept, and they were at the point where they played 84 total full seasons, including Super Bowls.

Ask him how it got to this point, as a fan of the game from growing up, and the answer is as simple as it is explanative: "That's how all of us got to be the way we are."

And bring up the prospect of him giving up the game, and his response is just as simple: "Oh heck no. Quit? Are you kidding me?"

The 40-year-old Bartels was a fan and participant of the game from when he was a kid — "only the last 30 years" — and he came from his native New Jersey to attend Evangel in the mid-1990s. He met his wife and as a college student scraping by to make ends meet, he answered an ad in the newspaper looking for electric football supplies.

He called the number and Williams answered. Williams bought all of Bartels' teams — he had every NFL team, in both home and road uniforms, and a board that had a broken switch was thrown in for free.

So he was out of the game — until he got married and his wife decided to buy him back in as a birthday present in 1998. They started by checking for boards at Toys R Us. They found an entry-level one, with the Packers and Broncos teams included.

"So I've got this game," Bartels said. "I'm 24 years old, I'm coming out of Toys R Us with the game held above my head, saying 'Woooo!' "

Bartels called Williams again, bought back some of the extra teams Williams had on hand, and it was back on.

Since then, Bartels and his wife had four children and they moved back east. He started and ran a league in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for 14 years, and came back to the area last July, with all of his equipment. The plan was to keep it all packed away until they bought a house and moved out of their rental.

That went away when a co-worker saw photos on Bartels' Facebook page and convinced him to get it all unpacked and start playing again. The Southern Missouri Pro Buzzball League was born. With a college league to follow.

And it has a definite family connection. The league has three father-son teams and started with 10 teams before two left early. The college league will have a "rivalry week" where all the games are between fathers and sons.

"The younger guys like it because their dads play," Bartels said. "Just because a night out with Dad is awesome. I've had that for years, where the Dad plays and the son is like, "Hey, I want to play that." They just want to be with Dad and be part of it, and that's awesome to see."

Bartels has four kids, with two of them playing. His oldest daughter was into it until she became involved in music, "so that was the end of her career."

Bartels is in constant motion on league nights, taking photos in the aftermath of scoring plays throughout the room, the participants keep stats, and game photos and write-ups are posted online at www.leaguelineup.com/welcome.asp?url=smpbl.

And if you're keeping score, Bartels' Packers used a 51-yard touchdown pass from Favre to Bennett, and another TD pass to Antonio Freeman to post a 14-0 victory and end the quest for the perfect season by Williams and the Niners. In the other game of the night, Anthony Leonardi's Baltimore Ravens claimed a 28-14 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals and Leonardi's 10-year-old son, Tony.

While Williams and Bartels are both married, their wives do not participate in the hobby. They both said their wives "get it," but aren't involved.

"For my wife, it's good because the house clears out for her on Tuesday nights," Bartels said. "My kids usually come with me. My youngest is 8, so he'll start playing next year in the pro league. He'll be ready to go, then the house will just be her and my oldest.

"So they're happy and we're happy."

The Buzzball Bash

When: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. April 11

Where: Bair's All-American Sports Grill, Nixa

Entry fee: \$20, with some proceeds to go to Nixa Parks and Recreation

Details: Game boards will be provided, with preregistration from 9-11 a.m. Anyone interested in participating should contact Paul Bartels (raiderman110@hotmail.com) for a copy of the rules.