

FEATURED

San Carlos Majors win game for the ages

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff Jul 1, 2019



PALO ALTO — It was as good a Little League baseball game as you're ever going to see.

Hillsborough and San Carlos, longtime rivals on the District 52 Little League All-Star circuit, squared off in the Majors Tournament in an elimination game on a pressure-filled Sunday at Mitchell Park.

It was a day characterized by pitching brilliance and defensive gems. And while the two teams combined to strand 10 base runners throughout, the game remained deadlocked amid a scoreless tie heading into the final regulation at-bat in the bottom of the sixth inning.

“I’ve been in baseball for a long, long time,” San Carlos manager Mike Zirelli said. “Still, today was one of the most intense games I’ve ever been a part of.”

Four batters later, the San Carlos All-Stars were jumping about the infield in celebration, reveling in a 1-0 walk-off victory, and the most noteworthy of their three years of District 52 play. In two previous seasons — first at the 9-10s level, then last year at 10-11s — Hillsborough had beaten them both times.

This year, San Carlos turned the tables. It was Logan Mathias who scorched an infield grounder with a runner at third and two outs. Hillsborough’s infielder picked it clean and had time to throw out San Carlos’ catcher, but the throw sailed wide, Clay Hinsdale scored from third base with the winning run, and Mathias, after running through the bag at first, turned to his dugout and yawped: “Let’s go!”

Mathias, in turn, was mobbed by his teammates on the infield.

“I felt so relieved,” said Ian Josephson, the winning pitcher for San Carlos, “because we’ve been trying to beat those guys since we were 8 (including non-District 52 games on the travel-ball circuit). So, it felt like 50 pounds lifted off our shoulders.”

On the other side of the field was a heartbreaking scene as Hillsborough manager Ben Coughlin rushed to console his player who made the error. As the other Hillsborough players, many of them stunned, looked on toward the San Carlos celebration, Coughlin embraced the infielder, with his face in his glove, deflated in the middle of the diamond.

“I told [him] I loved him,” Coughlin said. “I told him: ‘You’ve been an incredible player for us. This doesn’t define you. You’ve been a great player.’”

It’s a wonder how the game had remained scoreless to that point. Heading into the sixth inning, only twice had the side been set down in order, once by each side. In the top of the sixth, Josephson again retired the side in order to get his team back in the dugout, though the right-hander did set down 12 of the last 13 batters he faced while working four innings.

Josephson would not have kept that streak intact, however, if not for an extraordinary defensive play by center fielder Tyler Webster.

With one on and one out in the top of the fifth, Hillsborough batter Will Hirsch tattooed a drive to deep center. Off the bat, the shot looked like it had a chance to clear the fence just left of straightaway center and, at the least, as though it would land well over Webster's head to score a run.

"[Webster's] straight-line speed is ridiculous," Zirelli said, "and he showed it off on that play."

With a quick first step, adept concentration, a fearless approach as he neared the warning track and great closing speed, Webster chased down the towering drive, snagging it at the top of the webbing.

"What a catch," Coughlin said. "Good hit, better catch."

Hillsborough navigated through plenty of pressure spots of its own. Starting pitcher Beau Schaffer got off to a rough start as the first two San Carlos batters of the day reached base. Davis Minton started with an infield single and Rocco Loskutoff followed with a double over the first-base bag to put runners at second and third.

Then Schaffer went right through the heart of the beast, setting down San Carlos' No. 3, 4 and 5 batters with an infield pop-out and two strikeouts to strand both base runners.

In the fourth, Hillsborough escaped more peril. Josephson led off the inning for San Carlos with a double into the left-field corner. Zack Zirelli followed with a grounder to the right side of the infield, but Hillsborough second baseman Nate Coughlin alertly threw across the infield to peg pinch-runner Charlie Fulton at third.

Then in the bottom of the fifth, on the heels of his defensive gem in center, Webster led off the inning with a booming double to left. Hillsborough reliever Devin Saltzgaber struck out the next two batters. Loskutoff followed with a single right through the wickets of Saltzgaber and into center, but Hillsborough hustled the ball back in to catch Webster in a rundown between third and home.

"I knew we had a chance at getting him," Hillsborough catcher Collin Firestone said. "But I wasn't sure we were going to get him."

Firestone ultimately swiped a tag at home plate to get Webster for the third out of the inning.

Loskutoff and Josephson led all batters with two hits apiece. Hillsborough totaled four hits in the game.

This group of Hillsborough players had never lost a game in District 52 play prior to this season. In 2017, they won the District 52 9-10s championship, and did the same last year in 10-11s. This year, they were knocked into the elimination bracket June 23 by Palo Alto. They went on to win three straight elimination games and posted a 4-2 record in the tournament.

“I’m very proud of the boys,” Ben Coughlin said. “They’ve been battling hard the last few days, and battling hard for the last few years. San Carlos is a great baseball team, and a great team in our district. And today was just a great Little League baseball game.”

With the win, San Carlos advances to the elimination bracket finals Monday to face San Mateo American at Mitchell Field in Palo Alto at 5:30 p.m. The winner of that game will advance to the championship round starting Tuesday to face San Mateo National.