

THUNDER & LIGHTNING

by Larry Labiak

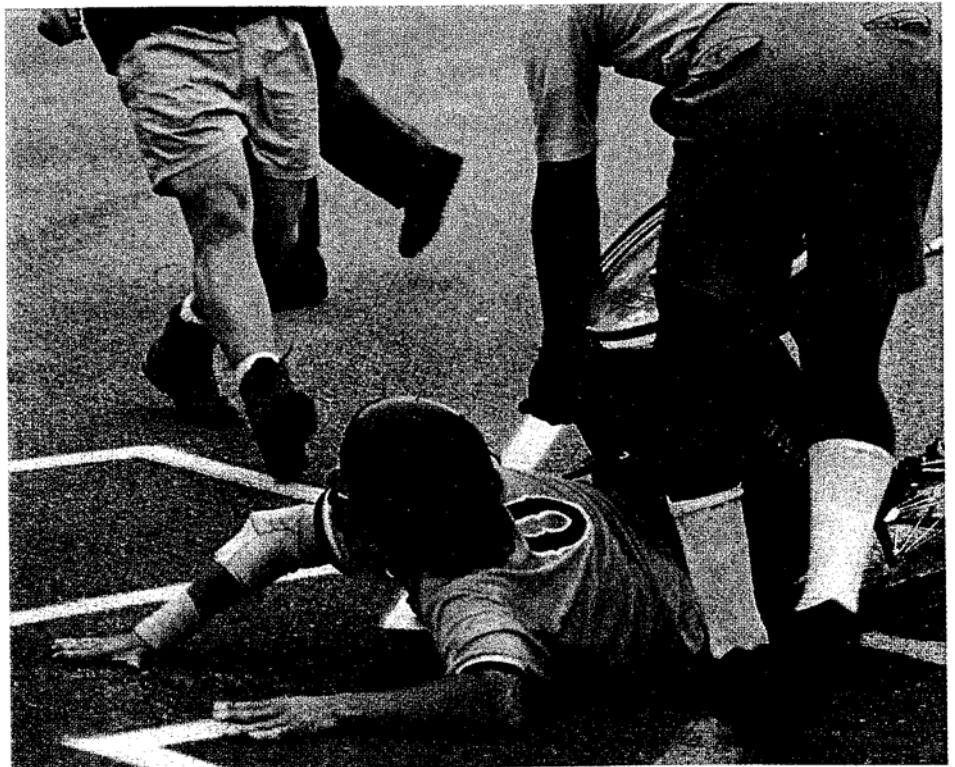
The National Wheelchair Softball Tournament returned to Minnesota for the first time in five years as 12 teams hit the blacktop in St. Paul.

The big story August 12-20 was the rivalry between the Rolling Thunder and the Pacemakers. The reigning three-peat national champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder made quick work of the Oak Forest Fire (Cook County, Ill.) in a 12-1 rout in their first-round game of this dual-division, double-elimination softball marathon.

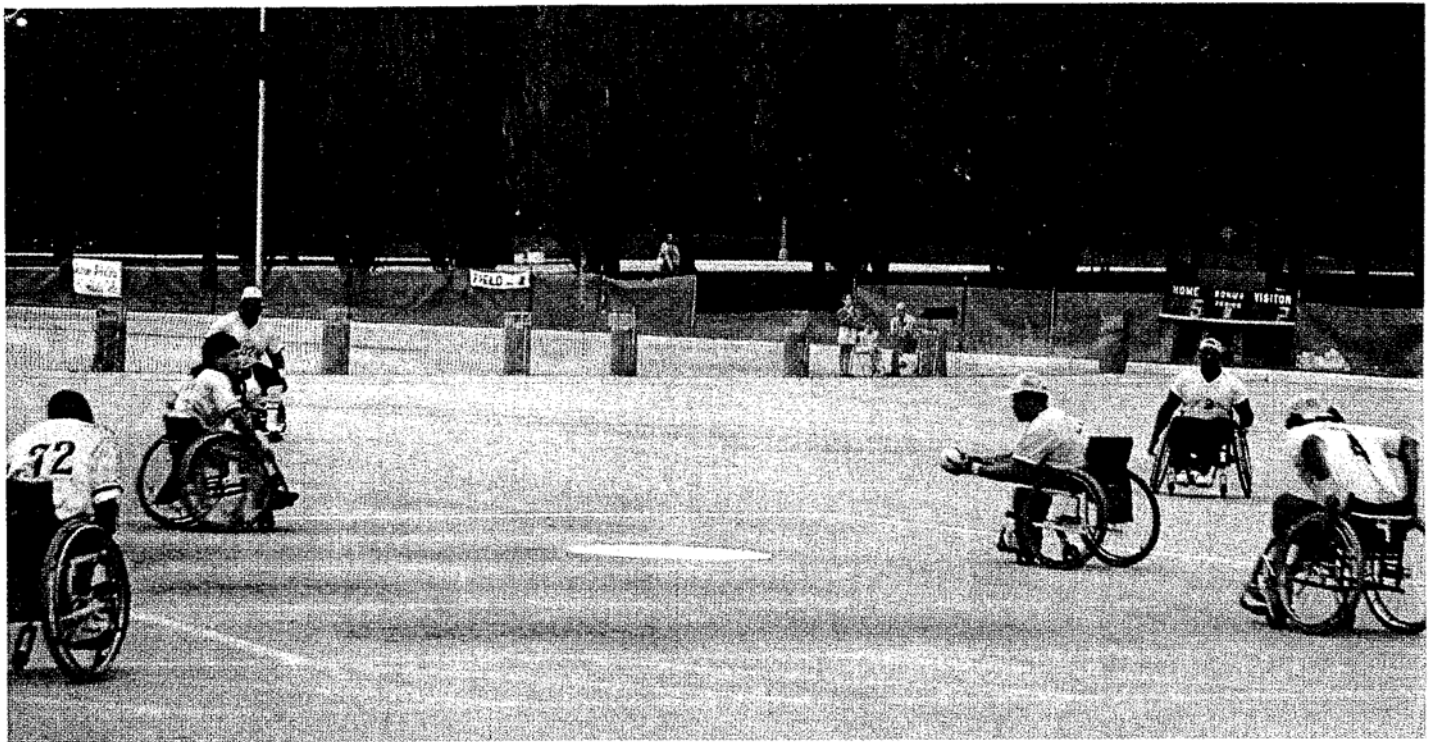
The Chicago Pacemakers, the Thunder's number-one nemesis, opened against a much-improved Halsam Hurricane (Dayton) squad that rallied from a four-run deficit to score three times in the bottom of the seventh before succumbing, 4-3.

With their wake-up call received, the Pacemakers responded with a come-from-behind 5-2 victory over the St. Louis Rams in game two. This put them in a position to face the winner of the Texas Stars versus Rolling Thunder match-up in the other division.

The upset-minded Texans faced the unenviable task of stopping the Thunder from finishing the first day of competition unscathed. Strength of experience and a superior defense proved too much for the Stars as the Thunder prevailed in



After a collision at home plate, Chicago's Larry Labiak is introduced to the pavement.



Putting an end to an inning, the Chicago Pacemakers turn a double play.

a 5-0 shutout, setting up the perennial showdown with the Pacemakers. Not since the last time the national tournament was held in Minnesota has a team other than the Pacemakers or Thunder emerged from divisional play undefeated and advanced into the "winners bracket"

competition on day two.

In typically classic style, the Thunder and the Pacemakers forged a 6-6 tie through three innings. The Pacemakers scored four times in the top of the fourth for a 10-6 lead; the Thunder countered with a pair of runs in their half of the

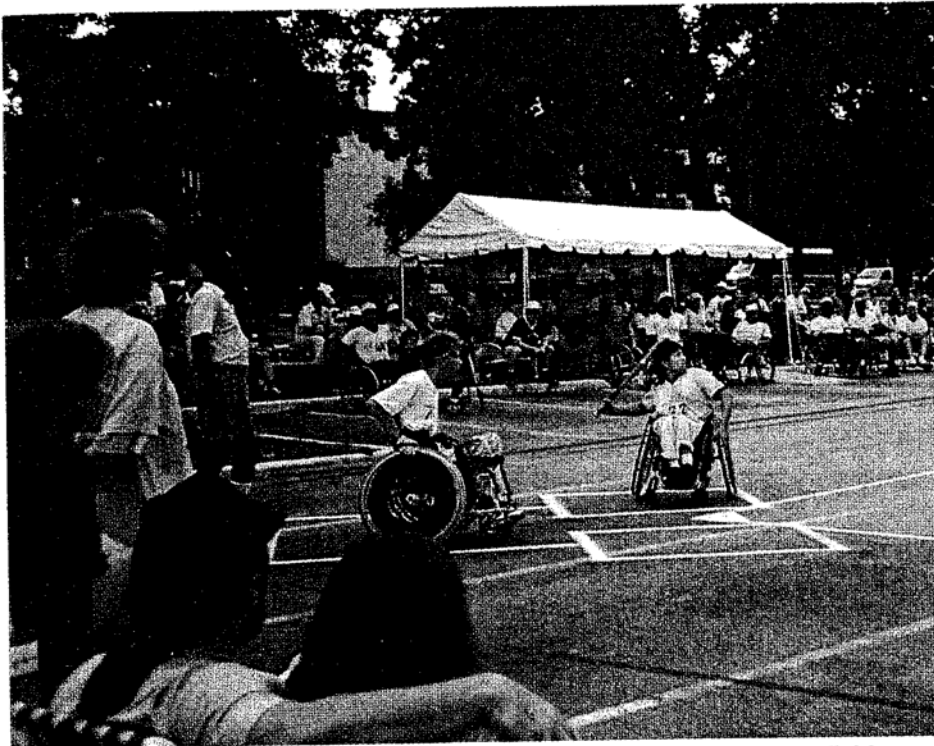
fifth. The Pacemakers picked up three insurance runs in the sixth and took an uncomfortable comfortable 13-8 lead into the bottom of the seventh with the heart of the Thunder batting order (3-4-5) coming to the plate.

Tourney MVP Todd Anderson flied to right field for the first out. Kevin Peterson, Chas Helgason, Jesse Gonzalez, and Brian Swanson followed with consecutive singles for two runs with Gonzalez stopping at third and Swanson perched on second. Then all hell began to break loose for Don Bulman, the Pacemakers ace 15-year veteran hurler. He walked Jerry Anderson to load the bases. With the potential tying run at the plate, Bulman battled back to strike out the number-nine hitter for the second out. But then he relinquished another base on balls, forcing Gonzalez across with the Thunder's eleventh run. Bases loaded, two outs, a two-run lead, and now Bulman faced lead-off hitter Steen Seestedt. With the runners on the move, Seestedt drilled a sinking liner toward center. A charging Perry Bender scooped it on the short hop and gunned him down by a chair's length at first to preserve the 13-11 victory.

The Pacemakers would enjoy the luxury of a one-game rest while awaiting the outcome of a Thunder versus St. Louis Rams match-up to determine which team would face Chicago for the championship. St. Louis had defeated the Baltimore Metro All-Stars, Courage Rolling Gophers, and Texas Stars to reach this pivotal game. A win would guarantee their first-ever advance to the championship round. A loss would mean an unprecedented fourth



Jerry Anderson (St. Paul Rolling Thunder) aims the ball down the middle toward his opponent.



Chicago Pacemaker Jorge Alfaro winds up to smack the ball to the outfield.



The St. Paul Rolling Thunder and the Columbus (Ohio) Pioneers shake hands.

consecutive third-place finish.

The Rams' big bats emerged early. They carried a 9-4 lead into the bottom of the fifth inning. It appeared that St. Louis was about to pull off the upset of the tournament.

The defending champions mounted a three-run rally in the bottom of the fifth to cut their deficit to two runs at 9-7. The St. Louis bats were quieted in the sixth except for a one-out double by pitcher Rick Belcher, who was left stranded at second. In the bottom of the inning, St. Paul fashioned a dramatic two-out rally begun by Swanson, the number ten hitter, who singled and scored the first of four decisive runs. The upstart Rams were up and out in the seventh without even hitting a ball to the outfield.

The Thunder would once again face the Pacemakers, having to beat them twice to possess the championship trophy. A victory by the Pacemakers would assuage, to a degree, the frustration of three straight second-place finishes.

St. Paul was all over Chicago in the top of the first inning. With no outs, the Thunder led 4-0 on the strength of five consecutive hits, the rally highlighted by a three-run homer by third baseman Todd Anderson. The Thunder added a pair of runs in the second inning to hold a commanding 6-1 lead through the fourth. St. Paul put up five more runs (2 in the fifth, 3 in the sixth) on the way to an 11-1 victory reminiscent of their 13-1 shelling of the Pacemakers in last year's championship round.

"The 11-1 win put us back on track," said Hall of Famer Dave Eckstrom, St.

1994 NWST ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAM

PITCHER	Barry Hite	St. Paul Saints
CATCHER	J.R. Wynne	St. Paul Saints
FIRST BASE	Steve Kirkwood	Chicago Pacemakers
SECOND BASE	Steve Hansen	Courage Rolling Gophers
THIRD BASE	Todd Anderson	St. Paul Rolling Thunder
SHORTSTOP	Kevin Peterson	St. Paul Rolling Thunder
LEFTFIELD	Mike Krato	St. Louis Rams
CENTERFIELD	Earl Jordan	Chicago Pacemakers
RIGHTFIELD	Paul Smith	Chicago Pacemakers
SHORTFIELD	Dave Eckstrom	St. Paul Rolling Thunder
BEST QUAD	Dale Erickson	St. Paul Rolling Thunder
SPORTSMANSHIP	Jim Dugan	St. Louis Rams
ROOKIE	Paul Smith	Chicago Pacemakers
BEST HITTER	Kevin Peterson	St. Paul Rolling Thunder (.758)
MVP	Todd Anderson	St. Paul Rolling Thunder
HALL OF FAME	Scott Robeson	Courage Rolling Gophers

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An aside to this year's championships is the story of the Baltimore Metro All-Stars. They were back for their first national appearance since 1987 with the best players Mike Heady, citywide softball coordinator, could pool from three area teams. Baltimore would ultimately settle for sixth place, but not before rattling a few cages.

On the second day of competition, the All-Stars mounted a two-run, bottom-of-the-seventh-inning rally to defeat the St. Paul Saints, 5-4. Then Baltimore challenged the Courage Rolling Gophers (Minn.) for the consolation round spoils and fell a run short, 5-4, in 11 innings.

"The relative parity evidenced among the fourth- through eighth-place teams shows how much the level of play has improved in the past year," said Jon Speake, tournament director and national commissioner. "The Thunder, Pacemakers, and St. Louis had better take note, because a number of teams are beginning to knock harder on their back doors."

Paul's shortfielder. "We were flat early in the St. Louis game, probably a carryover from the draining 13-11 loss to the Pacemakers. But the late-inning comeback against St. Louis obviously brought us back in that second game with the Pacemakers," he added.

The championship had come down to a third and deciding Pacemakers versus Rolling Thunder confrontation.

This time the Pacemakers drew first blood. Leftfielder Milton Smith led off the first with a triple and scored on another three bagger by shortfielder Bender with only one out. Clean-up hitter Earl Jordan lashed a single past second base to score Bender. It appeared Chicago was poised for a big inning with Steve Kirkwood, a constant long-ball threat, coming to the plate. Kirkwood, generally a pull hitter, looked for a pitch he could hit the other way. But Dick Crumb pitched him high and tight, finally forcing Kirkwood to pull the ball toward third. Todd Anderson knocked it down and turned an inning ending 6-4-3 double play.

Chicago's 2-0 lead held into the bottom of the fourth inning, when lead-off man Seestedt opened with a single. Eckstrom walked and Todd Anderson was retired 1-3. Peterson's line-drive double into the right-center gap drove in Seestedt and Eckstrom for a 2-2 tie. Helgason was retired 10-3 for the second out with Peterson advancing to third on the play. Leftfielder Gonzalez singled in Peterson and scored on Jerry Anderson's looping single to right field after Swanson had walked, putting Gonzalez in scoring position. Crumb lashed a one-hopper to right and

was thrown out 8-3 to end the inning.

St. Paul held the Pacemakers in check in the fifth and added an insurance run in the bottom half for a 5-2 advantage. With the top of their order due up in the sixth, Chicago remained confident that they would rally for the win. But not to be denied this unprecedented four-peat bid, the Rolling Thunder shut the Pacemakers down in the sixth and seventh to claim the rubber match and the national championship.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS SPORT

- Rules & regulations
- Tournament schedule
- How to form a team

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