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After lost season, San Mateo American wins District 52 Intermediate title

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff
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2020 was supposed to be the year for San Mateo American.

After taking runner-up honors in the 2019 Northern California Little League All-Star Tournament in the 10-11-year-old division, San Mateo American went into 2020 gearing up for a potential run at South Williamsport, Pennsylvania and the Little League World Series.

American, of course, never got that chance. The 2020 Little League season was canceled, the lost year of the coronavirus pandemic claiming another victim.

“I was pretty sad because I really wanted to play that season,” San Mateo American outfielder Oscar Osuna said, “because we had a better team than [2019] and I knew we were going to go farther than the year before.”

This season, American returns to the diamond in what would have been its 2020 incarnation. In doing so, they made quick work of the District 52 All-Stars Intermediate bracket, wrapping up the District 52 championship Thursday night with an 11-3 victory over Hillsborough at Red Morton Park.

With 11 players on roster, American stormed through the winner’s bracket, starting with a 3-2 win over Redwood City last Saturday followed by a 7-0 victory Monday over Hillsborough to advance to the championship round. Monday’s win was the highlight of the tournament as Archer Horn and Riley Lim combined for a no-hitter, with Horn striking out 16 batters through six innings of work.

Horn didn’t play for American during the Nor Cal run of 2019, but was one of three players manager Jason Gordon added in 2020 to add depth for a potential run at South Williamsport. Lim and shortstop Sean Kelly were also brought aboard.

“We don’t usually put a team like this together for our Intermediate division,” Gordon said. “But the reason we did was to give these guys a chance to play together one more time. They deserve it. Hopefully we can keep it going for a few more weeks.”

Horn and outfielder Charlie Platz were unavailable for action Thursday, leaving American with a nine-man roster. Gordon said the team will return its full 11-man roster for the Section 3 Regional tournament starting Friday, July 1 in Castro Valley.

With Horn and Platz out of action Thursday, Osuna stepped up for a big performance. Osuna didn’t start either of American’s previous games and had recorded just one at-bat prior to Thursday. But he made up for it by reaching base in all four of his plate appearances, including an RBI double in the second to give American the lead.

“I’m really proud of Oscar because the first two games he was on the bench and only got one at-bat,” Gordon said. “We were down to nine players tonight. So, he got his chance. Good for him, he took advantage of it.”

With the game tied 1-1, Osuna stepped to the plate with one on and one out and jumped on a first-pitch fastball from Hillsborough starting pitcher Kai Watanabe to drive an RBI double to left field.

“In my mind, when I was on deck, I said I was going to swing first pitch and see how far the ball goes,” Osuna said. “So, I did it.”

Hugo Guzman followed with a bunt single, Xavier Ruiz sent a sacrifice fly to right field, and Chase Gordon reached on an infield error to score Guzman, giving

American a 4-1 lead. They'd add two runs in the third and five more in the seventh to put the championship victory on ice.

Right-hander Sean Tam earned the win for American, working four-plus innings, allowing one run on one hit while striking out seven. His only blemish on the scoreboard was in the first inning when Hillsborough leadoff man Jack Callen led off with a walk, stole second and third base, and waltzed home on a throwing error by the American catcher.

Tam and American reliever Chase Gordon combined for 11 strikeouts, seven of them looking. Hillsborough pitchers Wantanabe, Callen and Ben Salama faired even better with the Ks, totaling 13 punch-outs, six of them looking.

Wantanabe started both games against American for Hillsborough, and also had a big home run in Wednesday's elimination bracket semifinal, a 10-0 win over Alpine.

"I'm very proud of his composure when he's on the mound," Hillsborough manager John Gherini said. "He's very difficult to rattle and is just a real bulldog out there. So, I'm really proud of how he pitched this year."

Salama came within a strike of striking out the side in each of the three innings he worked. Despite yielding five runs in the seventh, he still recorded eight straight outs via the punch-out before Kelly made the final out of the seventh, flying out to right on a 0 ball, 2 strike offering.

"Ben is one of our top elite pitchers," Gherini said. "Especially at this distance, his velocity is top notch for any of the team. He throws a lot of strikes and really gives us a chance to win every time he goes out there. So, I'm really proud of his effort."

Callen and Tony Sekelj picked up the only two hits of the night for Hillsborough.

“I’m really proud of the way the boys played in this tournament and especially today,” Gherini said. “The competition was really great, and I take my hat off to San Mateo American for how well they play the game. They are definitely deserving of advancing. We came out and we were ready to go today, and we just didn’t have enough power to get past ’em.”

Each of American’s starting nine reached base. Guzman recorded the only multi-hit game, going 2 for 2 with two walks, while reaching base in all four of his plate appearances.

The Intermediate division — featuring a larger diamond with 50 feet between the pitching mound and home plate, and 70 feet between bases — may not be as glamorous as the 11-12s division, but American is looking forward to making a run at the Section 3 title nonetheless.

Still, it took the team a lot of time to digest the lost season of 2020.

“I think we would have been pretty tough,” Gordon said. “I think what everyone saw here, especially some of the pitchers we ran out, that we would have been pretty damn hard to beat. We cried for it for a year, now it’s time to start playing again.”

