

SPORTS 'N SPOKES

November 2003



New Faces on the Field

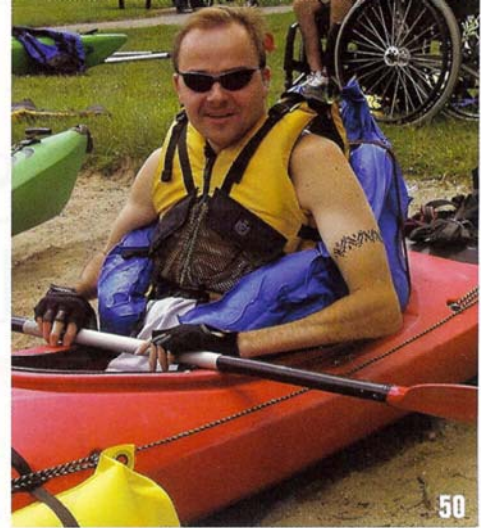
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Larry Labiak

After years of repeat softball championships, the past two have brought new blood to the winner's circle.



BARONS CONTROL THE LAND

by Larry Labiak / photos by Mark Cowan

After years of repeat softball champions, the past two have brought new blood to the winner's circle.

A contingent of 14 wheelchair-softball teams from across the country converged in view of the state capitol building in downtown St. Paul, Minn., August 14–16, to determine a 27th national champion. Thanks to the support of local Sears management, a double-diamond softball park was installed on the store's vast parking lot adjacent to the host hotel, and tourney director Jerry Anderson's one-stop brainchild became reality.

What was once an annual event typically dominated by one team, the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) in the new millennium has become a wide-open affair with a different champion in each of the past three seasons—St. Paul Saints (2000), St. Paul

Minnesota Twins–East Metro catcher Jason Miller tags out Nebraska Baron Greg Suing in the semifinal game. The Barons went on to win the championship.

Rolling Thunder (2001), and Chicago (RIC) Cubs (2002). In addition to these clubs, only a relative neophyte would overlook TC United, last year's runner-up, and the Nebraska Barons as top-five 2003 contenders.

With the Cubs, Thunder, and Barons all bunched in the upper of two seven-team brackets, the Minnesota Twins-East Metro (formerly St. Paul Saints) would have an apparent edge in the lower. The Twins-East Metro came out thrashing in the first round. With something to prove after a



disappointing third-place finish last year, no mercy was afforded the Courage Rolling Twins Blue (one of three local rivals in the tourney) in a 34–0 slaughter-rule-shortened four-inning walk-through. Same result, different victim in round two as Phil Price hurled a 13–0 four-inning no-hitter versus the St. Louis Rolling Rams.

TC United traversed the first-day slopes



with similar ease via a first-round bye followed by a 17-1 pasting of the NEPVA Red Sox. As expected, TC United and Twins-East Metro were primed and making ready to face off on day two.

Another View

On the other side of the ledger, the defending champion Cubs drew the other

first-round bye as they lay in wait for the EPVA Mets-Chicago Wolves winner. In that one, the Wolves mounted a dramatic two-out, 3-run rally in the bottom of the seventh inning to forge a 5-5 tie. The Mets countered with 2 in the extra frame, but the Wolves prevailed, 8-7, when leftfielder Rene Aquino, caught in a two-out rundown between first and second, kept the

play alive long enough for Wolves runners to score from third and second with the tying and winning runs. Such rare high drama notwithstanding, the Wolves were overwhelmed by the Cubs in round two, falling 11-1 in five innings.

The fourth-seeded St. Paul Rolling Thunder, the most storied team in wheelchair-softball history, became part of



In a come-from-behind championship victory, the Nebraska Barons defeated the Minnesota Twins-East Metro, 8-7.

another historical footnote when they took the field against the American Divas, the first all-women's softball team (see "Divine Divas," next page).

Not surprisingly, the Divas were overmatched by the former champions in a 17-0 shutout loss. Although the Divas didn't win any of their games, they came close against their final opponent, the Courage Rolling Twins Blue, who survived a 6-5 cliffhanger.

The Thunder's next opponent was the fifth-seeded Nebraska Barons, who had dispensed with the Center Coast Confluence, 14-2, in their round-one game.

At stake, the winner would move on to face the Cubs on day two; the loser would drop to the losers' bracket, thus giving the term "double elimination" a much deeper meaning.

Last year the Thunder had narrowly escaped with a 4-3 victory over the Barons in the late round that locked them into a fifth-place finish. No doubt, that memory was still fresh. Not only had Nebraska shored up its offense since then with the addition of the best home-run-hitting talent the game has ever seen, but it also had another year of experience under the players' belts. That combina-

tion proved lethal as the Barons pounded out 11 runs on 15 hits while holding the Thunder to a single run on 6 hits. Nebraska's climb to the big time would continue as the team next focused its attention on the defending champions.

Seven's a Winner

Unlike any of the previous six games these two teams had split over the season, the Cubs-Barons matchup in round three proved decisive in more ways than one. The Barons mounted 3-run rallies in each of the first three frames, while the Cubs' bats were silenced by Nebraska's



AT RIGHT: The Wisconsin Badgers' Jeremy Lade throws to first after forcing out the baserunner.

nearly flawless defense behind pitcher Rory Heaton, who consistently got ahead and stayed there. On the other side, the Cubs, normally an excellent defensive team, committed five errors.

By the time Chicago broke through with a pair of runs in the bottom of the third, the Barons held a comfortable 7-run lead. To make matters worse, the Cubs then made the mistake of pitching to the Barons' newfound home-run phenom, Brent Rasmussen, who led off the

Divine Divas

Featuring a veritable WHO'S WHO of basketball, softball, and road-racing talent (e.g., Jen Warkins, Christina Ripp, Jennifer Clarke, Deb Quick and Andrea Woodson to name several), the American Divas was the first all-female team to compete in an NWST. For years a handful of women players has been on men's teams, but never before has there been an exclusively female squad.

Kudos to Jennifer Clarke for bringing these athletes together under the tutelage of co-coaches Mike Wheaton and Sonny DeGuzman.

Jennifer Clarke and her American Divas teammates were the first all-female squad to compete in a National Wheelchair Softball Tournament.



fourth. The former minor-league baseball star proceeded to blast Ziggy Tkaczenko's first offering into oblivion. An intentional walk would have sufficed,

especially since Rasmussen had already cranked out a dozen during the regular season. After that, the floodgates reopened, and the rout was on. Nebras-

Mets Claim DII

All hail the EPVA Mets (at right)! They came to bury Division II opponents, not to praise them. It didn't start out that way as what would become a two-out-of-three showdown between EPVA and the Wisconsin Badgers saw the Mets fall to the Badgers, 6-5, in extra innings the first time out.

Facing do-or-die elimination versus the Center Coast Confluence, it was the Mets who did the eliminating. They pummeled the Confluence, 14-0, to set up a rematch with the Badgers.

Needing to defeat Wisconsin twice to claim Division II honors, leftfielder Eddie Jorge's 3-hit performance spearheaded the offense to a 5-1 lead after five. The pride of New York fought off a 2-run Badger rally in the bottom of the seventh to close out a 5-3 win and force a deciding game.

In the rubber match, the Mets chalked up single runs in the first and fourth frames and made them last. Behind solid defense and another complete game performance by David Deas, the New Yorkers shut out the Badgers, 2-0, and took home the Division II spoils.



laurels as they awaited the Twins-East Metro/TC United outcome. The Barons would get the winner.

Proving Their Worth

Jon Speakes's reloaded and renamed Twins-East Metro conglomerate had something to prove: that last season's third-place finish was a fluke. With the absence of first baseman Manuel Guerra and third baseman George Kiefner due to personal commitments elsewhere, last year East Metro (a.k.a. the Saints) lacked their normal offensive punch, and it showed in late-round losses to the Cubs and TC United. With the addition of new import Scott Douglas and the return of Steve Welch, who missed the nationals last year due to a basketball stint in Japan, East Metro's fire was well-stoked.

While the Cubs stumbled on day two, TC United's stock was on the rise. With last year's team returning intact, plus a deep bench, United had every reason to be confident about its chances against East Metro. The Twins made the first dent, but United quickly countered in inning one for a 4-3 lead. A single run in the third and steady defense held the Twins at bay through three. But in frames four and five, the Twins put up 3 and 7, respectively, for a commanding 13-3 lead. TC cut it by one in the sixth, and East Metro responded with another 7-run outburst in the seventh. United fired its last shot in the bottom half, scoring a single nonconsolation run.

With United, Cubs, and Thunder temporarily out of the way, Nebraska and East Metro stood directly in each other's path to the championship round—one a veteran ball club with a decade-long legacy, the other the proverbial upstart that



The Chicago Cubs, last year's champions, fell to eventual finalists TC United.

ka tacked on 3 more in the fourth and added another 3-spot in the fifth. The Cubs tried in vain to avoid a 5-inning

slaughter but fell 1 run short at 16-5.

Now squarely in the driver's seat, the Barons could take a short rest on their



The Minnesota Twins' Pete Stigman hits the ground after being tagged out at home by Nebraska Baron Rory Heaton.

has steadily risen through the ranks over the past half decade.

With so much at stake, the Barons proved themselves up to the task, amassing an early 5-0 lead after two innings. Leftfielder Rasmussen punctuated the attack with a line-drive home run in the bottom of the first, one of three he would eventually hit in the tournament—not too bad for a guy who was issued 13 intentional passes in the five games he played. No one before him had ever hit more than two at nationals. “I’ve never seen anyone hit a 16-inch ball as far as he does from a sitting position,” remarked veteran player/coach Sonny DeGuzman. “Good swing—timing’s on the money.”

The Twins countered with a pair of runs in the top of the third, but the Barons added 1 to their lead in the bottom half. In the fourth, the Twins cut the Barons lead, 6-4, but Nebraska matched that times two in their half for a 10-4 advantage. With their backs seemingly against the wall, the Twins batted around in the sixth en route to a 6-run game-tying rally.

At 10-10, the Twins and Barons had given up more runs to each other than either had allowed the opposition collectively in their previous three tourney victories. Regardless, even high-scoring seesaw battles garner an eventual winner, and so it goes with this one.

In the bottom half of the sixth, the Barons’ reliable offense strung together three doubles with an intentional walk to Rasmussen sandwiched between the first two. The resulting 3-run lead held up against the lower third of the Twins’ lineup in the seventh, and the Barons were on their way to the championship round.

“We’ve played Nebraska seven times this season, and each time they get better,” said Cubs outfielder Earl Jordan. “As far as I’m concerned, they can stop right now!”

Who Would Step Up?

The Cubs, TC United, East Metro, and Thunder were alive, not so well and living, in the losers’ bracket. One of these would need to step up to earn the other berth in the championship round.

The Thunder? They couldn’t muster one of those patented comebacks this time. TC bested them, 14-8, to advance to a day-three showdown with the Cubs, who had stayed in the hunt by knocking off the Red Sox, 11-4.

With the “final four” determined, Chicago and TC faced off to pare it down to three. This one is notable because it turned into a how-not-to-run-the-bases clinic by the Cubs. The no-luck Cubbies couldn’t seem to catch a break all weekend.

After lead-off man James Terpenning and number-two hitter Joe Wittkamp reached on consecutive singles in the first inning, Jeff Lewis’s one-out single drove in Terpenning, but Wittkamp was gunned down at the plate. After that, the Cubs defense tightened, keeping United off balance through five innings. In the meantime, facing this 1-run deficit, the Cubs proceeded to advance the tying and lead runs to second and third with less than two outs in three different innings but failed to score. The worst-case scenario was a bases-loaded no-out rally in which a little back-

2003 NWSA Hall of Fame Inductees

• **Dan Hall** (far right; St. Louis Rolling Rams) has been with the Rolling Rams for the past 13 seasons, and in 1997 the team won the national championship. Hall is a five-time all-tournament second baseman.

Nominator: "It's Dan's ability to put the ball wherever he wants to, whenever he wants to, as well as his humility on and off the field, that stand out."

• **Scott Berg** (center; St. Paul Saints) has been a St. Paul Saint (team changed name to Minnesota Twins—East Metro in 2003) for the past decade. In 2002, the Saints won the national championship. Berg is a five-time all-tournament shortstop, and he was named 1995 and 2001 best hitter.

Nominator: "Without his leadership over the years, this team would have fallen short of its goals."

• **Manuel (Jr.) Guerra** (left; St. Paul Saints) has spent the past decade with the Saints. He is a 15-time all-tournament first baseman, and in 1998 he was voted MVP.

Nominator: "He's always a tough out, and he makes all the tough outs look easy."



nity and grabbed a 3-0 lead in the first inning. They expanded it to 5-1 in the second, and all indications leaned toward their forcing

a decisive second game. However, we're talking about two power-laden, defensive-minded, speed-enhanced teams here, not just one.

The Barons methodically chipped away at the Twins' lead and whittled it down to a manageable 6-4 proportion by the fourth inning. The turning point may have been a botched bases-loaded hit-and-run that turned into a double play when pitcher Jason Miller popped out and outfielder Rick Cooper was doubled off second base. After that, catcher Brendon Downs was retired, 5-3, to end an erstwhile promising inning.

That revitalized the Barons, who struck for 4 more unanswered runs, highlighted by sure-hitting first baseman Greg Suing's RBI single that scored Paul Krabbenhoft, who had led off with a single. That was followed by second baseman John Morse's bases-loaded two-RBI single, and the rest is history. As usual, the dependable Krabbenhoft fired the first shot, and a salvo of batters followed. That paradigm was set early in the 2003 campaign, and it was evident again in the bottom of the fifth inning.

That was the decisive inning for both teams, as the Barons were able to avert the tie by limiting the Twins to 1 run in the sixth before shutting down the lower half of their order in the seventh to preserve a come-from-behind, 8-7 championship victory.

S'NS

spinning pop fly about six feet in front of home plate first bounced and then grazed catcher Jason Van Beek's outstretched fingertips in fair territory before slicing foul.

With all three runners thinking he hadn't touched the ball, and no "infield fly" indication, they froze momentarily when it was still in the air and then retreated. At that moment, the plate umpire motioned it fair. The tall, lanky Van Beek snatched at the ball again, scooped it up, stepped on the plate to force the runner from third and fired to second to force the runner from first base. The runner from second was simultaneously rounding third and was sent home on Van Beek's throw. A lightning-quick return relay nailed him at the plate, with Van Beek applying the swipe tag for the third out.

The Cubs' woes on the base paths haunted them again in the top of the sixth and again in the seventh when risky decisions caused putouts at third and home, each time with less than two outs. Credit TC United for making so many run-saving plays and thwarting the Cubs' bid to get back to the finals. Ironically, when Chicago did finally break up the shutout with a run in their last at-bat, it was still too little, too

late. TC had squeezed out an insurance run in the sixth that neutralized the Cubs' advance in the seventh, and then stranded the tying and lead runs to end the game.

It's difficult to know how to repeat if you've never done it. The Cubs learned that the hard way. On the other hand, they wouldn't have traded the rare opportunity afforded so few to attempt it.

TC had exacted a measure of sweet revenge—but only for a moment, because East Metro waited in the wings. Maybe the added rest helped the Twins, maybe they had some psychological edge, or maybe United had spent its whole wad battling the Cubs. For whatever reason, TC's offense never quite got on track against the Twins. East Metro scored 4 in the third, and TC responded with two. But after that, Price shut the door. He scattered two singles and retired 12 of the last 14 United batters in order as the Twins cruised into the finals, 9-2.

East Metro would have their work cut out for them in the championship round, needing to beat Nebraska twice to claim their second national title. A single win would clinch it for the Barons.

The Twins didn't waste the opportu-

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