

by Larry Labiak  
photos by Curt Beamer



In the championship game, St. Paul Rolling Thunder's Paul Bester makes an error on a ground ball. Geno Shultz comes in to assist. **AT RIGHT:** Thunder pitcher Dick Crumb was named an MVP.



**T**he St. Paul Rolling Thunder has dominated National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST) competition not just over the past decade but throughout the last 20 years. The Thunder's consistency in being at or near the top since 1979—evidenced by 12 championships (8 in the past 9 years) and four second- and two third-place finishes—goes unchallenged.

The Courage Rolling Gophers and Chicago Pacemakers racked up a combined seven national titles in the 1980s, but neither has the Thunder's uncanny "big game" survivability. And so it goes with the 1999 edition of wheelchair softball's late-summer classic.

The 23rd annual national softball wars, co-hosted by the Greater Minnesota Wheelchair Athletic Association and Courage Rehabilitation Center, returned to the Twin Cities—Minneapolis—St. Paul—on August 19–21 after a three-year hiatus. For the Rolling Thunder, the

homecoming was reminiscent of its sixth in a string of national championships from 1991 through 1996.

### The March

With 14 teams in the national tournament's dual-bracketed double-elimination pairings, the Thunder and the St. Paul Saints drew byes in the first round. In round two, the Saints breezed past the Nebraska Barons, a young team comprised mostly of former junior wheelchair-basketball players with bright futures on the softball fields as well as the hardwoods. Ironically, the Barons, who would eventually finish eleventh, defeated the power-laden Baltimore Ravens MetroStars in their first game. The MetroStars would ultimately work their way back through the losers' bracket to claim a very respectable fourth place.

The Saints buzz-sawed the Minnesota Twins, the other third of the Twin Cities softball triad, in game two, a 15–0 rout. The

talented, rather enigmatic Twins are often world beaters but at other times lack the consistency needed to best the top teams.

The Thunder tuned up with a 15–2 shellacking of the Wisconsin Badgers, followed by a solid 7–2 effort over the Chicago RIC Cubs. Their second loss relegated Chicago to a disappointing fifth-place finish and set up a showdown between the tournament's only remaining undefeated teams—the Saints and Thunder.

### Up in Smoke

True to form, the Saints and Thunder came out swinging in the winners' bracket face-off, each tallying a three-spot in the first inning. Defense dominated through the middle innings; each team was held to three hits from the second through the fifth, and only one runner advanced as far as third base.

In the top of the sixth, the Thunder finally broke through with two runs for a 5–3 lead. The determined Saints immedi-

# THE UNDEFEATED

In the softball wars, the key to success against the St. Paul Rolling Thunder is relatively simple: Either beat them early on—or wait for them to retire.

ately answered with three in the bottom half for their first lead of the game, 6-5. Now the Saints needed only to hold off the bottom of the Thunder batting order in the seventh to advance to the finals.

But the Saints' best-ever chance to go one up on the Thunder and banish them to the losers' bracket went up in smoke, as the Thunder breathed new life and went on to win, 7-6. The down-but-not-out Saints went to a losers' bracket one-game playoff with the St. Louis Rams that would decide which team would face the Thunder for the championship.

The Rams versus Saints game was another back-and-forth, evenly matched affair that could have gone either way. But the Saints' defense came through to stave off a two-run fifth-inning rally that turned a 3-2 advantage into a 4-3 deficit. Their 1-2-3 hitters sealed the Rams' fate in the top of the sixth. Pete Stigman and Rick Cooper singled and were driven home by Junior Guerra's double to the gap in right center for a 5-4 lead the Saints would not relinquish.

"Our defense rebounded and held up well, particularly in the late innings," says Saints second baseman Dan Price.

The Rams had to settle for third place (for the sixth time this decade), while the Saints moved on to a finals rematch with the Thunder. In spite of their earlier heart-



Playing rough in Division II action, Toledo's Glen Ashlock collides with Nebraska's Jason Greer at second base. INSET: "I've got it!" Ashlock flips out of his chair while making a spectacular catch—and manages to hold onto the ball.

breaking loss, the Saints exhibited no sign of residual effects in their do-or-die second game against the Thunder. In fact, they displayed a lot of heart and plenty of determination in trouncing the Thunder, 10-2. The Saints outplayed them in the field, outmuscled them at the plate, and held their high-output offense in check for the duration.

## All the Marbles

To some extent, the Thunder's unmatched long-term success is based on (1) their abundance of experienced

players (average age is 39), many of them all-stars, who have played together for years and are still enjoying it, (2) consistently good coaching, and (3) the success that has shown them over the years how to be victorious again. Better than any other team, they are almost always able to put themselves in a position to win.

Unfortunately for the Saints, in the rubber match of this twenty-third national championship the Thunder jumped out to a 4-1 first-inning lead that grew to 7-2 by the end of the third. The Saints tallied a single run in the fourth and a pair in the

## 1999 National Wheelchair Softball Tournament

### FINAL STANDINGS

St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 St. Paul Saints  
 St. Louis Rolling Rams  
 Baltimore Ravens MetroStars  
 Chicago RIC Cubs  
 Minnesota Twins  
 Blake St. Bombers  
 Chicago Pacemakers  
 Toledo Silver Streaks  
 Columbus Pioneers  
 Nebraska Barons  
 Colorado Rockies  
 KC Diamond  
 Wisconsin Badgers



Umpire Wally Kiffmeyer is the National Wheelchair Softball Association Hall of Fame's newest member. The other inductee, Wisconsin Badger Don Schmidt, was not present.

### ALL-TOURNAMENT TEAMS

#### Championship Bracket

Catcher ..... Rory Fosness, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 Pitcher ..... Dick Crumb, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 First Base ..... Jim Langevin, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 Second Base ..... Dan Hall, St. Louis Rolling Rams  
 Shortstop ..... Scott Berg, St. Paul Saints  
 Third Base ..... Ron Maurer, St. Louis Rolling Rams  
 Left Field ..... Jeff Gustafson, Minnesota Twins  
 Rover ..... Dave Eckstrom, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 Center Field ..... Pete Stigman, St. Paul Saints  
 Right Field ..... Tim Thode, St. Paul Rolling Thunder  
 Best Quad ..... Claude Hall, Baltimore Ravens MetroStars  
 Rookie of the Year ..... Jeff Lewis, Baltimore Ravens MetroStars  
 Sportsmanship ..... Gustafson  
 MVP ..... Langevin, Lewis, Todd Anderson (St. Paul Rolling Thunder),  
 Eckstrom, Crumb, and Gustafson  
 Best Hitter ..... Mike Krato, St. Louis Rolling Rams (.731)

#### Division II Bracket

Catcher ..... Larry Labiak, Chicago Pacemakers;  
 Dennis Witcher, Toledo Silver Streaks  
 Pitcher ..... Kristi Albertson, Chicago Pacemakers  
 First Base ..... Greg Suing, Nebraska Barons  
 Second Base ..... Joe Wonn, Columbus Pioneers  
 Shortstop ..... Joe Wittkamp, Columbus Pioneers  
 Third Base ..... Bob Trotter, Chicago Pacemakers  
 Left Field ..... Darryl Johnson, Colorado Rockies  
 Rover ..... Darryl Waller, Toledo Silver Streaks  
 Center Field ..... Sherman Lightner, Toledo Silver Streaks  
 Right Field ..... Lee Newman, Kansas City Diamond; Corey Fairbanks,  
 Blake St. Bombers  
 Best Quad ..... Garrett Osborne, Blake St. Bombers  
 Rookie of the Year ..... Waller  
 Sportsmanship ..... Gus Franks, Toledo Silver Streaks;  
 Bob Baker, Kansas City Diamond  
 MVP ..... Waller  
 Best Hitter ..... Josh Bailey, Kansas City Diamond (.733)



By invitation, Puerto Rico's James Torres played on the Colorado Rockies team.



Pacemakers Larry Labiak, catcher, and Ed Brewer, pitcher, plan some strategy.

fifth but were never able to put that one big inning on the board. The Thunder added an insurance run in the bottom of the sixth and fought off the Saints' too-little, too-late, two-run rally in the seventh to claim a 9-7 victory and their eighth title in the past nine years.

It's gotta be more than luck. Probably smoke and mirrors, too.

Chicago Pacemakers catcher Larry Labiak works at the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People With Disabilities. A graduate of the University of Illinois, he earned a bachelor's degree in radio and television and a master's in advertising. A more detailed account of this tournament is at [www.pva.org/sns](http://www.pva.org/sns).

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