

LIONS, TIGERS, OH MY!

The howls and roars were not from the nearby zoo animals but from athletes and fans enjoying great softball competition.

The 2009 National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) staged its championship tournament in August at the Milwaukee County Zoo. The Wisconsin Paralyzed Veterans of America (WPVA) hosted the event.

Tournament director Al Neu and his able team of “zookeepers” and volunteers staged this championship event on the same site as the 2007 National Veterans Wheelchair Games. While cages and bars may have restrained the Milwaukee Zoo’s jungle animals, the NWSA’s Warhawks, Cubs, Rays, and other beasts freely roamed the tri-field competition site and exhibited incredible displays of speed, skill, strength, and athleticism for all who dared to watch.

In opening-round action of this three-day tournament, the higher seeds dominated as the Rollin Red Sox defeated the reorganized Kansas City Diamond, 16–6. The host WPVA Warhawks soared over the New York Yankees, 14–3, and the Tampa Bay Rays glided over the Minnesota PVA Flamethrowers, 15–1.



& BARONS



*by Bruce Froendt
photos by Mark Cowan*

John Morse (Nebraska Barons) tags out Brian Chavez (Courage Rolling Twins). The Twins were without power-hitting shortstop Wyatt Halvorson, who missed the tournament following an automobile accident and the recent death of his father.



Rolling safely into second base, Dave Lewis (Chicago Cubs, left) beats out the throw to Brendan Downes (St. Paul Saints).

In the only closely contested game of the first two rounds, the number-four seeded RIC Cubs almost stepped in a bear trap set by their crosstown rival, Midwest Flyers, who would have surely treasured the prize. The Flyers had defeated the RIC Cubs II, 20–2, in round one. In their second game against a team from RIC, the Flyers trailed by a single run, 6–5, in the fourth inning but had the bases loaded with two out. Power-hitting Paul Smith came to bat with a perfect five hits in five at-bats on the day, including a home run. But Cubs ace pitcher Alex Parra kept his team safe by striking out the heavy hitter on three pitches to end the threat. The Cubs offense, led by Kurt Smith’s four-hit and five-RBI performance, went on to score four more runs over the last few innings to secure the 10–5 win.

In the first quarterfinal match, the Courage Rolling Twins, fresh from their 8–1 win over the Warhawks in the second round, met the St. Paul Saints, who had defeated the Rollin Red Sox, 13–1, in round two. The Saints took the lead in

the third inning when Hall of Fame (HOF) member Manny Guerra doubled in two runs and scored on Joe Arends’ single. With a 6–5 lead, pitcher Jerry Anderson and the Saints young but able defense retired the Twins hitters in order the final four innings.

While the Saints won the game, 9–5, the Twins were left to wonder how their fate would have changed if their power-hitting shortstop, Wyatt Halvorson, had been with the team. An automobile accident and the recent death of his father kept the 2008 NWST all-tournament shortstop, and best hitter, at home.

The top-seeded Nebraska Barons used the momentum from their 14–4 win over the Rays to take a commanding 6–1 lead over the upset-minded Cubs in the first inning of their quarterfinal game. The confident Barons built a 9–6 lead after four innings, but after adding one run in the fifth the Cubs awoke with the ferocity that would send the Barons to an unpleasant place. In the sixth inning, after a double by Angelo Cruz and an intentional walk to Paul Moran, Curtis

Lease ripped a two-run double to right center and scored the game’s final run on a single by Dino Ramirez to give the Cubs a 10–9 lead.

The Cubs held on to win this fierce battle, banishing the two-time defending champion Barons to a familiar place—the bottom of the double-elimination bracket.

Day Two

The Saints and Cubs clashed in a battle for tournament supremacy while the Barons, Twins, Warhawks, and Flyers fought for simple survival. The Saints jumped to a 2–0 first-inning lead in their game against the Cubs, only to see the Cubs charge back with two runs on consecutive doubles by Jorge Alfaro and Parra in the second, and three runs in the third to take a 5–2 lead. The Saints countered with two in the fifth, but a routine Cubs double play ended the threat. The Saints could not mount a challenge over the final two innings, falling to the Cubs, 7–5. The victory vaulted the Cubs to the final day’s championship match, where they

During National Wheelchair Softball Tournament action, Joe Chambers (Warhawks) stretches for the ball in front of Midwest Flyer Eric Wilkins.



needed only one win for their third title, while the Saints were sent to battle for the right to a rematch.

The Warhawks almost ambushed the Barons to open day two in the bottom bracket of the elimination games. Using their championship college basketball skills of speed and talent, the Warhawks held the Barons to a 1-1 stranglehold after five innings. Long-time Saints player Dan Price led the youthful Wisconsin Warhawks as coach and player and had his team poised for a huge upset. But skill and experience are the keys to survival in the jungle as well as in wheelchair softball, and the Barons' power-hitting Brent Rasmussen used both in clubbing a home run in the sixth. This gave the Barons a narrow lead and ultimately the victory, 3-1.

Rasmussen is a 3-time NWST MVP, 12-time all-tournament selection, and ar-

guably the most feared hitter in the history of wheelchair softball.

He began playing wheelchair softball in 2003 after his injury during a Good

Samaritan act. A former college baseball star and minor league pitcher for the Kansas City Royals, Rasmussen was injured in 2002 while attempting to help a

motorist who had slid off a slick Nebraska interstate. On his way back to his vehicle to get assistance, a second vehicle hit him and slammed him into the first car, severing his foot and crushing the ankle on his other leg. He is currently U.S. Paralympics sitting volleyball team captain, an athlete ambassador for The Hartford, a motivational speaker, and president of a successful mortgage banking business in Omaha.

The Warhawks went on to a surprising fifth-place finish by defeating the Midwest Flyers, 16-8. Warhawks all-tournament rookie Nate Hintz had a four-RBI performance on two doubles and a triple.



Jon Rydberg (left, Courage Rolling Twins) touches second base before Paul Krabbenhoft (Nebraska) can make the tag. In a high-scoring game, the Barons once again proved to be the Twins' nemesis.

The Twins survived to meet the Barons by defeating the Flyers, 8–7. Down to their last out with no runners on, the Twins loaded the bases using two walks and won the game on a Jake Karels RBI roll-off single. Jeff Gustafson, who ultimately captured the best-hitter title with an .843 batting average, led the Twins with three hits.

Next for the Twins was their nemesis, the Barons, who for the third consecutive year eliminated them, 16–12. The difference in this year's high-scoring game was the Barons' six-run, sixth inning powered by RBI doubles from Matt Johnson and Doug Bargman. All-tournament players Greg Suing and Pat Driver led the Barons with four hits each. The Barons advanced to slaughter the Saints, 15–2, in four innings to advance to the title game rematch against the undefeated RIC Cubs.

Day 3

Only the RIC Cubs and Nebraska Barons were left in the hunt for the national championship title. Combined, they had won six of the past seven national tournaments. The rested Cubs were relaxed, happy, and rightfully proud of their position and had confidence from having beaten the Barons earlier in the tournament. Ironically, the Cubs won their 2005 national title in Columbus, Ohio, beating the Barons from the same position.

Prior to the game, Alfaro, 2009 NWSA HOF inductee, said, with his trademark smile, "We want this championship. But I really want to beat the defending champions to win it!"

Alfaro, a 20-year softball veteran, was injured at age 11 when, as an innocent bystander, he was hit by a stray bullet. He also competes in wheelchair basketball and football and coaches RIC's quad rugby team. He participates in and pro-



In the championship game, Kurt Smith (RIC Cubs) takes a mighty swing. The Cubs looked good but ultimately lost to Nebraska.

motes kayaking and other recreational sports. Alfaro credits adaptive sports and recreation for making him the successful and positive role model he is today, and believes athletics and physical activity are an important way for people with disabilities to find happiness and fulfillment in an often challenging lifestyle.

Fighting Back

The Barons, who needed two wins over the undefeated Cubs to continue building their dynasty, had a quiet confidence that came from the fact that in each of their two most recent championships they had battled back through the bottom of the double-elimination bracket to win. In 2007, the St. Paul Saints were the Barons' victim, and the Courage Rolling Twins fell to the same fate last year.

"It's stressful to come back through the lower bracket when one loss means you're done, and the Cubs are playing really well right now, so it is going to be difficult. We will just have to give them all we have. Let the best team win—twice," said Barons' tournament MVP Mark Digilio, with a sly smile before the game.

Early on it appeared to be a tough battle, with each team scoring two in the first. The Cubs looked to take the upper hand in the third, scoring two runs on a Ramirez double with only one out. After an intentional walk to Kurt Smith, Barons pitcher John Morse enticed Alfaro to hit into an inning-ending double play to end the threat. It was the second of three Bargman-to-Hromek-to-Suing double plays in the game that would kill the Cubs' momentum and fuel the Barons' fire.

Smelling blood, the Barons immediately pounced on the Cubs by scoring six runs on the strength of Digilio's bases-loaded three-RBI double and Lance Perez's two-RBI double to take an 8–4 lead. The Cubs quickly responded with a one-out double by Juan Ortiz to begin the fourth, but pinch runner Hector Perez was thrown out while leading off second base to snuff the rally. The Barons' all-tournament center fielder, Driver, who had moved to catcher in a defensive switch, made the sensational pickoff.

In the Barons fourth, after a Suing single and another intentional walk to Rasmussen (his twelfth intentional walk in 12 plate appearances against the Cubs), Matt Johnson ended any hopes the Cubs may have had with a towering three-run home run to right center field. The Barons added one more

Juniors Strut Their Stuff

For the third year the National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) held a Junior National Championship Tournament, with five teams competing simultaneously with the adult event. The largest field ever included the Nebraska Junior Barons, Minnesota Junior Twins, RIC Junior Cubs, Windy City Warriors, and Wisconsin-K.C. Junior Warhawks.

NWSA organized the junior division to give youths the opportunity to play competitive softball in the summer. Athletes are eligible until they graduate from high school. Juniors play under many of the same rules as the adults, but they do so on a slightly smaller field with a smaller ball in June and July, with the national tournament slated for early August. While many of the junior softball athletes also participate in basketball in the winter, approximately 25% of this year's tournament athletes were not basketball players, and approximately 25% were female.

While the tournament had been scheduled as a pool-play competition over a day and a half, rain changed the format and forced the athletes to four games in one day to determine the 2009 championship. While steady showers started to fall early in the afternoon, it did not dampen the spirits, competitive desires, or incredible skills of the juniors.

The 2007 national champion Windy City Warriors opened with an 8-5 victory over the always tough Twins, while the defending champion Barons won, 13-0, over the host Warhawks. In the games that followed, the Cubs and Twins played to a 4-4 tie, and the Warriors showed their traditional dominance by beating the Warhawks, 7-4.

After lunch, the Barons stayed undefeated by beating the Twins, 5-0. In this game, Baron Joshua Maier hit two home runs over the 125-foot fence, the first out-of-the-park home runs ever in NWSA's junior division history. In the other game, the Warriors remained perfect by defeating the Cubs, 6-2.

Rain and a deteriorating-weather forecast forced cancellation of remaining pool-play games, and the championship and consolation games took place in less than ideal weather.

The Barons' and Warriors' undefeated records determined they would face off for the title. In the consolation game, the Twins narrowly defeated the Cubs, 4-3, to capture third place.

This was the third consecutive year the Barons and Warriors battled for the title. With the Warriors champions in

2007 and the Barons in 2008, this game would establish who could claim the title of best junior wheelchair softball team. Both entered the game respectful of their opponent, but each was also confident of their ability to take home the championship.

The championship game began with the efficient Warrior offense scoring a run when Jamas Hare singled and was driven home on Nathan Rymsza's RBI single. The Barons immediately countered with two runs in the bottom of the first when tournament MVP Joshua Maier singled and then scored on his brother Jon's RBI single. Jon also scored with aggressive base running on Micah Dotzler's hit, giving the Barons a 2-1 lead. After the Warriors were held scoreless



Although the Nebraska Barons won the junior division title, they first had to get by the RIC Cubs. Five teams competed for the championship.

in the second, the Barons' KJ Russ and Sam Dittus opened the inning with base hits. Catcher James McCormick's RBI single drove in Russ, and Dylan Fischbach's single plated Dittus to give the Barons a commanding 4-1 lead.

The Warriors tried to answer in the third with hits by Kyle Gribble and Jonathan Ruiz, but a stifling Barons defense proved too much for the Warriors. Strong throws and smart plays allowed the Barons defense to let only one Warrior runner past first base over the last four innings. Jon Maier and Jerome Meyer added two final runs in the fifth as the Barons won the game, 6-1.

in the fourth and two in the fifth to end the game early at 14-4 and set up a winner-take-all championship game.

The final game was over early as the seemingly depressed Cubs could only manage one base runner on a walk over the first two innings. The Barons opened by scoring their first four batters, highlighted by Digilio's two-RBI double to take a 4-0 lead. Driver's two-RBI triple in the second and two-RBI single in the fourth gave the Barons an insurmountable 9-2 lead. While great pitching by the Barons' all-tournament Morse seemed to tame the bats of the tough-hitting Cubs, the strong-armed Baron defense made spectacular plays and quickly silenced any noise made by Cubs bats.

As the rain began to fall steadily, Barons all-tournament short fielder Johnson once again launched a mammoth home run that ultimately sent the angry Cubs back to their den for the winter. The Barons went on to win, 11-4, for their third consecutive national championship and fifth in the past seven years—making them rightful holder of the King of the Jungle title.

Consolation Division (DII)

The six teams that lost twice on day one fell to the double-elimination Consolation Division (DII). On day one, the Minnesota PVA Flamethrowers, Kansas City Diamond, RIC Cubs II, New York Yankees, Tampa Bay Rays, and Rollin Red Sox shared the same fate but found new life in the day-two consolation bracket.

The opening-round games featured two come-from-behind efforts as the Cubs II beat the Flamethrowers by scoring five runs in the bottom of the seventh to win, 8-7. The Diamond scored two in the bottom of the seventh to win, 8-7, over the Yankees. Both winners then



Gerald Smith (Tampa Bay Rays) makes a catch in his team's DII championship win over the Rollin Red Sox. The Rays topped the Sox, 13-3, for the title.

faced similar fates of 10-run defeats in round two as the Rollin Red Sox beat the Cubs II, and the Rays lost to the Diamond by identical scores, 11-1.

In the critical third round, the Tampa Bay Rays established dominance by sending 17 batters to the plate and scoring 12 runs in the top of the first inning en route to crushing the Rollin Red Sox, 24-12. That victory gave the Rays an undefeated record in DII and positioned them only one victory away from a prized Consolation Division championship.

The remaining DII teams continued to battle on day two for the right to face the Rays for the title. The Diamond finished tenth after a win over the Flamethrowers, 8-7, then a loss to the Yankees, 13-7. The Yankees finished ninth after defeating the Cubs II, 12-1,

and the Diamond, 13-7, then losing to the Red Sox, 12-3.

The Red Sox emerged from the elimination games ready and energized to face a familiar foe, the Rays, for the title. The Red Sox had won the consolation division twice and finished second twice in the past five years, while the Rays won the division title in 2007 and finished second to the Sox the previous year. The Red Sox had to win twice on day three because of their earlier loss to the Rays.

The Red Sox forced the final contest by virtue of a narrow victory in game one of the two-game match. The Sox, powered by Ron Gendron's inside-the-park home run, scored six runs in the seventh inning to take an 11-4 lead, then held off a furious Rays five-run, seventh inning rally to win, 11-9.

In the DII title game, the Rays scored three quick runs on five consecutive hits in the first inning. The Red Sox got two in their half of the first to trail, 3-2. From there it was all Rays, as they scored five times in the

third, two in the fourth, and three in the sixth. Rick Hart, Jeremy Day, and DII MVP Shelton Mobley had four hits to power the Rays surge. Meanwhile, the Red Sox only mustered one run over the final five innings against Rays pitcher "Mr." Mason and a stingy Rays defense to finally fall, 13-3, in six innings.

Contact: www.wheelchairsoftball.com. **S'NS**



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