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From the Daily Journal archives

Hot start for Hillsborough in District 52 All-Stars tournament

Terry Bernal Daily Journal staff

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PALO ALTO — A lot can change in a year.

Take Hillsborough Little League pitcher Robert Ramirez, for example. The right-handed ace has grown nearly half a foot since his District 52 All-Stars team

finished runner-up in the 11s tournament last season. Ramirez enjoyed quite a district tournament in 2022, opening the bracket with a no-hitter against Redwood City, only to be unavailable to pitch in the championship game, a heartbreaking 3-2 loss to San Mateo National.

So, when Ramirez and his Hillsborough team drew a rematch with National in the 2023 District 52 All-Stars tournament opener, there was no way the right-hander — even bigger and stronger than he was a season ago — wasn't taking the ball.

“We were excited,” Ramirez said. “We wanted them. We got some new players this year and we're ready to go.”

They sure looked like it in Saturday's tournament opener at Middlefield Park, as Ramirez's five-plus innings set the tone for Hillsborough's 8-2 victory over San Mateo National. The big righty took a no-hitter into the fourth inning, and ultimately allowed two runs on four hits and three walks while striking out 12.

“Robert is so consistent,” Hillsborough manager John Gall said. “He really is consistent. We're used to him pounding the zone and staying cool under pressure, so that was a good performance.”

Hillsborough and National have something of a local rivalry, and quite the friendly one at that. San Mateo National manager Joe Garibaldi also manages the Starting Line Up 12U club baseball team based in San Mateo, with a roster that includes Ramirez, and also touts Gall on the coaching staff.

Garibaldi certainly wasn't surprised by Ramirez's performance.

“Like I told the kids, you ran into a buzz saw,” Garibaldi said.





San Mateo National right fielder Jackson Alvarez attempts a diving catch on a ball that falls for a single in the fourth inning of the District 52 Little League All-Stars 12s tournament.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

Last year's championship game in the 11s tournament featured National left-hander Gavin Thompson taking on Hillsborough's Cole Callen.

With Thompson taking the ball for National in Saturday's 12s tournament opener, he and Callen squared off in a different capacity. This time it was Callen who won the battle, as Hillsborough's left-handed swinging No. 2 hitter stepped to the plate in the top of the first inning with a runner on first base and promptly walloped a hanging curveball well over the center-field wall for a two-run home run.

"It was exciting," Gall said. "Any time a kid hits a home run — and this is such a great field, and there's people out in right-center, and it's kind of fun to see a ball land out there with people; I think that doesn't happen very often in a Little League game — it was a great swing. It was important for the energy of our dugout."

Hillsborough led the rest of the way.

"We got bigger, we got better," Callen said. "We put more practice in than last year."

Thompson battled through the rough start and went on to work into the sixth

inning. The southpaw still hasn't found a baseball cap in his size, as his trademark on the mound has become his cap flying off his head in the middle of his motion.

"That's his style," Garibaldi said.

Working five-plus innings, Thompson surrendered six runs on eight hits, but allowed no walks and struck out six. After Ramirez singled to follow Callen's first-inning homer, Thompson set down the next seven batters he faced.

"I wouldn't say today was his best game, but he battled and did the best that he can," Garibaldi said. "He made a couple mistake pitches to very solid hitters, and those hitters took advantage of that. But besides that, he did really well. He battled."

Hillsborough added on in the third, turning over the batting order with a one-out double from Tayden Flores, and an RBI double from leadoff man Johnny Gall. Hillsborough upped the lead to 4-0 thanks to Johnny Gall's legs, as he stole third on the catcher's return throw to the mound, and then motored home on a wild pitch.



Hillsborough base runner Johnny Gall scores on a wild pitch as San Mateo National pitcher Gavin Thompson covers the plate in the third inning Saturday at Middlefield Park in Palo Alto.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

In the fourth, Hillsborough manufactured a run to make it 5-0. RJ Alcantara led off with a single and moved to second when Griffin Luceno reached on an infield error. Noah Edling bunted the runners over, and Deckland Harris delivered a sacrifice fly to bring home Luceno.

“I felt like a hundred times better after I had the insurance, and everyone was hyped,” Ramirez said.

Ramirez used the lead well, pitching through trouble in the fourth. He took a no-hitter into the inning, but after walking Camilo Guillen, National leadoff man Tyler Uyekubo hit a bloop double down the left-field line. Dean Garibaldi followed with a two-run double with a hard shot over the third-base bag.

“We kind of just have to play harder,” Uyekubo said of playing from behind. “It boosts are motivation to play harder because we know we’re behind.”

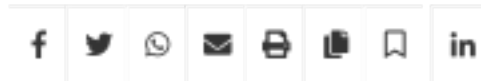
Ramirez would limit the damage, though, and Hillsborough went on to close out the win. Three insurance runs in the top of the sixth put it away, with Callen leading off the inning with a long double to right-center, Ramirez getting hit by a pitch, and cleanup hitter Jeremy Pak scorching a ground-rule double to left-center to bring home Callen. Ramirez then scored on a wild pitch, and Alcantara, after reaching on a fielder’s choice, scored on an infield error.

Callen was 2 for 3 with a homer and two RBIs, Pak was 1 for 3 with an RBI, and Ramirez went 2 for 2 and reached base in all three of his plate appearances.

“The middle of Hillsborough’s lineup hit very well,” Garibaldi said. “The 2, 3, 4 hitters, they did the most damage, as they should do. And I think every time they came up, they punished us out there. And I think he did very well with the front and the backside of the lineup, but the 2, 3, 4 guys did what they’re supposed to do.”

Hillsborough advanced through the winners' bracket and followed Saturday's triumph with a second straight win Sunday, downing Belmont-Redwood Shores 7-6. Hillsborough now advances to the winners' bracket quarterfinals, and will meet San Carlos at Middlefield Park Wednesday night at 6:30 p.m.

San Carlos advanced by virtue of two wins, 4-3 over Pacifica National Saturday, and 9-2 over Palo Alto Sunday. In the other winners' bracket quarterfinal, Alpine will meet Half Moon Bay at Middlefield Park at 4 p.m.



Terry Bernal, Daily Journal staff