



SAINTS BE PRAISED

Larry Labiak

Despite being unceremoniously tossed into the losers' bracket, could the defending softball champs come back for a repeat?

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by Larry Labiak
photos by Mark Cowan

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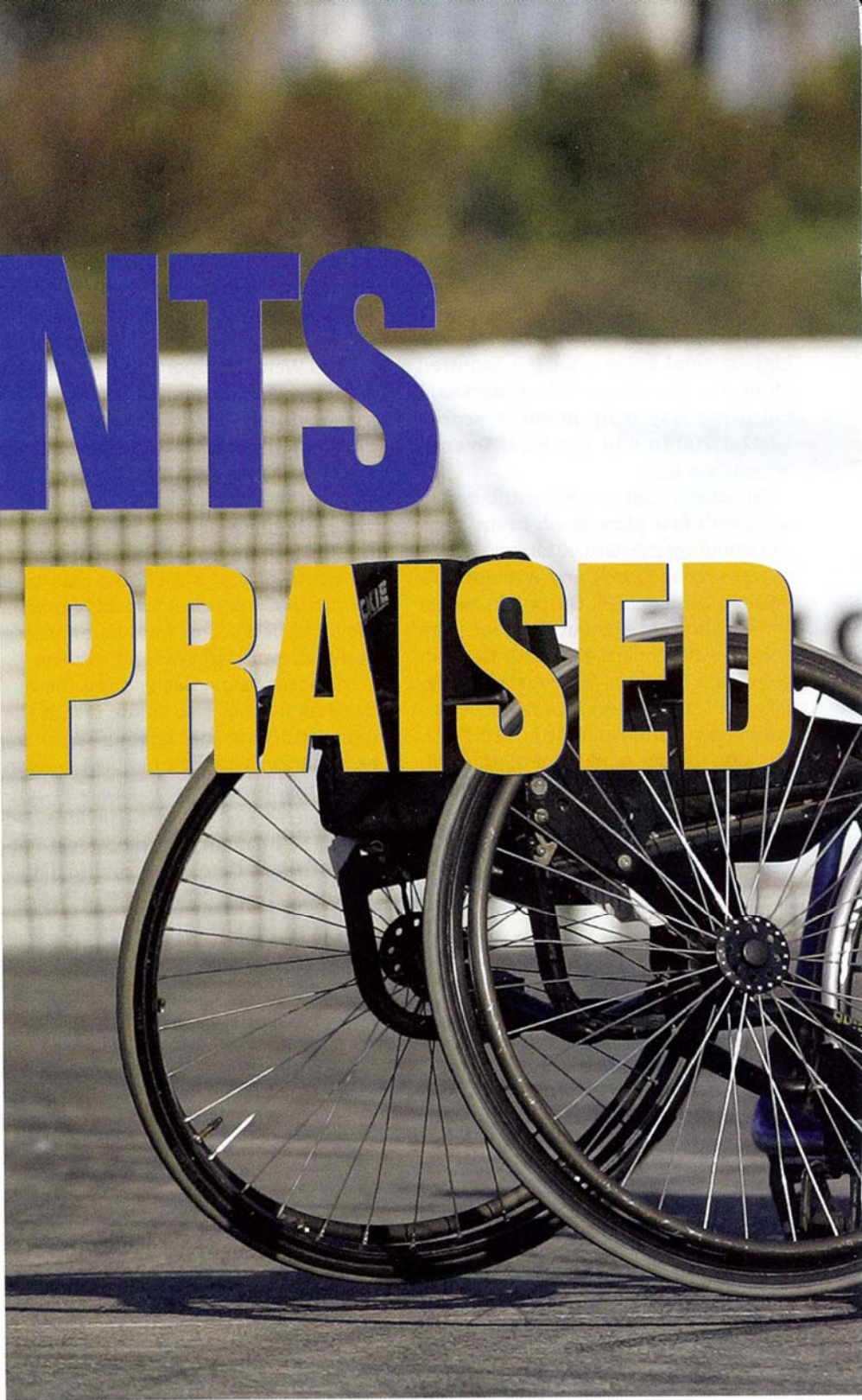
The Chicago (RIC) Cub A's—defending softball champions—had the home-team advantage as they and 14 challengers hit the field to open the 30th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament, held August 10–12. For the first time since '83, the championship returned to the Soldier Field blacktop along the shores of Lake Michigan, courtesy of a Rehabilitation

Institute of Chicago (RIC), Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, and Chicago Park District sponsorship.

But it would take more than home field to thwart the forthcoming challenge from the Nebraska Barons, St. Paul Saints, and Courage (Minn.) Rolling Twins. Power-hitting Zac Niemann, the one-year prodigal, was back with Nebraska; the Saints had a new coach and an improved

defense; and the Twins were twice as hungry as last year when they finally broke the top four.

With an odd 15 in the dual-bracket, double-elimination mix on day one, the Cub A's scouted the opposition while awaiting a second-round matchup with the Columbus Pioneers/Center Coast Confluence winner. Typical of most first-rounders was the Pioneers' lopsided 15–1 victory over





St. Paul Saints outfielder Scott Berg crashes to the ground after running into teammate Willie Hernandez while fielding a Twins hit.

Confluence. In round two, Columbus showed a steady defense but could do little on offense as the Cubs prevailed, 7-1.

Meanwhile, the aforementioned usual suspects whittled their way through the array of first- and second-round foes with typical efficiency. The only near anomaly occurred when perennial dark horse Vaughan (PVA) Chicago White Sox, after spotting the Twins an early 4-2 lead,

checked Courage through seven and knotted a 4-4 tie in the bottom half. Stirred but not shaken, the Twins broke through with four runs in the eighth and staved off a last-chance Sox comeback, which fell short by two runs.

The White Sox bounced back to bomb the Baltimore Orioles, 22-3, but surprisingly self-destructed in a 9-3 loss to Columbus, which eliminated them from title con-

tention. After finishing fifth in '05, the White Sox added more power and defense in '06. Those moves had paid off during the regular season, but somehow they couldn't put it all together in post-season.

Narrowing it Down

The four undefeateds poised themselves to pare their number to two on the second day of play, and the Twins proved ready



Courage Rolling Twin Ryan Anthony throws to first against the St. Paul Saints, who went on to the championship victory.

against the Cub A's. After two were out in the Twins' first at-bat, a throwing error and a clutch double put the Cub A's in a 4-0 hole.

The Cub A's clawed their way back with a single run in the third and three more in the fifth to draw even. In the sixth and seventh, Chicago got a runner to second base with one out, but the Twins' defense stiffened and held them off. After another threat in the eighth stranded Cub A's runners at second and third, you had to wonder how many more chances they would get. All of this took place as the Chicago pitching and defense idled the Twins' offense for seven innings after the first, allowing only one hit and three base runners over that span.

In the bottom of the ninth, their wasted chances proved costly for the Cub A's. The first two Courage batters struck back-to-back doubles to end it 5-4, dropping the defending champs to the losers' bracket.

On the other side of the ledger, the Saints and Barons were staging their own barnburner. The Barons drew first blood, scoring two in the first frame, to which the Saints countered with one. St. Paul took the lead, 4-2, in the second inning, and extended it to 7-4 by the end of the fourth.

In the fifth, the Nebraskans flexed their muscles, sent nine batters to the plate, and scored four runs on six hits to regain the lead at 8-7. Not to be outflexed, the heart of the Saints order dug in again and

pulled out back-to-back-to-back doubles to take a 9-8 lead into the sixth.

The Barons' first two batters also reached base in the sixth, but the would-be rally ended there, along with their comeback hopes. St. Paul slammed the door in the seventh, and the Barons prepared to join the Cub A's in the battle to survive elimination.

Following the game, Saints star short fielder Scott Berg commented, "After we got through Nebraska's lineup that first

Walking the quad is tantamount to grooving one on the inner half to a dead pull power hitter. The result is never good.

time without allowing a big inning, our confidence grew. For the past few years, we hadn't been able to do that. That was big, and it helped us later on."

Working Back

With the Twins and Saints pleasantly pondering the eventual all-Minnesota semifinal, the Cub A's and Barons went about the business of maneuvering through the losers' bracket to forge a second-chance opportunity. For the Barons, that meant a matchup with the Columbus Pioneers. For the Cub A's, it would be their friendly intra-city rivals, the Cubbies.

The Barons versus Pioneers lived up to the hype as the Barons eked out a 5-4 close-call win over the vastly improved Ohioans. The Cub A's/Cubbies contest was not so close, as the Cub A's showed little mercy with so much on the line, in spite of the homespun opposition. They pounded their brethren, 15-4, in a five-inning slaughter-rule affair that ended the Cubbies' upset hopes. The Pioneers and Cubbies finished fifth and sixth, respectively.

The Barons and Cub A's found themselves in a rematch of last year's finals, but this time both were coming out of the losers' bracket. Nonetheless, it became a classic see-saw battle in which the Cub A's



Vaughan PVA Chicago White Sox right fielder Sylvester Flis reaches third before Columbus Pioneers third baseman Jack Roudabush can make the catch. The White Sox added power and defense this year but couldn't put it together in post-season.

lost a 7-4 lead in the bottom of the fifth inning when the Barons scored four times. The highlight was a two-run blast over the left field fence by center fielder Niemann after Brent Rasmussen, arguably the most powerful hitter in the game, had been intentionally walked for the umpteenth time with one out. Four hits and two runs later, the Barons had surged to an 8-7 lead.

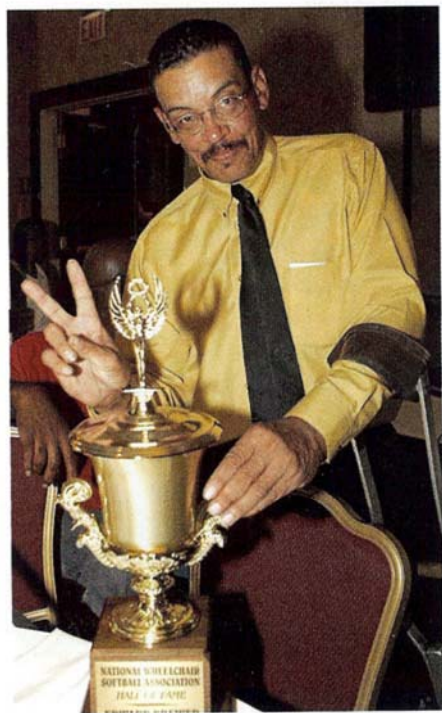
The teams exchanged single runs in the sixth to set up a decisive seventh. In the top half, after center fielder Kurt Smith reached on an error, right fielder Dino Ramirez smacked a triple to score Smith for the tying run. Short fielder Ryan Hauser followed with an RBI single, as the Cub A's took back the lead, 10-9. Hauser was erased in a 10-4 fielder's choice putout on pitcher Alex Parra's one-bouncer to right field. Parra advanced to second on a throwing error and raced around for the insurance run on a clutch



Alex Parra (Chicago Cub A's) winds up for the pitch against the Courage Rolling Twins. Chicago moved to the final game against St. Paul, but lost in a close contest.



Paul Moran (Cub A's) goes to bat against St. Paul. After climbing out of the losers' bracket, the defending champion Cub A's lost to St. Paul in the championship game.



two-out single delivered by veteran short-stop Jorge Alfaro.

To Chicago's advantage, Parra had only to face the 6-7-8 combo in the last of the seventh. As darkness descended on the second day of play, so did Nebraska's bid for a third national title in four years. The Barons went three up and three down, succumbing, finally, 11-9. With this substantial hurdle now in their rearview mirror, the Cub A's were relieved but also excited about their upcoming rematch with the Twins.

Home Sweet Home

With the Saints waiting in the wings as day three dawned, the action moved to the Cub A's' home field on the North Side, the finest single-field wheelchair-softball venue in the country. As the stands filled to capacity, the Twins and Cub A's went about

Edward Brewer (Chicago Pacemakers) was inducted into the NWSA Hall of Fame.

deciding who would be St. Paul's finals opponent. For the first five innings, much was in doubt. After a 3-3 first-inning tie was broken by the Cub A's in the top of the third, the Twins reknotted it at 5-5 in the fourth. Both clubs went three and out in the fifth, but Chicago scratched out their sixth run on a pair of singles and a fielder's-choice grounder to the right side that scored the lead runner from third.

Courage challenged back in their half with a pair of one-baggers, but their quest to again draw even was slowed by a 6-4-3 double play that left the tying run at third for Ryan Anthony, who had gone two-for-two with an RBI single. The Twins' third

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baseman muscled Parra's 1-0 offering in the direction of Smith as the runner from third raced toward the plate. Smith charged in and snagged the center field shot on one bounce before heaving it into first base to nip Anthony and squelch the threat.

The Cub A's tacked on three more to break the game open in the seventh. The stubborn Twins had no response, bowing out 9-5 as the Cubs A's readied themselves for a title showdown with the Saints.

For the Saints, one win would do it, but the Cub A's had a different plan. Talk about a tale of two cities. For Chicago it was the best of times, but for St. Paul it was the worst of times.

The Cub A's proceeded to power the ball all over the field for the first two innings. It was an offensive outburst seldom seen versus top competition in a national finals. Twenty batters pummeled longtime ace Jerry Anderson for 12 runs on 14 hits and a 12-1 lead. At the end of the third, the Cub A's' lead stood at 14-4, and some of the home crowd began thinking



In the Division II championship game, the Tampa Devil Rays' Russell Rodriguez beats the tag by NEPVA third baseman Juan Silva, as teammate Steve Davis surveys the action.

10-run-slaughter potential. After a scoreless fourth, the buzz grew in the fifth, even after the Saints tallied a pair to draw to within eight. But the Cub A's could do no wrong in their current charmed existence. They matched the Saints' two runs in the bottom of the inning to complete a nifty five-inning, ten-run slaughter-rule win to force an "if" game for the championship.

Cub A's second baseman Juan Ortiz summed up the outcome: "That game was magic. Everyone clicked on offense and defense. But, now we have to do it again."

Could the Cub A's sustain the same offensive potency for another game? Were the Saints too far back on their heels to recover? In two words: "unlikely" and "no."

Make or Break

In the championship game, the Cub A's started where they had left off 15 minutes prior. They put up a three-spot and then shut down the Saints in the first. The Saints countered with two runs in the

Sox Repeat

After falling out of favor (two losses) with their upper-division foes, the NEPVA Red Sox focused on the Division II title. The Red Sox blanked the United Spinal Mets, 10-0, and then dismantled the Center Coast Confluence, 13-1.

At the same time, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays were piling it on the Baltimore Orioles, 14-2, and the Colorado Rockies, 13-2; so much for low-scoring defensive battles.

The Sox and Rays converged in round three, and for the first two innings the Rays hung tough. But the Sox increased their 4-3 margin to 7-3 in the third, and added another trey in the fourth for good measure. The teams exchanged single runs in the fifth, but Tampa got no closer after that, falling to the Sox, 11-4.

Tampa fell back to the losers' bracket where the Mets lay waiting for a second chance. The Rays quick-punched the New Yorkers' ticket, 9-2, to send them packing. That set up their rematch with NEPVA.

The Suncoasters still had no viable answer for the New Englanders the second time around. The Devil Rays scored but once, and that came in the first inning. The Red Sox countered with nine and took home the DII trophy, as they did last year.

second, and the Cub A's tacked on one in the third for a 4-2 advantage. The Cub A's' bats had cooled down some, but defense and Parra's off-speed cut pitch and good placement kept the Saints off balance through the early innings.

Following a scoreless fourth, Chicago extended its lead to 5-2. But a couple of key defensive lapses turned the momentum in the bottom half of the fifth. First off, with one out, Dan Price walked on a 3-2 count. Walking the quad is tantamount to grooving one on the inner half to a dead pull power hitter. The result is never good.

After left fielder Steve Welch flied out, first baseman Manny (Jr.) Guerra lashed a looping line drive to center. A charging Smith misjudged the bounce, and the bright white sphere sailed over his head and outstretched arms to the wall. Instead of runners on first and second with two outs, Price scored and Jr. Guerra motored all the way to third. Right fielder Joe Arends' clutch double scored Jr. Guerra to narrow the Cub A's' lead to 5-4. Then Scott Berg smoked a base hit to left field that had Arends challenging Hauser's arm for the tie. Hauser lofted a laser to the plate, and Larry Labiak applied the bang-bang swipe tag to end the inning.

Bigger yet, the Saints loaded the bases with no outs in the sixth, and the Cub A's again found a way to wiggle their way out and preserve their slim lead. Thus, onto the seventh for all the marbles; a fitting scenario for two clubs so evenly matched.

Veteran shortstop Alfaro delivered a leadoff double to open the final frame. But the next three batters exhibited too little patience in chasing the first offering from the crafty Anderson. He masterfully worked the inside with all three, and they all popped out to short, including power hitter Paul Moran, who played into



St. Paul Saints outfielder and MVP Scott Berg celebrates the team's victory over the Cub A's.

gunning for the hyper-fast Welch as he steamed toward third. Ramirez's throw was wild, but the ball ricocheted off the dugout fence and back toward the mound. Parra scooped it and flipped it home, but the ball sailed high to the backstop as Welch sped across the plate.

The Saints had made it all the way back from their earlier debacle, and they were primed for the kill. The Cub A's countered with free passes to Berg and George Kiefner to set up a force at any base, and all the marbles were now in play.

The Saints' destiny was left to the very capable Rick Cooper, and he did not disappoint (unless you're a Cub A's fan). Cooper delivered a perfectly placed hole-finder between short and third that made its way neatly into short left field. Arends strode

across the plate a moment later, and the party was on. But, not before the traditional post-game gesture of sportsmanship. As Jr. Guerra and I brought up the rear of our respective line of players, he leaned forward and said softly, "This one was for Jon (Speake, who passed away October 2005). We really wanted to do it for him."

Anderson's hand by switch-hitting from his weaker left side because he had had some earlier success with it. Bottom line, Alfaro never advanced past second, and the potential insurance run was squandered. That would prove critical in the bottom of the seventh.

With the top of their order due up, the Saints had an advantage they would waste no time exploiting. Welch rapped a lead-off single that set him up as the equalizer. One out later, Arends pushed an outer-half offering into right field to move Welch into scoring position. His hit had Ramirez

across the plate a moment later, and the party was on. But, not before the traditional post-game gesture of sportsmanship. As Jr. Guerra and I brought up the rear of our respective line of players, he leaned forward and said softly, "This one was for Jon (Speake, who passed away October 2005). We really wanted to do it for him."

And, Jr. Guerra and his Saints teammates had done it in a way Speake, their late founder, coach, mentor, and father figure, would have been proud of—with class, poise, and dignity up to and through the last play of the final game. **S'NS**



Larry Labiak works for the Chicago Park District as disability policy officer. He oversees all aspects of change designed to bring more people with disabilities to the parks through more inclusive and better programs, barrier removal/accessibility modifications, and development of improved policies.