

SPORTS 'N SPOKES

November 2007

TENNIS:
A "grand slam"

CLIFF CRASE—
A man beyond measure

SELF-DEFENSE
More than physical contact

**Going Down...
and out**





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A DIFFERENCE MAKER

More than an accomplished athlete in days gone by, Cliff Crase was a great encourager, husband, father, boss—someone who cared more about others than himself—an unselfish, giving example to everyone around him.

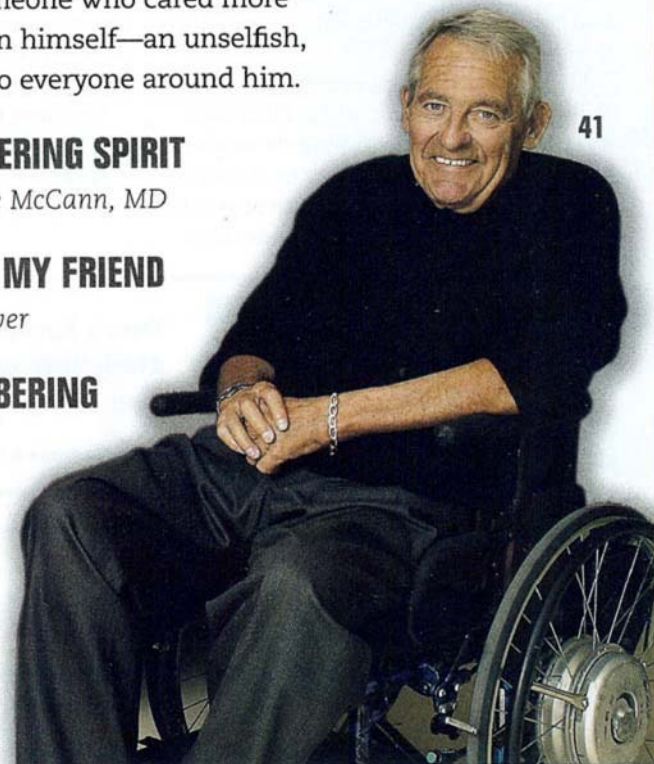
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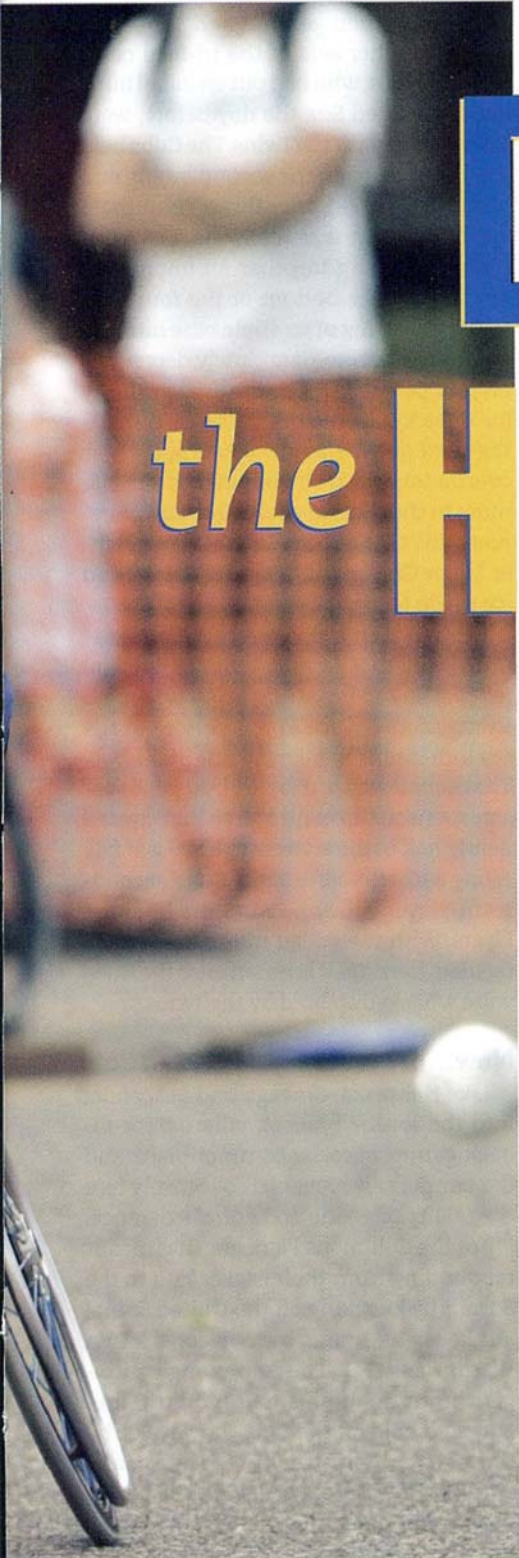
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by Larry Labiak / photos by Mark Cowan



DOIN' IT the HARD WAY

Solid pitching backed up by speed in the outfield and quickness in the infield—a winning softball combination.

The defending champion St. Paul (Minn.) Saints played host to a dozen contenders trying to snatch away their national title on their home turf (Midway Stadium, St. Paul) during the National Wheelchair Softball Association National Tournament, held August 23–25. In theory, home field carries an edge. In reality, living on margins is risky business.

In spite of a stubborn drizzle that turned into a four-hour steady rain on day one, the games played through with few surprises. By day's end, the Saints, RIC (Chicago) Cubs, and the '06 runners-up, Minnesota Twins and Nebraska Barons, all aligned as was expected, without a loss.

The Saints, Cubs, and Twins each cake-walked through their opening round to respective wins over the Tampa Bay Devil Rays (10–2), New England Red Sox (17–1), and Vaughan PVA White Sox (19–2). The Barons stretched their muscles in an opening-round 23–0 rout of Minnesota PVA, followed by a more measured 8–4 defeat of the improving Columbus Pioneers in round two.

Not surprisingly, the Nebraska/St. Paul confrontation, leading off the second day's competition, was no subtle affair. The Saints put up two runs in the first inning, to which the Barons countered with three. The Saints tied the score in the second and tacked on five more runs in the third. The Barons managed a lone run in the bottom of the third to cut the lead to 8–4. Veteran St. Paul ace Jerry Anderson held Nebraska in check through the sixth. Over that same stretch, the Saints only added one run. But their five-run seventh inning put it away, neutralizing Nebraska's five-run comeback rally in the bottom half that left them on the short end, 14–9.

Up From the Mire

The Barons' loss to the defending champs dropped them to the losers' bracket, and the double-elimination format meant they could ill afford to slip again. There was little chance of that their next time out, as the Red Sox bore the brunt of the Nebraskans' rising ire. The Barons dismantled the New Englanders, 11–1. But the Barons' competi-

The ball gets away as Courage Rolling Twin Jeff Gustafson (left) collides with St. Paul Saints third baseman George Kiefner.



In the Cubs/Twins matchup, Cubs outfielder Ki Yun tries unsuccessfully for a line drive in front of teammate Nataru Horie.



During the NWST National Tournament, several junior teams enjoyed great competition and gained valuable experience for the future.

tion would soon get tougher.

On the other side of the tri-field complex, the Cubs, who had put an initial hurting on the Red Sox the day before, were toiling away with the Twins. The Cubs held a 2-1 lead through the second inning and extended it to 4-1 after three. From there on, however, it was all Twins. The Minnesotans strung together an impressive ten runs in the bottom of the fourth by virtue of a string of multiple base hits and timely Cubs errors (or untimely, depending on your perspective). By the time the lucky (or unlucky) thirteenth batter had made the third out, it was obvious Chicago was overmatched. The Twins tacked on two more in the sixth to abbreviate and punctuate this 13-4 win. As Cubs reserve pitcher Major Gray put it, "We got beat up, and we made too many errors."

Keep in mind, this was not the same Cubs team that captured the '05 title and fell just shy of repeating in '06 when the Saints scored twice in the bottom of the seventh inning to take the title game, 7-6. That squad was torn apart by a post-season sponsorship controversy that caused nearly half of the starters to leave last fall. Along with a handful of the Cubs' second-team players, they became the Midwest Flyers. With the squad minus that many regulars from '06, it is no surprise the Cubs were whacked so hard by the Twins.

Now...or Never

Like Nebraska, Chicago had descended into the losers' bracket, where back-to-back games become commonplace and the temporarily banished collectively face the reality of a "one and done" existence.

For the Columbus Pioneers, that meant rebounding from their earlier loss to the Barons by knocking off the United Spinal Yankees, 13-4, and the Wisconsin PVA Warhawks, 11-1. The improving contingent from Columbus had too little firepower to hold off the Cubs, however. The Chicagoans built an early lead and coasted, 12-2, to set up a Cubs/Barons showdown. That matchup would be the measure of the difference between fourth place and ascension to the winners' bracket to face the Twins-versus-Saints victor. But first, to the impending business between the hometown rival Twins and Saints.



Vaughan PVA White Sox second baseman Kevin Link (center) reaches for the ball as Tampa Bay Devil Ray Doyle Mann (right) charges in. The Devil Rays beat the White Sox for the Division II championship.

The battle of the two remaining undefeateds quickly moved in favor of the Saints. Their four-run outburst in the top of the second turned a 1-1 tie into a 5-1 advantage. Almost methodically, St. Paul added 10 runs to their total over the final five innings, scoring at least once every time up. In contrast, the Twins could generate multiple runs (3) in only one inning, the third. Veteran St. Paul hurler Anderson held them to just two runs over the last four innings, as the Saints chalked up their third consecutive win, 15-6.

St. Paul's early dominance earned the team the catbird's seat and the right to await the worthy challenger, be it the Cubs or Barons, to their title.

It would not be the Cubs. The Barons' resurgence from the depths of the losers' bracket escalated exponentially as they applied a stranglehold of mammoth proportions on the Cubs' bats. As a result, Chicago could muster only six hits, four of them singles over four innings of play, against Nebraska's choking defense. That is also how long it took the Barons to run off 13 runs on 15 hits, thus, triggering the aptly named "mercy" rule (which calls for

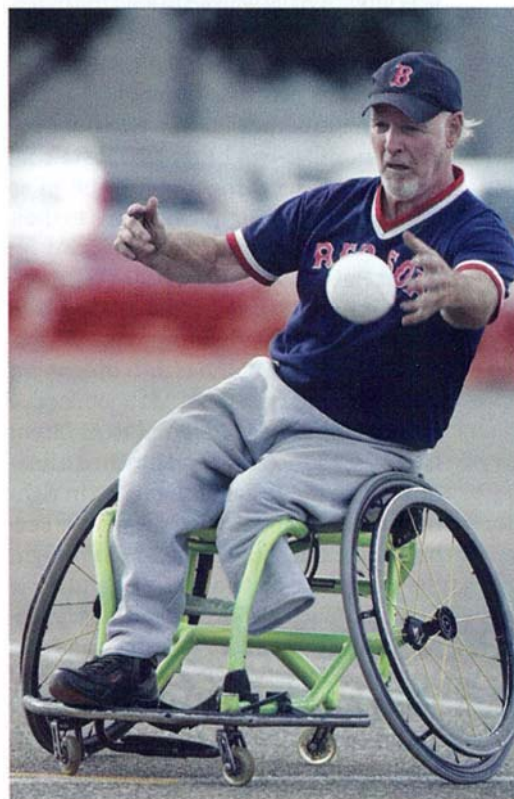
a team ahead by 12 or more runs after four innings to be declared the winner).

Down to Three

With three teams left in the hunt, the Twins and Barons went about paring that to two on the final day of play. It would become a classic back-and-forth slugfest that went to extra innings.

The Twins drew first blood, but only because they batted first. Their 2-0 first-inning lead turned quickly into a 4-2 deficit in the bottom half. After trading three-run rallies in the second, the Twins pulled ahead of the Barons, 8-7, with three more in the third. They opened a brief three-run lead with two in the fourth, to which the Barons countered three to knot it again at 10-10. By the end of the sixth, it was 13 all with neither club giving an inch they couldn't get back.

It appeared the Barons might put it away in the bottom of the seventh after loading the bases with two out. Consecutive singles by their seventh and eighth hitters, John Morse and Lance Perez, were followed by Bruce Froendt sacrificing the runners to second and third. After Bruce Hromek



New England Red Sox pitcher George Norton lets one rip against the Columbus Pioneers.



Following the Barons' championship victory, Nebraska's Pat Driver receives a winner's dousing.

struck out, leadoff man Brent Rasmussen—the most feared hitter in the game today—was intentionally walked to load the bases. That strategy paid off when Zac Niemann, a heavy hitter in his own right, lined out to right field to force extra innings.

In the top of the eighth, a two-out double by number-two hitter Jeff Gustafson, his third of the game and fifth hit in as many at-bats, brought Twins fans to their feet. Gustafson advanced to third on Wyatt Halvorson's shallow single to center, but Brian Chavez could not get him home, lining out to left to end the inning.

To the bottom of the eighth they went, and it was over in a flash. Matt Johnson, a Rasmussen protégé (referred to as "Brent Lite" by some opponents), launched a line-drive blast that cleared the fence in right field, with distance to spare. It was his second home run of the game, and it brought the Twins' season to a crushing end.

Twins Coach Bill Richardson was reflective in his summation. "As difficult as that loss was, our guys left it all on the field every time out, and I'm proud of that."

The Barons and Saints would be championship combatants, with the Saints needing a single win to clinch.

The Barons are machine-like efficient in the way they score runs. The players know

their strengths and weaknesses, and they seldom play to their weaknesses. They know how to maximize their abilities in getting on base, moving runners along, and/or hitting line drives in the gaps.

On the defensive side, the story is the same. Errors are uncommon and almost never consecutive, plus their pitching is solid and backed up by speed in the outfield and quickness on the infield. In 16-inch softball, that's a winning combination waiting to be successful.

Down to Two

And so it went in the Barons' first rematch with the Saints. Nebraska drew even for the tournament on the strength of a systematic 7-0 whitewash in which the Saints were limited to a mere five hits, four of them singles, and sent a 5-over-the-minimum 21 batters to the plate. Now, that's efficient.

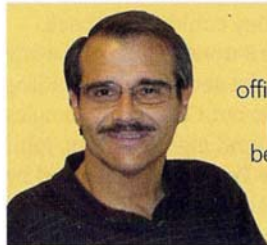
In the championship game, Nebraska mounted what appeared at the time to be a solid 7-2 lead after two innings. That proved false when the defending champs rallied for three runs in the bottom of the third to close the gap to 7-5. The Barons countered with a pair in the top of the fifth to which the Saints' counterpoint was a single run in their half. The Barons tacked on another run in the top of the sixth for a 10-6 lead. They held off the Saints in the bottom half, stranding leftfielder Evan Thorn at third and short-stop Brendan Downes at first when Anderson was gunned down to end the inning. Each time the Saints drew close, the Barons managed to maintain an arm's-length distance.

In the indecisive seventh inning, the Saints shut down the Barons before mounting a last-ditch effort to repeat. Lead-off man Jon Rydberg started a one-out rally with a single to right field. Manny (Jr.) Guerra and Scott Berg followed suit with Berg driving in Rydberg. Suddenly, the tying run came to the plate in the form of Joe Arends, who bounced out, scoring Guerra from third and cutting the lead to 10-8.

That left it up to Hall of Fame third baseman George Kiefner with one on and two out. Kiefner proceeded to launch a towering rocket to straightaway center that caught centerfielder Pat Driver by surprise—for a moment. He adjusted, spun 180°, and raced back toward the fence while maintaining a bead on the rapidly approaching sphere. Just as it appeared the ball would sail over his head to the deepest recesses of center field, "Penguin," as the well-liked Driver has been called for years, reached up and made an over-the-shoulder catch that would have made Willie Mays proud.

And just as suddenly, the Saints' party was over and the Barons' had just begun.

S'NS



Larry Labiak is the Chicago Park District's 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.