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FEATURED

From the Daily Journal archives

Alpine 9-10s claims District 52 Little League All-Stars banner

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff  
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From the moment Alpine pitcher Brandon Sweeney rubbed up the baseball prior to the start of the District 52 Little League All-Stars 9-10s Tournament championship

game, it was clear the right-hander was going to be a force to be reckoned with.

Brandon Sweeney continued Alpine's run of pitching dominance through the tournament, fronting a 4-0 victory over Hillsborough as Alpine claimed the District 52 9-10s championship banner Sunday morning at Ford Field. The one-hitter was the fourth shutout in five tournament games for the boys from Portola Valley.

Hillsborough starting pitcher Cole Callen matched zeroes with Brandon Sweeney for three innings. But in the fourth, Alpine pinch-hitter Amit Garg produced a bases-loaded triple to break the scoreless tie.

"They were fired up because they knew our pitchers were on," Alpine manager Ryan Sweeney said. "Once we got a couple runs across and they put a crooked number on the board, we felt like we were in a good spot to close the game out."

Brandon Sweeney worked 4 2/3 innings before reaching the 75-pitch maximum, with right-hander Jake Scott entering to close out the victory. Alpine utilized the same one-two pitching punch in its winners' bracket semifinal win last Friday over San Carlos.

And with the two flip-flopping positions between the mound and second base, Brandon Sweeney had one of the best views in the park as Scott fielded a short chopper in front of the mound and fired to first base for the final out of the tournament.

"I totally thought Jake was going to strike him out," Brandon Sweeney said. "But then when he put it in play, I was kind of shocked. And my first reaction was to go celebrate."

The expectation for strikeouts is understandable. Alpine's duo of pitching aces racked up 12 strikeouts Sunday through six regulation innings.

Brandon Sweeney — with his man-of-a-thousand-faces act, flashing various dramatic expressions at hitters just before releasing the ball, from mouth wide open, to tongue sticking out, to Bela Lugosi eyes — was nails to the bottom of the strike zone with a menacing downward tilt on his fastball in totaling nine punch-outs.



The many faces of Alpine pitcher Brandon Sweeney, who worked 4 2/3 shutout innings in the District 52 9-10s title game Sunday at Ford Field.

“He was just efficient, that’s what you need,” Ryan Sweeney said. “Not walking batters is the most important thing. Keeping them off the bases, they pitched a really good game.”

Alpine's pitchers allowed just four base-runners in the game — two by way of errors — including a second-inning hit by Robert Ramirez and one walk.

Callen was fairly efficient through the first three frames as well. Hillsborough's right-hander pitched through trouble in the first inning. After Wyatt Weiss led off with a single and Brandon Sweeney got hit by a pitch, Callen went on to retire the next nine batters in a row. That includes a smooth, clutch play by shortstop Tayden Flores to end the first inning to keep Alpine off the board.

“We played really well today,” Hillsborough manager John Gall “Alpine had the one big hit that broke it open. But I thought defensively, we made some really great plays. It was a well-played game by both teams.”



Hillsborough shortstop Tayden Flores makes a throw across the diamond at Ford Field.

That one big hit was a game-changer. And it came from an unlikely hero, as Garg recorded just one previous hit in the tournament.

It has been quite an odyssey for Garg this season. The right-handed hitting power threat missed the first four weeks with his regular-season Fogarty squad after breaking his wrist test-driving a new bike. He did return to play enough games to qualify for the All-Stars squad, though, and even notched two triples for Fogarty.

Then during a batting practice session Saturday, he put on a power show to move up the Alpine depth chart.

“He was roping the ball,” Ryan Sweeney said. “Absolutely destroying it in practice. And he was going to be our first guy off the bench today. And the situation came up where it was time for us to make some subs, we had bases loaded; there was no hesitation on our part to put him in there.”



Alpine set the table with some serious small ball in the fourth. Scott drew a leadoff walk. Then Anders Cahill and Beau Cassell reached on back-to-back bunt singles to load the bases.



Alpine's Anders Cahill legs out a bunt single in the fourth inning Sunday in the District 52 9-10s championship game.

Callen bounced back with a strikeout — one of his six on the day — but that set the stage for Garg, who stepped to the plate and quickly worked the count to 3 balls, 0 strikes. Callen poured the next pitch in for a strike. But the next offering was across the letters, and Garg jumped on it, hammering it into the left field corner to send all three Alpine base runners racing home.

“I was just trying to hit the ball hard,” Garg said.

With two outs, Alpine added an insurance run when Weiss shot a single to left to drive home Garg.

Callen exited after four innings with Hillsborough left-hander Griffin Luceno pitching a perfect fifth.

“I think we did good,” Callen said. “That one hit in the last inning down the line, I think that was the game-changing hit.”

Callen also chipped in with a defensive gem, gloving a line-drive comebacker to end the third. Alpine's Oli Coupe buzzed the liner back through the box, but Callen's catlike reflexes took over.



Cole Callen

"I threw it and all I saw was the ball coming at me, like a knuckleball coming at me," Callen said. "And then I just caught it."

Hillsborough endured a longer path through the District 52 tournament than anyone. The tourney opened June 26 with Hillsborough falling to the elimination bracket with a 5-2 loss to Alpine. While Alpine would need three more wins to reach the championship round, Hillsborough survived till Sunday with five straight wins, including a marathon nine-inning victory Saturday over San Carlos.

"A nine-inning game in Little League, those don't happen very often," John Gall said. "Our kids were super excited. My son Johnny Gall caught nine innings. It was like: 'That's like a major league game!'"

"Coming through the elimination bracket, we had some pitching depth, and that's how we got here. So, everybody contributed for our team."

With the championship win, Alpine advances to the Section 3 Tournament but won't have to travel far. Hillsborough Little League plays host, with Alpine opening the four-team, double-elimination tourney against the Section 45 champion Sunday, July 17 at District Fields. First pitch is scheduled for 1 p.m.

“We don’t want to stop here,” Ryan Sweeney said.  
“Winning the district is awesome. But let’s go try to win the sectional next and see what we can do.”

