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Pitching and defense Hillsborough's keys to District 52 10s title

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Clutch pitching and spectacular defense were the cornerstones of Hillsborough's championship run through the District 52 Little League All-Stars 10s tournament. Not to mention a little girl power.

Hillsborough finished off its run through the winners' bracket of the District 52 10s tournament at Ford Field with an 8-2 victory Monday night over San Mateo American.

After rallying for two runs in the top of the first, Hillsborough sounded the red alert when American got one of those runs back. But with the bases loaded and no outs, Hillsborough called upon its bullpen in the person of Drew Kettman, who kept all the inherited runners from scoring to shut down the rally.

"We call him 'The Weapon,'" Hillsborough manager John Gherini said, "because he throws a very good sinkerball, and he throws his curveball for strikes, and he's very deceptive. ... And he always seems to bail us out."

John Gherini has nicknames for each of his 12 players on roster. And while "The Weapon" backed up his nickname by firing four shutout innings to earn the win, it was Hillsborough's center fielder Nolan "The Lightning" Tognetti who really saved the day in the first.

With the bases full of American baserunners and no outs, Kettman was greeted by loud swing of the bat by Grayson McLaughlin, who shot a low, sinking line drive to center. Tognetti was on it, though, getting a good first step and streaking in to make a low, tumbling catch, then hopping to his feet to throw behind the runner at second for a pivotal double play.

“Just an absolute game-changer,” John Gherini said.

Tognetti wasn't done though. After the back runner stole second on the following pitch, Max Johnson followed with a long drive into the left-center gap. Once again, Tognetti got to the spot, chasing it down to get an excited Hillsborough squad back in the dugout.



Drew Kettman

“They were extremely fired up for how Nolan got them out of that inning,” John Gherini said.

Hillsborough led the rest of the way, adding one run in the second, two in the third and three more in the fifth. Right-hander Caroline Gherini — one of two girls on roster, along with Momo Lubarsky — closed out the championship with two innings of work, allowing one unearned run on one hit while nailing down the save with her second strikeout of the evening.

Caroline Gherini enjoyed quite a tournament, pitching in four of Hillsborough's five games. She struck out 12 over seven innings of work without yielding an earned run, and closed out Hillsborough's semifinal win as well, a 10-0 win over American, in relief of the starter Lubarsky, who firing 2 2/3 shutout innings.

Hillsborough's starting pitcher in Monday's win, right-hander Jack Veach, also turned in a noteworthy effort, but for a different reason. Even though Veach ran into trouble in the first inning, that he took the mound at all was a rallying point after injuring his knee in the top of the first. The injury occurred with Veach at the plate, as the left-handed hitter fouled a ball violently off his front knee which, on the mound, is his drive leg as a right-handed pitcher.

"He battled through it and finished his at-bat," John Gherini said, "and then went out there and took the mound and did the best he could. But his knee was obviously bothering him. ... Credit to him, he's a super tough kid and really grinded that out."



Caroline Gherini

Cleanup hitter Dylan Viera paced Hillsborough with a 2-for-3, three-RBI night. Mico DeMartini added two hits with an RBI, while Veach, Kettman and Leo "The Stallion" Matteucci drove in a run apiece.

American totaled seven hits, with Jacob Armstrong going 1 for 2 with an RBI, and Kekoa Rosenberg recording an RBI.

And Hillsborough ended with a classic postgame celebration, culminating in a victory lap with the District 52 banner in tow, to high-five all their fans along the outfield fence.

"It was just really thrill for us that we had so many fans there that it felt like it spanned the entire perimeter of the outfield," John Gherini said.

San Mateo American posted a 3-2 record in the tournament. Their roster includes Armstrong, Rosenberg, McLaughlin, Johnson, William Gregory, Avir Humphrey, Noah Jones, Justin Sanchez, Dominic Speight, Cullen Whiley, Ben Willard and Ben Wohlford.

In advancing to sectionals, Hillsborough will now play host to the Section 3 tournament, opening Saturday, July 13.



Nolan Tognetti



Momo Lubarsky

Terry Bernal, Daily Journal staff

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