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FEATURED

Hillsborough wins wild District 52 All-Stars 10s championship final

Terry Bernal Daily Journal staff
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They've really got to start handing out vomit bags at these things.

The District 52 Little League All-Stars 10s tournament ended with a pulse-pounding, stomach-churning championship finale. Fittingly, after Hillsborough navigated the elimination bracket with five wins in five days, the boys dubbed

“Hills” by their strong hometown contingent of fans rallied for a roller coaster 12-6 win over San Mateo National in the if-necessary championship finale Tuesday at Fairway Park.

Hills did the one thing neither team seemed to be able to do. In a game that saw six different half innings end with the bases loaded, three by each team, it was Hillsborough who finally came through, calling upon WD-40 — the nickname of left-handed slugger Will Duffell, who wears No. 40 — to clean up.

“You could just feel the momentum shift,” Hillsborough manager Chase Rowbotham said. “That was it. I mean, that was the play.”

Trailing 5-2 in the fourth, Hillsborough got a spark to start the inning on a hard ground ball by Ivan Grizelj to the left side of the infield. The grounder took a vicious hop, shot over the glove of shortstop Jackson Bottani, and carried all the way to the outfield wall for a leadoff triple. After Gianni Marrone executed a squeeze bunt to drive home Grizelj, Hillsborough loaded the bases with a walk to Colton Kreauzkamp, a single by Nico DeMartini and a walk to Jack Veach.

Then Duffell stepped to the plate and came through in grand style, roping a line drive down the right-field line for an inside-the-park grand slam home run.





Hillsborough's Will 'WD-40' Duffell cleans up a bases-loaded rally with a grand slam to give his team a 7-5 lead in the fourth.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

Hillsborough scored five more runs in the fifth inning, sending 12 batters to the plate with Duffell capping the rally with a bases-loaded walk to force home Kreuzkamp. Duffell reached base in all four of his plate appearances, going 2 for 2 with two walks and five RBIs.

"So close, so far; so close, so far; and the kids just didn't quit," Chase Rowbotham said. "That's all you can ask for. Things were not going our way, and we battled, we took pitches, we took bases. And when you play good baseball, it will eventually come your way."

The back-and-forth started in the first inning, with Hillsborough jumping ahead 2-0 in the top of the frame. Kung drilled a two-out, two-run single to left to score Duffell and Finn Rowbotham. But in the bottom of the inning, National fired back to take a 3-2 lead, with a game-tying two-run double by Nick Bosick, followed by a bases-loaded RBI walk by Ronan Hannon.

Then, National set a dubious trend in motion by leaving the bases loaded. They'd strand the bases full in the second inning as well, and again in the fifth, stranding 12 baserunners throughout.

"Obviously it's tough when that happens," San Mateo National coach Gary Falzon said. "You leave those opportunities on the table. But you tip your cap to Hillsborough, they made the pitches when they needed to, and they made the plays to get them out of the inning."

Hillsborough had its troubles as well, leaving the bases loaded in the second, the third and the fifth, while also stranding 12 baserunners in the game.

It was two innings in which National didn't strand the bases loaded that loomed

large though. Hillsborough starting pitcher Jack Snethen worked just 1 1/3 inning, but Kung entered in relief and turned in his finest outing of the tournament, working into the sixth inning to total 4 1/3 innings to earn the win. It was Kung who recorded the only 1-2-3 inning of the game in the third inning, then finished the fourth with a pivotal ground ball double play.

“I was just going to go as long as my arm kept feeling well,” Kung said. “As long as I was throwing strikes. So, I just wanted to stay in there and keep pitching.”



Hillsborough pitcher Colton Kung readies to pitch with his ‘Superman’ pose, done to set the ball in his hand properly.
Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

Kung has an unconventional posture in readying himself to pitch, straddling the rubber with his hands on his hips to set his grip on the baseball before coming set and delivering. The pose bears an uncanny resemblance to Superman’s arms akimbo. And he certainly proved worthy of the Superman comparison during a fifth inning at-bat when he got hit in the helmet on a play that helped set the table for the five-run landslide to follow.

Kung not only remained in the game but pitched another 1 2/3 innings from there.

“It was kind of painful for a little because it was just burning, it felt like,” said Kung, who was left cringing because the ball knocked his helmet loose, scraping his ear. “But it got better after we scored more runs.”

National entered the day with some pitching woes. After Hillsborough’s 7-1 win Monday in the championship-round opener, National manager Dave Fuata was left with three unavailable pitchers due to pitch-count rules — Bottani, Hannon and left-handed ace Caleb Fuata.

Hillsborough was in a similar predicament, with Kung saving the day by bridging the bullpen.

“He’s probably our No. 5 pitcher,” Chase Rowbotham said. “And that’s what happens when you go through the losers’ bracket. Your 1, your 2, your 3, they’re done. And now you’re relying on your fifth pitcher at the end ... and they were incredible. They didn’t wilt in the moment. They could have, and the moment wasn’t too big for them.”

Kung’s biggest moment was in the fourth. After Hillsborough had just taken a 7-5 lead in the top of the inning, National threatened with a leadoff walk by Dominic Galea and a one-out single by Bottani, with the runners moving to second and third on the play. With Fuata stepping to the plate representing the go-ahead run, Hillsborough opted to intentionally walk him to load the bases.

Casey Armstrong then stepped to the plate and hit a sizzling groundball toward the middle, but with the Finn Rowbotham shading that way, the shortstop was able to range toward his left, scoop up the hard grounder near second and step on the bag to throw to first for an inning-ending double play.

“We look like geniuses,” Chase Rowbotham said. “Caleb Fuata is a heck of a player. We walk him. We didn’t want to let him beat us. We looked better than we should, but it just worked out and Finn turned the double play. That was probably the second biggest play of the game. ... We got a little lucky, let’s be honest.”

Tommy Jacobson finished off the game in relief, recording a strikeout to wrap up Hillsborough's unlikely run to a District 52 banner.

"It means a lot because we did not win a banner since 2018," Duffell said.

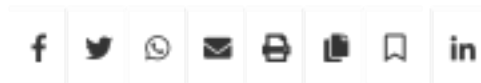
Hillsborough was battle tested, opening its five-day run through the elimination bracket with a stunning 11-7 win over Half Moon Bay. Hillsborough was trailing 7-6 in the game and was down to its final out before rallying back to take the lead on a bases-loaded, three-run double by Finn Rowbotham.

"We were one out from not being here," Chase Rowbotham said. "So, we got some breaks, obviously. You need some luck in these things, but it was fantastic. I'm so proud of these kids."

And the kids celebrated accordingly.

"It's amazing," Finn Rowbotham said. "I'm really happy that we won this, but we worked really hard, and I think we deserved it."

Hillsborough now advances to the Section 3 All-Stars tournament, hosted by District 57 in Alameda County, opening Saturday, July 15 at 10 a.m.



Terry Bernal, Daily Journal staff