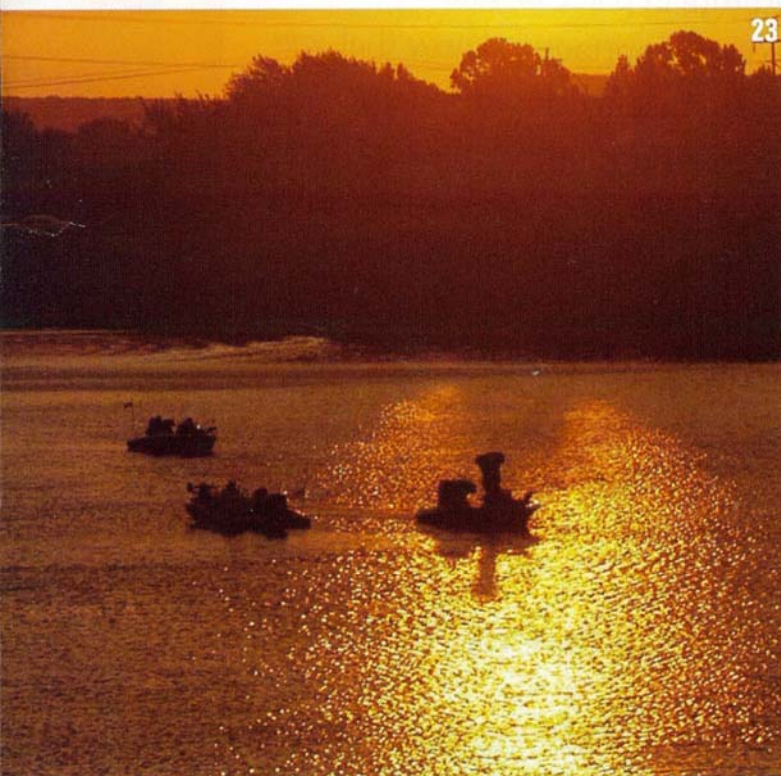
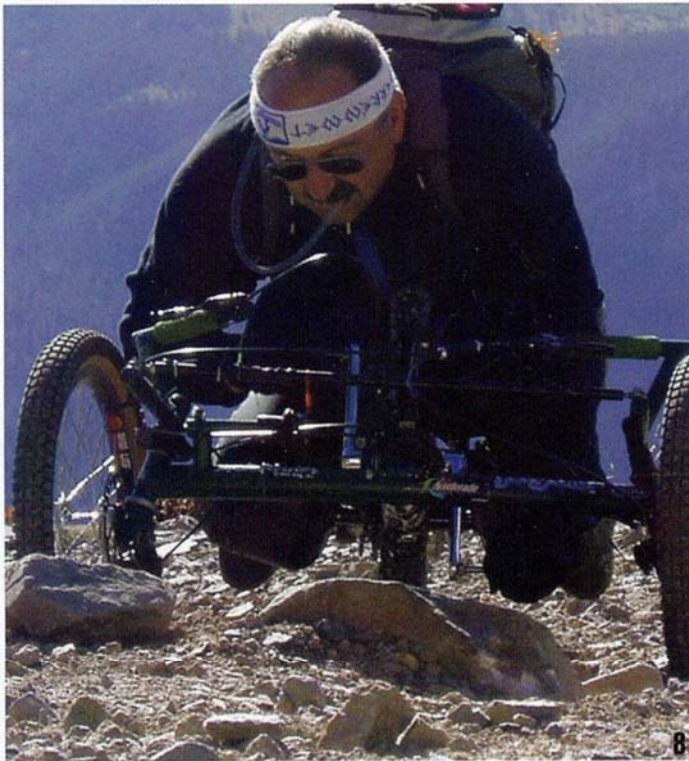


SPORTS 'N SPOKES

November 2005

Vol. 31 No. 6



8 UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Two failed attempts to summit one of Colorado's famous "14ers" left an adventurer with a renewed spirit—or an obsession—to give it another try.

23 FISH-Y BUSINESS

Rusty Lathrop

Making the right decisions at the opportune time results in winners. This year, a last-minute choice paid off—big time.

windy city WARRIORS

by Larry Labiak
photos by Mark Cowan

This annual double-elimination classic lulls competitors into a sense of security before taking them down the road to perdition-like reality that begins with that ever-looming first loss.

The two-time defending national wheelchair-softball champion Nebraska Barons brought their A-game to Columbus, Ohio, for a three-day mid-August (11-13) marathon affectionately known as the National Wheelchair Softball Tournament (NWST). The usual dual-bracketed, double-elimination format generated 50 games over 3 days among 15 competitors on 4 fields to determine the



During semifinal action, Matt Johnson (Nebraska) takes a whack at one in front of Cubs catcher Larry Labiak.

29th annual titlist. Credit co-tournament directors John Wall and Jerry Jones and their small army of sponsors and volunteers for pulling it off without a hitch.

The Barons, only the third National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) team to win back-to-back titles in its 28-year history, would face their greatest challenge from the likes of the Cleveland Indians, Chicago (RIC) Cubs I, and St. Paul Saints (formerly Twins East Metro). These three

finished second through fourth last year. While the Cubs and Saints have bulked up since then, the Barons lost power-hitting outfielder Zac Niemann to career-related pursuits. Would the balance of power shift enough for one of these or any other opportunist to upset Nebraska? As usual, finding out is why we play the games.

With 15 teams in the mix, Nebraska drew the only first-round bye on day one. They waited to face the NEPVA Red Sox, who



outclassed the Wisconsin Warhawks, 16-4, in their opener. In round two, the Barons were challenged, more so than expected, by the feisty Red Sox. The Sox held on for a 2-2 tie through five innings before falling, 5-2, to the defending champs.

As the other top seeds traversed the first two rounds, a couple of close calls emerged. After dispensing with the rookie United Spinal Yankees, 15-0, the Cleveland Indians faced a serious challenge

from the Courage (Minn.) Rolling Twins. The Indians finally broke a 5-5 tie in the bottom of the fifth to eke out a 6-5 win.

The Vaughn Chicago White Sox also provided some unnecessary stress for the Saints in their round-two matchup by holding St. Paul to three scattered runs. Unfortunately for the White Sox, after a single run on three consecutive hits in the first inning St. Paul ace Jerry Anderson set them down on three singles the rest of the way

for a 3-1 final advantage. Credit the White Sox and Twins for raising the bar early.

Besides the Indians, the Cubs I posed the greatest threat to upper-bracket foes. They added three starters since last nationals—Angelo Cruz (leadoff man), Alex Parra (starting pitcher), and Dino Ramirez (power hitter), all formerly with the crosstown rival White Sox—to their already potent lineup.

After an opening-game 18-run onslaught directed at and unanswered by



Nebraska outfielder Brent Rasmussen throws to first during the quarterfinal game against the St. Paul Saints.

the Baltimore Metro Stars, the Cubs I made quick work of Center Coast (Illinois and Missouri) in another lopsided outcome (15-1) in round two.

As expected, the Cubs I and Indians were now poised for their annual confrontation, one the Indians have survived by a single run in each of the past two seasons. In the lower bracket, the Barons and Saints would answer the head-to-head call on day two.

The Cubs I/Indians matchup was first up as day two commenced. Chicago took

an early 3-0 advantage that ballooned to 7-1 after three innings. The Cubs I coasted along until the fourth, when the Indians broke the drought with a run in the top half. Two innings and four Cleveland runs later, the Cubs' erstwhile shutout had turned into a 1-run difference. The Indians managed to put the tying run on first in the top

The RIC Chicago Cubs won the 2005 Division I title after defeating the Nebraska Barons, 10-5, in the championship game.

of the seventh but fell short in their bid to best the Cubs I three years in a row. The Chicagoans held on for a 7-6 victory that propelled them to the top of the leader board, putting them in a position to scout the competition as they awaited the outcome of the lower-bracket quarterfinal.

Losers' Bracket Bound

In suffering their first loss, the Indians were still alive but would have to play their way through the losers' bracket for another shot at the Cubs I, Saints, and Barons.



The beauty of the double-elimination format is the second-chance aspect. The curse of double elimination is its road to perdition-like reality that begins with that ever-looming first loss.

The Saints-Barons foray saw the teams draw even at 4-4 after two innings. It looked as if the Saints, rejuvenated by the return of speed demon Steve Welch this season, might have enough to stay with Nebraska on offense. But the next two innings glared in contrast as the Barons tallied seven runs to none for St. Paul. At

11-2, it was obvious the Barons still had enough bats to maintain an offensive edge the Saints could not surpass. A last-inning Saints rally started fast but ended quickly as the two-time champions went on to post a 12-7 win and earn a place in the semifinals versus the Cubs I. For the Saints, a less clearly defined route to the finals lay ahead, similar to that of the Indians.

Familiar Rivals

The Chicago Cubs I/Nebraska Barons rivalry has grown to storied proportion

over the past three seasons. This is due partly to the fact that these teams are highly competitive and each respects the other's substantial talent, partly because they square off several times during the regular season, and partly because, as the saying goes, familiarity breeds contempt.

At the '04 NWST, the Barons jumped out to a 4-1 first-inning lead and never looked back en route to an 8-3 victory that plunged the Cubs I into the losers' bracket. This time around, Chicago returned the favor with a five-spot in the



Beantowners Take D-II Title

The struggle for the top Division II spot was no walk in the park. The United Spinal Yankees, the new kids on the block, and the not-so-crusty veteran NEPVA Red Sox squared off in round one, with the Red Sox advancing, 8-1. The Red Sox upper-bracket follow-up foe was the revived Baltimore Metro Stars, led by the likes of seasoned sage third baseman Larry Toler. Baltimore had fought hard to get by the up-and-coming Center Coast Confluence, 6-5, in their round-one game, and would have their hands full versus the crimson hose. The Sox built a modest 6-3 lead through four and tacked on two more runs in each of their last two at-bats, while surrendering only a three-spot to the Stars en route to a comfortable 10-6 victory.

The plot began to thicken after the Wisconsin Warhawks knocked off the Mets, 15-5, and the Columbus Pioneers, 5-4, in a lower-bracket nail-biter that perched them high overhead with an eye on the Bostonians.

After trading first-inning single runs in their semifinal faceoff, the Warhawks and Red Sox clamped down on defense until the bottom of the sixth. Steve Davis, in the three hole, led off with a triple to center. Cleanup man Juan Silva provided the RBI single to right that tallied Davis and heaped do-or-die pressure on the Warhawks going into the seventh. This time it was Warhawks cleanup hitter Joe Carr who answered the call with a searing leadoff double between left and center, but he was gunned down trying to stretch it into a triple. That proved decisive as two of the final three batters were retired, and NEPVA held on for a 2-1 win and a spot in the finals.

The Warhawks would not go quietly, however. They rose up again versus the Columbus Pioneers in a 6-4 win that drew them back into a finals confrontation with the Red Sox. The Warhawks would need to beat them twice, but that was not in the cards with NEPVA dealing. The Red Sox amassed a not-so-comfortable 5-2 lead through four, to which the stubborn Warhawks countered a single run in the top of the fifth. The Sox responded with three in their half for an 8-3 lead that put them over the top for good. The Hawks' last-ditch 3-run rally in the sixth brought them close, but not close enough, as NEPVA prevailed, 8-6.



The Warhawks' Dustin Ferreira makes a throw to home in the D-II championship contest.





Pat Driver (Nebraska) scores before Larry Labiak (Cubs) catches the throw to tag him out.



first. Their first five batters reached safely on consecutive hits, and all five scored as the Cubs I batted around. As pitcher Ki Yun took the mound in the bottom half, he was already in the driver's seat, and it showed. With a stellar defense behind him, Yun managed to stave off the Barons' potent batting order their first time through the batter's box. Meanwhile, the Cubs I added an insurance run in the second inning.

In the third, Nebraska broke back for three runs after Yun lost his focus and walked the bases full with nobody out. A lineout, groundout, and single later, the Cubs' lead had been halved at 6-3. Yun managed to right himself in the fourth, aided by a retaliatory pair of runs in the Chicago half. Yun keyed that rally via a one-out single and eventually came around, followed by right fielder Ramirez, extending the lead to 8-3 after four innings.

In the fifth, Baron pitcher Rory Heaton walked with two outs, and Keith Wal-

The Division II champs NEPVA Red Sox beat the Wisconsin Warhawks, 8-6, in the title game.

lace went to his bullpen and brought in his ace, Parra.

"I realized Ki was wild early on, but I tried to give him every opportunity to work through it. It was a big risk, but our defense helped him out," said Wallace.

Parra surrendered a run-scoring double to right fielder Doc Krabbenhoft but then retired center fielder John Morse on a one-bouncer from third to first to end the inning.

Heaton closed the door on the Cubs' offense in the sixth inning, but the Barons were not through yet. They narrowed the margin to 8-6 in the bottom half as the Cubs' pitching again opened the door a crack, before their defense could push it shut. Bruce Froendt, the quad and number-ten hitter, worked the count full and coaxed a one-out walk. Shortstop Bruce Fromek slashed a sinking liner to left, but a charging Paul Moran fielded it on a bounce to gun down Froendt in a force play at second base. Left fielder Brent Rasmussen, the most feared hitter in the game, was then issued another in an unending string of intentional passes. That strategy backfired for Cubs I when

Many Thanks

The National Wheelchair Softball Association (NWSA) salutes its long-time Commissioner Jon Speake, who retired on August 10 after 21 years of meritorious service. Speake took over the reins as commissioner in 1986 from NWSA founder David Van Buskirk. At that time the organization consisted of 8–10 teams mostly scattered around the Great Lakes region. During his tenure, Speake's NWSA tripled its number of member teams and developed a working relationship with Major League Baseball (MLB) clubs across the nation. Today, almost one third of NWSA teams are affiliated with and/or sponsored in part by MLB teams.

Speake has dedicated his life—as have wife Lynn, daughter Heather, and son Jon—to wheelchair softball for more than two decades. He was inducted into the NWSA Hall of Fame in 1995 in recognition of his many contributions on and off the field. On August 13, he was honored again at the NWSA 28th Annual Awards Banquet with the presentation of its first-ever lifetime achievement award.

Thank you, Jon Speake, from the NWSA Executive Committee, all past and present teams, and their fans. We wish you well as we say goodbye.



National Wheelchair Softball Association Commissioner Jon Speake (center) retired on August 10 after 21 years of service. Speake took over the reins as commissioner in 1986 from NWSA founder David Van Buskirk.

short center Pat Driver walked to fill the bases for right fielder Matt Johnson (who is quickly becoming "Brent lite" in many observers' eyes). Johnson came through with a single that scored Fromek and Rasmussen, but the rally ended abruptly when Johnson was nailed at second on the cut-off play, pitcher to second base.

"That's okay. You were aggressive, Matt, and that's the way the game should be played," came encouragement from the Nebraska dugout to the second-year player.

The Barons checked the Cubs I in the top of the seventh and had the tying runs on first and third in their half, but the Chicago defense again came through in the clutch, and the Cubs held on for an 8–6 win. The loss dropped Nebraska into the losers' bracket for the first time in the past three nationals. They would need to play their way through for another shot at Chicago and the championship. The Cubs I sat back to enjoy the moment and the evening.

Down to Four

Day three dawned with the Saints, Indians, and Barons as the other teams still standing. The Saints had eliminated the Twins, 9–3; the Indians had squeaked by the White Sox, 7–6; and the Barons awaited the winner of the impending contest between the Saints and Indians. After that, the Cubs I would face that winner

once, possibly twice, for the national title.

Cutting to the chase, the Saints knocked off the Indians, 10–5, and moved a step closer to the championship round. But, it proved a step too large, more like a giant leap versus the Barons. The two-time defending champions proceeded to pound out 19 runs to put an exclamation point on a 19–10 slaughter-rule-shortened five-inning victory that propelled them into the championship round.

With the Barons and Cubs I so evenly matched, one could only wonder what the rematch would bring. What it brought was a complete turnaround from their first confrontation the day before. All-tourney pitcher Heaton had the Cubs I hitters' number all game long. He pitched away early, consistently working the outer half. When he invariably got ahead and teased them up closer to the plate, he jammed them time and again with repeated success, taking away their power and generating catchable fly balls. The Cubs' frustration at the plate was reflected in their meager two runs on eight hits.

On the opposite side of the ledger, the Barons rocked Cubs I pitching for 10 runs on 15 hits. Plus, nine walks were issued, four intentionally, and four runs scored off those free passes for a Barons get-even 10–2 win. Nebraska was dominant start to finish. Case closed. On to the rubber match.

Do or Die

The momentum pendulum had swung back to the Barons, and Froendt readied the troops for the final charge as the Cubs I regrouped in their dugout. Chicago had 20 minutes to get it back together.

"Okay, guys, we let 'em back into it. Now it's do or die time, or we go home in second place," shouted Wallace in an attempt to re-energize the Cubs I.

Cliché-laden verbiage is sometimes all there is to offer after such a good first game and such a poor second one versus the same opponent.

Of course, across the field, somewhat the reverse could be said of the Barons. They weren't as bad in the first game as the Cubs I were in the second, but they were every bit as good as the Cubs I were bad in the second one. Fast forward 20 minutes.

And, get it back together, the Cubs I did. They suddenly came alive. Left fielder Moran's one-out single was followed by a booming triple off the bat of Ramirez in the top of the first. Cleanup man Kurt Smith tallied them both with a single to right but was erased in a 6–4–3 double play to end the inning.

More importantly for Chicago, they set the Barons down in the bottom half after two had reached base with one out. Johnson sizzled a liner to right-center that Smith caught up with, and Greg Suing, the dangerous lefty, gunned a shot to second



In the D-I quarterfinals, the Courage Rolling Twins' Garret Osborn and Charles Clausen try to block St. Paul's Steve Welch so teammate Mike Laven (#35) can make the tag.

that Juan Ortiz snared on the short hop and flipped to first for the third out. The Cubs I added a single run in the second and shut down the Barons again in their half to maintain the 3-0 lead.

Two more in the third resulted from five consecutive hits by the top half of the lineup with third baseman Angelo Cruz leading the hit parade and short-center fielder Ryan Hauser icing the cake for a 5-0 lead. But, this time the Barons answered back. With two outs, the obligatory intentional pass was issued to Rasmussen. Driver, Johnson, and Suing strung together singles, and Nebraska was on the board with two. Key, however, was the Cubs I outfield defense as Hauser charged and snagged a patented Krabbenhoft line drive

to end the threat, stranding Johnson and Suing in the process.

What had begun to emerge was a stellar defensive performance that would carry Chicago down the stretch. The Barons drew within two in the bottom of the fourth, but the Cubs I countered again with a run in the fifth for a 6-3 lead. The see-saw battle continued in the bottom of

the inning, when the Barons closed the gap at 6-5. But that's as close as they got the rest of the way as Chicago's defense continued to turn in one huge play after another en route to a 10-5 national championship victory.

No doubt about it, the Nebraska Barons will be heard from again. But, for now, the Chicago Cubs are on their way! **S'NS**



Larry Labiak works for the Chicago Park District as disability policy officer. He oversees all aspects of change designed to bring more people with disabilities to the parks through more inclusive and better programs, barrier removal/accessibility modifications, and development of improved policies.