

# Thunder ROLLS

The St. Paul Rolling Thunder exploded and took its seventh softball championship title.

*by Larry Labiak  
photos by Curt Beamer*

The Rocky Mountain State played host to the 22nd National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST), held August 20-22 in Denver. What developed was a record 16-team affair played on an expansive five-field complex in sight of Coors Field, home of major league baseball's Colorado Rockies. Thanks to their support and that of the Mountain States Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) chapter as well as the PVA National Office, tournament director Tom Wheaton and his committee put on a stellar event.

Last year, the St. Louis Rams dethroned the St. Paul Rolling Thunder, which had previously amassed six consecutive national championships (1991-1996), an unprecedented feat in the annals of wheelchair softball. This year, the Thunder returned to the national tournament with a critical piece of the championship puzzle in place that was missing from last year's team: perennial all-star third baseman Todd Anderson.

Due to a long-standing family commitment, Anderson bypassed the '97

tournament, a move that arguably was the deciding factor in their second-place finish. To the Thunder's credit, they never groused that the absence of Anderson's defensive acumen and offensive prowess in the number-three spot was the critical difference last year. They simply gave the Rams their props and then made darn sure Anderson was back at his temporarily erstwhile position this season.

The Thunder warmed up with an opening round 14-4, five-inning, ten-run slaughter-rule victory over the fifteenth-seeded Omaha Barons. In game two, the victim was the Maryland Ravens Metrostars, who succumbed, 7-1, but lasted the full seven innings in a rather respectable outing.

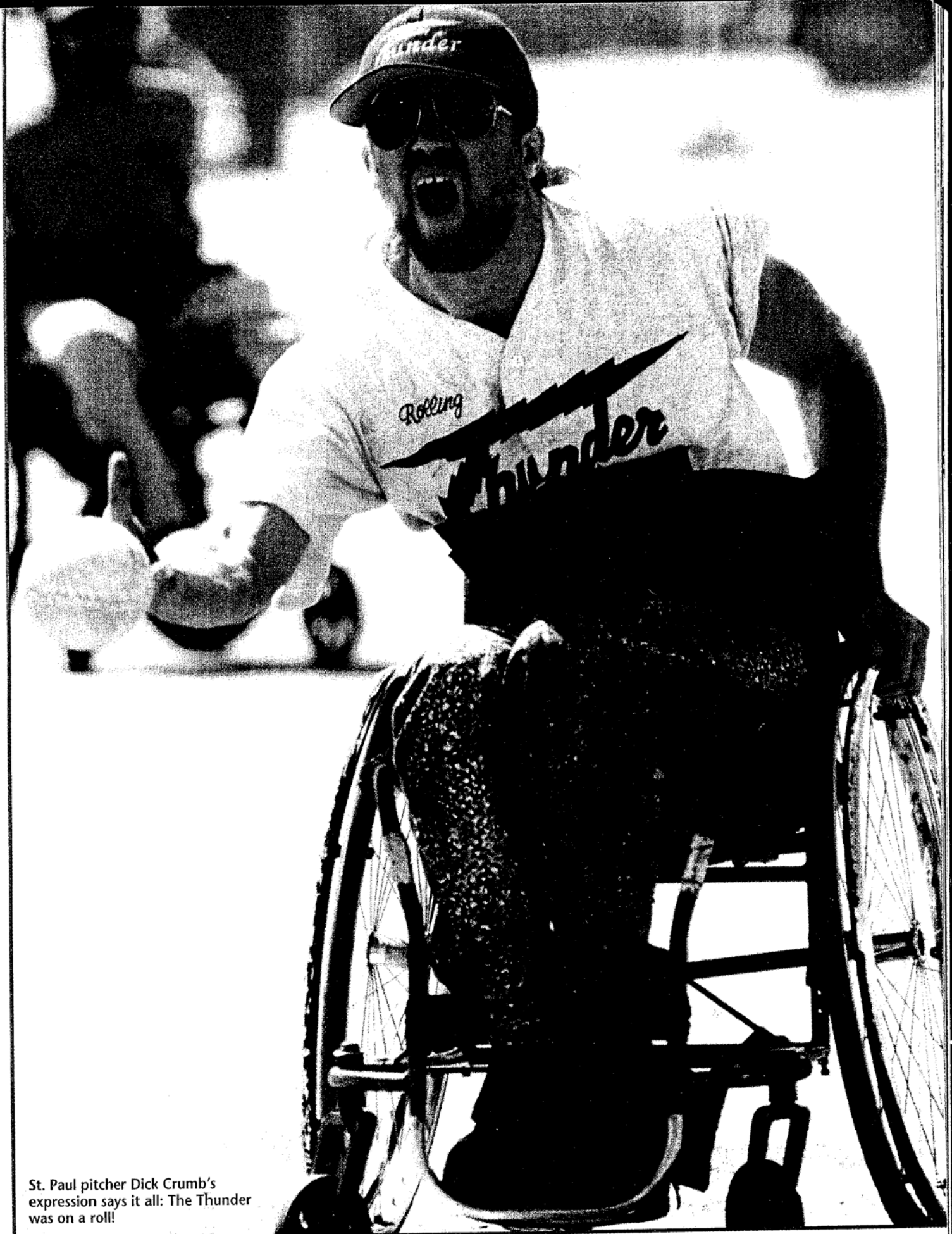
Things got a bit more interesting and serious when the Thunder faced the hometown rival St. Paul Saints on day two. Both teams came in with identical 2-0 records, but the loser would fall to the losers bracket, a huge disadvantage after three games in a 16-team dual-bracket double-elimination tournament. Simply put, the loser would have to play and win three more games just to earn

the chance to face the winners-bracket finalist. On the other hand, the Saints-Thunder winner would have to win only one more game to become the winners-bracket finalist.

The third-seeded Saints had already showcased their potent young offense in a 19-0 five-inning massacre of the fourteenth-seeded Wisconsin Badgers, followed by an equally impressive 11-5 thrashing of the upstart Colorado Blake Street Bombers.

The Thunder broke the ice with single runs in innings one and two, and the Saints responded with a six-spot in the third inning. The 6-2 lead held into the fourth. In the bottom half, the Thunder seasawed back with seven runs, and then piled on another seven in innings five and six. All the Saints could muster after the third were a pair of runs in their last at bat, leaving them far short and on the wrong end of a 16-8 final score.

As Chicago Cubs left fielder Paul Moran put it, "The Thunder cruised, and the Saints were abused—but certainly not amused." The Thunder was now in the driver's seat and on a collision course with the also undefeated defending champion St. Louis Rams.



St. Paul pitcher Dick Crumb's expression says it all: The Thunder was on a roll!



In the championship game, the Saints' Manuel Guerra (right) attempts to pick off the Thunder's Geno Schultz at first base. PVA in Pursuit cameraman Rich Jayne catches the action.

## HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE

At 27, Earl Jordan, Chicago Pacemakers center fielder, holds the distinction as the youngest inductee into the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) Hall of Fame.

A seven-time national all-tournament selection at his position, Jordan has been a Pacemakers member since 1987 and has helped his team win two national championships (1987, 1990).

Unfortunately, due to serious injuries sustained in the van accident involving the Pacemakers that occurred en route to the national tournament, Jordan was not present at the induction ceremonies. His long-time friend and former teammate, Jorge Alfaro, accepted in his behalf.

"Earl is a great player and great friend," Alfaro said. "He is a warrior, a survivor. Please pray for him so that we can have him back here next year to accept his honor himself."



## CHAMPS GET BUSY

The Rams had begun their quest for a second national crown with early wins over the EPVA North East Bombers (11-1) and tourney host Colorado Rockies (12-0). The Bombers, a first-year last-seeded team, claims the distinction as the only team in NWSA history comprised solely of disabled vets. Coached by the venerable Al Youakim, North East evinced a modicum of potential (and sported the classiest uniforms) but was badly over-matched by the defending champs.

The eighth-seeded Colorado Rockies entered the tournament in a weakened state, due to the defection of three starters a few weeks prior. Their inability to score a single run against St. Louis echoed the performance of their diminished offense throughout the tournament. Ultimately, they would do no better than an eighth-place finish.

On day two, it looked like the Rams would face their first real competition in the Chicago (RIC) Cubs, last year's fourth-place contingent. The Cubs shut down the high-powered Rams lineup through two innings while mounting a modest two-run lead. But from there, the Rams' fortunes rose while the Cubs' fortunes vanished. The Rams proceeded to pound the Cubs with 11 unanswered runs, and pitcher Paul Burley held them in check on three scattered hits over the last six innings, for an 11-2 win.

## RAMS-THUNDER REMATCH

Call it the almost ultimate rematch between the '97 finalists, if you will. I call it an old-fashioned slugfest. By the third inning, the visiting Thunder had forged a 7-4 lead. The Rams narrowed it to 8-7 in the bottom half and then exploded for five more runs in the fourth inning, answering a single run by the Thunder in that frame. By the fifth inning, the Rams were on top 12-9.

Thunder ace Dick Crumb had something else in mind. "It's time to shut 'em down..." he muttered to no one in particular as he exited the dugout to start the fifth. He had been knocked around pretty badly up to that point. The last three innings were an entire turnaround from the first four for the Rams. Either the veteran Crumb found his rhythm or the Rams batters went totally cold. Whichever the case, Crumb faced one-over-the-minimum ten batters over the last three innings. The sole St. Louis runner reached base on a walk and was stranded at first.

The Thunder still had something to prove: that this team at full strength is as good as it ever was. A strong signal went out in the form of two fifth-inning runs and another pair in the sixth that put the Thunder ahead for good at 13-12. Three insurance runs in the top of the seventh closed the door on the defending cham-

pions and reestablished the Thunder as the team to beat.

With three teams—Rams, Saints, Thunder—left in contention for the national title, the final day of competition came down to a do-or-die one-game playoff between the Saints and the Rams for the right to face the Thunder.

The Thunder had anticipated a finals rematch with the defending champion St. Louis Rams, who last year had interrupted the Thunder's string of six national titles. But the Saints, last season's third-place finishers, had other ideas (like blasting the Rams out of a rematch with the Thunder by a score of 17-5 in the semifinal). It was a game that the Saints dominated from start to finish. After three innings, the surprising Saints had surged to an 11-3 lead that staggered the Rams and stunned the bipartisan crowd. The Saints were relentless in their pursuit of a crack at the Thunder as they capped off the contest with a single tally in the fourth and a five-spot in the bottom of the sixth for a 13-run cushion. By then, the Rams' fate was indelibly apparent. Their final at bat was a futile one-run rally, demonstrative of the Saints dominance throughout the game.

The stage had been set for an all-St. Paul showdown, and Saints' coach Jon Speake chimed in, "We expected to play three games against the Thunder coming into this tournament, and that's still our expectation."

#### WINNER TAKES ALL

After two-and-a-half days of onfield battle, the championship game(s) had come down to two teams from the same city: St. Paul, Minn. The Rolling Thunder and the Saints would go head-to-head for the first time in a national tournament final, with the Thunder (4-0) coming in undefeated, and the Saints (5-1) going in with one loss and needing to beat the Thunder twice to capture their first national title.

The Saints did everything they could in the early innings to make a soothsayer out of Speake. With one out in the top of the first, Manny Guerra and Joe Arends reached base on consecutive singles. Scott Berg doubled to leftfield, scoring Guerra, and George Kiefner followed with a looping single to center that tallied Arends for a 2-0 lead. In the second, Shawn Corbin found a hole in the right-center gap that garnered three bases, and Barry Hite, the number-nine hitter, brought him home on a bounce-out to shallow leftfield.

In inning three, the middle of the order—Berg, Kiefner, and Rick Cooper (a Texas transplant)—all doubled. Kiefner's drove in Berg, Cooper's drove in Kiefner, and Dan Price's shallow sacrifice fly that had to be handled by the second baseman running out, brought home Kiefner for a



During National Wheelchair Softball Tournament action, the Minnesota Twins' Mark Mortenson is safe at third base as the Colorado Rockies' Corey Fairbanks attempts to tag him out.

6-0 lead. In the meantime, Hite, with solid defenders behind him, squelched a two-on, nobody-out rally attempt in the first inning and then methodically retired the Thunder in the second and third. At that point, Hite and his teammates were in complete control, but the Thunder had a decade-long habit of coming back.

After spotting the Saints a 6-0 lead through three innings, the erstwhile champions remained dormant in the bottom half but rallied in the fourth for a respectable 6-4 deficit. The Thunder tallied two more runs in the fifth (their favorite comeback inning) to forge a 6-6 tie that carried into the final inning. The Saints, unintimidated and unwilling to relinquish the championship to their veteran crosstown rivals, surged ahead again with a single run in the seventh for a 7-6 lead.

In the back of their minds, the Saints must have known they were far from out of the woods. At the same time, they had to focus on the gargantuan task of surviving the top of the Thunder's batting order. The Saints were focused but could not stave off or deny the Rolling Thunder their apparent destiny.

Dave Eckstrom led off the bottom of the seventh with a line-drive single to center and scored the tying run on Scott Robeson's double to the right centerfield gap. With first base open, the Saints were in the unenviable position of having to pitch to Anderson—arguably the best hitter in the history of the game—or cleanup



The Chicago Pacemakers' Kristi Alberson pitched for the Colorado Springs Wildcats. Several Pacemakers were seriously injured in an accident that took place on their way to the tournament. The Chicago players not hurt became part of other teams.



A relay from Saints' shortstop Scott Berg to second baseman Dan Price forces out the Twins' Mike Laven (right) at second. The Saints lost the championship to the Rolling Thunder.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Larry Labiak is Youth Services coordinator at the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities and National Wheelchair Softball Association president. He played basketball for years before retiring to officiate. A graduate of the University of Illinois, Labiak earned a bachelor's of radio and television and a master's degree in advertising.

man Kevin Peterson, no slouch in the clutch, either. They chose the apparent lesser of the two evils and walked Anderson intentionally, setting up multiple double-play combinations.

Playing the percentages failed to pay off when Peterson belted the first pitch toward the hole in left-center. The ball got down quickly and rolled to the wall as Anderson rounded third and trotted home to a throng of jubilant teammates already celebrating their 8-7 victory and seventh national championship of the nineties. ♦

## ACCIDENT UPDATE

On August 19, the van carrying Chicago Pacemakers players to the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) crashed near Cozad, Neb., killing one woman and critically injuring three men.

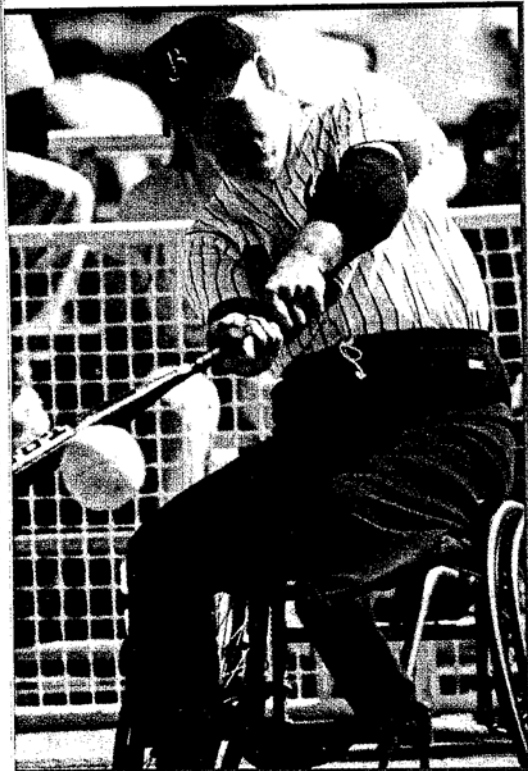
Debra Smith, wife of NWSA Hall of Famer Milton Smith, died in the accident. Of the three players seriously injured, Ed Brewer had a fractured wrist and foot, as well as a bruised sternum. He was released from Oak Forest Hospital (Cook County, Ill.) on October 24 and continues to recover at home.

Earl Jordan sustained head and shoulder injuries, a broken leg, and multiple contusions. He was released from The Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC) on October 13 and receives outpatient therapy.

Mike Hughes, the most severely injured player, had a cervical injury, multiple leg fractures, and head and internal injuries. He is currently rehabbing at Oak Forest Hospital, is off the ventilator, and shows steady improvement.

The Pacemakers thank the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) for its heartfelt support and generous monetary contributions.

Contact: NWSA, 1616 Todd Court, Hastings, MN 55033. (612) 437-1792.



North East Bomber George Norton takes his turn at bat. The Bombers, a first-year last-seeded team, claimed the distinction as the only team in NWST history composed solely of disabled veterans.