

SPORTS **'N** SPOKES

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THUNDER

by Larry Labiak / photos by Curt Beamer

Columbus, Ohio, played host to the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament's silver anniversary.

Thanks to an 18-month strategic planning effort by the Ohio Wheelchair Softball Association (OWSA), this annual dual-division, double-elimination extravaganza, held August 16-18, sported a triple-diamond three-day odyssey that unfolded not as expected.

With 14 teams in the mix, you can expect a few surprises along the way, not one of them being an opening-round loss by the defending national champions. You can bust your butt for five seasons, finish second or third in four of them, finally get over the hump last year by defeating the team (your crosstown rival) with eight of the previous nine first-place trophies, and be the number-one seed coming in. But if you drop your first game because you stumbled at the plate, you could be in big trouble. So go the defending champion St. Paul Saints.

Had the Saints been able to mount a sustained offensive threat in their opening game against the Maryland Ravens Metro Stars, the result would likely have been different. But surprisingly—and



Rolling Thunder pitcher Jerry Anderson helped his team to another championship. The Thunder held off the early-round upset bid by the tenth-ranked Nebraska Barons.

unfortunately for them—the Saints' 1-2-3 hitters went 0 for 9, splintering their offensive output, if not their bats. On the

other side, the Ravens put up 2 in inning one, drawing first blood on the strength of three singles and a double. The Saints countered with a pair of runs in the top of the second, and then took a 3-2 lead in the fourth, which they maintained into the sixth inning. But it soon became apparent they had allowed their upstart opposition to hang around too long.

Consecutive singles by Maryland pinch-hitter Jerry Mack and center fielder Jeff Lewis in the home half set up third baseman Larry Toler for a clinch two-run double. Pitcher Keith Lewis doubled to bring Toler around, and pinch-hitter Ray Maxey chimed in with a triple that scored Lewis. All told, the Ravens got four runs on five hits for a 6-3 lead, with St.

Paul's bottom third of the order due up.

The stunned Saints went down 1-2-3 in the seventh as Maryland completed its major upset—*major* because a second loss by the defending champions would catapult them into the Consolation Bracket (Division II) and out of the money; big for

OUS *return*



The St. Paul Rolling Thunder defeated the Columbus Pioneers (A) to take its thirteenth national softball championship. The Thunder has won half of its sport's national titles. St. Paul had to beat Columbus in two consecutive games to take the 2001 win.

the Ravens because nobody expects a number-nine seed to knock off last year's best the first time out.

Maybe St. Paul's first-round bye played against the Saints. Earlier in the day Maryland had a chance to loosen up in a decisive 15-9 contest with the Northeast PVA (NEPVA) Red Sox, while St. Paul sat and waited. No matter, softball's a funny game. But the Saints weren't laughing.

Shock and frustration quickly gave way to an aggressive, vengeful response a few hours later, with the Chicago Pacemakin' Wolves the victim. The Saints unleashed

a nonstop offensive barrage that decimated the Wolves, 24-2, in a 20-run slaughter-rule four-inning uprising. Nothing personal—the Saints merely needed to untrack their potent offense in order to regain their confidence as they began weeding through losers-bracket foes.

Maryland, on the other hand, prepared for a day-two matchup with the Columbus Pioneers (A), a contingent squad featuring the best of their original team and the best of the former Toledo Silver Streaks—including Darryl Waller, Sherman Lightner, and venerable rookie Dennis Mussery.

On the Other Side...

Meanwhile, in the other seven-team bracket, let's not forget the 12-time national champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder and the Chicago (RIC) Cubs, a legitimate contender the past four seasons.

Right out of the box, the Cubs, vying for their elusive first championship, dismantled the Columbus Pioneers (B), 16-0, and beat the former champion ('97) St. Louis Rolling Rams in a 5-4 squeaker that saw the Rams strand the tying run at third in their final at-bat.

Like the Saints, the crosstown Rolling



Looking to make a throw to second base, Charles Barre (St. Louis Rolling Rams) charges the ball and winds up to toss it in from the outfield.

Thunder enjoyed a bye thanks to the team's '00 champion runner-up status. And, like the Saints, the Thunder nearly fell victim to an upset bid by a low seed, the tenth-ranked Nebraska Barons. But the Thunder avoided the Saints' opening-game fate via an eighth-inning 2-run rally, to which the Barons countered 1, before falling short, 8-7, in the extra frame.

With the second seed stirred and the top seed shaken, what did the softball gods have in store for the Columbus Pioneers (A)?

What's Next?

The opening-round surprises continued as the fifth-seeded Courage Rolling Twins lost to the twelfth-seeded EPVA Mets. The pride of the U.S.'s premiere city mounted a spirited 4-run seventh-inning rally that eradicated a 6-3 Twins lead. The 7-6 loss staggered the Twins and propelled the Mets into a second-round conflict with the Pioneers (A).

Conflict resolution is what the Columbus Pioneers (A) are all about. In 2000, these guys finally broke the final-four barrier to achieve their best finish (fourth place) since 25th National Wheelchair Softball Tournament co-director John Wall founded the team in 1993.

EPVA stepped up a level in defeating the Twins, but Columbus was ready and waiting for the Mets after coming off a 7-0 whitewash of the Wisconsin Badgers. The Mets were no match for Columbus's high-powered 14-hit offense and John Winters's stinginess on the mound. Winters scattered three hits—all singles—over the course of this five-inning 12-run slaughter-rule-shortened 12-0 shutout of the New Yorkers. The proud but over-matched Mets were, thus, cast off to the second division, where they eventually finished tenth overall.

Having established themselves as the fifth contender, the question remained whether the Ravens' early success was an aberration or a paradigm. Could they stick with the Saints, Thunder, Cubs, and Pioneers (A)?

Day Two

It appeared the Ravens could, as they forged a 5-4 lead that held up into the fifth inning against Columbus. In the bottom half, a pair of walks to the ten hitter Rick St. John and lead-off man James Terpenning catalyzed a three-run Columbus rally. Joe Whittkamp, in the second spot, lashed a single that scored St. John as the speedy Terpenning motored into third and



The Courage Rolling Twins' short fielder Kurt Greniger loses his balance going for a ground ball. In this early-round contest, the EPVA Mets upset the fifth-seeded Rolling Twins.

Whittkamp advanced to second on the throw home. Right fielder Lenny Maclin's sacrifice fly scored Terpenning, and Whittkamp came across on a two-out single by third baseman Dave Anders. Winters, for whom Mussery had batted, returned to the mound and retired six of the last seven batters to notch his third straight victory.

Next up were the Cubs and Thunder, with the winner advancing to the semifinals against Columbus. The Cubs, who had never defeated the Thunder in nationals competition, played the erstwhile multiple champions even through regulation (4-4). In typical fashion, St. Paul strung together a foursome of singles in the top of the eighth inning for a 6-4 lead. In the past, this would have signaled an impending victory—but that was then.

The Cubs displayed a heretofore unseen level of confidence and focus as they came to the plate in the last half of the eighth. Number-ten hitter Sly Flis flared a 2-1 pitch to right-center and camped on first as center fielder Paul Moran settled in at the plate. On the first pitch, Moran duplicated Flis's effort, and, suddenly, the Cubs were in business. As right fielder Ki Yun conferenced with coach Corey Bell in the on-deck circle, Yun was heard to say, "Don't worry, we're going to win this game. This is it right here."

Yun towered a deep drive to right that sent Tim Thode on the run, back-pedal-

ing to the warning track. Just when Thode appeared to catch up with the ball, it flicked off and over his outstretched fingertips and bounced off the fence behind him. Flis raced around third and headed home with Moran in hot pursuit. The relay to the plate was wide left and flew past catcher Jason Dickmeyer to the backstop, as Moran crossed with the tying run.

Yun never broke stride as Bell waved him home, too. Pitcher Dick Crumb, backing up the play, scooped up the ball and flipped it toward the plate as Yun bulldozed into Dickmeyer. The hard collision left Yun flat on his back on home plate as the ball eluded Dickmeyer's grasp. The Cubs' celebratory eruption around Yun left no doubt they had just scored one of their biggest wins in club history, a victory that put them within one game of the championship round.

Across the field, the stunned Rolling Thunder began to regroup. They had been down this road before, but never at the hands of the Cubs. The loss left St. Paul three wins away from the championship round and one loss away from the consolation round.

Saints vs. Thunder

For the first time in five years, this annual confrontation took place in the losers bracket. The winner would face the Rolling Twins-Ravens Metro Stars winner. The loser looked toward—at best—fifth place.

On the other field, the Twins—who had meandered through the Badgers, Barons, and Rams—were battling Maryland for the chance to stay alive in the losers bracket. The victor had to meet the Saints-Thunder winner. The loser played that contest's loser for fifth place.

Bottom line, neither the Saints nor the Ravens would survive. As usual, the defending champions played their arch-rivals tough, but spotty hitting and the Thunder's typically solid defense ultimately did the Saints in, 7-4.

"You just can't lose that first game,"



The Columbus Pioneers (A) finally broke the final-four barrier to achieve their best finish (fourth place) in 2000. This year the team moved a step closer to the title but lost to the Rolling Thunder in the final game. Here, Columbus right fielder Lenny Maclin hangs on to the ball after flipping in his chair.

Saints coach Jon Speake said. "And you can't expect to outlast this much competition without consistent hitting. We didn't get it."

Rolling Thunder all-star short center-fielder Dave Eckstrom countered: "The key for us was our familiarity with the Saints' tendencies, because we play them a lot. Combined with Jerry Anderson's ability to locate the ball on each pitch, that allowed us to align our defense batter-by-batter."

It was much the same for the Ravens, who succumbed, 11-4, at the hands of the Twins. The Twins had overcome their first-round loss, strung together three wins, and were back in business—albeit not for long.

Cubs vs. Pioneers (A)

No one, except maybe these two teams, expected either to be 3-0 at this juncture. Nonetheless, each had a golden opportunity at hand—to move into the finals unscathed, with the potential to force a one-game championship on day three.

With so much at stake, neither team could afford a glitch at the plate. Columbus opened with a 2-0 lead in the first, to which they added an unearned run in the fourth. After a single run in the third, the Cubs couldn't garner an extra-base or clutch hit to save their lives. Along the way, they stranded seven runners, leaving the bases loaded in the sixth. The opposition added an insurance run in the bottom half, while their cranked-up defense held steady behind Winters until the Cubs



Anel Gonzalez (RIC Cubs) concentrates and pitches one down the middle. His team came out of the box quickly, dismantling the Columbus Pioneers (B), 16-0; beating the St. Louis Rolling Rams in a squeaker, 5-4; and notching a huge win against the eventual champion Rolling Thunder. The Cubs then faced the Pioneers (A) and lost, 4-1.

ran out of innings.

The Pioneers' 4-1 victory over the Cubs assured them a finals berth and the opportunity to close out the championship with



Although he is known more for his talents in tennis and basketball, Steve Welch tried his hand at softball this year and was named All Tournament Team Division I Rookie.

a next-game win on day three.

With one finalist determined, day three dawned early for the Twins and Thunder. One or the other would embark on a journey toward the championship that would necessitate a string of four victories.

I encountered Thunder coach Bart Oothoudt in the hotel lobby the night before and asked him what he thought about his team's chances.

Oothoudt's calm confidence was unwavering. "We have four games tomorrow. I think we can do it. We've been in this position before and have been successful," he said. "We'll make some adjustments. We have a plan. I think our guys will be ready."

Who could doubt a guy with 12 national championships under his belt? I could. But I also admired the product of his past success.

One Down, Three To Go

The Thunder hit the field and the Twins until it hurt. Secure in their resolve, the Thunder gave pitcher Anderson a two-run cushion in the first inning. Another run in the second and a five-spot in the fourth went unanswered, as the Twins failed to advance a runner as far as third until the

sixth. They loaded the bases with one out in that inning, but first baseman Jim Langevin snared a Joe Arends line drive and short center-fielder Eckstrom turned a Troy Paulson base hit into a throw-out at first to end the threat. The Thunder's stellar defense went on to post an 8-0 shutout en route to a rematch with the Cubs.

This one featured no late-game heroics, just seven innings of solid defense by both teams and a seven-run third inning

that proved decisive for the Thunder. It's not like the Thunder's hits were better, they just occurred more often.

"Our big bats didn't respond as well as expected," mused Bell. "But I'm proud of how we stuck together. Team unity almost got us there."

The 9-4 final score ended the Cubs' season and extended the Thunder's.

Two Down, Two To Go

So much for the lengthy prelims. With the championship series finally at hand, the Pioneers (A) needed a single win to claim their first national crown.

From the Thunder's standpoint, they only needed two wins. Let's not blur the line here between confidence and arrogance. Twelve national championships have a way of convincing you the next one is closer than it looks to everyone else. So it goes for a team that has won half of its sport's national titles.

After sending St. Paul down in order, Columbus set the tone with a pair of runs in the bottom of the first inning. The Thunder countered with a three-spot in the second and retired the Pioneers (A) in order. A walk, a pair of errors, two singles, and a double in the third put St. Paul back

on top, but Columbus broke back with 4 runs in their half to cut the lead to 8-6.

For the next three innings, both teams' bats gave way to defense, and it appeared the Pioneers (A) would hold off the Thunder for a last shot in the bottom of the seventh. That, apparently, wasn't in the Thunder's plans. Instead, they broke the game open with five runs in the top half that summarily ended the Pioneers' (A) hopes for a direct route to glory.

In fact, that loss signaled the beginning of the end for Columbus. The Thunder had been down the comeback road many times at this level, but the Pioneers (A) hadn't walked this path before.

Unfortunately, the championship contest failed to live up to the home fans' expectations (or anyone's for that matter—except the Thunder's). St. Paul jumped out to a 4-0 advantage that was challenged only in the fourth inning when Columbus scored its only runs of the game. The Thunder slammed the door on the Pioneers (A) with 5 runs in the fifth and a pair of runs in the sixth inning to close out their 13th national championship season.

"In the final analysis, they played well. We did not. It's just that simple," said Pioneers (A) coach Jerry Jones. "It's hard to argue with success."

S'NS



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