

HIGH



Boston Red Sox players Bill Hill (left) and Mac Williams reach for the ball in their championship game loss to the Midwest Cicero Flyers.

& MIGHTY

by Mike Wheaton

photos by
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Softball teams were hotter than the Midwest's summer weather, as they took to the diamonds to see who was top dog.

The 2007 defending national champion Nebraska Barons played host to the 2008 National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) on August 7–9 at the Mid-America Center in Council Bluffs, Iowa. It was the second time in five years the national championship took place in this river town rich in gaming and pio-

neering history, and just like last year the Barons had to double-down after an initial loss to a Minnesota powerhouse.

Gas prices, the economy, and a Paralympic scheduling conflict played havoc with the number of teams vying for this year's title, but out of the 12 ready to compete, the Courage Rolling Twins proved to be the ones to beat after going unde-

feated through the first two days of the tournament. By topping a much-improved New York Mets team, 17–2, the Twins found the momentum they needed to beat their interstate rivals St. Paul Saints in the third round.

In a defensive showdown, the Twins and Saints went scoreless through the top of four innings until Twins leftfielder Jeff



Will Smith (Midwest Cicero Flyers) stretches for a line drive during a game against the New York Mets. The Flyers defeated the Boston Red Sox for the DII championship title.



Keeping his eye on the ball, Evan Thorn (St. Paul Saints) prepares to nab it in front of teammate Scott Berg.

Gustafson hit a leadoff double in the bottom of the fourth, placing him in scoring position. Shortstop Wyatt Halverson advanced Gustafson with an RBI single, giving the Twins a one-run advantage. The Saints answered in the top of the sixth when shortfielder Scott Berg hit an RBI single to bring leftfielder Evan Thorn across the plate. In the bottom of the sixth, Gustafson hit a leadoff double, and Halverson brought him in with another RBI single that gave the Twins the go-ahead run.

Saints pitcher Jerry Anderson led off the seventh inning with a single and scored when centerfielder Bob Willheum reached first on a fielder's choice. Shortstop Brendan Downs's hit and RBI put the Saints up, 3-2, going into the bottom of the seventh. Twins first baseman Mike Laven walked and reached home on Kurt Greniger's RBI single. Third baseman Ryan (Sunshine) Anthony scored off Halverson's single for the game-winning run to beat the Saints, 4-3. It was the first time in the Twins' 12-year history they beat the Saints in national tournament competition.

Although plagued by injury and attrition, the Saints are always a formidable opponent. The loss positioned the Twins

Nebraska Barons pitcher John Morse sends the ball toward the plate. The Barons beat the Twins for the championship.

to play the defending national champions Barons with added confidence.

The late Friday afternoon game between



the two remaining undefeated teams, the Twins and Barons, was much different than the prior low-run contest the Twins enjoyed against the Saints. The Barons arrived at this game by narrowly beating the talented Columbus Pioneers, 6-4. The visiting Twins sent an early message to the Barons when Halverson hit one over the fence for a two-RBI home run in the top of the first. The Barons quickly answered, scoring two off rightfielder Mark Digilio's single. Halverson sent another message in the top of the third with a leadoff over-the-fence home run. He was intentionally walked the remainder of the game.

The Twins put up ten runs in the second through fifth innings, but the Barons' bats came to life in the fifth, scoring back-to-back over-the-fence home runs from leftfielder Brent Rasmussen and centerfielder Matt Johnson. The Barons brought

the score to within three in the bottom of the sixth, but the Twins owned the seventh, as they used nine of their ten-man lineup for five runs. In this slugfest, the Twins beat the Barons, 17-10. The win sent the Twins directly to the championship game and the Barons to Division I lower bracket.

Division I Lower Bracket

In a major upset, the eleventh-ranked New York Mets blanked their northeastern rival, sixth-ranked Rollin' Red Sox, 1-0, in the first round, forcing the Red Sox to the lower bracket. All eyes

Tampa Bay Rays' Josh Renner takes a mighty swing of the bat that counted for a single.

were on the Vaughan PVA White Sox versus Midwest Cicero Flyers game, however, as the cross-town (Chicago) matchup was one of contention for the embattled White Sox, who lost key players to the Flyers earlier in the season. The Flyers' two-dozen-man-plus roster was just too much for the White Sox, as the Flyers went on to win, 19-5. The "South Siders" had some satisfaction later that day when their northern rivals, the RIC Cubs, sent the Flyers to Division II after coming from a five-run deficit in the middle of the fifth to win, 10-9.

The White Sox beat the Mets, 12-5, then lost to the Pioneers, 16-11, in the third round of the lower bracket. The Cubs followed suit, losing to the Saints, 2-1, sending both remaining Chicago teams to face off for the fifth-place game. The Cubs made quick work of the White Sox with a 10-0 victory.

The Pioneers and the Saints met to see who would play the Barons for a chance at moving on to the championship game. In a back-and-forth matchup, the Saints were just too tough for the Pioneers, winning the 12-9 contest, thus giving the Pioneers a fourth-place finish. The Barons stunned the Saints by allowing only three runs the entire game and gained a huge momentum boost from Johnson's third-inning grand slam. The Barons won, 13-3, to advance to the championship game but would need to beat the Twins twice to take the title.

Division I Finals

The first of what was to be two games for the national title started with back-to-back doubles from the Twins' Halverson and Brian Chavez, which scored one quick run in the top of the first inning. The Barons followed suit with Rasmussen and shortfielder Pat Driver hitting doubles of their own to tie the score. The game was relatively quiet until Twins shortfielder Jake Karels led off with a triple in the top of the fourth and later scored on a sacri-

St. Paul base runner Brendan Downes (right) crashes into Twins second baseman Scott Rickford.



got six more in the fifth and sixth innings to take the first game, 12-9.

The second and final game featured the Barons as the visiting team. Barons first baseman Greg Suing led off with a single to right field and was quickly sent home by Rasmussen's over-the-fence home run, prompting Twins pitcher Charlie Clausen to intentionally walk the Barons' next batter, Johnson. He later scored on a sacrifice fly, giving the Barons a three-run lead going into the bottom of the first. The Twins put up two in the bottom of the inning, produced by three extra-base hits from Gustafson, Halverson, and Karels.

fice fly. The Barons came to life in the bottom of the fourth, scoring five runs. The Twins answered with five runs of their own in the top of the fifth, but the Barons

The motivated Twins shut out the Barons in the top of the second and went on to bat through their lineup in the bottom of the inning, starting with back-to-



back singles from Anthony and Clausen. Greniger brought them in with a triple, prompting Barons pitcher John Morse to intentionally walk Halverson. Greniger and Halverson scored off a two-RBI double from Chavez, who later came home on second baseman Scott Rickford's RBI single.

Suing led off the top of the third for the Barons with another hit to right field. He finished the game batting five for five with five runs and an extra-base hit. Clausen intentionally walked Rasmussen, who was later called out when he failed to tag up after Johnson hit a fly ball to Halverson for a double play. Suing later scored off Driver's RBI double, and Digilio brought in Driver with a double of his own, bringing the Barons within two runs.

The Twins rallied in the bottom of the third, batting nine of their ten-man lineup. Anthony led off with a double, and catcher Chad O'Fallon reached on a fielder's choice. Gustafson brought them in

with a double, and Halverson drew an intentional base-on-balls. Back-to-back singles from Chavez and Karels brought both runners in, putting four on the board to give the Twins an 11-5 advantage.

The Barons answered back in the top of the fourth, getting four runs off singles from shortstop Bruce Hromek and third baseman Lance Perez. Suing brought them in with a single, and Johnson got Suing and Rasmussen across the plate with a two-RBI single that moved the score within two.

The Barons shut down the Twins in the fourth, fifth, and sixth innings, while producing one in the fifth and four in the sixth to go ahead, 14-11. The Barons put up four more in the top of the seventh off doubles by Suing, Driver, and Digilio. The Twins managed to score twice in the bottom of the seventh, but with two on, it was not enough, as Chavez sent a line drive to Morse, who caught it for the final out in the Barons' 18-13 win for the 2008

Division I national title. It was the second time in as many years and the fourth in the past six years that the Barons won the national championship.

Consolation Bracket (Division II)

If teams lose two games on the tournament's first day, they go to the consolation bracket, which is Division II.

The Tampa Bay Rays and Red Sox made quick work of the Minnesota PVA Flamethrowers and Colorado Rollin' Rockies, respectively. The Rays then lost a close one to the Mets, 8-6, and the Red Sox rallied off centerfielder Mac Williams's leadoff triple in the first inning for an 18-8 win over the heavily favored Flyers. The Red Sox exacted revenge against the Mets, scoring six runs in the first and four in the second and third innings to win, 14-1, and advance to the Division II championship game.

The Flyers had to battle through Division II's lower bracket by first beating the Rockies, the Rays, and finally the Mets for a chance to advance. The Flyers outscored their three opponents, 35-9, easily flying on to face the Red Sox for the championship.

The Flyers needed to beat the Red Sox twice to take the Division II title. They took off in typical fashion, scoring the first run when Angelo Cruz crossed the plate off Dino Ramirez's double. The Red Sox quickly answered with three runs in the bottom of the first inning from four hits, including a triple by shortstop Bill Hill. The Flyers prevented the Red Sox from scoring again, and after a five-run third and a five-run sixth, the Flyers won, 13-3, to take the first game.

Both teams scored two in the first inning of the final game and were scoreless in the second. But the Flyers broke it wide open in the top of the third by batting through their lineup and producing eight hits, including six singles, a triple from Mike Krato, and an over-the-fence home run from Paul Smith. The Flyers got five additional runs and then another two in the top of the fourth. The Red Sox made a gallant effort in the bottom of the sixth, scoring three to bring the game within four. However, the Flyers put up five more runs in the top of the seventh off two intentional walks and four hits,



During the Junior Division championship of the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament, Joshua Maier (left, Junior Nebraska Barons) throws to first after forcing out Eric Todd (Windy City Warriors). This division includes five active teams.

Honors/Awards

Jerry Anderson, a 20-plus-year veteran of the game, was inducted into the NWSA Hall of Fame during the 2008 NWST closing ceremonies. Anderson revolutionized the sport by proving class ones can become power hitters. He holds three all-tournament team selections for best DI pitcher. His off-field contributions to the sport equal his on-field performance, as he is credited with helping host the 2002, 2003, and 2007 national tournaments. Anderson and his family received the George Kiefner Jr. Volunteer Award in 2007.

Greg Suing became the first Nebraskan inducted into the NWSA Hall of Fame. As a 20-year veteran of the sport, Suing tallied a half dozen all-tournament team selections, including two MVP awards and a best-hitter award in 2001 with a .913 batting average. His leadership and lead-off hitting capability helped the Barons to four national championship titles in the past six years.

NWSA President **Bruce Froendt** received the George Kiefner Jr. Volunteer Award for his contributions to the organization. Under Froendt's direction, the NWSA became an allied member of the Amateur Softball Association of America (ASA) and helped foster the junior program nationally. Locally, Froendt provided oversight for the construction of the new AllPlay Park, the 2008 NWST, and helped facilitate the softball event at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, held in July in Omaha.

NWSA President Bruce Froendt receives the George Kiefner Jr. Volunteer Award for his contributions to the organization.



Jerry Anderson (right) and Greg Suing were inducted into the National Wheelchair Softball Association Hall of Fame during the 2008 NWST closing ceremonies.



including triples from Terry Boyd and Cruz. The Flyers took the Division II national title, 15-6.

Junior Division

The second Junior National Wheelchair Softball Tournament featured the defending national champion Windy City Warriors, the Junior Nebraska Barons, and the Junior Courage Rolling Twins. The heavily favored Warriors took down the Twins in an 11-8 slugfest, then blanked the Junior Barons, 2-0, to advance to the championship. The Barons beat the Twins in games three (2-0) and four (4-1) to move on to face the Warriors for the junior national title.

In the championship game, the Junior Barons came out slugging, putting up five

runs in the top of the first and scoring two in the second. It was a defensive matchup until the bottom of the sixth when the Warriors scored two. But it was not enough, and the Barons went on to take the second junior national championship, 7-2.

The Junior Division includes five active teams and is sponsored through a grant from CVS All Kids Can™, a program of the CVS Caremark Charitable Trust that is supported by CVS Pharmacy.

Wrapup

The 2008 NWST attracted more than 300 athletes from across the country. Presented by the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) and the Eastern Nebraska Wheelchair Athletic Association, the event was made possible

through a grant provided by the Paralyzed Veterans of America and other donors. The NWST featured commentary and coverage by xAble.com and was partially funded by Colours Wheelchairs. Several games from the tournament may be seen at www.xAble.com.

For more information about wheelchair softball, go to www.wheelchairsoftball.org.

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Mike Wheaton is National Wheelchair Softball Association commissioner.