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FEATURED

Hillsborough opens District 52 12s tournament with thrilling walk-off

Terry Bernal Daily Journal staff
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A rematch one year in the making certainly lived up to the hype.

In last year's District 52 Little League All-Stars 11-year-old baseball tournament championship game, San Mateo American rallied late for a 9-6 win over neighboring rival Hillsborough to win the tourney title. With both teams' rosters

advancing to the 12s tournament this season, Saturday's opening round of the 2022 District 52 tournament at Middlefield Little League Ballpark just happened to pair the two teams for a highly anticipated rematch.

And this year, Hillsborough flipped the script, rallying for two runs in the bottom of the sixth inning to celebrate a 5-4 walk-off victory over San Mateo American.

"Honestly, I will describe this game as a championship game in Game 1," San Mateo American manager Paul Witten said. "Truly, honestly, that's what it felt like."

Hillsborough won in dramatic fashion, scoring both the tying and winning run on the same play — a wild pitch allowed Dominic Barulich to score on a contested play with the American catcher retrieving the ball and throwing to the pitcher covering the plate. But the throw sailed past the pitcher, into the infield, and allowed Patrick Bala, who advanced from second to third on the wild pitch, to race home with the game-winning score.

Then mayhem as Hillsborough raced out of the dugout to maul Bala at the plate.

"They were ecstatic," Hillsborough manager Mike Chesnosky said.

Bala earned the win in relief for Hillsborough, firing 2 2/3 shutout innings. Along with reliever Ryan Duffell, the Hillsborough bullpen combined for 4 2/3 shutout innings of one-hit ball.

It was a tall task to slow the American offense, after Witten's club tallied four runs over the first two frames. In the top of the first, American jumped ahead 2-0 on RBI singles by William Folau and Nick Loew. Hillsborough answered right back in the bottom of the first, tying it with a two-run single by Barulich.

But American jumped right back ahead in the second with a pair of runs and held the lead until the game's final play.

"It was fantastic," Witten said of the game's competitive back and forth. "It was amazing. I loved everything about it outside of the outcome."

The environment was fantastic as well, with approximately 300 to 400 fans attending the opening day matchup.

While San Mateo American's home field at Trinta Park doesn't allow for fans to sit behind home plate — there's simply no place for them because of Trinta's design — the field at Middlefield Little League Ballpark is a veritable thunder dome, with fans able to view a game from nearly the entirety of the circumference of the sunken diamond.

"I thought that game was going to be a dogfight the whole way … so it was," Witten said. "It was everything I thought that game could live up to with that crazy inning."

Hillsborough scratched out a run in the bottom of the fifth to make it 4-3, with Colt Crawford drawing a bases-loaded walk to force home Charlie Dyner.

That set the stage for the wild sixth.

The wild pitch heard around Paly was a high fastball that sailed to the backstop. Barulich at third had a moment of hesitation but was still able to slide home with a hand-swipe across the plate just ahead of the catcher's throw to the pitcher covering.

"It would have been pretty close," Chesnosky said. "I think he would have been safe still, but I think it would have been close."

Bala started the play at second base and read the offline throw perfectly, never breaking stride around third base. He raced home so quickly he surprised even Barulich, who had just clapped his hands together and whipped off his helmet to celebrate when he turned around to see Bala sliding across the plate uncontested with the game-winning run.

"He just kept going," Chesnosky said. "He saw the ball was not caught, that it was overthrown, so he just kept going right on home."

Both Hillsborough and American returned a majority of their rosters from last year's 11s groups. Each team has just two new additions, with the rest of the rosters intact. Chesnosky said he wouldn't be surprised if this year's championship round

pits Hillsborough and American in (yet another) rematch of last year's 11s championship.

"Very well could," Chesnosky said. "I believe it's definitely a possibility. They definitely have strength in pitching. … So, I can definitely see them coming back. They definitely came out swinging the bats well in the beginning. And we were just fortunate … we were able to work out of a couple jams."

Hillsborough now advances through the winners' bracket to face San Carlos 6:30 p.m. at Palo Alto Little League.

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