

# SPORTS 'N SPOKES

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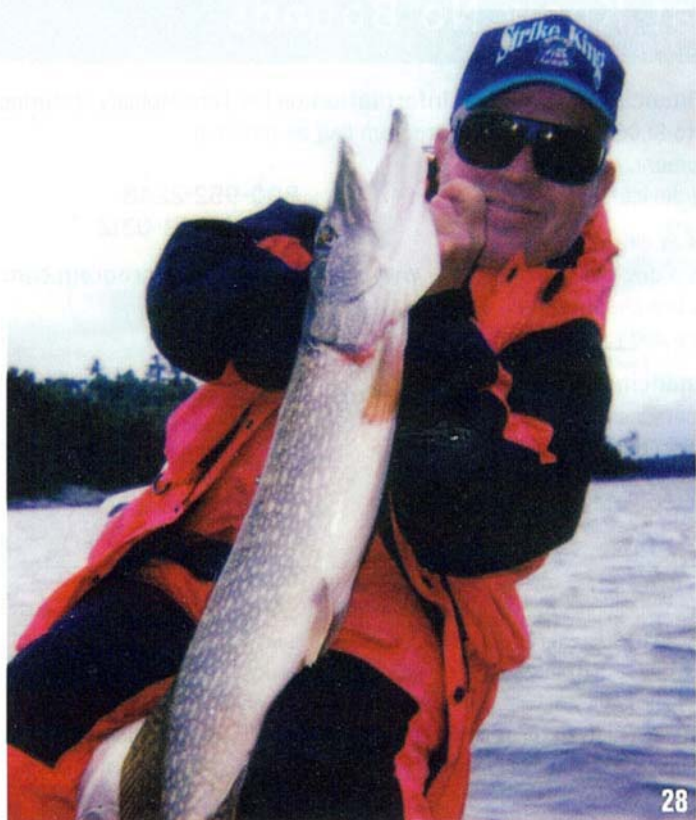


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The battle for softball  
supremacy changed  
locales—but could  
the contenders  
dethrone the champ?

**F**or the first time in its 28-year history, the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) turned to an Omaha/Council Bluffs (Iowa) consortium of softball fanatics, headed by Bruce Froendt—soul of the defending champion Nebraska Barons—to stage its national tournament (August 5–7). Their tri-field softball arena adjacent to the Mid-America Convention Center and the host hotel provided the perfect backdrop for the Barons to begin pursuing a second consecutive national title.

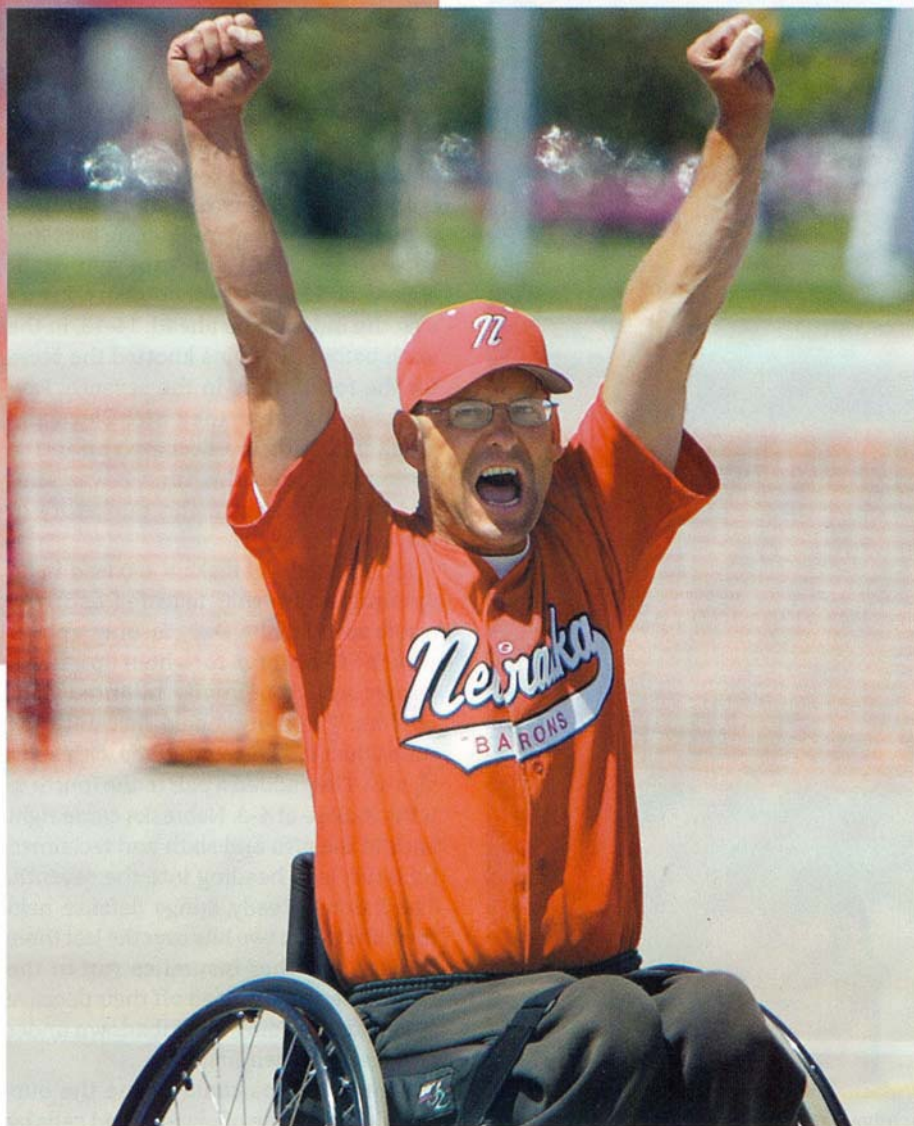
After drawing a first-round bye, the

lumber-laden Nebraskans flexed their muscles with a lambasting of the Vaughan PVA White Sox (formerly Wolves), 18–2. The outcome was no surprise, but the margin of victory raised some eyebrows. The White Sox have filled a couple of holes in their lineup but still lack some punch on offense and have too little depth. They were no match for the Barons' shotgun approach to hitting.

The Barons' main competition in the upper half of this 15-team, dual-bracket, double-elimination, three-day softball sojourn was the RIC Cubs, who slipped to



# HEATING UP THE HEARTLAND



Chris Rasmussen (far left) slugs one for his never-say-die Cleveland Indians in the Division I title game, but the defending champion Nebraska Barons' Bruce Hromek (left) gets the last word.

fourth last year after snagging the '02 title. In the lower half, the Minnesota Twins-East Metro, '03 runner-up, and the third-place Cleveland Indians (formerly TC United) were chomping at the bit.

## Have and Have Nots

The Cubs opened day one with a 23-0, four-inning, slaughter-rule-shortened shutout of the Columbus Pioneers and a follow-up 13-1 thrashing of the Courage Rolling Twins to place themselves squarely in the path of the Barons on day two.

For the Cleveland Indians, who fully expected a straight shot to the semifinals, the RIC Cubs II were an easy mark in round one. The Cubs II, RIC's first-year second team contingent from the North Side, were pounded and pummeled, 17-0, by the Indians in another slaughter-rule-shortened tuneup. In round two, the NEPVA Red Sox lasted through five before succumbing, 13-1, at the hands of the Indians, also by slaughter rule. The disparity between the

haves and the have nots was quite apparent in the early rounds.

On the other side of the lower-bracket ledger, the Minnesota Twins-East Metro began their march to the semis with a 15-0 five-inning rout of the rookie Tampa Bay Devil Rays. The Devil Rays, the newest Major League Baseball affiliate to join the NWSA, displayed sound fundamentals but are several bats short of a full rack on offense. In time, however, they could be contenders. Credit team leader Doyle Mann for adding veteran Chicago transplant Steve Truels to the Devil Rays' coaching

staff to complement the less experienced, but baseball savvy, Shayne Wilkerson.

"It was a great experience to work with this new team," says Truels. "They're enthusiastic, eager to learn, and coachable. Doyle and Shayne deserve a lot of the credit for getting it going in Florida."

The final piece of the semifinals' puzzle was about to be set in place by the Minnesota Twins-East Metro as they faced the Wisconsin Badgers. Last year the Badgers advanced to the Division II finals, their best-ever finish, before falling to the EPVA Mets. That was only good enough for a

tenth seed this year, and although Wisconsin bested the seventh-seeded St. Louis Rams, 6-4, in round one, round two was like night and day. The '00 national champion and perennial contending Twins showed no mercy en route to yet another five-inning, 20-4, slaughter of a second-division club to claim the remaining spot in the semifinal round. The top four seeds had all survived and would pare their number to two on day two.

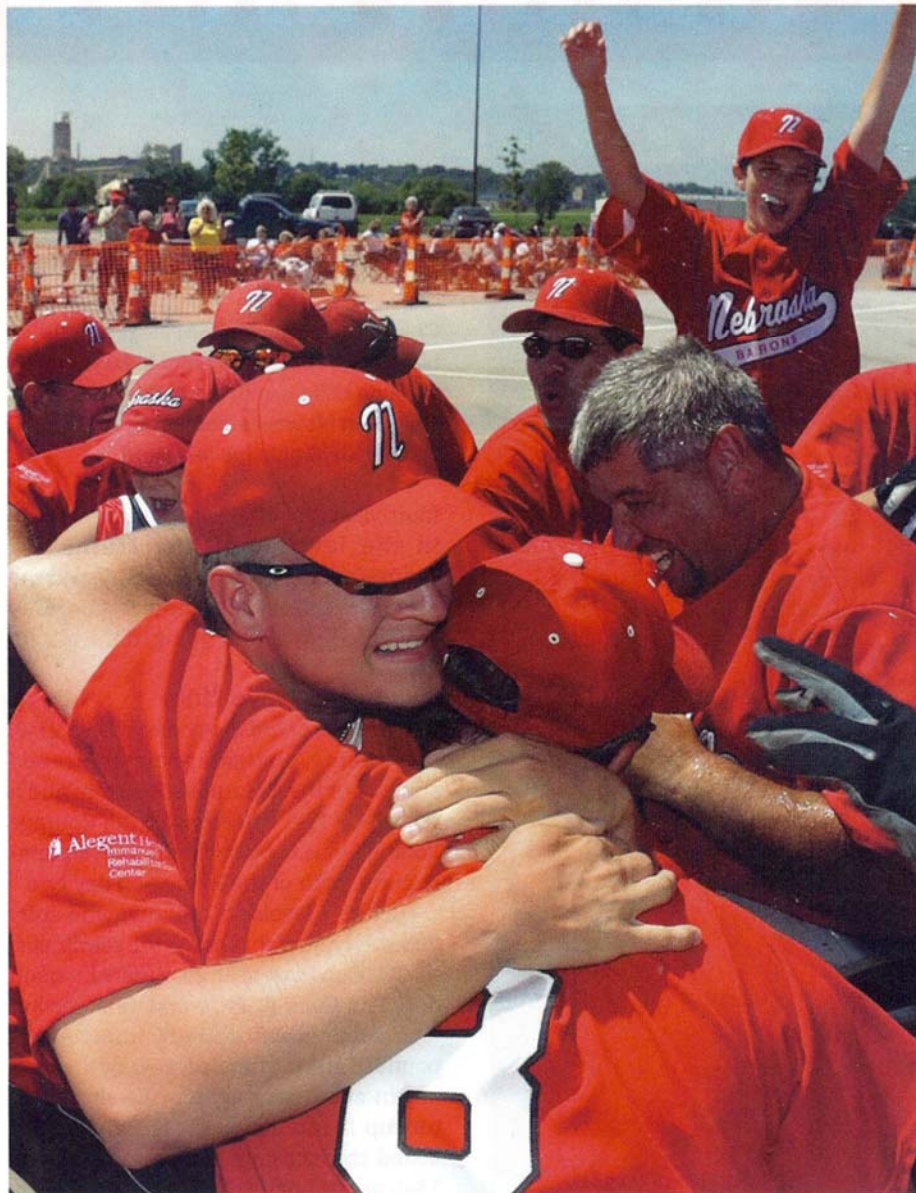
### Have's Clash on Day Two

Last year, in the same situation on the second day of play, the Minnesota Twins-East Metro summarily banished this same Ohio contingent to the losers' bracket in a veritable blowout. But this time the process bore a potentially better outcome for Cleveland. The Indians managed to stay close in the early innings and were locked in a 4-4 tie after three. The Indians inched ahead, 5-4, in the fourth, but that slim advantage evaporated when both offenses came to life in the fifth.

By the time their smoldering bats had cooled, the Indians and Twins were deadlocked at 11. This evolving barnburner saw the Indians slip ahead, 14-13, in the sixth before the Twins knotted the score for the fourth time in the seventh. Paybacks being what they are, Cleveland countered with the decisive run in the bottom half, and this time it was Minnesota cast off into the purgatory of the losers' bracket.

RIC spotted Nebraska a 4-0 lead in an opening frame that featured as many errors as it did hits. One can only wonder why the Cubs seem to tighten up early in games against equally talented contenders. The Barons held fast until the third when the Cubs countered with a single run. They added a pair in the fourth to bring it close at 4-3. Nebraska came right back in the fifth and sixth and reclaimed its 4-run lead heading into the seventh. The Barons' steady, stingy defense held the Cubs to just two hits over the last three innings. Another insurance run in the Barons' seventh topped off their decisive 8-3 victory, sending the Cubs down under as a result of their first loss.

Sure, the Cubs could blame the outcome on a couple of obvious bad calls by



Nebraska's Barons celebrate their second consecutive national softball title.

## Badgers Claim D-II

After an opening round 6-4 victory over the St. Louis Rolling Rams, the Wisconsin Badgers were bested by the Twins-East Metro and the more experienced United Spinal Association Mets before getting back on track in Division II (consolation bracket) play.

The Badgers reeled off back-to-back wins over the RIC Cubs II (15-2) and the NEPVA Red Sox (9-1), before facing off against the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Wisconsin rocked Tampa for five runs its first time up to set the tone for a one-sided staccato slugfest that would see the Badgers score a pair in the second and third innings, plus four in the sixth and six more in the seventh. The first-year Rays got on the board with a four spot in the bottom of the fourth and scattered three more after that, but could not keep pace with the Badgers, as evinced by the 18-7 final tally.

Yet to be decided was who would challenge the Badgers for the title.

The Red Sox answered the call with a 15-8 defeat of the St. Paul Rolling Thunder and a 4-3 squeaker over the Devil Rays in the semifinal round. Decimated by the absence of several of their glory-years stars, the Thunder receded to its lowest finish in the past 25 years. Hopefully, they will rebuild and rebound. For the Devil Rays, it was a pretty good ending to their rookie season. They placed tenth overall, and veteran out-of-retirement pitcher/catcher Tom Krizka made the Division II All-Tournament squad as Best Quad. Tampa has a solid foundation and could be on the rise in '05.

In anticipation of their impending showdown with the Red Sox, Badgers' coach Tom Colwell put the title game in perspective. "We're definitely getting better, and beating Boston in the Division II final would be a step in the right direction. But our larger goal is to break into the upper division."

The Badgers-Red Sox rematch saw the Bostonians take a

the men in blue. But bottom line, the team failed to produce in a pair of clutch hitting situations with runners in scoring position and less than two out. In contrast, the Barons' ability to spray the ball as well as drop well-placed hits over the heads of Cubs infielders allowed them to methodically move runners from station to station and score multiple runs.

With the Cubs and Twins temporarily pushed to the backseat, the Indians and Barons took to the front seat and concentrated on each other to see who would continue the drive to the winner's circle. At the same time, they could not afford to ignore the backseat drivers still leering over their shoulders.

Cleveland drew first blood on a two-out

string of three hits to garner a 2-0 lead in the first inning. But it's a big ball, and prosperity is fleeting when an opponent enters the confines of those right-angled white lines with the Barons. Nebraska proceeded to crank out five runs in its first turn up before an out was made. After shortstop Rick Swauger's leadoff double in the second (he eventually scored), the Cleve-



The Wisconsin Badgers' Keith Cooper makes the force-out on the way to his team's win in the D-II championship game.

1-0 first-inning lead. The speed boys from Wisconsin ran off four in the top of the third, to which the Red Sox countered with single runs in the bottom of the third and fourth to cut the lead to 4-3. In the pivotal fifth inning, a one-out single by short center Jaime Mazzi was followed by a triple off the bat of left fielder Tommy Schroeder. Mazzi, one of the fastest runners in the game, jogged around to increase the lead to 5-3. Second baseman Keith Cooper's single advanced Schroeder to third, and they both came around on first baseman Jake Counts's opposite-field double to the fence in right-center.

After a walk to center fielder Rob Welty, veteran shortstop Eric Barber laced a single over third base that drove Welty in to complete the Badgers' decisive 5-run outburst. They tacked on four more in the sixth, while the Red Sox could manage only four scattered runs in response, and the Badgers won it going away, 13-7.



Dave Lewis (RIC Cubs) stretches for the catch in his team's semi against the Barons.

landers managed only three hits over a string of 12 batters into the fifth frame.

On the other side, the Barons were showing their intention to beat the Indi-

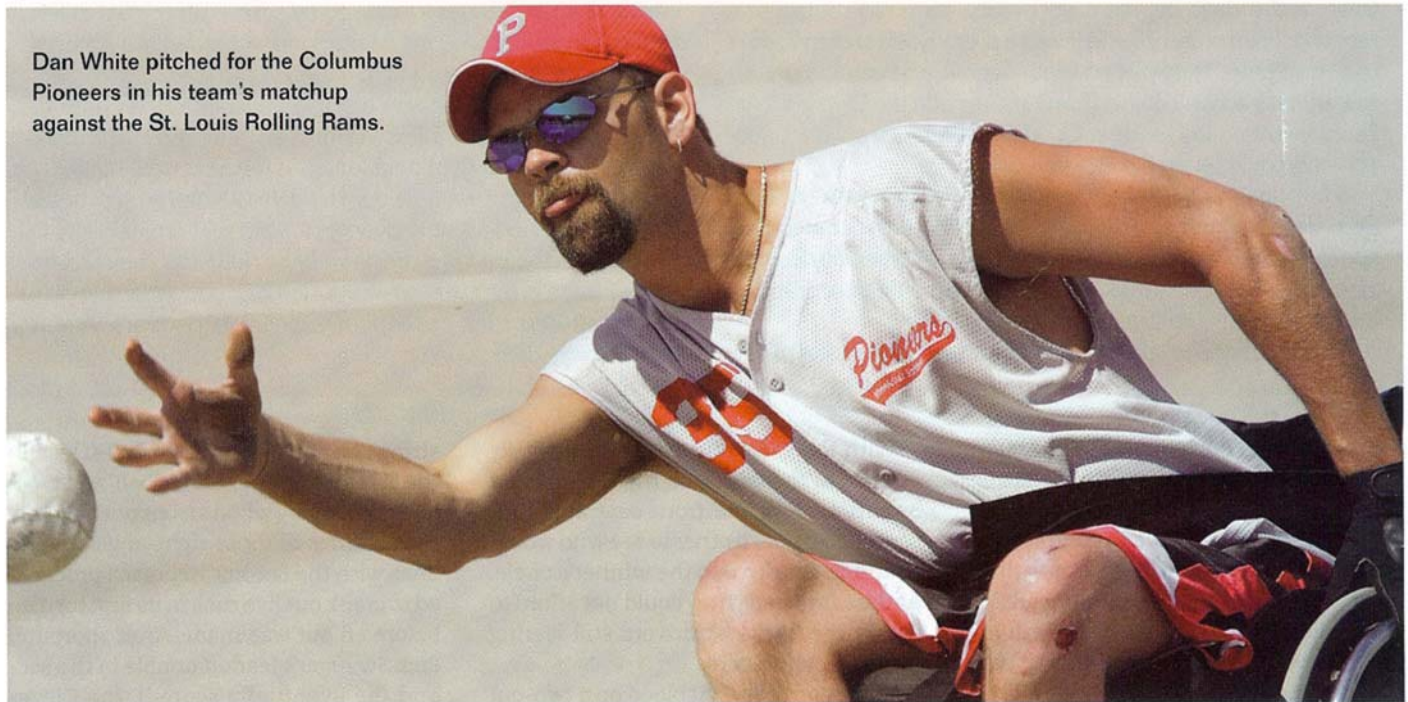
ans into the ground early. A 6-run outburst in the bottom of the second was a clear signal. The Indians' defense was able to stiffen and hold long enough to

cut the lead to 11-6 in the fifth. Unfortunately for the Indians, the Barons' early onslaught plus three more runs in the fifth and sixth proved insurmountable. Cleveland's 3-run rally in the seventh fell way short, and the Barons prevailed, 14-9. They were now behind the wheel and on a roll.

Meanwhile, those two backseat drivers and others continued to jockey for position to regain a seat up front. In the process, the Twins' and Cubs' parallel paths would eventually veer and intersect.

The Cubs rebounded versus the United Spinal Association Mets (formerly EPVA) to post an 11-3 win, while the Minnesota Twins-East Metro were besting the White Sox. Thus, the stage was set for a do-or-die matchup between the Cubs and Minnesota on day three.

The White Sox and Mets would ultimately finish fifth and sixth, respectively, as the Sox prevailed, 10-7, on day three. The Sox broke a 4-4 tie in the fifth to go ahead, 7-5. They tacked on three runs in the sixth before a short-circuited Mets comeback fizzled in the seventh. Despite their collective disappointment, the Sox and Mets posted their highest-ever positional finish and first-ever finish in the upper division.



Dan White pitched for the Columbus Pioneers in his team's matchup against the St. Louis Rolling Rams.

### Final-four Face-off

As the final day of play commenced, the undefeated Barons got to sleep in, but the other three championship contenders were up and out on the field early. First off were the Cubs and Twins in a contest that would not live up to the pre-game hype. The Twins' bats were also sleeping in, but the Cubs' bats were highly caffeinated. Through four, the Cubs had built a 4-1 lead. The teams traded runs in the fifth, and then the Cubs reeled off eight unanswered runs in the top of the sixth and four more in the seventh. Indicative of the outcome, the Cubs sent 46 batters to the plate, but their defense faced only 28. The 17-2 final score was the Cubs' highest offensive output against a Division I foe, and signaled the end of the season for the Minnesota Twins-East Metro.

### Then There Were Three

All that was left to decide (as the Barons enjoyed their mid-morning breakfast) was who, the Indians or the Cubs, would get the rematch with the defending champions. It would turn into another classic confrontation between the perennial contenders and the erstwhile champions. In recent years these two teams have battled neck-and-neck for a shot at the title game, the Cubs outdueling the Indians in '02 and vice versa in '03.

Chicago fired first, but Cleveland pulled the trigger twice in the bottom half for a 2-1 lead. The Cubs countered with a four-spot in the second, and the Indians responded with two more. Both defenses settled in, and the Cubs' 5-4 lead held up until the fifth when short center James Terpenning beat out an infield chop with one out. Shortstop Joe Wittkamp followed with a shot up the middle, and the Indians had runners on the corners for center fielder Bill Wolfe. Wolfe lashed a single over the head of Cubs short center Kurt Smith to score Terpenning with Wittkamp stopping at third. Left fielder Jeff Lewis smoked a long single to left that brought in Wittkamp and the speedy Wolfe, who came all the way around, laying out catcher Larry Labiak in the process as the relay throw to the plate sailed high overhead. That punctuated a rally that put Cleveland on top and the pressure on the Cubs.



Angelo Cruz (Chicago White Sox) forces out United Spinal Association's Eddie Jorge.

With their bid for the championship series on the line, the Cubs dug in and came out swinging in the top of the sixth. Center fielder Ki Yun belted a leadoff triple and came across on first baseman Dave Lewis's one-out single down the right-field line. Labiak bunted Lewis to second, and he scored on left fielder Paul Moran's double in the gap between center and right. Shortstop Jorge Alfaro dropped a single over second that wasn't deep

enough for Moran to chance it with two out. With the lead runs in scoring position, power-hitting third baseman Ernest Currie's bid for heroics was thwarted when pitcher Rick St. Johns knocked down his shot headed up the middle, recovered, and calmly threw Currie out to preserve the 7-7 tie. Both clubs went three and out in the bottom of the sixth and top of the seventh.

The bottom of the seventh proved piv-



Cleveland's Rick Swauger (right) couldn't beat the ball as the RIC Cubs' Juan Ortiz is poised for the out.

otal as the Indians loaded the bases with one out on a pair of singles and an intentional walk to set up a force at any base. That strategy backfired when Jeff Lewis's soft liner fell in front of a charging Yun. Yun saw that the Cubs' only hope was to turn a double play. He had Alfaro streaking toward second, ready to receive his quick throw and fire to first to extend the game. Unfortunately for the Cubs, second baseman Juan Ortiz had the same idea and made the same ill-advised move to second from the opposite direction. In those split seconds, the Cubs' season ebbed, flowed, and ebbed again as Yun's throw ricocheted off the fingertips of both infielders as they collided at second base. Game, Cleveland!

### Two's a Crowd

To the victor go the spoils—in this case, a return engagement with the Nebraska Barons.

Not since the fabled St. Paul Rolling Thunder had an NWSA champion repeated ('98 and '99). At 4-0, the Barons were one win away from this distinction, and they could just about taste it as they took

the field in the first of a potential two-game final series with the Indians. Naturally, this seasoned ball club had no desire to have it go that far. On the other side, Cleveland's focus was on extending its season for yet another game. As the Barons' Froendt put it, "These four teams are pretty evenly matched and fiercely competitive, so we're glad to have gotten to this point by stringing together three wins. Now, we take it to the final step with Cleveland and see what happens."

The Barons wasted no time in putting pressure on the Indians. With one out and first base open, Cleveland intentionally walked left fielder Brent Rasmussen, the most potent home-run threat in the NWSA. It was one of many passes doled out to Rasmussen to keep him from swinging the bat. Next up was first baseman Greg Suing, arguably the best contact hitter in the game. True to form, the strong lefty lined a single to right that advanced Rasmussen to third. Short center Pat Driver looped a double to left center that scored Rasmussen and Suing, and center fielder Zac Niemann followed up with a three-base bomb that brought Dri-

ver around. Pitcher Rory Heaton, in the sixth spot, grounded out, and Niemann came across for a 4-0 first-inning lead.

In their half, the Indians nicked Nebraska for a run on a Wittkamp one-out double and a two-out Jeff Lewis single. After adding a pair in the second, the Barons threw everything they had at putting an exclamation point behind the defense of their title in the third. Eight two-out runs later they held a commanding 14-2 advantage that appeared insurmountable at the time.

However, their fight-to-the-finish, underdog, us-against-the-world psyche would not allow the Indians to roll over. They never do. That's why they're dangerous. They small-balled one back in the third and went on a tear in the fourth. Swauger got it going with a leadoff single and moved up one on right fielder Len Maclin's bouncer through the middle. A ground out advanced both into scoring position, and then catcher Claude Hall stepped in. Hall lashed a single to right that cut the lead to 14-4. The ten hitter, short center Steve Smutak, dropped a double past third base that scored Hall.



Larry Labiak (shown here scoring a run for the RIC Cubs I) works for the City of Chicago's Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities and is the National Wheelchair Softball Association president.

This catalyzed a parade of five more batters who reached safely before Swauger and Maclin were retired their second time around to end the inning. Talk about turning over the lineup. The Indians cut the deficit to 14-10 and were looking to get even (in more ways than one).

Getting even with the Nebraskans is much easier said than done, however, especially with their complement of power and place hitters, pitching, speed, and defense. It's hard to find a weakness to exploit, and they know it as well. The Barons rallied back in the top of the fifth to stretch their lead to 16-10. The lower third of the Indians' lineup was silent this time around as the Barons reduced their magic number of outs to six.

After holding off the Barons, the Indians battled back in their half on the strength of a triple by Wolfe, RBI singles by Lewis and Swauger, and a Maclin two-bagger that brought Swauger around and drew them closer at 16-13. The Barons loaded the bases in the seventh, but Cleveland maneuvered its way out again. With the fat lady waiting in the wings, the challengers would need more than a lucky seventh to overtake the defending champions. But they had already left it all on the field, and three quick outs later it was over. The Barons' repeat was complete, and they headed for the winner's circle. **S'NS**

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