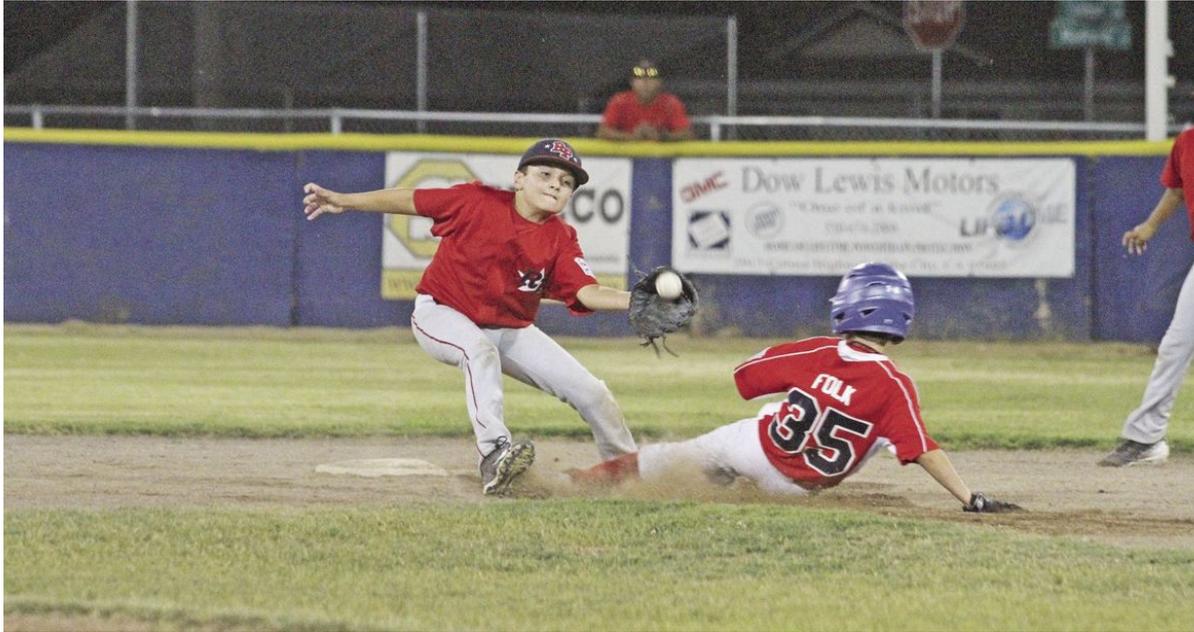


FEATURED

Hillsborough falls in Northern California 9-10s championship game

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff Jul 31, 2017 Updated 5 hrs ago



SUTTER — Hillsborough had one last comeback in them. But it wasn't enough.

After falling behind six runs in the first inning, Hillsborough rallied to tie it before a heartbreaking final inning in the Northern California Little League 9-10s All-Star Championship Tournament title game Saturday night at Sutter Baseball Field.

River Park of Fresno rallied for four runs in the top of the sixth to score a 10-7 victory to claim the Nor Cal banner, making Hillsborough the runner-up in the second Little League age bracket of 2017. The Hillsborough 10-11s All-Stars also claimed the runner-up station earlier in the week.

“I’m so proud of these kids,” Hillsborough manager Ben Coughlin said. “Again we were down early; that’s three nights in a row. And we were running on fumes a little bit ... but it gave other kids a chance to step up.”

The biggest impact to Hillsborough’s personnel was the loss of one of its best players. A day after injuring his foot — but attempting to play through it Friday in a 4-0 win over River Park to set up Saturday’s winner-take-all “what-if” game — Anakin Manuel was placed on the injured list and was not even able to attend Saturday’s Little League All-Star finale.

Not only did Hillsborough lose its No. 3 hitter, Manuel would have been Saturday's starting pitcher. Instead, Ben Coughlin turned to right-hander Beau Schaffer, who previously hadn't thrown more than four innings in a game this summer, working primarily in relief.

"I told the team we could win it for Anakin and we still had a chance," Schaffer said.

The right-hander stepped up for a quality outing, hurling a season-best five innings while surrendering just six first-inning runs, all of them unearned. The shockwaves of losing Manuel more affected the infield defense as Schaffer and Manuel have platooned at shortstop all summer. With Manuel out and Schaffer on the mound, Hillsborough was forced to field an untested infield.

"It had a lot of implications," Ben Coughlin said. "Pretty much the entire infield was shifted."

And it was back-to-back infield errors to start the game that opened the floodgates for River Park. With two on and one out, River Park cleanup hitter Camden Estrada shot an RBI single to center to get his team on the board. Then starting pitcher Carson Tatsumura, before ever throwing a pitch, launched a three-run homer to center. River Park sent 10 batters to the plate, scoring twice more to take a 6-0 lead.

Schaffer settled in though, finishing the night with four straight scoreless innings. At one point he set down seven straight, starting with a smooth double play by shortstop Nate Coughlin on a bouncer over the middle in the third. And in the bottom of the third, it was Nate Coughlin and Schaffer who started chipping away at the River Park lead.

Tatsumura was nails the first time through the Hillsborough batting order. The big right-hander would strike out six through 3 2/3 innings of work. After he walked Nate Coughlin with one out in the third, he still had no-hitter in tact.

"He was just hitting his spots throwing fastballs," Schaffer said.

Then Schaffer connected with one of those fastballs. Having hit in the cleanup spot in every game previous this season, until moving up to the No. 3 spot Saturday to replace Manuel, Schaffer showed his middle-of-the-order power with a towering two-run home run well over the wall in right-center.

Then in the fourth, Hillsborough capitalized on a glut of River Park errors to tie it up. The comeback rally started with two outs when Ryan Schoup drew a walk to knock Tatsumura out of the game. Then, as the first batter facing the River Park bullpen, No. 9 hitter Jack Callen proved a quick study for a clutch two-strike single to left.

Callen had struck out the previous inning, swinging through a high-and-away fastball. When he was facing a two-strike count in the fourth, he figured River Park would stay consistent to that approach.

“I was pretty sure because in the last inning I got a strikeout with the same pitch,” Callen said. “So, I knew maybe they were going fastball outside. So, I just went for it.”

As has been the case throughout the Northern California tournament, the bottom of the Hillsborough turned over the batting order effectively. Schoup and Callen were the first two of six straight batters to reach base in the inning.

“I don’t think you can get too deep in these tournaments without everybody making a contribution,” Ben Coughlin said. “Those things matter. And we saw that.”

Nate Coughlin and Nate Drake then reached on back-to-back infield errors, each pushing a run across. River Park opted to issue an intentional walk to Schaffer to load the bases. Then cleanup hitter Devin Saltzgaber hit a popup into shallow right field that the River Park second baseman jogged under but dropped, allowing two runs to score to tie it 6-6.

A scoreless fifth set the stage for a dramatic conclusion to this year’s Nor Cal tourney. And Hillsborough came within inches of making an amazing diving catch to put itself in the driver’s seat.

Facing Hillsborough’s bullpen in the sixth, River Park had two on with one out when Matted Martinez lifted a sinking blooper to shallow right. Schoup, the Hillsborough right fielder, got a good jump on it and went into a knee-slide with a valiant attempt at a diving catch, which would have been an easy inning-ending double play as the base runners were on the move. The ball, though, short-hopped him, hit his glove and trickled away, allowing the go-ahead run to score. Then, after a walk to load the bases, Tatsumura capped a 2-for-4, six-RBI performance with a bases-clearing, three-run double.

In the bottom of the frame, Nate Coughlin tried to spark another comeback with an exquisite one-out bunt single. With two outs, Schaffer drove him home with a RBI triple. But, after working the count full, Saltzgaber grounded out to end it.

“We came close,” Ben Coughlin said. “We didn’t quite get it done but it’s been an unbelievable ride.”

Hillsborough’s 9-10s summer player roster in its entirety:
Logan Burns, Jack Callen, Nate Coughlin, Ryan Drake, Collin Firestone, Quinn Folk, Will Hirsch, Luke Levitt, Anakin Manuel, Ian McMahon, Dillon Moss, Devin Saltzgaber, Beau Schaffer and Ryan Schoup.