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## A championship rally

July 11, 2009, 12:00 AM By Nathan Mollat, Daily Journal Staff

The District 52 Majors All-Star tournament was all but set to advance to a Saturday, winner-take-all finale between Hillsborough and Half Moon Bay.

Half Moon Bay, which lost to Hillsborough Sunday, came through the loser's bracket and had Hillsborough's collective backs to the wall Friday evening at the Belmont Sports Complex. Half Moon Bay led 5-4 in the top of the sixth inning and were one strike away from beating Hillsborough, which needed to be beaten twice to be denied the title.

Instead, Hillsborough rallied for five runs in the top of the sixth, capped by a Nick Franco three-run shot over the left-field fence to take a 9-5 lead. Hillsborough ended the game in the bottom of the sixth with a double play and the celebration began.

"Unbelievable," said Hillsborough coach Ken Kammuller. "There is no die in these kids. This is such a team. I'm thrilled for them."

For Half Moon Bay, it was a quick and sudden end to its season.

"They're a little stunned. I think we'll have to debrief over the next couple of days," said Half Moon Bay coach Jennifer Freeman. "We've never not won district with this group."

While Half Moon Bay Little League has had a nice run over the last couple of years, Hillsborough has been a juggernaut. A Hillsborough team was in the 9-10, 10-11 and Majors (11-12) tournament championship this year and it's the second year in a row a Hillsborough club has won the Majors title.

Unlike last year when Hillsborough left no doubt which team was the best, this year's team had to work for the win. Hillsborough scored two runs in the top of the first Friday, without benefit of a hit as Half Moon Bay starting pitcher Sam Vaughn struggled to find the strike zone. Gordon Barrows and Ryan Ward had back-to-back walks to start the game and both moved up on wild pitches and Hillsborough took a 1-0 on an Eric Whitfield sacrifice fly to center. Ward would eventually score on a wild pitch.

Half Moon Bay responded with four runs in the bottom of the first. With one out, Cody Dexter walked and Josh McKnight reached on an error, bringing cleanup hitter Rico Nuño to the plate. On the first pitch he saw, he crushed the ball high over the center-field for a three-run homer. There was no doubt the ball was gone off his bat and the Hillsborough center fielder just turned and watched it go.

Following a popout, Zane Gelpman came to the plate and drilled a line drive over the fence in left field to put Half Moon Bay up 4-2.

Hillsborough, however, clawed its way back into the game. It cut the deficit to 4-3 in the second inning when Ryan Kammuller drew a one-out walk, went to second on an infield hit and eventually scored when Ward drew a bases-loaded walk. Hillsborough tied it in the third when Billy Funkhouser smacked a one-out double to the gap in right-center field and scored on a Kammuller single to left.

After Half Moon Bay's initial offensive outburst, Hillsborough's Ward settled down on the mound. He gave up only one more run the rest of the way — a Colton Gonsalves solo home run in the fourth that gave Half Moon Bay a 5-4 lead — but Ward did an admirable job limiting Half Moon Bay. He allowed only three hits over his final four innings of work after giving up three in the first inning alone. Reliever Whitfield came in to pitch the sixth and gave up hit before earning the victory.

"Gritty," was how coach Kammuller described Ward's outing. "This (Half Moon Bay) is a tough team. He didn't get down after getting roughed up in the first inning."

It appeared everything was going Half Moon Bay's way, however. With the score tied at 4 in the top of the fourth, Hillsborough drew three consecutive walks to load the bases with no outs, ending the day for starting pitcher Vaughn. Josh McKnight came in to relieve him and promptly got out of the inning without allowing a run. He struck out two of the three batters and got a popout to the second baseman.

Half Moon Bay then got Gonsalves' homer in the bottom of the frame to take the lead.

It appeared it would be enough with the way McKnight was throwing. He retired the first eight batters he faced before walking Ward on a 3-2 pitch with two outs in the sixth.

That's when the Hillsborough fireworks began. Whitfield singled and Brenden Barrows followed with a single up the middle to drive in Ward with the tying run.

It appeared Half Moon Bay would get out of the inning without any further damage when Funkhouser hit a comebacker to the pitcher. But in his haste to throw the runner out at first, he fumbled the ball. Funkhouser was safe at first and Whitfield slid home with the go-ahead run.

With the error fresh in the minds of Half Moon Bay, Franco came to the plate and all but ended Half Moon Bay's hopes with his three-run bomb.

"We knew today was the hard one. Our top two pitchers weren't available," Freeman said. "Ultimately, it was the little things that changed the game. We just didn't do the little things right."



Nathan Mollat / Daily Journal The Hillsborough dugout celebrates Nick Franco's three-run home run in the top of the sixth inning as Hillsborough rallied for five runs in the sixth to beat Half Moon Bay 9-5 and win the District 52 Majors championship.



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