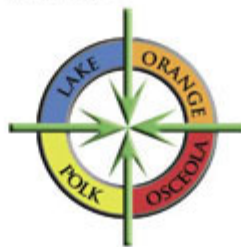


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## Rays Host Florida's Largest Wheelchair Softball Tournament – May 19-20, 2007



Brent Rasmussen, left, gets ready to hit the ball at this year's Spring Training tournament for Wheelchair Softball, held in May at Disney's Wide World of Sports.

**Kim Hall**/Celebration Independent



**Kim Hall/Celebration Independent**

Tracey Wilkerson is out to prove women as just as capable as men in this game, as she gets ready to bat. In her first tournament three years ago, she was voted best second baseman.

By Kim Hall

The Tampa Bay Devil Rays' players cheered and high-fived each other as they came off the field. The opening game of their spring training series closed with the Rays beating the New York Yankees with a final score of 11 to 3. This, however, was no ordinary spring training game.

Disney's Wide World of Sports transformed its bus and recreational vehicle parking lots May 19 and 20 in order to create playing fields for the largest wheelchair softball tournament ever held in Florida. The event was hosted by the Tampa Bay Devil Rays Wheelchair Softball Team, a team sponsored in part by the Major League Baseball team of the same name. More than 100 players and coaches from six teams across the country came to compete, including the Rays, which are currently ranked ninth in the nation; the Yankees, the Chicago Cubs, the Nebraska Barons, the St. Louis Centercoast and the Schaumburg Flyers, also from Chicago.

“Everybody says, ‘Aw, wheelchair softball, that’s so sweet,’ and it’s not sweet,” said Natalie Mann, who founded the Rays with her husband, Doyle, four years ago. “These guys are not feeling sorry for themselves. They’re out to prove they can play softball. It’s just so good for their spirits.”

Every spring, the MLB Tampa Bay Devil Rays present a donation check to the Rays wheelchair softball team at Tropicana field prior to a game. Last year, Rays right-fielder Delmon Young assisted the softball team as part of a community service project. After the service was done, however, Young continued to visit the team.

“He’s been really good to us,” Natalie said.

Doyle, 47, was born with spina bifida, a condition in which the spinal cord is not completely formed. He admits he has been a big fan of MLB’s Devil Rays since the team started in 1997. Although he had played in other wheelchair sports before starting the Rays wheelchair team in 2004, he always wanted to play baseball.

“I’ve been a baseball fan since I was 9 years old,” he said, adding that he knew all the logistics of the game, but never had an opportunity to put them to use. “I’ve watched it for so long, and now I get to play.”

Wheelchair softball was started almost 30 years ago when a few people in the Midwest who suffered from spinal injuries or were paralyzed in their lower extremities got together to play the game. The sport is played on hard surfaces, such as vacant parking lots, to allow the chairs to roll easily. Players use a 16-inch softball, which allows them to keep one hand on the wheelchair while catching the ball without a glove. The sport is co-ed and is one of the few wheelchair team sports which allows nearly everyone confined to a wheelchair the opportunity to compete, Natalie said. Most of the athletes are paraplegics or amputees ranging from college students to players in their 60’s. Today, the National Wheelchair Softball Association oversees more than 30 sanctioned teams, nine of which are sponsored by MLB teams.

“We very much enjoy the same things as other athletes,” said Bruce Foendt, who not only plays on and coaches the Nebraska Barons but is also the current president of the NWSA. “The wheelchair is just like a bat or a glove. It’s just another tool we have to use.”

Brent Rasmussen, who attended the Florida tournament, also plays for the Nebraska Barons, a team which won the wheelchair softball national championships in wheelchair softball in 2003 and 2004. He is ranked as one of the top wheelchair softball players in the country.

In 2002, Rasmussen was assisting a stranded motorist when another vehicle crashed into him, pinning both of Rasmussen’s legs between the two vehicles. One leg eventually needed to be amputated.

Prior to the accident, Rasmussen was a star athlete at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and received varsity letters in baseball for four straight years. He also briefly played minor league baseball for the Kansas City Royals. After the accident, Rasmussen became involved in wheelchair sports, including basketball and sitting volleyball. He was a member of the 2004 Paralympics Men’s Sitting Volleyball Team and captain of the 2006 World Championship Men’s Sitting Volleyball Team. He got involved with softball when a member of the Nebraska Baron team

members contacted UNO after reading about Rasmussen's accident in the newspaper. Rasmussen believes one of the best parts of the game is that players can not only come out and compete, but can compete as a team.

"It's been fun ever since," he said. "It's the team spirit. You don't always get that for disabled [athletes]."

The Rays' team, which tries to participate in at least three tournaments per season, practice every Saturday, April through August, in a church parking lot in Tampa, but is seeking a more permanent venue. Natalie and Doyle are currently in talks with people in Orlando, Daytona and Miami in the hopes to start more teams in Florida and give more players an opportunity to compete.

"We find players anywhere we can," Natalie said. "Our team is the only one in the southeast. That's why we want other teams to build in Florida."

For more information on wheelchair softball, visit [www.wheelchairsoftball.org](http://www.wheelchairsoftball.org). To find out more about the Rays Wheelchair Softball Team or about the potential to form other teams in Florida, visit [www.devilrayswheelchairsoftball.com](http://www.devilrayswheelchairsoftball.com).