

back from the **BRINK**

by Larry Labiak

Despite an early-round-elimination scare, the St. Paul Rolling Thunder found that five national championships were good—but six are *great!*

Twenty years in the making, the 1996 National Wheelchair Softball Tournament was bound to prove one for the record books—those written and rewritten by the St. Paul (Minn.) Rolling Thunder. For the sixth successive season, this team captured the championship spoils, albeit the hard way.

The Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome, major league home of the Minnesota Twins, was a perfect backdrop for the National Wheelchair Softball Association's (NWSA's) 20th national tournament, held September 5-7 in Minneapolis. Several games took place inside the dome on Sportcourt, a plasticized surface of interlocking sectional sheets laid out over the Astroturf to fashion a regulation-size wheelchair-softball field. A blacktop field outside the dome was the site of the remaining contests.

The Thunder rocked the Wisconsin Badgers, 11-1, in game one, which featured a 200-foot line-shot home run off the bat of Thunder third-baseman Todd Anderson. The drive easily cleared the fence in straightaway leftfield. The opening round was trademark Rolling Thunder: a combination of raw power, consistent pitching, and flawless defense that vanquished the Badgers in methodical fashion.

UPSET THREATS

St. Paul faced a much tougher foe in their second contest. The up-and-coming Texas Stars contingent, last year's fourth-place finishers, had upset on their minds. Not knowing just how good they could be gave the inspired Texans an apparent advantage against the Thunder. The Stars played loose and focused, completely

Sonny DeGuzman, of the new Colorado Rockies team, connects against the Chicago Pacemakers.





Jesse Gonzales (St. Paul Thunder) loosens up during the game with the St. Paul Saints.

LARRY LABIAK

unawed by their opponents' results-based reputation. Texas pulled it off by eking out a 6-5 nail-biter in which the winning run scored on a rare Thunder throwing error in the bottom of the seventh inning.

The unexpected loss dropped St. Paul into the losers' bracket. The Thunder hadn't fallen to that level this early in double-elimination national competition in years.

Facing the imminent threat of a premature exit, the Thunder finally got serious. They wasted the Minnesota Twins, 13-3, in a cakewalk. "It was time to wake up and smell the coffee. Good thing we did," commented Thunder short fielder Dave Eckstrom. Next up was St. Louis.

The St. Louis Rolling Rams, at two up and one down in tournament play, were trying to better their 1995 third-place finish but found themselves in the same boat as the Thunder when these two powerhouses faced off. Ultimately, St. Paul's patented airtight defense (as it so often is) was the bot-

tom-line difference in their 6-5 victory over the Rams in 11 innings.

THE SAINTS GO MARCHING

The fundamentally sound, quick-on-the-base-paths, crosstown-rival upstarts known as the St. Paul Saints were waiting in the wings. The Saints are built on youth, speed, well-placed power, and solid defense. Recalling more than one early season defeat of the defending champions, the Saints had confidence going in. But confidence means little when the opponent is the Thunder.

The Saints doubled four Thunder runners off base, and the Thunder turned a triple play on the Saints over the course of this eight-inning extravaganza that featured a little bit of everything on the defensive side. Not surprisingly, this game belonged to the pitchers, and the Thunder's Dick Crumb was one run better (4-3) than the Saints' Barry Hite.

The Saints did, however, leave their

mark on this national tournament. They leapfrogged from seventh to third place in just a year and threaten to take center stage in the foreseeable future.

CHICAGO FALTERS

The Thunder had impressively forged a pathway back to the finals and was poised for its annual two-of-three-game matchup with the Chicago Pacemakers. But the Pacemakers had faltered at the outset and lost to the Saints, 14-9. Following a win over the first-year Colorado Rockies, Chicago fell 4-3 to the Minnesota Twins and was summarily eliminated from championship play.

"Our pitching was below par overall. [Kristi] Albertson was the only one throwing strikes," mused Chicago coach Steve Truels.

The Pacemakers, a team that had finished as low as fourth only once in its 17-year history, had to settle for seventh place. Chicago needs a moderate overhaul in 1997 to remain in competition

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All-tournament Selections

Selection for an all-tournament team is more than a temporary honor. Players who are active competitors for ten years are eligible for the NWSA Hall of Fame. All-tournament status sometimes helps decide election into the Hall. The following athletes are on this year's all-tournament teams.

Winners Bracket

Pitcher.....	Johnny Banda.....	Texas Stars
Catcher.....	Rory Fosness.....	St. Paul Thunder
First Base.....	Manuel Guerra.....	St. Paul Saints
Second Base.....	Bobby Martin.....	Texas Stars
Third Base.....	George Kiefner.....	St. Paul Saints
Shortstop.....	Scott Berg.....	St. Paul Saints
Leftfield.....	Mike Krato.....	St. Louis Rams
Centerfield.....	Mike Kult.....	St. Paul Saints
Shortfield.....	Rick Cooper.....	Texas Stars
Rightfield.....	John Fay.....	Texas Stars
Best Quad.....	Dan Price.....	St. Paul Saints
Rookie.....	Sam Dent.....	Baltimore All Stars
Sportsmanship.....	Bobby Martin.....	Texas Stars
Best Hitter.....	George Kiefner (.662).....	St. Paul Saints
MVP.....	Rick Cooper.....	Texas Stars

Consolation Bracket

Pitcher.....	Artie Guerrero.....	Colorado Rockies
Catcher.....	Larry Labiak.....	Chicago Pacemakers
First Base.....	Steve Kirkwood.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Second Base.....	Larry Sidebottom.....	Colorado Rockies
Third Base.....	Bob Trotter.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Shortstop.....	David Radbel.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Leftfield.....	Milton Smith.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Centerfield.....	Linh Bowie.....	Colorado Rockies
Shortfield.....	Perry Bender.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Rightfield (tie).....	Jeff Russell.....	Columbus Pioneers
	Matt Coppens.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Best Quad.....	Larry Labiak.....	Chicago Pacemakers
Rookie (tie).....	Linh Bowie.....	Colorado Rockies
	Jason Dickmeyer.....	Integrity Wolves
	Chris Keutzman.....	Wisconsin Badgers
	Rich Palmerine.....	RIC Cubs
Sportsmanship.....	Bob Baker.....	Kansas City Diamond
	Milton Smith.....	Chicago Pacemakers
	Dave Corning.....	Colorado Rockies
	Ray Petty.....	Kansas City Diamond
MVP.....	Steve Kirkwood.....	Chicago Pacemakers

with the upper-division teams.

Returning to the finals for the eighth consecutive year, the Thunder would test the championship mettle of a new challenger: the Texas Stars. The undefeated Texans, on the strength of wins over Colorado, Baltimore, the Thunder, and the Saints, only needed one win. The Thunder had to beat Texas twice to retain their title for an unprecedented sixth straight year.

In their "opportunity for redemption" rematch, the Thunder amassed a 9-1 lead through four innings. The Stars never recovered and came up way short at 10-4. In the rubber game, Texas broke out early and maintained a 5-1 lead after five innings. Just six outs away from the national championship, the bottom dropped out. Texas could not prevent the Thunder's number-nine and -ten batters from reaching base safely in the sixth, the former on a single to right and the latter on a walk. The Stars had committed a mortal sin by walking the quad, typically the weakest hitter in the lineup and normally an automatic out.

Forget about repenting! St. Paul didn't give Texas the chance. Their top of the order proceeded to knock in four runs, including the two "gimmies" already on base, to bring them even at 5-5. The Thunder tacked on three more to open the seventh before shutting the door, three up and out.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON TEXAS

In spite of their ultimate demise at the hands of the Thunder, the Texas Stars must be acknowledged as the new number-two team in the NWSA. The Stars not only posted their first-ever victory over the Thunder by effectively making a chink in St. Paul's championship armor, but they also posted four position players to the All-Tournament Team, including short fielder Rick Cooper, who was voted tourney MVP.

Just as impressive is the fact that Texas played only intrasquad games throughout the regular season because no local opponents exist in the Houston/Pasadena area, and travel to regional tournaments was cost prohibitive in light of the Stars' burgeoning roster.

The new kids on the block making their inaugural appearances were the Colorado Rockies, Kansas City Diamond, and Illinois Integrity Wolves. Of these three newcomers, Colorado, with support from the major league club by the same name and the Rocky Mountain Paralyzed Veterans of America, definitely impressed opponents the most. "The Rockies are better than the score indicated," said Texas manager Karen Atteberry after the Stars had bested Colorado, 12-1, in their first game. "They've got the fundamentals down. They just need more experi-

CEREMONIAL FIRST PITCH
JERRY ANDERSON



PHOTOS COURTESY MINNESOTA TWINS

Rolling Thunder's Jerry Anderson is bigger than life, on DomeVision. INSET: Minnesota Twin Chip Hale greets Anderson, who threw out the first pitch of the Twins/Angels game.

ence and a couple of heavy hitters." Atteberry ought to know. That's exactly what opponents said about her team a few short softball seasons ago.

The Minnesota Twins provided the national-tournament site. Prior to games with the California Angels on September 6-7, the Twins hosted participating NWSA teams.

On Friday night, pregame ceremonies included a salute to wheelchair softball. Jerry Anderson, Thunder pitcher/outfielder, threw out the ceremonial first pitch following on-field introductions of the three local NWSA teams. Saturday night, 54,000 fans packed into the Metrodome watched the Twins honor retiring all-star outfielder Kirby Puckett. Courtesy of the Twins, all NWSA teams had complimentary luxury skybox seating for "Kirby Puckett Night."

Growth remains the NWSA's main focus. The organization's members continue to recruit youths for existing teams on the local level. Although three new teams competed at the national level in 1996, NWSA is still trying to reach areas of the country that have a nucleus of softball talent but not enough exposure or local financial support. Consequently, develop-

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Teams ended in the following order:

Winners Bracket

- St. Paul Rolling Thunder
- Texas Stars
- St. Paul Saints
- St. Louis Rolling Rams
- Minnesota Twins
- Baltimore Metro All-Stars

Consolation Bracket

- Chicago Pacemakers
- Colorado Rockies
- Wisconsin Badgers
- Columbus Pioneers
- Chicago (RIC) Cubs
- Integrity Wolves
- Kansas City Diamond

ment of a Youth Division remains a major challenge. Locally sponsored "Junior Softball Saturdays" in the Twin Cities and Chicagoland next summer will address this issue.

NWSA Commissioner Jon Speake is organizing a series of six Minnesota Wheelchair Athletic Association-sponsored Saturday softball clinics for kids. Chicago Area Wheelchair Sports (CAWS) and the Chicago Pacemakers are planning another three one-day clinics for juniors.

Next year's tournament takes place August 21-23 in Pasadena, Tex. For more details about this year's championship or information about playing wheelchair soft-

ball, contact the National Wheelchair Softball Association, 1616 Todd Court, Hastings, MN 55033. (612) 437-1792. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Larry Labiak is Youth Services coordinator at the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. He played basketball for many years before retiring to officiate. He plays quad rugby during the off-season. A graduate of the University of Illinois, Labiak earned a bachelor's in radio and television and a master's degree in advertising. He has been a Chicagoland mainstay since 1983.