



by Bruce Froendt
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Playing

As winners of six of the past eight national softball titles, the Barons needed to draw on all the experience, talent, ability, and luck they could to have a chance against a newfound Twins powerhouse.

For more than 60 years the College World Series has crowned its champion in Omaha, and this year the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) did the same. Twelve teams traveled to wheelchair softball's newest "Field of Dreams" located at ALLPLAY Complex in Omaha this past summer to compete in the 2011 championship tournament.

The \$1.5 million barrier-free sports and recreation complex, built by Ne-

braska Barons coach and NWSA Commissioner Bruce Froendt, includes the Barons' wheelchair softball field, a Miracle League baseball field, a playground, and a water park (among other features)—all especially designed for ease of use by people with disabilities.

The field is the latest of a growing number of dedicated wheelchair softball fields in the nation constructed over the last ten years. The first known one was built in 1996 in Pasadena, Tex. Since

then, ten additional fields have been constructed, with two more scheduled to open next year in Brooklyn Park (Minneapolis) and Wichita, Kan.

"At a cost in excess of \$300,000 each, these new fields will not only provide a safe place to practice and compete for our teams but they also serve as recognition and commitment by the communities that build these facilities as to the importance of wheelchair athletics," says Froendt.



Manny Guerra (Twins) goes to bat during the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament, held at the ALLPLAY Complex in Omaha.

HARDBALL

In NWSA championship play, teams begin in the double-elimination tournament in the championship division. Teams that have two losses in early rounds are eliminated from championship contention, but they find new life (and more games to play) in a double-elimination consolation division.

Day 1—Championship Division

Opening-round action saw the Columbus Reds, Tampa Bay Rays, and Center Coast Storm easily advance, but the seventh-seeded Red Sox were upset by the tenth-seeded MPVA Flamethrowers, 16-3.

Over the past year the Rolling Red Sox had fallen victim to several unfortunate situations including the death of former all-tournament player Mac Williams, the

absence of several long-time veterans, and a few new players. These challenges were too much for the Red Sox to overcome and they ultimately finished eleventh. A reinvigorated Flamethrowers team used former Twins player and hall of fame member Jeff Gustafson's two inside-the-park home runs and six RBIs to lead the team to an easy victory.

In round two, the top-seeded Barons, Cubs, and Twins advanced to the quarterfinals, powering by the opening-round victors with slaughter-rule shortened contests. The third-seeded Midwest Flyers did not share the same success in their opening game as the Tampa Bay Rays made an early statement to other higher seeded teams by posting a 7-4 upset victory over the Flyers. All-tourna-

ment pitcher Ron Richardson's three hits led the Rays' attack.

The eight teams with losses in the beginning two rounds began a battle in the bottom half of the double-elimination bracket for the right to keep their championship dreams alive. The Kansas City Diamond, New England Rolling Red Sox, and New York Yankees immediately suffered their second consecutive slaughter-rule loss in as many games and were relegated to the Consolation Division.

The Nashville Wheelcats stayed alive in the championship division's losers' bracket by getting their first national tournament win, defeating the eighth-seeded Center Coast Storm, 9-4. In the game, Nathine Woodward hit his team's first home run (inside the park) in national

tournament play, and Mike Sells had three RBIs on two hits. But their joy was fleeting because in their next game the experience of the fifth-seeded Columbus Reds and big hits of Charlie Coon and his six RBIs ended Nashville's champion di-

feated the Flamethrowers, 12-2, to advance to a familiar position in the quarterfinals. After holding the Cubs scoreless in the top of the first, Tampa's lead-off hitter, Rick Hart, knocked a relatively harmless fly ball to center field

The Cubs used a relentless 18-hit attack to attempt to battle back, but the Rays' timely defensive stops and effective small-ball offense kept the Cubs from ever taking the lead. With the bases loaded in the sixth and trailing 11-10, the

Cubs' final threat of the game was thwarted with a harmless fly ball to Mobley in right field for the third out. Tampa added one more run to win, 12-10, and continue its quest toward a national championship and a best-ever finish in the tournament.

Jack Roudabush, Ron Richardson, and Mobley each had three hits in an effective 12-hit attack that scored 12 runs for the Rays.

In the other quarterfinal match-up, the Courage Rolling Twins faced an all too familiar opponent in the four-time defending champion Nebraska Barons. But while the Barons may have been familiar to the

Twins, this year's Twins had a distinctively different look.

Gone were long-time starters Jeff Gustafson, Jeff Fischer, and Ryan "Sunshine" Anthony. This year's "new look" team included players from their former crosstown rivals and two-time champion St. Paul Saints. Saints hall of famers Scott Berg,

Manny Guerra, and Jerry Anderson, along with all-stars Evan Thorn and Brendan Downs and other Saints players, joined the Twins after the dissolution of the Saints last year. The merger



New York Yankee Nick Teodoro (left) heads to home as Center Coast Storm's Paul Stewart Jr. tries to make the catch.

vision play, 12-10. The victory kept the Reds in the Championship Division for second-day competition.

To finish the day and complete the final competitors for the Championship Division, the Flyers kept their hopes alive by extinguishing the Flamethrowers, 8-2.

Day 2

In the first quarterfinal match of the day, the Tampa Bay Rays faced the heavily favored RIC Cubs. The two-time champion Cubs ('02, '05) had earlier de-

feated the Flamethrowers, 12-2, to advance to a familiar position in the quarterfinals. After holding the Cubs scoreless in the top of the first, Tampa's lead-off hitter, Rick Hart, knocked a relatively harmless fly ball to center field

Twelve teams traveled to wheelchair softball's newest "Field of Dreams" to compete in the 2011 championship tournament.

leave the game for the hospital. Tampa used the momentum from two opening-round wins, Shelton Mobley's inside-the-park home run, and four other Ray hits to take an early 4-0 lead.

created a potent combination of experience, power, and speed and made the “new look” Twins a big threat to the tournament field.

The Barons jumped to an early two-run lead in the top of the first inning on 2011 co-MVP Brent Rasmussen’s towering home run, one of five he had during the tournament. After being held scoreless in the first, the Twins countered with seven runs over the next two innings to take a lead that would not be relinquished. With a 7-4 lead in the third, the Twins used a sacrifice bunt by all-tournament catcher Chad O’Fallon and a two-run double by Scott Berg to take a commanding 10-4 lead in the fourth. Rasmussen’s second home run of the game and a solo homer by Zac Niemann were too-little, too-late for the Barons, as the Twins held on to win, 11-8. Evan Thorn and Berg paced the Twins with two doubles and three RBIs each.

In the Championship Division’s semifinal match-up between the Twins and the Rays, the Twins again took immediate command of the game, scoring six runs in the second inning, led by 2011 co-MVP Downs’ triple. The Twins then added five runs in the fourth inning to easily rout the Rays. Tampa could only muster a single run in the fourth inning of this slaughter-shortened game to fall, 13-1. Every Twins starter

Nebraska’s Zac Niemann (right) and the Midwest Flyers’ Art Johnson collide at second base.



Curtis Lease fields a line drive in the RIC Cubs’ game against the Nebraska Barons.

The Twins now had the luxury of resting and waiting with the knowledge that someone would have to beat them twice to keep them from their first national title. The Rays joined the Barons, Flyers, Cubs, and Reds in a lower-bracket battle of this double-elimination tournament for the right to face the powerhouse Twins in the finals.

In the losers’ bracket, after a disappointing loss in the quarter-finals, the Barons crushed the Flyers, 13-1. The Barons used a fourth-inning grand slam by all-tournament short fielder Matt Johnson and home runs by all-tournament outfielders Rasmussen and Niemann. The Cubs similarly dispatched the Reds, 12-2, on Paul Moran’s

had at least one hit in an impressive 17-hit attack, and eight different Twins had at least one RBI.



four-hit performance and Curtis Lease's four RBIs.

The Reds would later go on to defeat the Flyers, 6-3, for a fifth-place finish. Joe Wittkamp and Terry Boyd's inside-the-park home runs in the first inning were the decisive hits for the Reds.

The Barons and Cubs next faced off for survival, with the Barons immediately taking control of the contest by scoring ten runs in the first two innings, led by Doug Bargman, to lead, 10-1. The proud Cubs battled back with 17 hits in the game but could only score six runs (11-6), as the Barons sent the Cubs home with a fourth-place finish.

In the final game of day, the Tampa Bay Rays and the Barons squared off for the right to continue play on Championship Saturday against the vaunted Twins. The Barons vaulted to a quick 4-0 lead in the first, then again used home runs by Niemann and Rasmussen to easily outdistance the Rays in six innings, 14-3.

While the final two games against the Twins and Barons were disappointing performances for Tampa, its third-place finish was the highest finish in the team's eight-year history.

Day 3—Championship Saturday

The undefeated Twins welcomed the six-time champion Barons for a battle for the 2011 crown. The Twins were confident after defeating the Barons earlier



Chad O'Fallon pushes fast and furiously for home in the Twins' game against the Tampa Bay Rays. The Twins took the championship title.

in the tournament when they displayed rare offensive firepower that resulted in 43 runs in 15 innings. The addition of the players with championships on their résumé also gave the Twins a needed confidence against the always dangerous Barons.

For the fifth year in a row, the Barons had a loss in the tournament and bat-

tled back through the losers' bracket to make it to the finals. And each year the Barons had beaten the undefeated team twice on Championship Saturday to claim the national title.

The Barons started the title tilt with a single run in the first. In the bottom half of the first, the Twins unleashed the offensive firepower that was all too familiar to this year's opponents, essentially ending the game as soon as it had started. Eight of the first nine batters reached base as the Twins scored six runs and took an early 6-1 lead. Over the next three innings, the Barons' typically heavy-hitting bats remained silent, while the Twins added runs in the next three consecutive innings to take an overwhelming 11-2 lead after four innings of play.

The Twins were in a similar position in 2008 against the Barons with an 11-4 lead in the fourth inning in the championship game. The Barons proceeded to score 13 unanswered runs to take the 2007 title. Would history be repeated?

All-tournament first baseman Guerra answered that question with four hits, including two doubles and a triple, and led the Twins in a relentless 19-hit attack that overwhelmed the hapless Barons. All-tournament-team players Brian Chevez and Downs added three hits apiece, as the Twins ended this championship tilt in the sixth inning, courtesy of the mercy rule, 13-3.

Bittersweet Victory

For Kurt Greniger, a founding member of the Twins team in 1991, making it to the championship game for the national title was bittersweet. A fierce competitor, he has always enjoyed the game of wheelchair softball and has played for more than 30 years. In that time he has been selected to the all-tournament team four times, been a part of four national championship teams (the Rolling Gophers in '84, '85, '86, and '88), and was inducted into the NWSA hall of fame in 2002. But this year Greniger played with a heavy heart with his attention di-

verted elsewhere. Only 30 days earlier he was notified that his oldest son, Lance Cpl. Robert Greniger, had lost his life while serving with the U.S. Marines in Afghanistan.

"I want to thank the NWSA, my teammates, and all my friends for the heartfelt support they have given to me and my family during this very difficult time in my life," said Greniger. "It was very difficult, but all of the support I received meant a lot to me and it was really a big help to be a part of this year's national tournament."

A celebration erupted that was 20 years in the waiting. The sense of relief, joy, and accomplishment seemed to be overwhelming for many of the Twins. This was especially true for Kurt Greniger, who was named to the all-tournament team as third baseman and selected for this year's sportsmanship award. Surrounded by his teammates and friends, he raised the championship trophy above his head so everyone could see and share in his joy.

Consolation Division

The Kansas City Diamond, New England Rolling Red Sox, Center Coast Storm, New York Yankees, Nashville Wheelcats, and MPVA Flamethrowers found new life in the Consolation Division's double-elimination bracket on the second day of tournament play. Starting over in this division gave teams a renewed vigor and hope for taking home a title.

In opening-round action, the Red Sox defeated the Diamond, 12-9, and the Yankees beat the Storm, 10-7, each winning their first game of the tournament. But joys of victory were short-lived for both as the Wheelcats and Flamethrowers took immediate control of the division after receiving first-round byes due to their championship-play.

The Wheelcats beat the Red Sox, 10-9, when, in their final at-bat, Jeff Lloyd singled and scored the game-winning run on a single by Mike Sells. The Flamethrowers won in a similar fashion on a home run by Donovan Hoffman in the seventh inning to defeat the Yankees, 11-10.

The Wheelcats and Flamethrowers were next scheduled to face off in the semifinals of the Consolation Division, with the winner advancing to the championship game with an undefeated record. The other four teams with one loss embarked on a last-

in the final two innings to win, 7-5, and advanced to the division finals.

The Flamethrowers were relegated to the lower half of the division, which saw the Yankees send home the winless Diamond, 17-5, and the Storm defeat the Red Sox, 17-7. The Center Coast

Storm then shut out the Yankees, 4-3, on Pat Driver's three RBIs. The Flamethrowers similarly dismissed the Storm from further play with an 8-0 whitewashing, led by two inside-the-park home runs by DII MVP Gustafson.

The Flamethrowers joined the Wheelcats in the Consolation Division championship tilt, needing two wins against their upstart opponent. In the championship game, Gustafson again led the Flamethrowers in the first inning with another three-run inside-the-park home run. The Flamethrowers looked to force a second championship game when they took a 5-3 lead into the bottom of the seventh inning. The Wheelcats' Nathan Woodard and Spencer Archie singled, bringing the winning run to the plate with one out. Jeff Lloyd then hit a rocket



Tampa Bay Rays' Jack Roudabush loses the ball on an infield fly.

chance journey in the bottom of the bracket that would hopefully match them against the victor in the division championship match-up.

In the semifinal game, the Wheelcats jumped on the Flamethrowers with four quick runs in the first inning. The Flamethrowers answered by defensively holding Nashville to one run over the next three innings while scoring five. Tied at five in the fifth, the Wheelcats scored the decisive runs on a two-run double by Lloyd with two outs. The Wheelcats held their opponent scoreless

that split the Flamethrowers' outfielders and hit the fence. An errant relay throw created the time Lloyd needed to round the bases. The three runs lifted the Nashville Wheelcats to the Consolation Division championship, 6-5, in their first national tournament appearance.

Junior Division

Eight junior teams convened in Omaha in early August for the fifth annual National Junior Wheelchair Softball championship tournament. This year's events featured Varsity and Junior

Varsity divisions at ALLPLAY Complex, which served as the perfect site for the 90+ players and families attending.

Teams played a round-robin tournament on the first day, which created seeding for a single-elimination event to determine the champions of each division on day two.

Teams competing in this year's championship tournament included the Jr. Nebraska Barons (Varsity and JV), Jr. Rolling Twins (Varsity and JV), Windy City Warriors (Varsity), Jr. Midwest Flyers (Varsity); Chicago Jr. Cubs (JV), and Bennett Blazers (JV).

Varsity

After the first day of competition, the three-time defending national champion Barons finished first in pool play (2-0), followed by the Warriors, Twins, and Flyers.

The Twins and Warriors opened championship play on day two with the Twins grabbing a 2-1 lead on Mark Braun's home run. The Warriors took a 5-2 lead in the fifth after scoring four runs on five consecutive hits, highlighted by Erik Todd's triple. The Twins answered by scoring two in the sixth and had a chance to tie the game when Anca Smith was on third with one out. But a solid Warriors defense stopped the rally and sent the Blazers to the championship game while relegating the Twins to the consolation game.

In the other semifinal, the Barons blanked the Flyers, 12-0. The Flyers mustered only one hit against a stiff Barons defense, while the Barons banged out 12



The Minnesota Courage Twins celebrate defeating the Nebraska Barons, 13-3, to win the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament championship title.

hits in the game. The Flyers would go on to finish third by defeating the Twins in the consolation game, 10-8. Joel Adams' three hits, including a home run, led the Flyers' attack.

The Barons and Warriors met for the championship for the fifth time in a row. The Warriors won the title in 2007, while the Barons took each one since.

In the third inning of the title game, with the score tied 1-1, the Barons used five consecutive singles and scored five runs to take a 6-1 lead. A stifling Barons defense held the Warriors to three hits as the Barons went on to win, 7-1. Josh Maier and Dylan Fischbach led the Barons with three hits each.

Junior Varsity

The top-seeded Bennett Blazers battled the Twins in the first semifinal game

to a 4-3 lead through four innings of play. After John Fagre scored a run for the Twins in the fifth to tie it, the Blazers scored three runs to win, 7-6, on doubles by Jasper Shrake and Jorge Medrano.

The Barons and Cubs waged an epic battle in the second semifinal game that was tied at 9 after five innings. After the Cubs were held scoreless in the sixth, Toni Fachman scored the winning run on Kennedy Feller's RBI single. The Barons won, 10-9, to advance to the JV championship game.

The Cubs went on to beat the Twins in the consolation game, 10-6. Stella McMillian led the Cubs with three hits.

In the JV championship game, the Barons and Blazers battled to a 3-3 tie after five innings. In the sixth the Barons scored four runs on KJ Russ' triple and singles by Alonte Davis and Kennedy Feller. The Blazers' Brandon McMillan scored a run in the bottom of the sixth, but with two baserunners on and the tying run at the plate, the Barons defense stiffened and ended the game.

The Barons won, 7-4, and were champions of the first Junior Varsity Division.

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Bruce Froendt is National Wheelchair Softball Association president and commissioner.