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FEATURED

Hillsborough fires shutout in District 52 Little League All-Stars 10s opener

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Hillsborough Little League has a real-life Amanda Whurlitzer.

Four pitchers combined for a shutout as Hillsborough claimed a 7-0 victory over Redwood City in the opener of the District 52 Little League All-Stars 10s tournament Saturday at Ford Field. While Jack Veach, Mico DeMartini and Charlie Willard each had their time to shine, it was right-hander Caroline Gherini who stole the show.

Bearing and uncanny resemblance to ace pitcher Amanda Whurlitzer from the classic 1976 movie “The Bad News Bears,” Gherini fired 2 1/3 innings of scoreless relief. And her devastating curveball, which she used to record each of her four strikeouts, was bad news for the Redwood City All-Stars.

“I feel like I pitched probably one of my best games,” Gherini said. “I thought I dealt today. I liked my curveball.”

It was Gherini’s first time setting foot on Ford Field — Alpine Little League’s home yard in Portola Valley — but she had been to the park before. It was seven years ago when the now 10-year-old attended a Little League All-Star game there to watch her cousin Henry Chastain play. That’s where she caught the baseball bug, and she’s been playing ever since she was old enough to join her first T-ball team.

“The thing about Caroline is when she was a little baby, she was seeing her cousins playing baseball, and she started playing baseball and it’s all she’s ever wanted to do,” said John Gherini, Hillsborough’s manager and also Caroline Gherini’s father. “So, she absolutely loves it.”

With each team using four pitchers, Caroline Gherini shouldered the biggest workload of any of them.

Redwood City pitched Matthew Meredith, Eli Totah, Zach Nakanishi and Ben Dalrymple, who all relied on ground balls to pitch through jams in every inning. Hillsborough ultimately stranded 11 baserunners, while Redwood City rolled the dice by playing the infield in every time Hillsborough loaded the bases. The Redwood City

defense — highlighted by Meredith at shortstop, Totah and Matthew Larsen at second base, and Charlie Trester and Erik Burkett at catcher — went on to record a remarkable five force outs at home plate.



Redwood City catcher Charlie Trester makes the putout of Hillsborough baserunner Mike Sakai at home plate in the third inning.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

“To see that, and see the kids — and we’ve practiced it and practiced — and to see it actually happen ... it saved five runs,” Redwood City manager John Dalrymple said. “So, for me ... that’s was one of the biggest bright spots of the day.”

Hillsborough got on the board in the first with Leo Matteucci getting a pinball-wizard RBI single — hitting a sharp comeback off the pitcher’s glove, that redirected and glanced off the shortstop’s glove on the way into center field — to drive home Veach.

Then in the second inning, Hillsborough turned to Caroline Gherini with one runner on and two outs. The right-hander was immediately greeted with a double to deep left field by Matty Brennan. The Hillsborough reliever bounced back to get her first strikeout of the day on a big, bending curveball to strand runners at second and third.

“I feel like my curveballs really dropped well,” Caroline Gherini said. “And I’ve been working on it for a long time. ... My dad taught me a few years ago, but I never really got the hang of it dropping. So, it was kind of just this year when it became my weapon at 0-2, 1-2.”

The Hillsborough offense gave its pitchers some breathing room in the third, sending nine batters to the plate for a three-run rally. Drew Kettmann led off with a single and Mason Dow followed with a walk. Then No. 13 batter Bryant Lien — one of Hillsborough’s twin-brother tandem, along with Brady Lien — executed a textbook bunt, and motored to first for an infield single to load the bases.

“They actually are very good contact hitters, but they’re a tough strike zone because they’re small,” John Gherini said. “We’ve been working on that play to put in a bunt for them, because it’s just an added weapon that they have. And it was really fun that Bryant was able to execute it in a big spot like that.”

Mike Sakai cashed in with the bases loaded, flipping a two-run single to right field. DeMartini got hit by a pitch to reload the bases, and Veach singled home Bryant Lien to give Hillsborough a 4-0 lead. It could have been worse though, as Redwood City gunned down two straight runners at the plate, with the reliever Nakanishi battling to strand the bases loaded.

After Hillsborough loaded the bases once again in the fourth, Redwood City forced out another runner at the plate. That’s when baserunner Momo Lubarksy took matters into his own hands during the following at-bat, taking off for the plate when Redwood City’s catcher threw the ball back to the pitcher to steal home with a stunning sneak attack. It would be the only run Hillsborough scored in the inning.

In the fifth, Hillsborough plated two more. Bryant Lien opened the inning with a sharp single. He’d later score on an RBI by DeMartini. Veach then reached on an infield single and, after Redwood City forced out two more runners at the plate for the first two outs of the inning, Veach scored on a wild pitch to cap the day’s scoring.



Hillsborough cleanup batter Dylan Viera connects Saturday at Ford Field.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

Redwood City sparked a two-out rally in its final at-bat in the sixth, when Burkett hustled on an infield grounder to extend the game on a Hillsborough error. Totah and Nakanishi followed with back-to-back singles to load the bases.

“We needed it,” John Dalrymple said. “We needed a spark. And that’s the one thing. We were looking for a spark all day. We just didn’t have it, and there was a couple things that happened in that last inning that sparked us up.”

Willard closed it out, though, inducing a fly ball to center field to strand the bases loaded.

Veach, DeMartini and Willard all stayed under the 20-pitch threshold, meaning they will all be available to pitch when Hillsborough takes the field Sunday in its second-round game against Pacifica.

“I think our pitching was outstanding,” John Gherini said. “That was really how we drew it up, to have Jack Veach start the game and set up the tone for us by throwing a lot of strikes and keeping hitters off balance. And our intent was save him in the event we advanced, so once he got to 20 pitches we went to Caroline, and she’s been a workhorse for us all year.

“She throws a lot of strikes and can really change speeds and is really effective,” he said. “She got a lot of key strikeouts after she gave up a couple hits. So, I’m super proud of how she stuck in it. And then we’ve got the backend, Mico DeMartini and Charlie Willard just pumping hard and throwing strikes.”

The 11-team bracket continues Sunday with four games at Ford Field beginning at 9 a.m. Hillsborough, Half Moon Bay and San Mateo American each advanced through the the winners’ bracket Saturday, with Redwood City, San Carlos and Menlo-Atherton each falling to the elimination bracket. Belmont-Redwood Shores, San Mateo National, Palo Alto, Alpine and Pacifica each received first-round byes.



Terry Bernal, Daily Journal staff

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