

World wiffleball power shift goes back decades

New teams, new tournaments continue to feed the plastic beast

After more than ten years, is the wiffleball power structure finally shifting?

In 2004, Club Ripped knocked off seven-time champion, the Blue Ribbon Builders, and the game would never be the same.

Over the next 12 years, Ripped joined Funky Plastic Offspring (FPO) and the Balco Boys in what would be known as the “Power Three,” a triad of Indiana teams that went on to win every world wiffleball championship between 2006 and 2015. The three teams are stacked with hall-of-famers and won ten championships between them, in what is widely considered the golden age of wiffleball.

In 2015, Clutch Players of South Bend, Indiana ended that string.

So will Clutch be the next dynasty, or is something else going on?



Clutch Players of South Bend, Ind.
2015 World Champions

The game as played in the World Wiffle®Ball Championship, was hatched in Mishawaka, Indiana in 1980. And for more than three decades, teams came from all over the country – and around the world – to test their wiffleball chops in the oldest and most prestigious tournament on the planet.

By the late 1990s, however, with the advent of the internet, the game proliferated, with tournaments and leagues exploding across the country.

When the World Wiffle®Ball Championship moved to Skokie, Illinois from Mishawaka in 2013, new tournaments immediately filled the Indiana void. Now, four organizations play a “wiffleball grand slam,” with many teams playing in multiple Northern Indiana tournaments, thereby getting more practice and more experience.



ORWBL Commissioner Koby Keck

The oldest of the group is New Carlisle, Indiana’s Old Republic Wiffleball League, which has hosted a travel league for ten years, and also runs an enormous tournament in July. The stability and popularity of Koby Keck’s operation is now turning out powerhouse teams, some that enter the World Wiffle®Ball Championship immediately ready to contend.

The roots of World Wiffle®Ball Championship-style wiffleball in New Carlisle go back nearly 20 years. Hall-of-Famer John Ardnt, whose team won the world title in

2000, hosted a tournament in his hometown in 1997 and 1998. Now, nearly two decades later, Keck’s league serves as wiffleball central in Northern Indiana and Southern Michigan.

In 2014, from that league, came a then-middling ORWBL team, the Maple City Magic, who went all the way to the World Wiffle®Ball Championship final game, giving four-time world champs, FPO, all they could handle. In 2015, league powers, the New Carlisle Newts (Keck) and the Hudson Lake Heat, joined Maple City in Skokie, all three teams advancing to Sunday, with the Newts going to the final four.

Now this is where things get really interesting. In 2016, the New Carlisle tournament's most dominant team, three-time champion, Cult West Warriors, will finally head to Skokie to take a shot at the world's finest.

But Cult West is actually no stranger to the World Wiffle®Ball Championship, as a variation of the team has been playing in the tournament for nearly 30 years.

In 1987, a team of little-known kids from South Bend Washington High School, The Westsiders, stormed all the way to the world championship game, finally getting knocked off by eventual six-time champion, Dud's Gang. On that team was Juan Balderas, who later went on to form Cult West, and whose nephew Daniel Hernandez eventually joined the team.

Hernandez, now 30, still plays for the Warriors, who are now going back to the tournament that spawned the legendary team. With three prestigious trophies in hand, Cult West looks more than ready to take on four former world championship teams, possibly bringing home the world title that has eluded the franchise since the '80s.

So, if Cult West comes in as the new power team, what about Clutch Players? The defending champs have been great for years and finally came of age last year, knocking off FPO in the final game. But this desire for teams to play wiffleball all summer (rather than just on one weekend) also makes them vulnerable. Clutch may be the first team in tournament history to actually have lost a game between World Wiffle®Ball Championship tournaments. (The #6 Warsaw Whitecats beat them in the South Bend Wifflehawk Tournament last August.)

In fact, World Wiffle®Ball Championship players are moonlighting all over the Indiana. Combinations of various teams are playing in the ORWBL – with Club Ripped, Lombard Lightning, Deuces Wild, Warsaw Whitecats and FPO players – all found on ORWBL rosters.

But the trend is actually nothing new. Tournament founders Mark Waumans, Scott Ermeti, Perry Baert, Larry Grau and Jim Bottorff, at one time or another between them, played in tournaments in Connecticut; Maryland; California; Oregon; and in Indianapolis, New Carlisle, and Seymour, Indiana; in the 1980s and '90s. Former commissioner Rich Carrasco played in tournaments in London, Ohio for years.

So what is the point to this wiffleball-gone-wild tale?

First, ORWBL and Indiana teams will clearly still be a force in this year's tournament. Second, the players and teams mentioned above (regardless of origin or era) have two things in common. 1) They play a lot of wiffleball, and 2) they tend to contend for (if not win) world championships.



Three-time New Carlisle champs, Cult West Warriors
Courtesy of their Twitter page.

And finally, the World Wiffle®Ball Championship, while no longer the only game in town, continues to serve as the wiffleball tournament tree that keeps on giving, and is a tree that it's loyal disciples keep coming back to annually, to generously water. □