



# Quick Studies

Wheelchair softball started just five years ago in Japan, but the country has already hosted the first international championship and is building a strong bond with the United States as the sport grows.

*story and photos by The National Wheelchair Softball Association*

**W**hile this year marks the 40th anniversary of wheelchair softball in the United States, Japan just started playing the game five years ago.

But that didn't stop the country from hosting the first International Wheelchair Softball Championship and the 4th Japan Wheelchair Softball National Tournament. Both tournaments were held concurrently July 2-3 in Sapporo, Japan. Although the Japanese are relatively new to the sport, they're fast learners.

"Japan has been a quick study of the game and in five years, they have managed to create 10 teams that are actively playing," says Team USA and LWRSA Hawks coach Keith Wallace. "With their work ethic, I would give them a few more years, and many of their teams will be competing at a very high level of play."

Wheelchair softball began in Japan in 2011, when wheelchair athlete Wataru Horie returned to the country after attending college in the United States. The fol-

Above, Team USA faced Team Japan at the first International Wheelchair Softball Championship in Sapporo, Japan, in July.



Team USA and Team Japan players bonded during the first International Wheelchair Softball Championship in Japan.

Following year, a team from Japan competed in National Wheelchair Softball Association's (NWSA) annual championship tournament in Chicago. Team Japan recently competed in its fifth consecutive U.S. championship tournament, finishing in fifth place.

"I have always hoped that wheelchair softball would develop a Team USA and once that became possible, I knew right away that I wanted to have that feeling of representing the greatest country," says Team USA wheelchair softball player Brendan

“ I believe the exposure of this event will spread via social media and will make a huge impact with players in the USA wanting to experience this incredible event.”

— Jeff Gustafson, on the International Wheelchair Softball Championship

"It is incredibly exciting to see the international growth of the sport and see athletes with disabilities in other countries given the opportunity to play wheelchair softball," says Bruce Froendt, NWSA commissioner and Nebraska Barons coach.

### International Tournament

Team Japan, Team Korea and Team USA competed in the international championship tournament. All three countries used many of their best wheelchair softball players for their national teams, and all NWSA players were invited to apply to be a part of Team USA.

Downes (Minnesota Twins). "Truly humbling and a great sense of pride is how I would describe hearing that I was selected for the team, and hopefully this is just the beginning."

The Korean players had only been introduced to the sport during an exhibition event provided by the Japanese Wheelchair Softball Association (JWSA) in February, but there are now reportedly eight teams organized and playing in Korea.

In the first game of the international championship, Team USA defeated Team Korea 17-0. The championship game pit host Team Japan, which also defeated Team Korea, against Team USA in a challenging contest.



Team USA's and Team Japan's wheelchair softball teams show support for one another.

Japan capitalized on early mistakes by Team USA to take an early lead, but the U.S. battled back to tie the score at two in the fifth inning.

"The Japan team was fundamentally sound, and their outstanding defense kept the game close," Wallace says.

Team USA capitalized with its hitting and on some errors to win the first international championship, 5-4. Jeff Gustafson (MPVA FlameThrowers) was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player (MVP).

"This was the apex of my softball career," says Gustafson, a member of the Wheelchair Softball Hall of Fame. "I believe the exposure of this event will spread via social media and will make a huge impact with players in other countries, as well as with players in the USA wanting to experience this incredible event."

Other Team USA members named to the tournament's Top 10 Players Team included Josh Maier (Nebraska Barons), Jeff Yackley (LWSRA Hawks), Brent Rasmussen (Nebraska Barons) and Downes.

"My favorite moment in Japan was when my teammate, Jeff Gustafson, was voted MVP of the International Championship Tournament," says Team USA and MPVA FlameThrowers member David Richardson. "He has been a huge supporter of me in my career, so that was amazing to be able to share this moment with him."

In Sapporo, 12 teams, including 10 from Japan, also competed in the 4th Japan Wheelchair Softball National Tournament. Team USA won the tournament with a 4-0 record.





Downes was named MVP of that tournament and was joined by several other Team USA members named to the Top 10 Players Team, including Joe LeMar (Boston Red Sox), Greg Suing (Nebraska Barons), Rasmussen, Scott Rickford (Minnesota Twins), Lance Perez (Nebraska Barons) and Froendt.

"This experience was amazing," Rickford says. "The Japan Wheelchair Softball Association took such good care of us. Every person we played was so welcoming and genuinely excited to meet Team USA players. The country is beautiful, and both Tokyo and Sapporo were not overwhelming due to the hospitality and good na-



Team USA's wheelchair softball team visited Narihira, an elementary school in Tokyo.



Above, Team USA and Team Japan played in the first International Wheelchair Softball Championship.

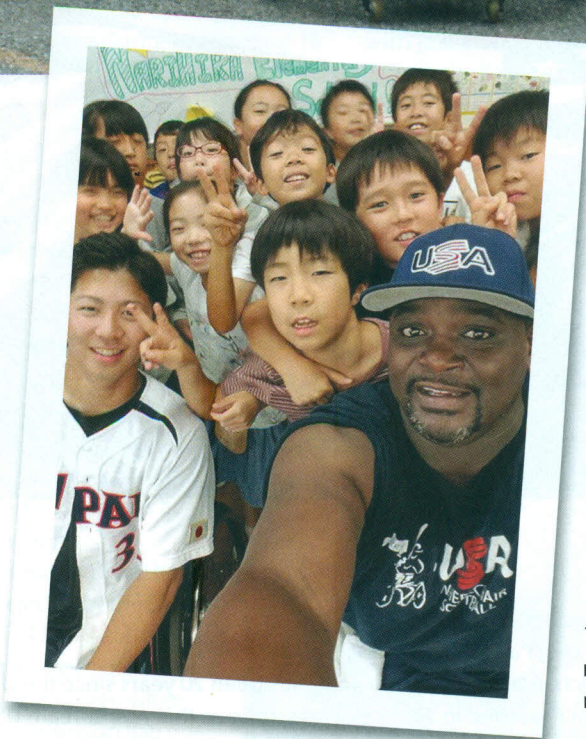
ture of our hosts and the Japanese people. This event was amazing and an experience I will never forget."

## Countries Offer Support

Earlier in the week, Team USA conducted an interactive wheelchair softball demonstration for more than 400 students at Narihira, an elementary school in Toyko. Students were shown the basic skills of the game and given an opportunity to throw, hit and push a sports chair.

"The enthusiasm of the students was contagious and although there was a small language barrier and many kids, we managed to get them all into a chair and let them experience the game of wheelchair softball and have a great time," Wallace says.

The U.S. team conducted a second demonstration for more than 100 college students in a large indoor



At left, Team USA's and Team Japan's wheelchair softball teams visited students at Narihira, an elementary school in Tokyo.

gymnasium at Hokusho University, which is used by Japanese players for practice during the winter.

An International Wheelchair Softball Federation (IWSF) will be established to promote and oversee the growth of the sport around the world.

NWSA and JWSA have identified several teams that are actively playing or have expressed interest in playing, including Canada, Puerto Rico, Nigeria, Guam, Europe and Colombia. Select members of the 2016 Team USA will travel to help promote and start up programs both nationally and internationally.

NWSA will take applications for the 2017 Team USA Wheelchair Softball team beginning this month.

"This opportunity solidified my desire to be a great ambassador for not only wheelchair softball but all wheelchair sports," Yackley says. "This improved my confidence and made me a more rounded individual. It is my hope that this was the first step in the right direction to hopefully bring the game of wheelchair softball to the Paralympics."

For more information on wheelchair softball, visit [wheelchairsoftball.org](http://wheelchairsoftball.org) or visit the National Wheelchair Softball Association page on Facebook.

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