

THUNDER

Sets the Pace

by Larry Labiak / photos by Delfina Colby

Up-and-coming teams tried to upset the reigning softball champs but couldn't prevent the "five-peat."



The St. Paul (Minn.) Rolling Thunder is enjoying a dynastic reign never before witnessed in the 19-year history of the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA). For the fifth consecutive year, the Thunder defeated the Chicago Pacemakers to capture the national crown...an unprecedented feat. The 19th Annual National Wheelchair Softball Tournament was played August 24-26 in Pasadena, Tex.

With a 10-1 win, the St. Paul team breezed past the Chicago (RIC) Cubs, who gave

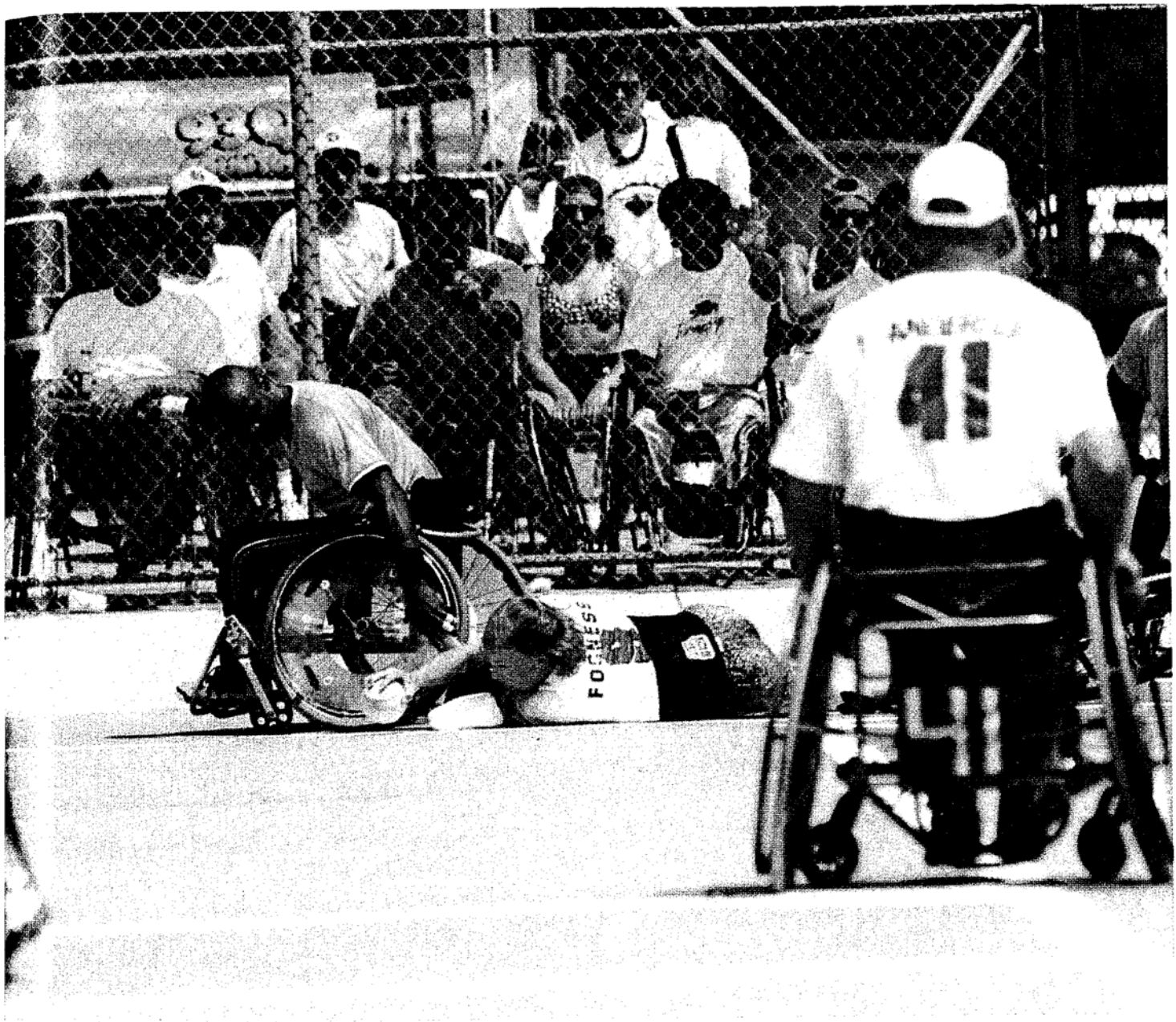
up tourney MVP Todd Anderson's 200-foot home-run drive that cleared the trees beyond the left-field fence. As Chicago pitcher Kristi Albertson proclaimed later, "I wish I had known how much he likes that tight one above the knees."

The Thunder faced a hard-nosed dig-in-the-dirt Texas Stars contingent in game two. Home-field advantage and the humid 95° heat of Pasadena notwithstanding, the Stars eventually succumbed, 6-3, and St. Paul looked ahead to its annual two-of-three-game matchup with the Pacemakers.

Unfortunately, the Pacemakers once again did not match up well against the Thunder. St. Paul jumped out to a 6-0 lead in the first inning of both games and

never looked back. In each game Chicago mounted a potential threat more than once but failed to produce the key hits needed with players on base (including two bases-loaded situations). The Pacemakers were thwarted repeatedly by the Thunder's speed on defense and their own failure in the clutch. Ultimately, St. Paul cruised to the winner's circle by scores of 15-3 and 13-2.

"What can I say? Some things we tried worked, and some didn't," says Pacemakers coach Steve Truels. "But everything seemed to be working for them," he adds. As for the perennial second-place Pacemakers, they've gone home to kiss their sisters, but they'll be back next year.



COMEBACK KIDS

Although the Thunder continues to dominate softball's upper echelon, a couple of other teams—the Baltimore Metro All-Stars and the Chicago (RIC) Cubs—warrant recognition for noteworthy performances in this national tournament.

Baltimore (my pretourney dark-horse pick) opened against the eleventh-seeded Wisconsin Badgers and spotted them a 2-0 lead through three innings. Each team scored a single run in the fifth and went scoreless in the sixth. In the top of the seventh, Wisconsin added a pair of insurance runs for an apparently comfortable margin, 5-2. With the number-

six hitter to lead off in their last at bat, the Metro All-Stars needed the lower half of the order to pick up the slack—and pick it up they did.

A double by second baseman Pat Burns after consecutive singles by centerfielder Pat Hart and rightfielder Mike Heady scored both runners. With the tying run at second and nobody out, Baltimore still faced a 1-run deficit. When pinch hitter Keith Lewis bounced out, Burns, the potential tying score, advanced to third. Catcher Claude Hall walked and represented the winning run at first base. However, he was forced at second on leftfielder Robert Tucker's deep-in-the-hole shot behind the bag at third. Burns tallied the tying run on the play to forge a 5-5 tie.

Two out with the winning run on base was the opportunity pitcher Mike Hylton had been waiting for. He didn't wait for opportunity to knock twice. He lined a double into the left-center gap, and Tucker hooped it home all the way from first for the comeback 6-5 victory.

Next up for Baltimore was St. Louis, last year's third-place finisher. Again the All-Stars exhibited their newfound penchant for dramatic late-inning rallies.

After breaking out 3-0 in the bottom of the first inning, Baltimore was in a potential-upset mode. But St. Louis countered

ABOVE: Catcher Rory Fosness (St. Paul Thunder) gets way down to business after colliding with Pacemaker left fielder Milton Smith.

19TH ANNUAL NATIONAL WHEELCHAIR SOFTBALL TOURNAMENT

ALL-TOURNAMENT SELECTIONS

<i>Pitcher</i>	Dick Crumb Wisconsin Badgers
<i>Catcher</i>	Larry Labiak Chicago Pacemakers
<i>First Base</i>	Steve Kirkwood Chicago Pacemakers
<i>Second Base</i>	Rick Benavides Wisconsin Badgers Dan Hall St. Louis Rams
<i>Third Base</i>	Larry Toler Baltimore All-Stars
<i>Short Stop</i>	Kevin Peterson St. Paul Thunder
<i>Leftfield</i>	Mike Krato St. Louis Rams
<i>Centerfield</i>	Earl Jordan Chicago Pacemakers
<i>Rightfield</i>	David Radbel Chicago Pacemakers
<i>Shortfield</i>	Perry Bender Chicago Pacemakers



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE:

In game 14, Coach Steve Truels urges his Chicago Pacemakers to bear down and play harder against Baltimore.

In the championship-game rout, Thunder short stop Kevin Peterson's missing this fly ball didn't matter much.

The St. Paul Rolling Thunder's 13-2 victory over the Chicago Pacemakers was good for a fifth consecutive national crown.

with one run in the first, three in the third, and another in the sixth for a 5-3 lead to protect in the seventh. To compound Baltimore's problems, St. Louis's 9-10-1 hitting combo was scheduled to bat.

Hall, a pretty fair hitter in the ten spot, blooped a one-out single to left. Tucker did the same in right field to set the stage for another possible comeback. Hylton followed with a force-out grounder that advanced Hall to third.

Two on, two out, and down two signaled leftfielder Jim Turner's chance to answer opportunity's knock. His answer was a line-drive RBI single to right that scored Hall and moved Hylton up to second base. All-Tournament third baseman Larry Toler followed with another RBI single to right that scored Hylton, knotted the game at 5-5, and forced extra innings.

Surprisingly, the meat of the St. Louis order came and went, 1-2-3, in the top of the eighth, leaving Baltimore's window of opportunity open again. Three one-out singles later, the Rolling Rams found themselves defending a bases-loaded situation with Hall, the number-ten man, due up again.

After working the count full, Hall fouled off a couple of good pitches to stay alive. He tightened his grip on the bat and leaned in again. This time he waited, watched, held up, and then held up again as the ball dropped just off the outside corner of the plate to force in the winning run.

The All-Stars had eked out another heart-stopping, come-from-behind 6-5 win, this time over a legitimate contender. These so-called "Comeback Kids" were (and are) for real!

The true test of Baltimore's mettle would be their first-ever confrontation with the Pacemakers on day two of this three-day softball marathon. The game began under humid, sunny skies and endured a thunderstorm and high winds that toppled a newly erected six-foot-high cyclone fence extending from home plate to first base. Two-and-a-half hours later in temperatures still hovering around 90°, the contest concluded after 42 hits, 28 runs (16-12), and numerous errors.

The Pacemakers broke out early and often, staking a 7-1 lead through three innings. The All-Stars countered with three in the fourth and four in the fifth for an 8-7 advantage. In the bottom of the fifth, the Pacemakers tallied the tying run on a double by veteran third baseman Bob Trotter and All-Tournament

shortfielder Perry Bender's single.

Chicago's sloppy fielding and Baltimore's timely hitting gave the All-Stars another brief lead at 12-8 in the sixth inning. Once again Baltimore had battled back from an early deficit, just as in its two previous games. The Pacemakers, not to be denied (this time at least), mounted an 8-run attack, scoring six times with two outs in the bottom half of the sixth before shutting down the All-Stars in the seventh inning to spoil their otherwise perfect day.

the seventh. Leftfielder Paul Moran led off with a single and advanced to second on a single off the bat of third baseman Normez Schultz. The hit-and-run sign was on for utility first-baseman Greg Ridley who scored Moran with a single to right. Schultz was cut down trying to make third on the play. Then on Jorge Alfaro's deep high-hop bouncer to the hot corner, Ridley (never willing to settle for just one base on a hit-and-run) hustled home all the way from second for the 2-0 lead Chicago would maintain until the Baltimore seventh.

Enter the Comeback Kids. Toler began this last-of-the-seventh do-or-die rally with a triple to center field. Then it was first baseman Tony Riley's turn. He looped a single to left that scored Toler and perched tying runners on first and third—with no outs. Lewis lined a double to the fence in left center to bring the All-Stars even at 2-2 but was stranded at second by Cubs starter Sean Griggs, who retired the next three batters to give his mates a chance in extra innings.

Both squads were up and down in the eighth. The Cubs flooded the bottom half of their lineup with pinch hitters in the ninth—but to no avail. Then Toler flared

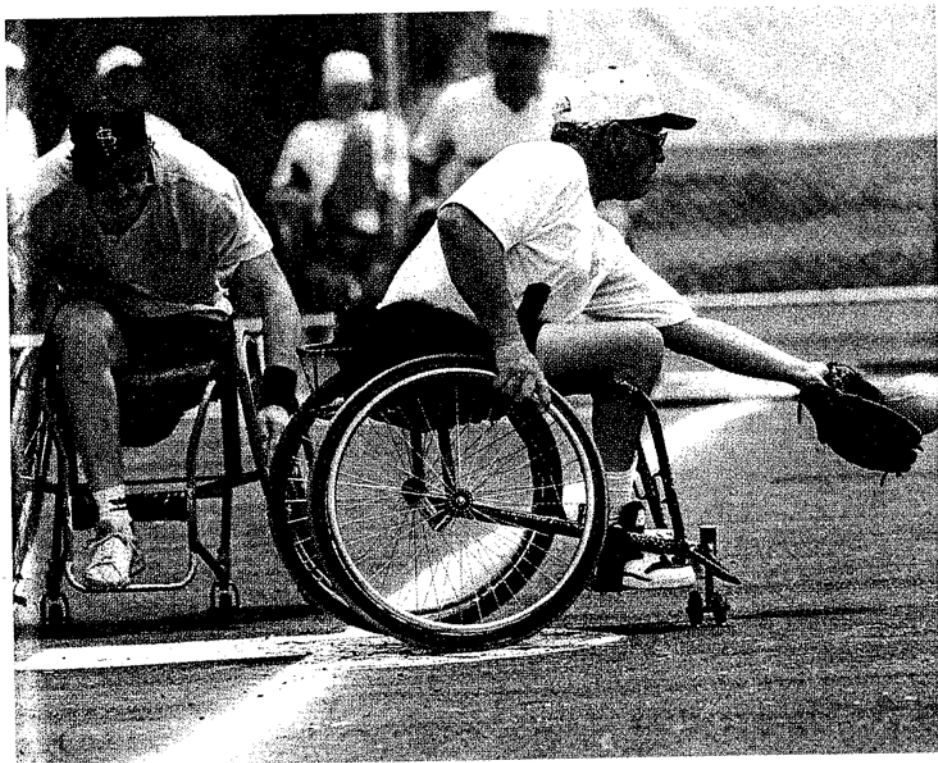
a lead-off single to center. Pinch hitter Tony Miles held up his end with another base hit that moved Toler to second. Lewis had the opportunity on the comeback trail this time around. He lashed Griggs's second pitch past the drawn-in Cubs infield, and a raucous celebration erupted at home plate as Toler crossed with the 3-2 winner.

The Metro All-Stars would go on to face—and be defeated by—the Rolling Rams, 6-3. The All-Stars ultimately settled for fourth place—a stellar performance for any team making only its second appearance in the national tournament.

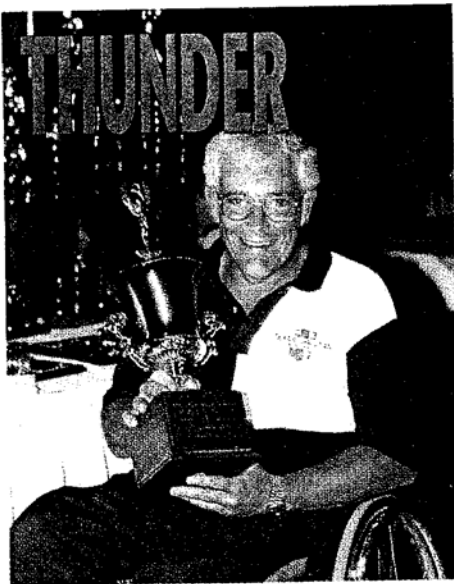
The Chicago (RIC) Cubs dropped to the consolation round and played Texas for fifth place. In retrospect, the Cubs had already shown they were a vastly improved club with a tight defense, good speed, and a two-headed monster on the mound in Griggs and Albertson. What the team still lacks is a bona fide power hitter. With a half million people with disabilities living in Chicago, the RIC

The Metro All-Stars' next confrontation featured the Chicago (RIC) Cubs as antagonists. The surprising Cubs had amassed a 3-1 record thus far and were gaining confidence. The winner would stay alive in the championship quest; the loser could finish no higher than fifth place.

In what eventually became a classic pitcher's duel, the Cubs built a 2-run first-inning lead that held up until the last of



CLOCKWISE, FROM ABOVE:
Mike Krato (St. Louis Rams) beats it for home plate before catcher J. R. Wayne (St. Paul Saints) comes up with the ball.
Dan Price (St. Paul Saints) was named All-Tournament Rookie.
St. Louis Ram Rich Diecker flips over after catching a fly ball. Teammate Rich East (backing up Diecker) calls the play.



National Wheelchair Softball Association Commissioner Jon Speake is one of two 1995 inductees into the NWSA Hall of Fame.



Bob Trotter (Chicago Pacemakers) accepted a Hall of Fame trophy for Don Bulman, who was unable to attend the awards banquet.

Cubs are bound to find one soon.

As for the Metro All-Stars, their ability to repeatedly rebound from adversity shows the character of this team on the rise. What they lack is experience, and that comes with repetition on the field. They've got plenty of time.

In the standings of this 19th Annual National Wheelchair Softball Tournament, the champion St. Paul Rolling Thunder was followed by the Chicago Pacemakers, St. Louis Rolling Rams, Baltimore Metro All-Stars, Texas Stars, RIC-Chicago, St. Paul Saints, Wisconsin Badgers, Oklahoma Twisters, St. Paul Rolling Twins, and

Columbus Pioneers.

Rick East (St. Louis Rams) won the Sportsmanship Award, Claude Hall (Baltimore All-Stars) was named Best Quad, Scott Berg (St. Paul Saints) was Best Hitter (.840), Dan Price (St. Paul Saints) took home Rookie honors, and Todd Anderson (St. Paul Thunder) was selected Most Valuable Player. NWSA Commissioner Jon Speake and Don Bulman were inducted into the organization's Hall of Fame.

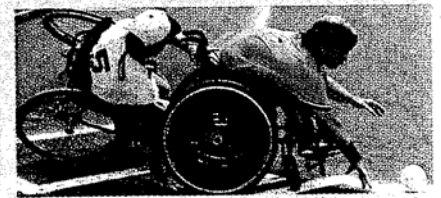
The Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) was a major sponsor of this tournament. Throughout the year, PVA chapters support local teams.

About the Author

After 12 years of playing basketball in Illinois and California, Larry Labiak retired to pursue officiating. He has called National Wheelchair Basketball Association (NWBA) regular and postseason competition on all levels and in 1989 helped co-found Chicago Area Wheelchair Sports (CAWS). Two years ago CAWS hosted the first Junior National Wheelchair Basketball Tournament.

Labiak has been a Chicagoand mainstay since 1983 and is currently president of the National Wheelchair Softball Association. He plays quad rugby during the off-season to stay primed for collisions at home plate.

A graduate of the University of Illinois, Labiak earned a bachelor's degree in radio and television and a master's degree in advertising. From 1976 to 1982, he was a disc jockey, talk-show host, and cable-television producer. After that he owned and operated a durable medical equipment (DME) company and provided sales support for a retail distributor. For the past two years, he has worked for the Chicago Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities. He is currently staff assistant in the Public Information/Relations Unit.



Catcher Larry Labiak (right) conditions for home-plate collisions. Baltimore's Paul Hart was ruled safe here.

THESE OLD BALL GAMES

Abner Doubleday reportedly "invented" baseball at Cooperstown, N.Y., in 1839. However, research has proved that a game called "Base Ball" was played in the U.S. and England before 1839 (*The 1989 Information Please Almanac*).

The first team-baseball as we know it was played in Hoboken, N.J., on June 19, 1846, between the Knickerbockers and the New York Nine. The first catcher's mask was worn in 1875, the three-strike rule was put on the books in 1887, and the four-ball "walk" to first base was instituted in 1889. For decades, baseball has been called our "national pastime."

A similar game becoming more popular every year among wheelers is softball, a form of baseball played on a smaller diamond and with—as the name implies—a softer ball. Formed in 1976, the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA),

establishes rules of play and organizes national tournaments. The first national contest was played in Sioux Falls, S.D. Currently about 25 organized teams are located throughout the country.

NWSA Commissioner Jon Speake has been involved with wheelchair softball since 1984. He says the biggest difference between this and other wheelchair sports is that softball players can come up out of their chairs to play balls. Otherwise the game is played as closely as possible to the able-bodied version.

Many people have played softball or baseball at some time in their lives. According to Speake, the sport is recruiting many newly injured individuals already familiar with the able-bodied game. The problem in forming teams is that softball requires more players (ten, plus replacements) than basketball, for example. For

this reason, two or three basketball teams often combine to play softball.

The aspect of trained umpires also presents a problem. Individuals who will officiate are usually not familiar with wheelchair softball. NWSA is developing a national pool of officials.

Although most current teams are in the central U.S. (probably because this area is where the sport began), NWSA plans to begin adult programs on the East and West Coasts. A Youth Division is also on the drawing board. Another project that may be completed by spring 1996 is production of a video that will teach the rules of play and explain how to form teams.

For information about establishing teams or playing the game, contact the National Wheelchair Softball Association, 1616 Todd Court, Hastings, MN 55033. (612) 437-1792.