

Changing of the

by Larry Labiak / photos by Curt Beamer



Six-time defending champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder met their match in this annual bat-swinging challenge.

Guard



The NWST (National Wheelchair Softball Tournament) returned to Pasadena/Houston, Tex., home of the finest wheelchair-softball complex around, for its twenty-first national tournament, held August 21-23. A record 15 teams from all parts of the country attended this extravaganza. The host site, Verne Cox Multipurpose Center, boasts dual diamonds (one with lights for night games), electronic scoring, and cool-air

blowers in the dugouts to counter the sweltering, sun-drenched sauna that is Texas in August.

Don't ask the St. Louis Rolling Rams if they were affected by a midday high of 97° (110° heat index) when they blew a 5-3 lead in the bottom of the seventh against six-time defending champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder. They would say, "No!"

These two veteran ballclubs faced off on day two in the first of three games that would ultimately determine a champion, and the Thunder prevailed, 6-5. Both teams were undefeated after preliminary rounds, but only one, St. Paul, came away unscathed, albeit temporarily.

ABOVE: St. Paul's Geno Schultz forces the Rams' Aaron Gunn (#10) out at third.

AT LEFT: The St. Louis Rams defeated the St. Paul Rolling Thunder for the championship title.

In the home half of the seventh, Thunder first baseman Geno Schultz singled with nobody out. Speedster Pete LePage pinch ran for Schultz and was forced at second on Hawkeye Schultz's line shot one-hopper to Mike Krato in left field. Paul Bester, the number-eight hitter, was lifted for Stan Koich, who slammed a single to left, advancing Hawkeye to second. Pitcher Dick Crumb went down swinging on a 1-2 count to set the stage for high drama.

Rory Fosness, the quad and tenth hitter in the lineup, coaxed a full-count, two-out walk from Rams' pitcher Paul Burley. Dale Erickson went in to pinch-run for Fosness as a slight smile broke the normally stern face of leadoff man and hall-of-famer Dave Eckstrom when he strode to the plate. Thanks to Burley's unintended generosity, Eckstrom would have his chance with the bases loaded and two out. Eckstrom, arguably the best clutch hitter in the game, worked the count to his advantage at 2-1, in effect, tightening the noose around the Rams' collective necks. Burley had to throw a strike, and he did. But Eckstrom transformed it into a missile-shot double to deep right field. The hit careened off the fence, cleared the bases (helped by cagey Erick-



He's safe! The Rams' Aaron Gunn beats the tag at third base.

Kiefner followed with a hard shot to left-center; he hit it sharply enough to allow Jesse Gonzales to force Berg at second and end the game 11-4, Thunder.

The Thunder was now, as usual, in the most enviable position (3-0) and a single win away from another championship. They would wait for the Rams, Saints, or RIC Chicago Cubs to emerge from the losers bracket.

Next up for St. Louis was the Houston Astros-White (formerly Texas Stars), 1996 runners-up to the Thunder. The Astros-White had blown out the Lone Star Lightning (21-0) in their opening game but were upset by the Cubs, who snapped a 3-3 tie in the bottom of the sixth inning. This came on the strength of a two-out home run by shortfielder Kurt Smith, a walk to rightfielder George Burns, a bloop single to right by first baseman Joe Robinson, and an error in right on pitcher Chris Villarreal's can of corn that scored Burns from third. In the seventh the Cubs retired the middle of the Astros' lineup in order to close out a 5-3 second-round victory.

son's sizable lead off first base), and turned an apparent loss into yet another miracle comeback victory by the defending champs.

How can anyone dispute the superiority niche carved out by the St. Paul Rolling Thunder in the annals of wheelchair softball over the past decade and a half? Their record—eight national championships, three second-place finishes, and one third-place since 1982—speaks for itself.

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR

After defeating the Rams, St. Paul was two victories away from an unprecedented seventh consecutive national crown. The first came surprisingly easy versus the cross-town rival, St. Paul Saints. The Thunder never trailed after taking a 2-1 advantage in the top of the first. While holding the Saints scoreless from innings two through six, the Thunder scored twice in the fourth, four times in the fifth, and added three for good measure in the seventh.

The Saints came alive briefly in the bottom half of the seventh when Dan Heidtke singled to right field and went to second on a 4-3 fielder's choice putout. The bases were loaded following consecutive two-out walks to shortfielder Pete Stigman and left-fielder Brian Swanson.

Saints' shortstop Scott Berg kept hope alive with a slash single into right-center, scoring Heidtke and Stigman. Third baseman "Big George"

CUBS STEP UP

Not only did these upstart Cubs untrack the Astros-White, but they also slipped past their South Side rivals, the Chicago Pacemakers, in round one to claim hometown bragging rights. Despite a solid pitching performance by right-hander Kristi Albertson, the Pacemakers failed in the clutch with runners in

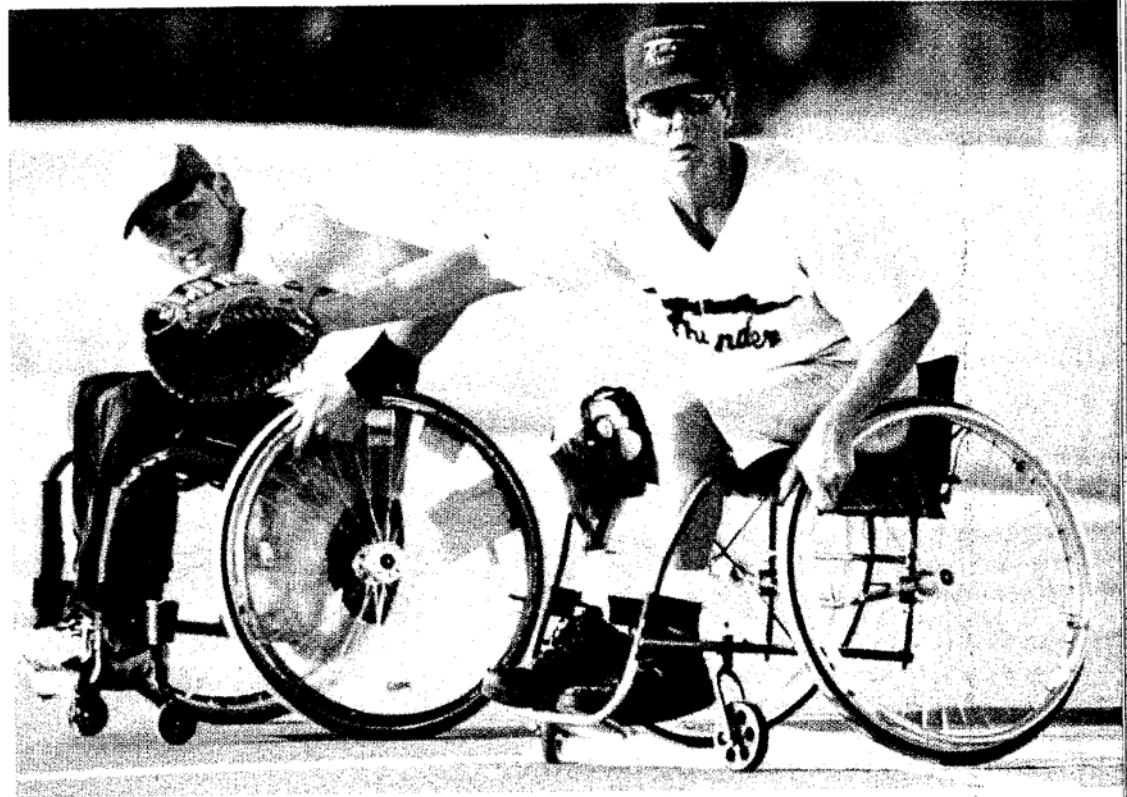


Pacemaker Kristi Albertson tags out the Twins' Charlie Witter as he tries to score at home plate.

Thunder first baseman Jim Langevin holds the Saints' Dan Price at first.

scoring position in the first and third innings. In the bottom of the sixth, the Pacemakers' precarious 3-2 lead fell to the Cubs' previously dormant bats.

Cubs leftfielder Paul Moran punched a one-out single to right as did first baseman Sean Griggs. Burns ran for Griggs and scored along with Moran on rightfielder Richie Palmerin's double to left, after cleanup man Kurt Smith was intentionally passed to load the bases. To further complicate matters for the erstwhile four-time champions, Pacemaker leftfielder Milton Smith overthrew Bob Trotter in an attempt to force Burns at third, and Smith and Palmerin advanced to scoring position when the ball ricocheted off the backstop behind home plate and bounded away from catcher Larry Labiak. By the time he tracked it down, Burns had scored, and the game was even at 3-3. Joe Robinson was intentionally walked to again set up a



NATIONAL WHEELCHAIR SOFTBALL TOURNAMENT

Teams ended in the following order:

WINNERS BRACKET

St. Louis Rolling Rams
St. Paul Rolling Thunder
St. Paul Saints
RIC Cubs
Houston Astros—White
Minnesota Twins
Maryland Ravens Metrostars
Colorado Rockies—Grey

CONSOLATION BRACKET

Chicago OFH Pacemakers
Columbus Pioneers
Colorado Rockies—White
Kansas City Diamond
Colorado Sky Sox
Houston Astros—Blue
Lone Star Lightning



The Cubs' Kurt Smith pounds the ball toward the outfield.

The St. Louis Rams' Paul Burley pitched a one-hit, 10-1 masterpiece against the Cubs.

force at any base, but Villarreal crossed the Pacemakers up with a two-run single to left that tallied Smith and Palmerin to cap the decisive four-run rally.

The Pacemakers went three up and out in the seventh, fell to the losers bracket, and faced imminent elimination (which occurred two games later). The Cubs' 6-3 win gave them the confidence they've been seeking for the past three years—that they can win under pressure in a big game.

In spite of the fact they were shellacked, 13-1, at the hands of the Saints in game three, the Cubs maintained their newfound poise and defeated the Minnesota Twins, 6-3, in game four. These Cinderella Cubs, one of several NWSA teams that receive financial support from their Major League baseball counterpart, were establishing themselves as bona fide contenders.

Meanwhile, the St. Louis Rams were struggling to right their psychological ship after their loss to the St. Paul Thunder. The Rams' game-three opponent, the Astros-White, in the second inning forged a 2-0 lead they maintained through the fifth. Was it the Astros playing their best series defense that had stymied St. Louis thus far, or were the Rams reeling on offense because they were still in shock over their preceding loss to the Thunder? Probably both.

Vito Lucido, Rams field manager and catcher, explained it this way: "I thought we were going to lose when we took the field in the sixth inning. I couldn't believe we hadn't scored, we had only five scattered singles, and only one runner had made it to third base. But when [the Astros] made the mistake of walking me (the quad) to lead off the bottom of the sixth, I changed my mind."

After that, third baseman Ron Maurer forced Lucido at second, but Lucido came in hard and broke up the double play. Center-fielder Aaron Gunn singled up the middle on a hit-and-run, and Maurer coasted into third. Shortstop Jim Dugan slammed a long single into the gap in left, scoring Maurer and sending Gunn to third. Championship bracket tourney MVP Krato fired a rifle shot to straightaway centerfield, the hit cleared the bases, and the



KIEFNER IN HALL

Kudos and congrats to George Kiefner, the sole 1997 NWSA Hall of Fame inductee. In his nominating petition, Tom Wheaton, NWSA treasurer and former teammate, said of Kiefner: "He has been my mentor for the past six years. He introduced me to wheelchair softball and continues to be the leader that everyone on the team looks up to and respects for his leadership, workout regimen, and commitment to the game. He truly has enhanced this sport and continued the dedication and efforts of his late father, George Kiefner Jr., in support of wheelchair softball." (Atta boy, George! Dad would be proud.)

speedy Krato raced to second on the throw home. Shortfielder Rich Diecker smashed a low frozen-rope line drive to second, and the Astros fielded it on the short hop. On the throwout to first, Krato rounded third and barreled home. Astros first baseman Jason Van Beek's throw to the plate beat the ever-daring Krato, and pitcher Johnny Banda applied the tag on the collision at home. An efficient three runs on three hits via six batters was just enough as the Astros went down 1-2-3 in the seventh, suffering their second loss and denied a higher than fifth-place finish.

RAMS ON A ROLL

With another late-inning win under their belts, the St. Louis Rams were suddenly alive and well and ready for the Cubs.

Unfortunately for the Cubs, Burley and the Rams' defense found momentum in simultaneous fashion. In one of the tournament's finest pitching performances, Burley faced a one-over-the-minimum 22 batters in seven complete innings and hurled a one-hit, 10-1 masterpiece. The only Cub to score was leadoff man Moran, who doubled to left in the first and advanced to third on shortstop Jorge Alfaro's slapper that second baseman Hall misplayed. With runners at the corners, Palmerin hit a sacrifice fly to right that scored Moran. What had the makings of a breakthrough inning disintegrated as rightfielder Krato threw behind Alfaro and doubled him off second. Power-hitter Smith followed with a tough hop golf-swing chip-shot to second, and Dan Hall scooped it up and pegged it to first to quell the tide. From that point on, Burley retired every Chicago batter in order from the second through the seventh to earn his fourth tourney victory. Burley's outfield defenders chalked up seven runners gunned down at first base and accounted for ten outs overall.

Although the clock had just struck midnight for his Cinderella team, Cubs coach Corey Bell was far from disappointed with fourth place: "This is our highest finish ever and a credit to our players who stepped up as a team and played like I knew they could. Even through the adversity of losing two starters to injury the week before the Nationals, they banded together and showed what T-E-A-M means."

As the St. Paul Thunder continued to wait for a final-round opponent to be determined, the Rams took the field against the St. Paul Saints.

Behind another stellar pitching performance by Burley, the Rams shut out the Saints 7-0. The Rams' defense was ironclad, the offense erupted for seven unanswered runs, and Burley allowed just six hits over the course of the game. The still young and developing Saints claimed their second consecutive third-place finish, while the Rams claimed they still had unfinished business.

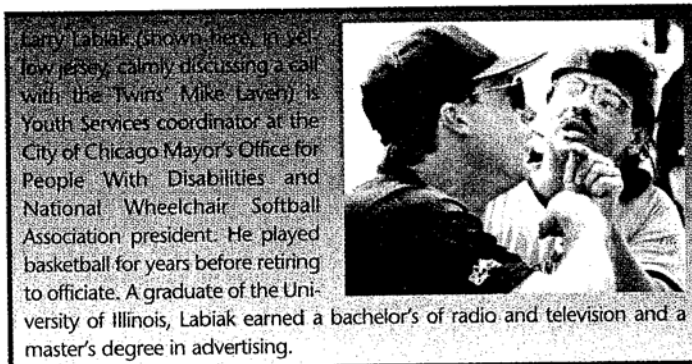
TAKES TWO TO TANGO

The Rams' hearts were stoked with vengeance, but did they possess the heart of a champion?

In a classic rematch pitting the Rams' airtight defense against the Thunder's hitting prowess, the Rams amassed a 5-0 lead through two-and-a-half innings, "and the Thunder found themselves in a deep hole," as Eckstrom describes it. The Thunder countered with four runs in the bottom of the third inning to narrow the gap to 5-4. Both sides went out in the fourth; St. Louis added an insurance run in the fifth and protected their lead through the sixth.

The Thunder held the Rams in the top of the seventh and had their 10-1-2 hitters coming up for last raps with the title on the line. St. Paul needed two runs to tie and three for the championship spoils. Their backs weren't literally up against the wall, because they still had a game in hand on the Rams. But opportunity was knocking with the top of their lineup coming up after number-ten-hitter Fosness.

The pressure appeared too much for Burley when he walked Eckstrom and Scott Robeson after Fosness grounded out. With Kevin Peterson, one of the game's most potent and dangerous hitters, coming to the plate and St. Paul's first-game seventh-inning heroics still fresh in the Rams' minds, they called for a pitching



Larry Labiak (shown here in yellow jersey, calmly discussing a call with the Twins' Mike Lavery) 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.

change. Shortstop Dugan replaced Burley as Peterson stepped to the plate. Peterson, maybe a bit too anxious to get the rally going, went after Dugan's first offering. Fortunately for the Rams, Peterson undercut it and looped a harmless pop-up to third for out number two. With cleanup man Gonzales up next, this would-be decisive matchup pitted power against finesse. Dugan laid in a called strike on his first pitch as Gonzales sized him up. The waiting game was over. His second pitch also split the plate, but this time Gonzales connected, driving the ball back at Dugan, who snagged it on one hop and tossed him out to end the game, 6-4.

St. Louis had played its way back through the losers bracket to knot the championship series at 1-1 and force a third and final game with the defending champs.

THE FINALE

The rubber match between these two superb veteran ballclubs should have been another nailbiter decided in the bottom of the seventh inning. But it didn't play out as this writer thought it would. In fact, it wasn't even close. You can only wonder what effect the absence (due to a family commitment) of the Thunder's perennial all-tournament power-hitting third baseman, Todd Anderson, might have had on the final outcome.

St. Louis put on a defensive clinic heretofore unseen in recent memory, highlighted by MVP Krato's strong-arm performance in left field. Krato vacuumed up everything in his vicinity and gunned down four batters at first on apparent solid base hits to thwart the Thunder's offensive attack in three separate innings. Each time, he cut down a leadoff hitter, and in the sixth he also pegged out cleanup batter Gonzales for the third out. Krato's outfield mates contributed four additional putouts over the course of the game and effectively prevented St. Paul from mounting a serious threat in any inning.

In contrast, the Rams put up three runs in the first, two in the second, and two more in the fifth. Surprisingly, the Thunder's powerful offense was subdued at every turn. Even in the seventh inning when the Thunder broke up Burley's championship shutout bid, their lone run was unearned, helped by three St. Louis errors.

Incredibly (and in Rolling Thunder fashion), the St. Louis Rolling Rams had battled back from their earlier seventh-inning demise and amassed back-to-back victories (6-4, 7-1) over the six-time defending champions to claim their first-ever national crown.

As champions go, Rams' all-tournament third baseman Maurer sums up their rise to the top of the wheelchair softball world: "We went into the tournament expecting to win, and we could not have been satisfied with anything less than a championship. We're not a 'rah, rah!' bunch by any means, just a workman-like group who knew we could win. It was really just a matter of putting together a good tournament, getting some breaks and some calls, and taking advantage of other teams' mistakes, which we did."

Sounds simple enough. Take heed all you national champion wannabes! You'll get another chance next August in Denver, site of the 22nd NWSF. By the way, Maurer and the rest of the Rams will be waiting for you. So will the Thunder. ♦