

From gridiron to goalball

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A few of the campers at Lighthouse Louisiana, a nonprofit organization serving the blind and visually impaired community, seize the opportunity to feel Ryan Griffin's authentic NFL jersey. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

New Orleans Saints quarterback and former Tulane University standout [Ryan Griffin](#) has spent his entire career relying heavily on his vision to throw touchdown passes and dissect defenses. For the first time in his life, Griffin found out what it is like to compete in an athletic contest while being blindfolded when he attended a [goalball](#) game at the Harahan Lions Homes on Saturday (Feb. 28).

To give back to the community, Griffin is supporting [Lighthouse Louisiana's](#) youth summer camp and monthly goalball game, a Paralympic sport designed exclusively for blind athletes. Shortly after arriving on Saturday with teammates Tim Lelito and Austin Johnson, he put on knee pads and a blindfold and jumped right into the action.

The Saints players started the day [playing goalball](#) with a group of young kids and then moved on to face more competitive players once they learned the game. At first, Griffin and his teammates struggled to adjust while wearing their blindfolds, but their play improved significantly over the course of the day. Early on, their attempts to score rolled out of bounds and they failed to connect successfully on several high-five attempts.

“Everyone listens to the quarterback when you are in the huddle calling the plays, so for me everything is visual and communicating,” said Griffin. “This was completely quiet and I had to rely solely on my hearing which is something I'm not used to.”

Unlike most sporting events, fans are discouraged from cheering during a goalball game. All participants are blindfolded and teams attempt to score points by rolling a ball past their opponents. Players try and block the ball when it is heading toward them to prevent the opposition from scoring. To do so, they must listen closely for the noise bells inside the ball, making the silence essential.

“It is important to know that these kids want to play sports just like we do,” said Griffin. “I learned that from playing sports with the family friends I knew growing up who became blind.”

At the end of the event, the Saints players autographed footballs and posed for pictures with the Lighthouse Louisiana kids. The visit was arranged by the [Team Hero Foundation](#).

Greg Thomson is a senior at Tulane University majoring in communication.

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