

FEATURED

## Hillsborough 10-11s claim Section 3 title

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff Jul 17, 2018 Updated 2 hrs ago



Hillsborough's Devin Saltzgaber, right, celebrates after recording the final out of the Section 3 Little League 10-11s All-Star Tournament, with Nate Coughlin, left, and Anakin Manuel.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal



UNION CITY— The force is strong with Hillsborough ace Anakin Manuel.

Named after the “Star Wars” character Anakin Skywalker, the right-hander proved powerful indeed in leading Hillsborough to the Section 3 Little League All-Star 10-11s Tournament championship Monday night at Hall Ranch Park in Union City.

One night after falling to Danville in the opening game of the championship round, Hillsborough bounced back for a 7-3 win Monday over Danville. Manuel starred both sides of the ball, striking out 11 over five innings of work to earn the win on the mound, while also going 2 for 3 with two RBIs at the dish.

### Hillsborough 10-11s claim Section 3 title (Continued)

"I knew it was a do-or-die game," Manuel said. "And I was really excited but also really nervous."

The night previous, Manuel pitched in relief and gave up the game-winning hit in relief. And Monday's game started inauspiciously for the usually dominant starter, as Danville opened the winner-take-all showdown by keying on the fastball for back-to-back singles by Jason Doyle and Nate Chang.

"Danville hits fastballs really well," Hillsborough manager Ben Coughlin said. "And he threw a couple ones in this game, and they hit it hard. But ... one of the great things about Anakin, he can throw his curveball for strikes ... and he is always calm out there."

Indeed, Manuel maintained his composure and hit his stride in a hurry, escaping the first inning unscathed by striking out the next three batters en route to setting down eight straight Danville hitters.

"Once I got those three strikeouts, it boosted my confidence," Manuel said. "Like, 'I can do this.'"

Danville didn't go quietly though, and eventually jumped out to a 2-1 lead in the top of the third. Hillsborough had taken the lead in the bottom of the first on an RBI single by Devin Saltzgaber. But in the third, Danville cleanup hitter Brad Laird took advantage of a preceding walk and an error by smashing a two-run double.

Then Manuel and the Hillsborough offense went to work, answering with two runs in the bottom of the third and adding four insurance runs in the fourth.

Manuel was in the middle of both rallies, singling in the third before cleanup hitter Beau Schaffer tied it with an RBI single and took the lead on a bases-loaded walk to Luke Levitt. Then in the fourth, after Nate Coughlin walked and Collin Firestone got hit by a pitch, Manuel scorched a two-run double to center. Schaffer — 2 for 3 with two RBIs — followed with an RBI double. Ryan Drake later drove home Hillsborough's final run of the night with an RBI fielder's choice.

"The top and bottom of the order hit very well," Schaffer said. "And that's why we won this game."

Despite the commanding lead, Hillsborough faced its share of dramatics in the sixth and final inning. Manuel almost certainly was not going to finish the game. After five innings of work, he was sitting on 82 pitches, just three shy of the maximum of 85 allowed at the 10-11s level.

Still, the right-hander was slated to start the sixth. But when Hillsborough cavalierly took the field during warm-ups the final inning, third baseman Will Hirsch casually picked up the game ball from the pitchers mound and threw it to Manuel who had strolled out toward home plate. According to Little League rules, once a player takes a warm-up pitch from the mound, he must pitch in the game.

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Therefore, Manuel was removed from the game and Hirsch, a non-pitcher, took the mound and promptly issued a walk to Laird before being removed for the Hillsborough closer Saltzgaber.

“That was entirely unexpected,” Ben Coughlin said. “I’m sure our players didn’t know that rule. But it’s a good reminder there are some specific rules in baseball for a reason.”

Saltzgaber went on to allow two hits, including an RBI knock to T.J. Adlman for Danville’s final run. But the left-hander — who fired a shutout as Hillsborough’s starter in the second game of the tournament — finished off the title by inducing a bounder to the right side, which Saltzgaber snagged with a bare hand and threw to first for the final out.

“I think Devin did a great job coming in and shutting it down for us,” Ben Coughlin said.

The Section 3 championship is the second straight for this group of Hillsborough players, who also won the title last season at the 9-10s level.

Hillsborough now advances to the Northern California state championship tournament, beginning Saturday at West Sacramento Memorial Park in West Sacramento at 1 p.m. The seven-team tournament runs from July 21-27.

“It was just representing Hillsborough,” Saltzgaber said. “It feels really good. And we hope to win state.”

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HLL Editor’s Note: The final out of the game – the grounder hit to pitcher Devin Saltzgaber – was fielded “with a bare hand” and not a backhand. The typo in the online version has been corrected.