

Tampa Tribune

Throwing Out Disabling Notions



Dennis Mason, playing for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays wheelchair softball team, pitches to an opponent from the No. 2-ranked Nebraska Barons.

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Published: May 21, 2006

TAMPA - They use names like "Doc," "Shaky" and "Professor."

When they wheel onto the field, they mean business - refusing to cut themselves slack over their disabilities.

"I'm 50 years old. After what I've been through, every day is a good day," said Tampa resident Ron Richardson.

More than 60 wheelchair-using softball players from Nebraska, Chicago and the Tampa Bay area competed Saturday at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church in Town 'N Country. The nine-game spring training exhibition tournament, which continues today, is practice for the teams' regular games in a few months.

"After you watch it for a while, you forget they're in a wheelchair," said Tampa resident Banks Repass, a church volunteer. "They are so good and serious about the game. Look at them just hit the ball."

The players, mostly young men who were in car accidents, treat the sport like any other - they practice their form, condition their bodies and compete in the spring for the coveted top spots in the National Wheelchair Softball Association.

Several wheelchair teams are affiliated with Major League Baseball teams. In the Tampa Bay area, it's the Rays. In Chicago it's the White Sox, or the Indians in Cleveland.

Richardson said the game improves players' self-esteem by teaching them the wheelchair doesn't limit their abilities. Richardson had his right leg amputated in 1993 after it was crushed by a forklift.

"I almost died from the infection," he said. "But I'm here now."

The games inspired fans, too.

"For the people who come here, it is so eye-opening," said Shayne Wilkerson, a coach for the Rays softball team. "Every time I see them, ... there's such an athleticism to them, it's like there's no disability."

Bill Downs, of Chicago, who uses a wheelchair and has limited mobility in his arms, said sports inspire people like little else.

"A lot of times when people [have a disability], they become withdrawn," he said, rolling his chair just enough to view the game. "One of the first things we want to do is bring them into the work force. Well, this improves their self-esteem so they can ring that doorbell and get into the work force."

Downs started the Chicago team 12 years ago and travels across the country playing the sport.

"I don't consider myself handicapped," he said.

Matt Johnson, a 20-year-old from Omaha, has played with his Nebraska team, the Barons, for three years.

His teammates call him "Friday," although he can't remember why.

"Did you see my home run?" he asked them, clearly miffed that no one noticed.

Johnson's left leg was amputated after he was diagnosed with soft-tissue cancer at age 16. "I just thought I was flat-footed," he said.

Doctors found a tumor the size of a pancake at the bottom of his foot; his leg was amputated inches below his knee.

Players are on the team for different reasons, said Kim Rasmussen, who cheered for her husband, Brent, under the shade.

Brent Rasmussen played college ball in Nebraska before he was hit by a car. The accident severed his ankle.

"When it gets really competitive, they start knocking each other out of the chairs," she said. "They have to get to home plate somehow."

Crystal Molina, a first-grader at Robinson Elementary School in Plant City, wheeled her chair up and down the blacktop near the softball area. She was waiting to go to a kids' softball clinic.

The polite 7-year-old, who has spina bifida, stopped and smiled, exposing a gap from her missing front three teeth.

Asked about the game, she said, "I feel like I can do anything now."

MORE PLAY TODAY

The wheelchair softball tournament resumes at 9 a.m. today at Wesley Memorial United Methodist Church, 6100 Memorial Highway in Tampa. For information, call (813) 323-2569 or go to www.devilrayswheelchairsoftball.com.

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