Softball Nerds Prevail at UVA Tournament

by Richard Hess, ’04

For the nearly dozen members of Chicago (Maroon)—the University of Chicago Law School’s top softball team—Saturday, March 29, 2003 had all the makings of A Moment: the stars aligned, the moon eclipsed the sun, and a rag-tag band of nerds delivered unto their jock oppressors the comeuppance of a lifetime.

Struggling through a drizzling rain but supported by a thunderous core of diehard fans, the Maroons trounced squads from around the country to emerge, undefeated, as the 2003 University of Virginia Softball Tournament Champions. The Maroons’ title game victory over Missouri followed a gripping quarterfinal win over perennial softball powerhouse and home crowd favorite, UVA (Golo).

U of C fans arrived early, packing the two available bleachers and creating a wall of sound along the first-base line even before the first pitch. A handful of UVA boosters, clad in matching sweater sets and shielded from the weather by Burberry umbrellas, gamely attempted to support their squad despite being outnumbered. Most UVA fans skipped the U of C game, choosing instead to freshen their cocktails, attend a barbeque in a nearby pavilion, or head home to don clean baseball caps for what they anticipated would be an inevitable victory party.

But for the players on the field, hungry and muddy from previous games, the constant cheering of the Chicago fans sounded less like a UVA home game and more like a raucous, sake-bomb-fueled Friday afternoon Wine Mess. UVA and U of C traded one-run leads inning after inning. Every time the Maroons retook the lead, chants of “Nerds! Nerds! Nerds!” erupted from Chicago fans. UVA fans in the barbeque line occasionally turned toward the noisy diamond, expecting an easy win. Shaking off their indolence, a few of them drifted back to game, where sour dismay quickly replaced their mint julep-flavored bonhomie. Faster than you can say Appomattox, the Virginians surrendered their lead.

“A lot of people lost track of the innings,” said utility outfielder and designated hitter Jordan Ginsberg, ’04. “We were just focused on keeping them from getting back in the game, keeping the lead, and making it to the next inning.”

Back-to-back home runs by the U of C’s Tim Mooney, ’03, and Mark Mosier, ’04, sealed the victory. UVA, winner of twelve of the last twenty championship games and a participant in six more, quietly died on a routine infield groundout in the bottom of the last inning. Their top team’s early departure from the rain-shortened tourney represented the first time ever that UVA exited the Big Show before the semifinals. Final score: U of C 21, UVA 20.

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Chicago continued on to beat Penn in the semifinals and wrap up their first-ever championship with what ended up being, after the UVA game, an anticlimactic victory over Missouri. But the Maroons’ hot bats generated plenty of excitement throughout the day. The offensive air show came from outfielders Mosier and Mooney, two jacked-up law students whose supplies sent long balls over the fence five times each during the tournament. Mosier finished with the most runs, an impressive sixteen in nineteen at-bats, while Mooney walked away with the team batting title, a .778 average.

U of C’s defense kept the close games tight enough for the offense to surge to victory. Co-captain Brad Martinson, ’03, scored fifteen runs, and his Dirt Devil-like performance at shortstop robbed opponents of numerous easy hits. Pitcher and co-captain Chad Schafer, ’03, stoked the ball like Greg Maddux on a good day: fourteen runs on twelve singles,
two triples, and one four-bagger. On both offense and defense, outfielder Jay Richardson, '03, supplied scrappy play at odds with his shuffling gait and drawling South Carolina patois. Rangy third baseman Will Lee, '03, loped around the hot corner and scored every time he got on base save once.

Many of the Chicago students attending the Tournament had road-tripped the seven hundred miles to Charlottesville, including a few intrepid students who piloted a twenty-nine-foot RV to Virginia to serve as a mobile fan support headquarters. These diehards had only witnessed such jubilant nerd Moments in movies. Films like Revenge of the Nerds teased long-suffering bookworms with the promise that every geek would have her day. A day when the Tri-Lams would rise up, join with the Omega Mus and triumph over—no, humiliate, the beautiful and popular cheerleaders and football captains.

During the final game, spectator Mike Vermylon, '04, intoxicated with school spirit, pledged to run a shirtless circuit around the entire ballpark for every home run hit by a Chicago player. Showing nerdly solidarity, and the good sense that comes from a lifetime of being excused from physical education for medical reasons, U of C fans raised their asthma inhalers high as Vermylon began his fourth celebratory lap.