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Hillsborough takes state crown

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Beau Schaffer pitches out of a jam in the fifth inning of Hillsborough's 7-5 win over Maidu-Granite Bay in the Division 2 Northern California Little League All-Stars 10-11s title game Thursday night in West Sacramento.

Terry Bernal/Daily Journal

WEST SACRAMENTO — For two seasons, the Hillsborough Little League 10-11s All-Stars have been on a roller-coaster ride.

After taking runner-up in the Northern California 9-10s tournament last year, the boys from Hillsborough can call themselves Nor Cal champions.

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Hillsborough claimed the Section 2 Northern California 10-11s Tournament championship Thursday night at Memorial Park in West Sacramento. And, fittingly, the 7-5 championship-game victory over Maidu-Granite Bay was a non-stop thrill ride.

"I'm so proud of these boys," Hillsborough manager Ben Coughlin said. "That was a really tough game. And just like they've done all year, they stayed calm, played it pitch by pitch, play by play, and they won the championship."

Playing comeback baseball is always drama enough. And Hillsborough did just that, overcoming a 3-1 deficit with a five-run rally in the bottom of the third inning. Then the bullpen delivered escape act after escape act, with Maidu stranding eight baserunners over the final three innings.

Hillsborough saved the best escape act for last as Maidu loaded the bases with no outs in the sixth. But, just as Hillsborough looked ready to unravel, reliever Nate Coughlin settled in — with some help with an outstanding running catch by center fielder Ryan Drake — to close the door and seal the championship win.

"That was awesome," Nate Coughlin said of the postgame celebration in the middle of the diamond. "It really was."

Hillsborough's closer certainly earned it. Taking the mound to start the sixth and final inning, Nate Coughlin issued back-to-back walks, then a single to Logan Crabtree to load the bases. Nate Sperduto followed with a scary at-bat, shooting a fading liner into center field that looked destined to tie the game. But Drake got a great first step and sprinted straight in to make a fine running catch to preserve the lead.

"It's kind of just adrenaline," Drake said of the situation, not worrying about the score at all, but just reading the ball and making the play. "I was just thinking on the play ahead of me and what I should do with the ball."

Drake seemed to be the only person in Memorial Park that knew he was going to catch it.

"Ryan is just rock solid in center field," Ben Coughlin said. "He has one of the better senses on ball trajectories, even at such a young age. In the dugout, we all thought that was a hit. And he was just chugging in ... and made a nice catch."

Nate Coughlin made a fundamentally sound play on a comebacker to get the second out. The ball was struck hard enough that the smooth fielding pitcher — who also played second base and catcher in the game — could have considered trying for a double play. Instead, he charged home plate to give him a shorter throw to catcher Collin Firestone to ensure the second out.

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“I was very happy he did that, just quickly survey the situation and get the out at home,” Ben Coughlin said.

Then with two outs and the bases loaded, Nate Coughlin induced a grounder to second base for Beau Schaffer to scoop up and toss to first baseman Devin Saltzgaber for the final out. Schaffer has played very little second base this summer, seeing most of his time at shortstop or on the mound. And despite it appearing to be a routine grounder, Schaffer said the ball nearly hit the base runner, causing him to lose sight of it.

Not to mention the pressure of recording the championship out.

“I was pretty nervous,” Schaffer said. “I know if I field the ball, we win the championship. If I don’t, one or two runs can score.”

Seconds later, though, Schaffer found himself in the championship celebration, with gloves flying everywhere and a frenzy of gamers in the middle of the diamond jumping, and shouting, for joy. “It was loud,” Schaffer said. “My ears were ringing after that. It was fun.”

Schaffer helped earn it as well. The right-hander bridged the bullpen from starting pitcher Anakin Manuel to the closer Nate Coughlin. And he, too, got ‘er done in style.

Manuel wasn’t his usual dominant self. With the game tied 1-1 in the third, Hillsborough’s ace surrendered a two-run home run to Chase Bentley in the top of the third.

But Hillsborough capitalized on two errors, two walks and two hit batsmen in the bottom of the inning for a comeback rally. Hillsborough only got one ball out of the infield in the inning. After back-to-back bases-loaded walks to Tolu Carroll and KC Chavinson to tie it, Nate Coughlin got backed into a two-strike count before socking a two-run double down the left-field line to give Hillsborough the lead.

“It was a high pitch, but I had two strikes and the last thing I wanted is to get a strikeout to end the inning,” Nate Coughlin said. “So, I had to go for it.”

Manuel followed with an infield single — the San Francisco Giants would call it the “magic wandu” — with an all-out swing that sent the ball about five feet up the third-base line, only to hug the line and stay fair, to up the lead to 6-3.

In the top of the fourth, Maidu closed the lead to 6-5 with RBI singles from Bentley (3 for 3 with three RBIs) and Crabtree. But, with the bases loaded, Schaffer entered to close the door with a groundout to end the threat.

In the fifth, Schaffer had to escape from another jam. With runners at second and third and two outs, he ran the count to 2-0 to Maidu leadoff hitter KC Tibbits. Schaffer pounded his glove in

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frustration, then did the same after the count went to 3-1. But the headstrong right-hander bounced back with two straight fastballs for swinging strikes to end the inning.

“We’ll take the attitude all day long because, in the clutch, that’s what got him through,” Ben Coughlin said.

Unlike his animated frustration, Schaffer’s reaction to the strikeout pitch was to simply walk off the mound with a cool tip of the cap.

Hillsborough added an insurance run in the bottom of the fifth. Carroll led off the frame with a booming double down the left-field line. Then after a single to center by Will Hirsch to put runners at the corners, Nate Coughlin produced a key sacrifice fly for the game’s final run.

Hillsborough’s championship was two years in the making. Last year ended up being a season of what-ifs, as the team lost Manuel — the scheduled championship-game starting pitcher — the day before the title game due to injury.

“We don’t like talking about it,” Drake said of last season’s loss in the championship game, “because it brings back old memories.”

Now, Hillsborough has a new well of memories from which to draw. And these memories culminate with a victory lap with the first Northern California state championship banner in Hillsborough Little League history.

Source Link

www.smdailyjournal.com/sports/hillsborough-takes-state-crown/article_1d447f9c-91b6-11e8-878a-67a1441f5747.html

HLL Editor’s Note: Minor typos and name spellings corrected.