

Hillsborough claims District 52 9-10s title behind pitching gem

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It's an old baseball adage — if a pitcher throws a shutout and hits a home run, it's a guaranteed win. The same can be said of a near-perfect shutout gem combined with going 4 for 4 at the plate with three runs scored.

That's precisely what Hillsborough 10-year-old Anakin Manuel did Tuesday night in the District 52 Little League 9-10s All-Star Tournament championship game. Not only did Manuel notch a perfect 4-for-4 performance at the plate, he came within one hit of perfection on the mound, facing one batter over the minimum to fire a one-hit shutout to lead Hillsborough to the District 52 crown at Ford Field with a 9-0 win over San Mateo National.

Manuel was brilliant, needing just 59 pitches to earn the victory. The right-hander yielded a one-out single to National's Sean Kelly in the first inning. From there, Hillsborough rode into the sunset of the District 52 tourney in style as Manuel set down the final 17 batters he faced.

"He had the fastest arm we've seen, so he was throwing heat," San Mateo National manager Dan Luzzi said. "And that curveball was working for him. He was just great."

And the efficiency was something not often seen from a 10-year-old pitcher. While three different National pitchers combined to issue four walks and a hit batsman — fairly routine totals for the 9-10s bracket — Manuel allowed nothing wild.

Not only that. Of the 19 batters he faced, he started 17 of them with first-pitch strikes. And he settled all but two at-bats in four pitches or less; those other two at-bats were a five-pitch

groundout in the first to start the 17-in-a-row streak, and a five-pitch strikeout for the final out of the game to end it.

“He’s a very good control pitcher and he can throw multiple pitches,” Hillsborough manager Ben Coughlin said. “He also has a good head on his shoulders. He doesn’t get rattled. ... He’s a focused kid and I think that showed today.”

The secret to Manuel’s success is good, old-fashioned practice. He credits his outstanding control to working on his mechanics with his father Eldon and his older sister Martica. And while Martica, on the softball diamond, plays mostly second base and outfield, she has been essential to Manuel’s routine as a bullpen catcher.

“It’s just repetition with my dad in the backyard,” Manuel said. “And my sister too. She will put on the gear and catch so my dad can watch my mechanics.”

Not that Manuel was a one-man show Tuesday. Far from it. While he tabbed Hillsborough’s first hit of the night on a bloop double to right in the first inning, and went on to total four knocks in the game, Hillsborough as a team totaled 16 hits, including three-hit performances by cleanup man Beau Schaffer and No. 5 hitter Dillon Moss.

“Our 3 through 5 hitters can hit the ball hard and the top of the order gets on base a lot,” Ben Coughlin said.

Still, it took Hillsborough one time through the batting order to figure out National starting pitcher Tommy Kane. The left-hander has been the ace up the sleeve of National manager Dan Luzzi, who utilized Kane for just one inning through the team’s six previous games.

“He was our freshest arm,” Luzzi said. “He’s only thrown one inning in the last six games, so he was ready to go.”

Falling to the elimination bracket last Wednesday with an 11-8 loss to Hillsborough, National had to play four games on four consecutive days. Luzzi diligently juggled pitchers, keeping as many below 35 pitches per game as possible to have them available through the busy elimination bracket.

With the title, Hillsborough advances to the Section 3 tournament, starting Saturday in San Lorenzo. Hillsborough opens against District 45 champion Union City in the four-team, double-elimination tournament at Ashland Little League Field at 1 p.m.

“Then we got to these last two games and let it ride,” Luzzi said.

Kane surrendered three hits the first time through the batting order — two bloopers and a trickling infield single. The second time through the order, however, Hillsborough solved the southpaw and rallied for five runs in the third inning to knock him out after 2 2/3 innings of work.

“It’s really happened in every game,” Ben Coughlin said. “There’s always been one inning where everybody feeds off it and contributes.”

Manuel led off the third with a single. He advanced to second on a wild pitch then scored on an RBI single by Schaffer. Hillsborough ran itself into two outs on the base paths, but kept the pressure on, generating two runs on a single by Ryan Shoup before Nate Coughlin greeted the National bullpen with a two-RBI single to give his team a 5-0 lead.

In the fourth, Hillsborough benefitted from the long ball. After another leadoff single by Manuel, Schaffer teed off on a fastball from Franklin Kuo for a two-run home run. After a double by Moss and a single by Devin Saltzgaber, Quinn Folk produced a sacrifice fly to score Moss, giving Hillsborough an 8-0 lead.

In the fifth, Manuel sparked another rally with a two-out double.

“When I pitch well or hit well, it helps me with the other side,” Manuel said.

Schaffer then singled and Moss singled home Manuel. But after a walk to Saltzgaber to load the bases, National reliever Josh Jacobs induced a pop-out to end the inning, stranding the bases loaded to avoid a potential mercy-rule after five innings.

No one benefitted more than Manuel from the game going a full six innings. He seized the opportunity to finish in dominant fashion, going on to strike out eight and record eight other outs via groundout. The only two balls National got out of the infield were Kelly's first-inning hit and a second-inning liner to center by JT Zarry, who was robbed by a sweet diving catch by Ryan Drake.

"As a group, it's a team that likes to compete," Ben Coughlin said of his team's effort. "So when it's game time, they're pretty tuned in and focused."

As dominant as Manuel's performance was, there was another in the tournament that rivals it. That came in the tourney opener, a 17-0 win over San Carlos Blue, in which Manuel, Schaffer and Saltzgaber combined on a five-inning, mercy-rule no-hitter.