



ABOVE: The St. Paul Saints' Joe Arends (right) is out at third base with a tag from Geno Shultz, of the other St. Paul team—the Thunder. The Saints went on to win the championship game and the title at the 24th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament.

AT RIGHT: The jubilant St. Paul Saints celebrate their national title.



# THE SAINTS GO MARCHING

by Larry Labiak / photos by Curt Beamer

For the third consecutive season, the rubber game between the Saints and Thunder tested both softball teams' championship mettle.

In typically classic style, their two-out-of-three-games confrontation became a championship rematch between defending champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder and their crosstown rival, the St. Paul Saints, who had to "kiss their sisters" in 1998 and 1999. But this time the Saints positioned themselves in the catbird seat—an advantageous position—and then clawed their way to the top.

The 24th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament, held August 18–20, found a home in the friendly confines of Chicagoland, the birthplace of 16-inch softball more than a century ago. The Chicago Cubs (standing as well as sitting types) were tournament hosts under the sponsorship auspices of Cubs Care—the National League baseball club's charity arm—and the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC). A grand triple-diamond

softball venue was developed on the expansive parking lot at Schaumburg Stadium, home of the Schaumburg Flyers minor league ball club—and *voilà!* The battle to unseat 12-time national champion St. Paul Roller Thunder was on.

## The Mission

The nitty gritty of the double-elimination tournament was the Saints' continuing mission to unseat the Thunder, and the Thunder's staunch defiance of that notion. To get to the Thunder, the Saints pulverized the Nebraska Barons (12–2) and pounded the Twins (10–3) on day one, while the Thunder dominated Columbus (7–2) and dumped the Cubs (6–3). Neither of these only remaining undefeateds was about to relinquish its winners-bracket status without a knockdown, drag-out brawl.

In actuality, their first head-to-head never lived up to its advance billing. The

Saints cruised to a surprising (to everyone but them) 10–1 rout.

Pitcher Phil Price, who had joined the Saints in midseason after being out of the game since the end of 1995, approached his first Thunder encounter with a get-ahead, work-ahead, stay-ahead philosophy—and a matching attitude. He and the Saints had taken the upper hand, but the Thunder is notorious for almost annual comebacks from the losers bracket to the winners circle.

In their next encounter, the Thunder apparently figured they "had 'em just where they wanted 'em." After teasing the Saints with a two-run head start, they bashed Hall of Famer Barry Hite, who had come out of retirement just days before, for five first- and two second-inning runs to forge a 7–2 lead halfway home. Saints coach Jon Speake had cajoled Hite back to the game after starter Jason Dickmeyer



In Game 22, the RIC Cubs' Mark Rusin pitches the ball to Kurt Smith at second base to force out the Rams' Jeff Lloyd. Chicago won, 5-4.



Kansas City's Bob Baker jars the ball loose from Twins second baseman John Christianson. Minnesota won the 20-5 rout and ultimately a respectable fifth-place finish against tough, all upper-division foes.

## This Old Ball Game

Wheelchair softball is played under the official rules of 16-inch slow-pitch softball as approved by the Amateur Softball Association of America. The following excerpts from the NWSA rules help explain the game:

- The playing field is a level, smooth surface of blacktop or similar material with 150 feet on the foul lines and 180-220 feet to straight center.
- The official diamond has 50 feet between all bases and 70 feet 8.5 inches from home to second base.
- The pitching stripe extending perpendicularly one foot on either side of the diagonal from home to second base is 28 feet from home base.
- A four-foot-diameter circle is located at second base. A four-foot-diameter semicircle is at first and third, in fair territory. The defensive baseman and the base runner must touch the circle with one or more wheels in order to tag the base. Bases are painted white.
- At first base only, the base extends into foul territory. This extension, painted white, is 24 inches deep and 24 inches wide beginning at the 50-foot mark. Base runners may use the extension only as an extended tag area for first base.
- During active play, all teams must include a quad. When a team is on defense, it must have a quad playing one of the positions. Failure to field a quad will require the team to play one person short (nine rather than ten players). When a team is hitting, a quad must be in the lineup and bat in the same position throughout the game. Failure to have a quad hit in that position will be an automatic out.
- Teams must have the required ten players, including one or more quads, to start the game.
- Players classified as quads may alter their bats to improve their grip. The altered bat must be approved by the head umpire for safety concerns.
- Quads may wear gloves on either or both hands regardless of position (including pitcher).
- A restraining line is marked 12 feet from the bases and parallel to the baselines running from first to second and from second to third. All four infielders must have at least one wheel on the line or on the infield-area side of the restraining line until the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. If any infielder fails to observe this restraining-line rule, the umpire immediately awards first base to the batter. The infraction is treated as a "walk."



Wisconsin's Rick Benevedes stretches for a ground ball.



The Ravens' Claude Hall and his teammates finished a respectable third, even though the RIC Cubs pounded Baltimore's pitching on the way to a 19-6 twelve-run slaughter-rule win in six innings.



Bombers pitcher Sonny de Guzman worked all ten Division II games his team played.

quit the team just two weeks before nationals. Price relieved Hite in the fifth but didn't fare much better as the Thunder lead grew to 11-2.

On the other side, Dick Crumb worked methodically through the Saints lineup, scattering just four hits over five shutout innings (two through six) before the Saints tacked on a pair in the seventh. So much for the false security of the catbird seat, as the Thunder's

12-4 comeback knotted the series at one apiece.

### Two Outta Three Ain't Bad

And so, for the third consecutive season, the rubber game between the

Saints and Thunder would test both teams' championship mettle. Crumb and Price were on the mound, each searching for the exhilaration, glory, and satisfaction that goes with a national title.

The Saints swiped the early advantage with four runs in the top of the first, but the Thunder stayed close, put-



RIC Cub Rene Aquino (left) was named Division I Rookie of the Year.



New Hall of Famer Dick Crumb (above) shared induction with Wisconsin's Phillip Rosenberg, who was unable to accept his award in person.



The Saints' Scott Berg sports a grin and the Division I MVP title.

## 24th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament

### FINAL STANDINGS

#### Division I

St. Paul Saints  
St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
Chicago (RIC) Cubs  
Columbus Pioneers  
Minnesota Rolling Twins

#### Division II

Colorado Blake Street Bombers  
NEPVA Red Sox  
Baltimore Ravens  
Nebraska Barons  
Chicago Pacernakin' Wolves  
EPVA Mets  
Kansas City Diamond  
Wisconsin Badgers

### ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAMS

#### Championship Bracket—Division I

Pitcher: Sean Gnggs, RIC Cubs  
Catcher: Rory Fosness, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
First Base: Manuel Guerra, St. Paul Saints  
Second Base: Dan Hall, St. Louis Rolling Rams  
Third Base: George Kiefner, St. Paul Saints  
Shortstop: Kevin Peterson, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
Left Field: Joe Arends, St. Paul Saints  
Center Field: Paul Moran, RIC Cubs  
Right Field: Sylvester Flis, RIC Cubs  
Short Field: Dave Eckstrom, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
Best Quad: Dan Price, St. Paul Saints  
Rookie of the Year: Rene Aquino, RIC Cubs  
Sportsmanship: George Kiefner, St. Paul Saints  
MVP: Scott Berg, St. Paul Saints

#### Consolation Bracket—Division II

Pitcher: Sonny de Guzman, Blake Street Bombers  
Catcher: Claude Hall, Maryland Ravens  
First Base: Deb Quick, Blake Street Bombers  
Second Base: Victor Calise, EPVA Mets  
Third Base: Billy Hill, NEPVA Red Sox  
Shortstop: Steve Davis, NEPVA Red Sox  
Left Field: Ron Gendron, NEPVA Red Sox  
Center Field: Eddie Jorge, EPVA Mets  
Right Field: Dave Nelson, Nebraska Barons  
Short Field: George Norton, NEPVA Red Sox  
Best Quad: Adam Ellis, NEPVA Red Sox  
Rookie of the Year: Dave Nelson, Nebraska Barons  
Sportsmanship: Tony Buccini, Baltimore Ravens  
MVP: Zac Niemann, Nebraska Barons

ting up a pair in the bottom half. The Saints tallied single runs in the second and fourth, while Price kept the Thunder at bay through the fifth. Consecutive one-out errors in the sixth fueled a Thunder comeback, highlighted by consecutive RBI-producing hits by outfielders Jesse Gonzales and Linh Bowie that narrowed the gap to 6-5. At that point, Speake thought about bringing in Hite to relieve Price, who would have none of it.

"This one's my game, and they'll have to drag me off," Price vowed to no one in particular.

Meanwhile, Crumb settled down, quieting the Saints in the fifth, sixth, and seventh. Last raps belonged to the Thunder, who eked out the tying run on short fielder Dave Eckstrom's two-out double that pushed across second baseman Paul Bester, who had singled to lead off the inning. Eckstrom moved into third on the throw home, and Speake had a dilemma on his hands. Would they pitch to the number-two hitter, Jim Langevin, or the number-three batter, Todd Anderson, touted here as softball's best in the clutch?

Neither. Price intentionally walked them both to get to shortstop Kevin Peterson. Speake's calculated load-the-bases gamble paid off when Peterson flied out to deep left center to end the inning.

In the ninth, the Saints tallied a two-out run that would prove decisive. With two outs in the bottom half, rightfielder Manny Steeber camped under, waited on, and finally squeezed the life out of Langevin's last-gasp two-out high fly to end the ball game. Anderson was left in the on-deck circle; the dynasty was put on hold.

It took seven long years for these erstwhile young upstarts and sprinkling of seasoned veterans to reach the pinnacle of their success. Who says youth is wasted on the young? Not Jon Speake!

### Hall of Fame

This year's two new National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) Hall of Famers are from upper-Midwest teams.

• **Dick Crumb** has been a member of the St. Paul Rolling Thunder since 1982 and a starting pitcher since 1987. He has been a starting—and winning—pitcher at the national tournament in each of the Thun-

der's nine national championship series. He was voted all-tournament Division I pitcher at the nationals in 1995, 1998, and 1999, as well as co-MVP in 1999.

According to Dave Eckstrom, a 1992 HOF inductee and Crumb's teammate and nominator, "Not only on the field but off the field, Dick has been very important to the success of the Rolling Thunder in fund-raising [as well as] organization. He is a low-key, focused, effective leader and sportsman."

• For more than 20 years, Phil Rosenberg has played for and served as head coach of the Wisconsin Badgers. In 1998, he led the team to the Division II national title in Denver. Off the field he has been the Badgers' team representative for more than a decade, and although his opinions are sometimes controversial, he has helped draft and pass significant NWSA legislation.

Nominating Rosenberg for the HOF, Don Schmidt (1999 inductee) and Wisconsin

PVA Executive Director Dan Heidtko wrote, "Perhaps his greatest contribution comes as an unofficial ambassador for wheelchair softball. He is an enthusiastic and tireless recruiter of new players. Role models are more than just the best players. They are people who, with hard work and perseverance, combined with character and integrity, succeed in the ongoing game of life. By his involvement and success with every aspect of the game, Phillip E. Rosenberg has become a true role model."

#### On Deck

The Columbus Pioneers and the city of Columbus, Ohio, will

cohost the Silver Anniversary 25th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament in 2001. For information, contact NWSA.

Contact: National Wheelchair Softball Association, (612) 437-1792 / 437-3889 (fax) / [www.wheelchairsoftball.com](http://www.wheelchairsoftball.com). S'NS



When not working at the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities, Larry Labiak is an avid softball player. He and his new bride, Kristi Albertson-Labiak, are on the Chicago Pace-makin' Wolves team. For the complete text of this article, visit the S'NS Web site at [www.sportsnspokes.com](http://www.sportsnspokes.com).

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