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9 HOLY COW—CUBS WIN! CUBS WIN!

Larry Labiak

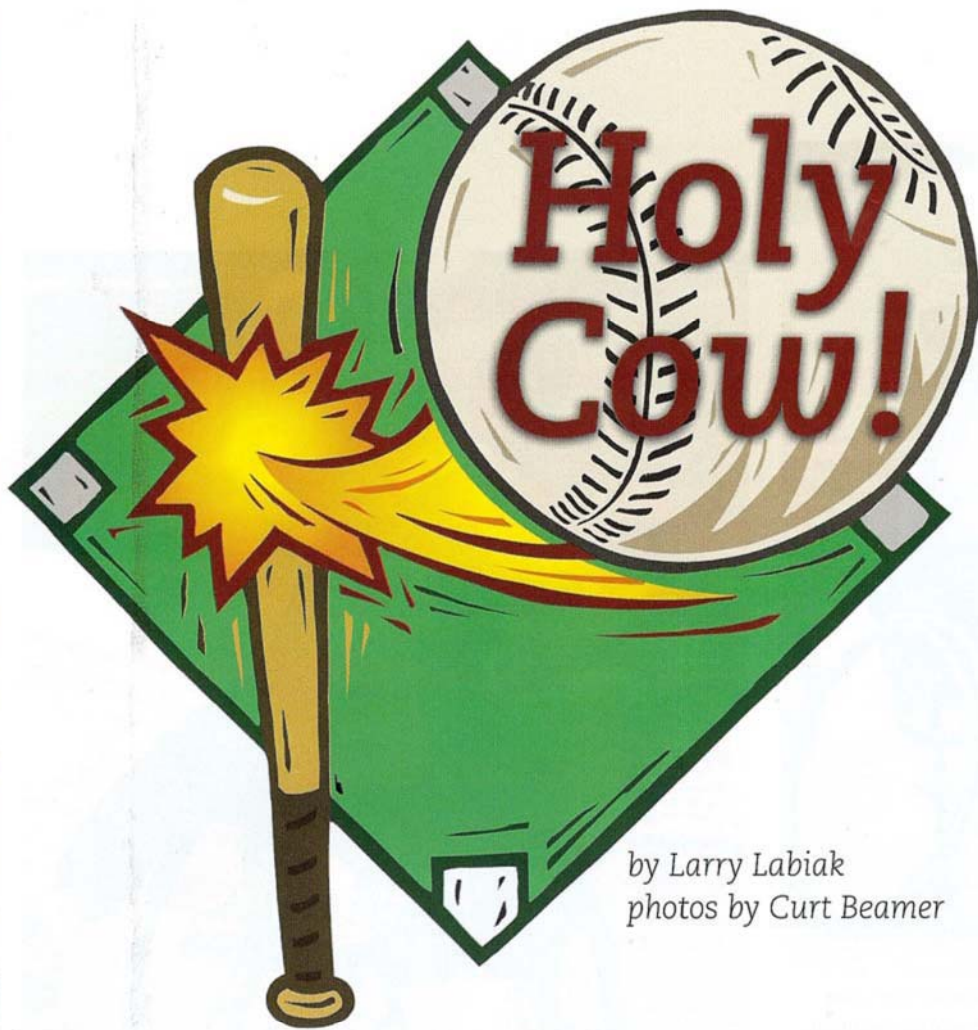
After two straight third-place finishes, the Chicago (RIC) Cubs, like their Major League Baseball counterparts, were ready for a championship title.

22 CHASING GOLD

Tip Thiboutot

Basketball teams from throughout the world headed to Japan in search of victory and that magical cup of gold.





by Larry Labiak
photos by Curt Beamer

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Episode 26 of the National Wheelchair Softball Association's (NWSA's) annual epic unfolded with few surprises on August 14. The Minnesota Wheelchair Athletic Association's quad diamond complex at Aldrich Arena in St. Paul set the stage for three days of double-elimination play, with a record 15 teams vying for the national title.

First-round play was business as usual for the upper seeds, including the defending champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder, which drew the only bye. In round two, the Thunder opened against the eighth-



Chicago's RIC Cubs break out the bubbly after clinching the Division I championship.

seeded St. Louis Rolling Rams. The Thunder reeled off 5 runs in the second inning and 2 in the third. The Rams broke through with a harmless pair in the fifth but were heavily overmatched. The Thunder again exercised its bats in the sev-

enth to close out this 10-2 tune-up en route to a third-round showdown with the crosstown rival St. Paul Saints.

The Saints placed themselves squarely in the path of the Thunder by virtue of wins over the Nebraska Barons (14-6) and



Cubs rookie pitcher Ernest Currie (above) hit a line-drive home run over the left-field fence in his first-ever at-bat in national competition. It was the first of two Currie cranked out in the tournament. TC United's Darryl "Tree" Waller (right) hit his fair share of big ones, too, but that wasn't enough to beat the determined team from Chicago.



Although he flipped out of his chair in the process, Mike Hylton (Metro Stars) forced out NEPVA's Omar Benitez at third base in the first Division I game of the tournament.

the Courage Rolling Twins (8-2), the Twin Cities' third wheelchair-softball contingent. The significance of the Saints-Thunder day-two matchup was that the loser would fall to the losers' bracket and the winner would advance to the semifinals.

Not lost in the hype is these two teams' obvious familiarity with each other. They play one another all summer long and have faced off a dozen or more times in the past eight national tournaments. In this one, the Thunder and Saints saw-sawed early, with the Thunder clinging to a 5-4 lead through three innings. In the top of the fourth, the Saints two-through-six hitters strung together consecutive hits after two Thunder errors provided a pair of gift runners. The Saints ultimately ran the lineup table, scoring five times for a 9-5 lead. They added 2 more in the sixth to stave off a last-ditch, 3-run seventh-inning rally that left the Thunder 3 short (11-8) and headed for the losers' bracket.

"For some reason, the Thunder was just not able to kick it into that extra

gear that you always expect to see in the late innings," EPVA's Mike Wheaton said after the game.

Meanwhile, in the other bracket, second-seed TC United and third-seed Chicago (RIC) Cubs were making hay versus weaker opponents en route to a possible shot at each other and the finals.

TC (Toledo/Columbus) United, formerly Columbus Pioneers (A), the 2001 NWSA runners-up, had tweaked an already potent lineup with the addition of center fielder Bill Wolfe and first baseman Jason Van Beek. With all the pieces to their championship-run puzzle now in place, coaches Bob Ocvirk, Mike Gorny, and Jerry Jones liked their chances against anybody. The Cubs, too, had added to their mix a few seasoned veterans from the Chicago Pacemakers glory days: Earl Jordan in right field and the Labiak battery.

In first- and second-round play on day one, TC United methodically mowed down the newly formed Center Coast Confluence, 22-3, and the EPVA Mets, 5-0. No doubt, TC was getting ready for anybody.

The Chicago (RIC) Cubs, coming off a



The ball gets away from St. Paul Saint Jon Speake at home plate as Nebraska's Mike Kult scores.

second consecutive third-place finish last year, were also an obvious contender in the upper bracket. The Cubs opened against the other rookie team in this nationals, the Mauldin (S.C.) Maulers. For the Cubs, the highlight of the game was rookie pitcher

Ernest Currie's line-drive home run over the left-field fence in his first-ever at-bat in national competition. It was the first of two Currie cranked out in the tournament. (More about the second one later.) Currie's shot started a 17-run barrage in the Cubs'



Wolves Reign

Kudos to the Vaughan PVA Wolves on their Division II championship win over the EPVA Mets. In the best of three, the Wolves out-slugged the New Yorkers, 9-5, in game one. The Mets shut out the Wolves, 2-0, in game two to set up a winner-takes-all rubber match.

Behind a stellar three-hit, four-strikeout performance by Dan Douglas, the Wolves overcame an early 2-0 deficit to defeat the Mets, 4-2. The Wolves' win capped off an all-Chicago championship weekend at the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament.



Trying to return to second base, Henry Fortis (EPVA Mets) is tagged out by Vaughan PVA's Will Smith. The two teams met again—twice—before the Wolves won Division II.

opening-round win (17-1).

The Cubs found the going much tougher in game two. A solid defensive effort from the NEPVA Red Sox stymied Chicago's offense in the early innings. The Cubs eked out a single run in the fourth and added a three-spot in the fifth while holding the Red Sox scoreless. Currie checked them on three scattered singles and faced a 5-over-the-minimum-26 batters for a 4-0 victory.

TC-Chicago Showdown

TC United and the Chicago (RIC) Cubs were no strangers to each other over the course of the 2002 season. In June, United dominated the Cubs in Chicago, winning a pair by "slaughter rule." Three weeks later in Columbus, TC handled the Cubs again, taking them 7-3 and 8-7, the second win coming on a dramatic come-from-behind, 3-run rally in the bottom of the seventh inning.

In this day-two, third-round contest, defense set the pace in the early going, but the Cubs found a way to manufacture a run in the third and take the lead. With one out, TC gave up a walk to the quad, one of the cardinal sins in wheelchair softball. As Larry Labiak led off first, Dave

Lewis, the ten hitter, lobbed a looping fly ball toward short right field that lanky first baseman Van Beek nearly snow-coned with his outstretched glove extended skyward. But the ball found its way out of the webbing and fell to the ground as Labiak headed for second. Just as Van Beek picked it up and attempted a force-out throw to second, Lewis crossed the bag at first, collided with Van Beek, and caused him to throw wildly, the ball sailing into deep left field. Labiak motored to third and was waved home, easily beating the relay to the plate.

In the bottom of the third, United nearly tied it up on the strength of a lead-off double by center fielder Wolfe, followed by pitcher Rick St. John's flare to short center. The ever-charging Kurt Smith scooped it on a bounce and fired to Lewis for the out at first. With Wolfe rounding third and converging on his goal, Lewis whirled and threw it home. Wolfe tried in vain to find a bit of unblocked plate as he circled wide and around, but catcher Labiak spun to his right and applied the tag to complete the double play. After that, Currie struck out TC catcher John Winters to preserve the Cubs' 1-0 lead.

United shut down the Cubs in frames



Kurt Greniger of the Courage Rolling Twins, a team he helped establish, was inducted into the softball Hall of Fame. A 22-year softball veteran, his credentials include three all-tournament selections and four national championships.

four, five, and six and forged the tying run in the bottom half. Wolfe reached on a one-out single and moved to third on St. John's double into the left-center gap. Winters laid down a perfect chop "bunt" toward third on a hit-and-run, and the speedy Wolfe scored easily to knot it 1-1 going to the seventh.

After the Cubs were retired in the top half, TC loaded the bases with two outs on back-to-back Cubs errors and an intentional walk. Chicago breathed continued life, however, when right fielder Lenny Maclin fouled off strike three to assure extra innings. The Cubs' collective sigh of relief was almost audible.

Again, in the balance for these two evenly matched combatants, the semifinals or the losers' bracket. The Cubs answered the call in the eighth, mounting a decisive two-out 5-run rally that effectively shut the door on TC United. Regardless, in the back of their minds, the Cubs knew TC United wasn't through. A rematch down the road would surprise no one.

Un-Saintly Behavior

With the St. Paul Saints waiting in the wings, Chicago needed to focus its sights on the former national champions ('00) who were the other still unscathed enti-



James Terpenning (TC United) hangs onto a fly ball after falling on the catch. His team beat the St. Paul Rolling Thunder, 7-5.

ty. Right out of the box, the Saints first four pounced on the Cubs. Pete Stigman, Manuel Guerra, Scott Berg, and George Kiefner reached safely and scored before the Cubs could catch a breath. Sean Griggs, starting his first game on the mound, bore down after that to stop the blood-letting and avoid a transfusion.

Key for the Cubs in this contest was their ability to quickly return the favor with Paul Moran, Ki Yun, Smith, Ziggy Tkaczenko, and Griggs coming across while the Saints waited to exhale in the bottom half of the first.

In the third, the Saints secured the equalizer on shortstop Berg's double and an RBI single off the bat of cleanup man Kiefner. Short fielder Rick Cooper reached on a Moran throwing error, which was erased in an inning-ending double play when center fielder Manny Steeber lined out to short and Mark Rusin doubled Cooper off first.

After that, it was quiet until the fifth when Chicago again erupted for 5 runs. Currie replaced Griggs on the mound for what turned out to be mop-up duty in the sixth and seventh. Respecting the Saints' comeback ability, the Cubs made certain of the result (14-5) with a four-run rally capped off by Currie's towering tape-

measure job that cleared the left-field fence by a good 20 feet. No doubt, this 32-year-old rookie phenom's quick, powerful bat will not go unnoticed by opposing pitchers in the future.

"He'll need to back off the plate a bit to counter their efforts to jam him inside next season," Cubs coach Tom Richey said after the game. "If he does, the sky's the limit for this young man."

The Cubs, having surprised the prognosticators with an unblemished 4-0

record, perched themselves in the catbird seat for the first time in their ten-year history to await a day-three championship opponent. How it would shake out between the five remaining one-loss contenders (Rolling Thunder, Barons, Metro Stars, United, and Saints) was still in question, but only temporarily.

The Thunder just got by the Barons (4-3) to earn the right to face the United-Metro Stars winner. TC knocked off the Metro Stars (13-6) in a game suspended due to darkness and completed early morning on day three. Not to be outdone by a rookie, TC left fielder Darryl Waller belted one out as well, a decisive fifth-inning, 3-run job that put United ahead of the Stars to stay.

In the Thunder-United contest, United amassed a 7-1 lead through five. The Thunder's 4-run response in the sixth was too little to make a difference. The Rolling Thunder's elimination by TC would mark the first instance since 1988 the 13-time national champions did not make the championship round—an incredible run ended by a very worthy opponent.

The slugfest that decided who would face the Cubs in the championship round had TC take a 4-run lead in the top half of the first inning. The undaunted Saints

countered with a 7-run outburst in the second that saw 13 batters stride to the plate before it was over. The Saints held off United until the fifth when they narrowed the gap by 2. TC tallied 3 more in the sixth and added another three-spot in the seventh for a commanding 12-7 lead the Saints would not overcome.

Cubs-United Meet Again

The stage was finally set for a Cubs-United rematch for the national title.

The intense rivalry emerging between these two teams was as evident in this game as it was in their first encounter. Both jockeyed physically, mentally, and verbally for any kind of advantage, from the first pitch to the last.

It was TC United quickly out of the box, as lead-off man Joe Wittkamp and short fielder James Terpenning reached on successive throwing errors in the bottom of the first. Obviously, the Cubs were still trying to home in on that fine line between tight defense and defensive tightness. Waller followed with a sharply lined hit to center to load the bases, and TC was poised for a big inning. Fortunately for the Cubs, third baseman Mike Miles rapped into a 6-4-3 double play. Wittkamp scored from third, but the Cubs had bought some much needed breathing room.

Van Beek singled across Waller, and Wolfe kept TC's big-inning hopes alive with a looping hit over third that advanced Van Beek to second. Dave Anders, batting seventh, worked the count full but then flied out to right to end the inning. (That fine line was coming into focus for the Cubs.)

TC held Chicago in check until the fourth inning when the Cubs began to chip away at their modest 2-0 lead. Currie bounced a ground-rule double over the right-field fence. With one out, second baseman Jorge Alfaro punched a balloon shot into left center that tallied Currie with the Cubs' first run. In the fifth, they were at it again off consecutive singles by Lewis, Moran, and Yun that set up Smith and Tkaczenko to take the RBI bows; the Cubs moved ahead, 3-2.

United knotted it up in the bottom of the sixth to raise the curtain on Act 7 (as in inning), the grand finale of this twen-

ty-sixth national tournament. The Cubs perceived an immediate advantage with the top of their order coming up. On their side, TC would send up 7, 8, and 9 in the bottom half.

For the Cubs, perception began to defy reality as TC shut down Moran and Yun on fly-outs.

With two down, Chicago's chance to retake the lead appeared to dwindle. But Smith lashed a sinking one-hop liner to short center that Terpenning hurried into an errant throw to first, allowing Smith to take second. Tkaczenko proceeded to pound one to second that handcuffed Rick Swauger. Now, with runners at the corners and two out, TC's dilemma was whether or not to pitch to Currie, who had already hit two homers in the tourney. They decided to walk Currie to get to Rusin, the number-six batter. Percentage-wise and perception-wise it was the right move, but Rusin crossed them up, pulling a single to left to score Smith. Alfaro added a thin

layer of icing to the "Cubcake" when he banged a chip shot off pitcher Winters' footrest that responded like a perfect bunt. As it spun ever so slowly toward third, Tkaczenko lumbered home and Alfaro raced safely to first. Jordan's pop-out to third provided the anticlimax to a clutch rally and a 5-3 Cubs lead.

With the game and the championship on the line, United's coaching brain trust pulled out all the stops in the bottom of the seventh. Steve Smutak pinch hit for Anders and drew a lead-off walk. Winters went down 1-3 for the first out with Smutak taking second. Sherm Lightner pinch hit for Maclin and sliced a curve-away fly ball to right that a hustling Jordan caught up with on one bounce and relayed to first for the second out. In response, each Cub breathed a quick sigh of relief. With Smutak at third, Gus Franks pinch hit for Swauger, worked the count full, and drew a walk. With the tying runs on and the potential winning score coming to the

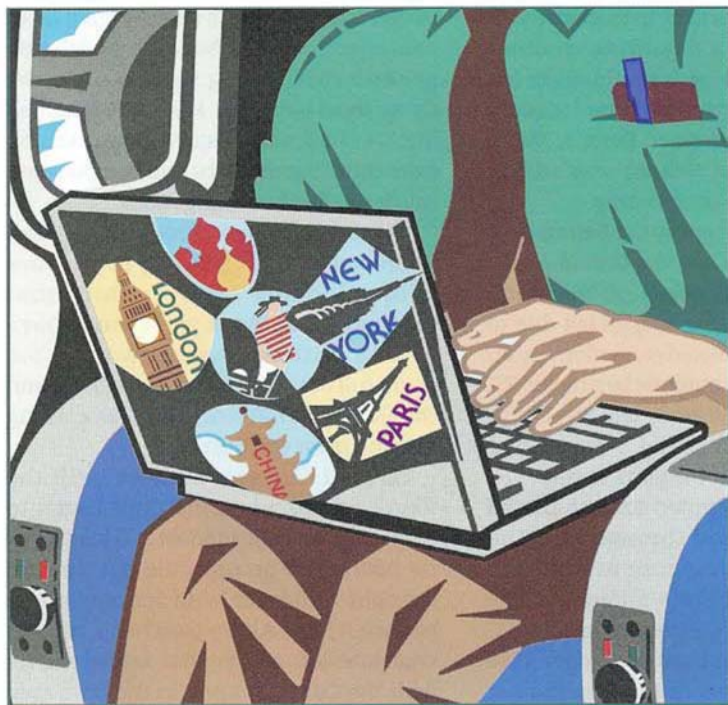
plate in lead-off man Wittkamp, the Cubs defense dug in one more time.

In little more than the blink of an eye, the Cubs' high anxiety turned into eruptive elation. On Currie's first offering, Wittkamp lashed a sizzling grounder to the hot corner that Tkaczenko gathered in, savored for a split second, then fired to first to clinch the Cubs' first-ever national championship title.

Holy cow! Harry Caray would have been proud. **S'NS**



Larry Labiak works for the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities.



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