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FEATURED

## San Mateo National claims its first Majors section title since '74

By Terry Bernal Daily Journal Staff Jul 17, 2019



DANVILLE — These kids from San Mateo National sure are gritty competitors.

National's path through the Little League All-Stars Majors season has been chock full of old-school baseball determination, built on surefire fundamentals shining in the spotlight on the pressure-filled stages of the District 52 and Section 3 tournaments.

With Tuesday evening's Section 3 championship game, National kept its unbeaten winning streak intact with the walk-off heroics of Alejandro Ferosa, rallying in extra-innings for a 3-2 victory over Danville at Osage Park to capture the Section 3 title banner — their first since 1974.

"This was the biggest moment," National manager Dan Luzzi said. "Riley coming in (to pitch), one out, and getting out of it ... and he's only 11 years old. Just amazing."

Indeed, it was the right arm of reliever Riley Lim that put National in prime position to walk off with the title. One of just two 11-year-olds on the roster, Lim was summoned upon in the most dire of situations, amid a 2-2 tie with the bases loaded and one out in the sixth.

Lim locked up with Danville leadoff hitter Josh Werner for a 12-pitch at-bat. The right-hander pumped fastball after fastball into the zone, including five straight strikes after running the count to 3-2. At last, Lim got Werner to chase a pitch below the knees for a swinging strikeout.

"I just knew I had to throw strikes or I'd let my team down," Lim said.

And, after a groundout to retire the side, National was back in the dugout with the tie still intact. But National's first shot at a walk-off win in the bottom of the sixth was denied.

With runners at first and second and two outs, Sean Kelly shot a single back through the middle. With Ferosa on second base, Luzzi, coaching at third, waved him home. When the throw from center fielder TJ Adlman to catcher Kaleb Pleis got there well ahead of Ferosa, he tried to turn back to third, slipped, and got tagged out for the third out to send the game into extra innings.

“I told them right away, ‘You’ve got to pick me up,’” Luzzi said. “I took all the blame on that one. ... I wanted him to have that walk-off moment. And he ended up getting that walk-off moment with that hit.”

This time, in the bottom of the seventh, it was Formosa at the dish with two on and two outs. Kurt Schaffer sparked the rally with blooper behind first base that the Danville second baseman nearly ran down with a remarkable route, but the ball fell to the outfield grass just inside the foul line, and Schaffer legged it out for a double.

Jordan Kiaaina pinch ran for Schaffer and moved to third on a wild pitch. Then, after a two-out walk to Josh Jacobs, Formosa stepped up for his date with destiny. The scrappy right-handed No. 2 hitter would finish by going 5 for 11 in the tournament. The biggest hit of the bunch, by far, was the two-out, two-strike sinking liner to right field to redeem his base-running out from the previous inning, setting off the championship celebration in the seventh.

“I felt like it was the one,” Formosa said. “I was really confident out there. I wanted to make up for my (base-running) error. ... Off the bat, I knew it was the one.”

It took plenty of National’s signature gritty determination to get to that one heroic swing though.

National jumped out to a 2-0 lead in the second when Noah Greenspan and Kelly both scored on an infield throwing error. Jacobs, National’s starting pitcher, worked 5 1/3 innings, dodging trouble through the as he stranded five Danville base runners through the first four innings.

In the fifth, however, Danville broke through on a two-run double by Nate Chang to tie it 2-2. In the sixth, Danville chased Jacobs after singles by Jack Yribarren and Ryan Starkey. Morgan followed with a walk to load the bases with one out, ending Jacobs’ evening.

National had warmed up three pitchers prior to the inning, including Casey Strezo and Jay Leder. So, Lim didn’t know he was going to get the call until Luzzi walked out to the mound and pointed to him in right field.

“OK, I have to do this,” Lim said to himself as he jogged in from right field. “I have to make my team happy. And if I don’t, I still have to perform well.”

Lim said it took several pitches for him to find his groove. In the 12-pitch immortal with Werner, the right-hander fell behind in the count 2-1. But as the at-bat progressed, Lim began finding his rhythm.

“I was just getting better and better every pitch,” Lim said.

After battling for the strikeout, he got some help from his defense when a chopper to third ended with Greenspan at first base making a mighty stretch across his body to record the putout. Then in the top of the seventh, Lim recorded back-to-back strikeouts before finishing the 1-2-3 inning with a grounder to third, with Greenspan again fielding his position by hauling in a high throw and slapping the tag on the runner.

“I was really happy because I had my defense behind me,” Lim said, “and great pitch selection because [catcher Franklin Kuo] was calling good pitches, and Noah (Greenspan) at first base, he made two good plays behind me. So, I was just congratulating them.”

It was a night of congratulations as National wrapped up the Section 3 title on its first try. Advancing through the winners’ bracket in the four-team, double-elimination tournament, National had a game to give, meaning had they lost Tuesday, Danville would have had to beat them one more time for the Nats to be denied the title.

Not that “tomorrow” was ever part of the conversation in the National dugout.

“Never part of the discussion,” Luzzi said. “We want this game. They didn’t even say it.”

San Mateo National now advances to the Northern California State All-Star Majors Tournament hosted by Castro Valley Little League at Five Canyons Park. Play opens in the seven-team tournament Saturday. The date and time of National’s opening game were not available at press time Tuesday.

