

CITI FIELD

# Start Spreading





# ng the News

by Bruce Froendt  
photos by Mark Cowan

In the shadows (and on the parking lot) of the majestic \$800-million Citi Field, New York City played host to the annual softball championships.

**T**he 34th annual National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST), sponsored by the Wheelchair Sports Federation, New York Mets, NY City Parks & Recreation, and Major League Baseball, arrived in New York—and the East Coast—for the first time in the 34-year existence of the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA).

With Citi Field—home of the New York Mets—as the backdrop and under La Guardia airport’s main landing pattern, the NWST used the home-plate monument imbedded in the parking lot from the 40-year-old Shea Stadium as home

plate for the NWST’s championship field. Darryl Strawberry, Dwight Gooden, Tom Seaver, Nolan Ryan, and other famous Mets made baseball history in the same location from which the 34th NWST champion would be decided.

Four new teams took their clue from Frank Sinatra’s song “New York, New York” and decided they wanted to be a part of it by attending their first national tournament—North Carolina Tar Wheels (Charlotte, N.C.), Nassau Aviators (Long Island, N.Y.), Shepherd Sluggers (Atlanta), and New York Yankees. They joined the three-time defending champion Nebraska Barons and nine other contenders

in this annual double-elimination tournament, knowing if they could make it there, they’d make it anywhere as champions of wheelchair softball.

### Day 1

The opening two rounds of action featured all the higher-seeded teams winning, with the exception of the fourth seeded WPVA Warhawks (Wisconsin). In the opening round, the North Carolina Tar Wheels, led by all-star and former Nebraska Baron Pat Driver’s six RBI performance, crushed the Warhawks, 14–2, to advance to round two.

In the second round, after defeating the

Nassau Aviators, 15–1, the third seeded Courage Rolling Twins (Minneapolis) were challenged by the sixth seeded Tampa Bay Rays, who had advanced by defeating the New York Yankees, 18–0. With the game tied at seven after five innings, the Twins scored four runs on five hits, highlighted by Jeff Gustafson’s two-RBI double, to win the game, 11–7. The other top seeds—Nebraska Barons, RIC Cubs (Chicago), and Midwest Flyers (Chicago)—all advanced to the quarterfinal round with little trouble.

In the first quarterfinal game, the second seeded Cubs, who earlier beat the Rolling Red Sox, 16–3, jumped to a 7–0 lead over the Twins, only to see the Twins score six runs in the fifth inning to close the gap to 8–7.



In semifinal action, Scott Berg of the Midwest Flyers is called safe at first. Despite a valiant comeback effort, the Flyers lost to eventual champions Nebraska.

The Cubs went on to outscore the Twins, 8–1, over the last two innings to advance, 16–8. Curtis Lease’s five-hit, five-RBI, five-run performance led the Cubs’ attack. Jeff Gustafson, who was named to the NWSA Hall of Fame this year, and Kurt Greniger each had three hits for the Twins.

Day one’s other quarterfinal game featured the top seeded Barons—who had defeated a pesky New York Mets team, 21–6—against the Midwest Flyers. Nebraska jumped to a 7–2 lead over the Flyers after two innings. The Flyers made it to this game by defeating the Shepherd Sluggers, 18–2, and the Tar Wheels, 12–0, in earlier action. After the Flyers

scored three runs in the sixth to close the gap, the Barons responded with two to take a 9–5 lead going into the seventh. The Flyers shocked the confident defending champions for six runs in the top of the seventh to take an 11–9 lead. Former White Sox player Jimmy Jackson’s two-out, bases-loaded line drive to the center field fence for a grand slam home run was the fatal blow. Scott Berg led the Flyers with three hits and three RBIs.

The Flyers’ victory sent a shock wave through the tournament participants, but the win was not unexpected for coach Keith Wallace. He had complemented his home-grown talent with former stars from the VPVA White Sox and RIC Cubs and picked up perennial all-star players from the recently disbanded St. Paul Saints—Scott Berg, Manny Guerra, and Evan Thorn. By beating the Barons, the Flyers advanced to face the Cubs in day two’s semifinal matchup.



Jeff Hayne (right, Courage Rolling Twins) crashes into James Gorch (Columbus Pioneers).

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In the losers’ bracket, the Columbus Pioneers recovered with vengeance from their opening-round loss to the Red Sox to defeat the Yankees, 28–1; the Mets, 13–0; and the Tar Wheels, 13–0, to continue playing in the championship

bracket (DI) on day two. Similarly, the Tampa Bay Rays blasted the Sluggers, 21–1, and Red Sox, 8–1, to stay in Division I for the first time in Rays’ history, and continue in the battle for the championship.

The Red Sox, Warhawks, Tar Wheels, Mets, Minnesota PVA Flame Throwers, Nassau Aviators, Sluggers, and Yankees headed for a new double-elimination consolation division (DII) by virtue of having two losses on opening day.

## Day 2

The Cubs and Flyers were undefeated and hungry for the easy path to a championship. With a win, one of them would

be done for the day, get some needed rest, and need only one victory on day three to win the coveted championship trophy.

The Cubs quickly showed why teamwork in wheelchair softball is more valuable than a collection of “vagabond” all-stars when trying to win a championship. The Cubs scored two in the first and added four in the third on five consecutive hits, highlighted by Kurt Smith’s two-RBI double, to take an early 6–0 lead. The Flyers immediately closed the gap (6–5) in the fifth with five runs on four hits and two walks. The Cubs scored four runs in the sixth and two more in the seventh to win, 12–5. Smith’s six RBIs on two doubles and Dino Ramirez’s three singles led the Cubs’ attack and for the second year in a row placed them as the sole undefeated team heading into championship Saturday. For the Flyers, it meant dropping to the losers’ bracket with a chance to face the Cubs again.

On the losers' side of the championship (DI) bracket, the Twins took a 10–0 lead over the Columbus Pioneers and went on to win, 10–4. The Barons exercised some frustration from day one and thumped the Rays, 18–1, powered by Paul Krabbenhoft's three-hit and four-RBI performance and home runs by Brent Rasmussen and Matt Johnson.

The Barons next met the Twins in an elimination game, with the winner advancing to play the Flyers later in the day. The Barons jumped to an early first-inning lead and held on to win, 4–3.

The Twins finished fourth for the second consecutive year but gained a moral victory. Just before the tournament began, the Courage Rolling Twins won a \$200,000 Pepsi Challenge Grant contest to help build the first dedicated wheelchair softball field in the home of the sport—Minneapolis.

The Flyers/Barons rematch went much like the first game, with the Barons racing to a 7–1 lead after four innings. A stifling effort by the Barons' pitching and defense continued and stopped a comeback effort by the Flyers. The Barons cemented the victory with three additional runs in the seventh to win and advance to the championship game(s) against the Cubs.

In the fifth-place game between the Pioneers and Rays, the Pioneers jumped to a 9–2 lead with 12 hits and 3 walks as 20 batters came to the plate in the first two innings. Rick Swauger's 5 for 5 at the plate, Charlie Coon's 4 for 4 performance, and Brian Funderberg's 5 RBIs on 4 hits led the Pioneers to fifth place in an easy defeat of the Rays, 17–6. Jack Roudabush led the Rays with 3 RBIs on 3 hits.

## Championship Saturday

For the second consecutive year and third time in the past six years, the undefeated Cubs needed just one victory to win their third championship title. The Cubs defeated the Barons from this position for the 2005 title, but this year, in a similar situation in 2009, the Cubs were



Angelo Cruz (Chicago) is up to bat against the Nebraska Barons in the Division I championship game.

outscored, 25–8, in the two championship games to lose to the Barons.

For the Barons, it was the fourth consecutive year they lost a game in the first two days of this double-elimination tournament and needed two back-to-back victories against the tournament's undefeated team to win the championship. The St. Paul Saints (2007), Courage Rolling Twins (2008), and RIC Cubs (2009) were undefeated and lost the final two

games to the Barons. The Barons were going for title number six, which would tie them for second place with the Minnesota Courage Rolling Gophers from the '70s and '80s for total championships in NWSA history. Even then, both teams would still be far behind the 14 titles won by the St. Paul Rolling Thunder of the '80s/'90s.

In the first championship game, defense and pitching controlled the action of an otherwise offense-oriented sport. The Cubs could muster only one base runner in the first four innings of their championship quest. The Barons were only marginally more effective as they were caught in three double plays in the first four innings. But they did manage to score a single run in the third inning when Greg Suing's single was followed by an RBI double from Rasmussen. The Cubs knotted the game at 1–1 in the fifth when Smith, who was elected to NWSA's Hall of Fame, scored on a Juan Ortiz RBI fielder's choice out.

In the sixth, the Cubs managed two singles but were again held scoreless by the Barons' defense. Nebraska's offense was a different story. After one out and consecutive "intentional" walks to Rasmussen and Johnson, Zac Niemann's single to left field scored Rasmussen

for the go-ahead run. After another intentional walk loaded the bases, Krabbenhoft plated Johnson on a fielder's choice hit to left field. With two outs and runners on first and third, all-tournament team shortstop Doug Bargman hit a two-RBI line-drive double to center field to secure a 5–1 win for the Barons.

In the winner-take-all final championship game, the Barons batted first and opened the game with the bases loaded

## Déjà Vu in the Windy City

by Bruce Froendt

The Fourth Annual Junior National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) took place in Chicago, August 6–7. The Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago and the Chicago Park District hosted the 2010 event for six teams, including the two-time defending champion Junior Nebraska Barons (Omaha), Windy City Warriors (Chicago), Junior Courage Rolling Twins (Minneapolis), Junior Chicago Cubs (Chicago), and two new entrants—the Junior Midwest Flyers (Chicago) and the Bennett Blazers (Baltimore).

The 2010 tournament was designed to guarantee four games through a first day pool-play format and second day playoff. After opening day, the undefeated Barons and Warriors took 2–0 records and first-round byes as the top seeds, while the Twins and Blazers opened the final-day elimination games along with the Cubs and Flyers.

The Blazers and Twins contest was a battle of strategy from the start. This was a close-matched game where the newly developed Blazers



**At the Fourth Annual Junior National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) in Chicago, Nebraska won the title for the third consecutive year.**



found their groove with the strong play of Ryan Neiswender, and edged out the Twins. In the other elimination game, the Flyers used strong hitting and fielding to defeat the Cubs. Twaun Crain and Deandra Seawood demonstrated excellent play for the Cubs.

In the second round the Barons met the Blazers, and the Warriors were matched up against the Fly-

ers; winners would advance to the championship game. The Barons made quick work of the Blazers, as the experienced Barons showed off their stellar defense behind Dylan Fischbach and strong hitting by brothers Jon and Josh Maier. The Warriors and Flyers added drama to the tournament as there were close calls, crashing plays at the plate, and great competition by both teams. But the experience of the 2007 national champion Warriors and the play of Kyle Gribble and Erik Todd were enough for a two-run victory by the Warriors.

In each of the previous three national championship tournaments, the Junior Nebraska Barons and the Windy City Warriors met in the title game. The Barons held a 2–1 lead, but the Warriors were eager to exact revenge for last year's 6–1 loss.

The Barons won each of their three preceding games in the tournament by ten or more runs, and they began the title game like they wanted to extend that streak. Nebraska sent ten batters to the plate in the first inning, scoring six runs on seven hits. The Barons added two in the second, while the Warriors were held scoreless and had only one base runner reach first during the first two innings.

In the third inning after two quick outs, Kyle Yeager and Toni Fachman reached base on singles. Jon Maier, who batted 833% for the tournament, drove in Yeager with a single. Tournament MVP Josh Maier, who hit 917%, proceeded to crush his second home run of the championship game and fifth of the tournament over the left field fence to drive in two runs and finish the scoring for the Barons. The Warriors could not muster a base runner the final two innings, and the game ended, 12–0, after four innings. Nebraska was national champions for the third consecutive year.

The National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) is looking for new teams to compete in the Junior Division and attend the 2011 championships, to be held in Omaha. Go to the NWSA's website ([www.wheelchairsoftball.org](http://www.wheelchairsoftball.org)) and learn how easy it is to start your team and join in the fun next year.

after a Suing single and intentional walks to Rasmussen and Johnson. The Barons followed with three consecutive singles by Niemann, Digilio, and Krabbenhoft to take a 3-0 lead. The Cubs answered for one in the bottom of the inning on a Moran single and Angelo Cruz double.

In the third inning after another walk to Rasmussen, 2010 MVP Johnson blasted a 1-0 Alex Parra pitch deep over the right centerfield fence for a two-RBI home run and a 5-1 Barons lead. This was Johnson's third home run in four championship games against the Cubs over the past two years.

Johnson, after being diagnosed with cancer at age 16, had his lower leg am-



The Nassau Aviators attend the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament for the first time. Dan Wallace pitches against the Wisconsin Warhawks.

hit .723 and tied for hitting the most home runs (15) in NWST games.

In the seventh inning, the Barons, leading 6-3, again loaded the bases with one out and singles by Rasmussen and Niemann and another walk to Johnson. Digilio's sacrifice plated Rasmussen, and after an in-

putated. He playing football and baseball in high school while using a prosthesis, and was drafted by the Philadelphia Phillies in the 2004 Major League Baseball draft. He has won eight All-Tournament wheelchair softball awards. Since his rookie season in 2004, Johnson has

tentional walk to Krabbenhoft to load the bases again in the inning, Doug Bargman's hit glanced off Parra's chair and scored Johnson. On the play, the Cubs caught Niemann in a rundown between third and home to potentially end the rally. Niemann scored the Barons' ninth and final

run when Niemann collided with Cubs outfielder Curtis Lease, who was called for interference.

The Cubs' grit, determination, and never-say-die attitude helped start the final inning with base hits by Parra and Dan Palmer. After a ground out, the Cubs' hopes for a comeback and third championship were dashed when Parra was caught leading too far off third base on a sensational pick-off throw by Baron pitcher John Morse and tag by third baseman Lance Perez.

With the final Cubs ground out, the Barons had won their fourth consecutive national championship and sixth in eight years. Seven Barons players were named to the all-tournament team, and the squad was once again singing, "We are the top of



Greg Suing (Nebraska, right) makes the catch at first to get RIC's Dino Ramirez out. Nebraska took its fourth consecutive national championship and sixth in eight years.

the list; king of the hill; A number one!”

## Consolation Division (DII)

The eight teams that lost twice on the first day of action were given new life in a double-elimination consolation division on day two. The Red Sox, Warhawks, Tar Wheels, Mets, Flamethrowers, Aviators, Sluggers, and Yankees found the competition much more even in this fight to win the consolation division and claim seventh place overall.

Opening-round games saw the Warhawks edge the Mets, 4-3; the Red Sox blast the Yankees, 15-5; the Flamethrowers clip the Aviators, 9-4; and the Tar Wheels beat the Sluggers, 7-1. In round two the Red Sox easily rolled past the Warhawks, 10-3, and the Tar Wheels came from behind and scored five runs in the fifth inning to beat the Flamethrowers, 9-6. The Red Sox and newbie Tar Wheels advanced to the semifinals with their victories, while all others faced elimination with another loss.

In the semifinal game, the Red Sox opened with four runs on six singles, but the Tar Wheels stayed close (4-2) on a Jimmy Bruce two-RBI double. The Sox went on to outscore the Tar Wheels in the next four innings to win, 12-5. The Sox were well positioned with a 3-0 record and needed only a single win in the championship game(s) to better their second-place finish the past two years in DII action.

On the losing side, the Mets crushed the Yankees, 16-1, as the Yankees were



Tampa Bay's Rick Hart (right) throws to first after forcing out Joe Mendez of the New York Mets.

ousted from the tournament with a 0-4 record. Similarly, two new teams battled to a 7-6 finish, as the Aviators eliminated the Sluggers in extra innings. The Mets defeated the Flamethrowers, 11-0, and the Warhawks beat the Aviators, 11-1, both by the slaughter rule.

The Mets and Warhawks were tied at 4 after nine innings in their elimination game. Eddie Jorge scored in the tenth for the Mets, but the Warhawks' Nate Hinze drove in two runs on a bases-loaded single to win the game, 6-5. The Warhawks rode that momentum into the next game to defeat the Tar Wheels, 8-4, to advance to the title game(s) against the undefeated Red Sox.

In the championship game, in the top of the first the Red Sox made a strong claim for the title by sending ten batters to the plate en route to seven runs on six hits. Mac Williams led the effort with a

two-RBI triple. A seemingly tired Warhawks team showed little energy, focus, or effort as they sent four batters to the plate each inning but didn't advance a runner past second base.

The Red Sox left no doubt, as they added two runs in each of the third and fourth innings to capture their first consolation division title, 11-0, and best NWST finish (seventh) since 2006. Joe Lamar and Ron Gendron led Sox hitters with 3-3 hitting performances. **S'NS**



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