'Curve ball' wins international illusion contest
26 May 2009

Science has proven what baseball players have known for more than a hundred years, the curve ball is more powerful than the brain.

At the fifth annual international Best Visual Illusion of the Year Contest, first place went to a mind-boggling entry called "The Break of the Curve Ball." The entry submitted from a team of academics led by an American University professor, challenges the human visual system and brain to predict the movement of a spinning disk. The illusion is available at www.illusioncontest.neuralcorrelate.com.

The popular illusion contest is led by two visual neuroscientists at Barrow Neurological Institute at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. Dr. Susana Martinez-Conde and Dr. Stephen Macknik launched the contest five years ago as part of their ongoing research into the human brain's relationship to visual perception.

"As scientists and medical researchers, we learn from these visual illusions every year. The knowledge that we will eventually get from studying the 'Curve Ball' illusion may be applied throughout our research and far beyond baseball," says Martinez-Conde, who heads the Laboratory of Visual Neuroscience at Barrow.

The contest results were announced this month at the annual Vision Sciences Society meeting where more than 1,000 attendees voted on the finalists. Sent from around the world, this year's entrees included illusions from artists, academics, scientists and even a Microsoft engineer.

The creators of 'The Break of the Curve Ball' illusion suggest that the perceived "break" may be caused by the batter's transition from using his central visual system to his peripheral visual system. Like a curveball, the spinning disk which is shown in the illusion appears to abruptly change direction when an observer switches from central...