**NATIONAL SCHOOLS CHAMPIONS CROWNED**

 By Tony Smith

A seesawing, gripping girls’ grand final and a virtuoso hitting and pitching double act in the boys’ gold medal game highlighted the climax of the 42nd Tradestaff national secondary schools’ softball championships in Christchurch.

An all-star display by pitcher George McCarroll drove St Patrick’s College Silverstream to their first national boys’ title with a 12-2 win over Auckland’s Alfriston College.

One Tree Hill College triumphed 6-5 over first-time finalists Westlake Girls’ High School from North Harbour in the girls’ gold medal game.

It was the first title for the Ellerslie-based school under the One Tree Hill College brand following three titles (in 1999, 2006 and 2007) as Penrose High School.

The national secondary school’s tournament is always one of the high points of the NZ softball calendar.

The enthusiasm of the players, their passion for their sport and pride in the schools seems to drive up the fun quotient in a way not always seen at club or representative events. It’s always a fitting way to bring down the curtain on the summer season.

Especially this year because the Ōtautahi series was the first full secondary schools tournament held since 20019 after the 2020 and 2022 installments were cancelled due to the Covid pandemic and a reduced series, largely for nothern-based teams, was staged in 2021.

Twenty teams, from Auckland to Invercargill, lined up for the first national event hosted on Canterbury Softball’s two new brick-red artificial turf diamonds, which stood up to the test.

Guiding proceedings were experienced Canterbury Softball chief executive Cheryl Kemp and groundsman Ian (Hally) Hall, both overseeing their 277th tournament in the past 31 years.

Capricious Christchurch autumn weather – bitter cold and driving rain - tested the character of the resilient teenage ball players over the first couple of days, but fine conditions prevailed on finals day.

The standard of play, particularly at the business end, was encouraging with no boys team going through Division One unbeaten.

One Tree Hill College had a 100% wins record in the girls’ top grade, but Westlake pushed them to the limit in the final.

 **BOYS’ FINAL**

Winning championships is always a team effort, but St Patrick’s College Silverstream pitcher George McCarroll shone on centre-stage.

St Pat’s head coach Craig Wallace brought McCarroll on for the final innings of a 9-3 semi-final win over Christchurch’s Shirley Boy’s High School to get him in the groove for the gold medal game.

McCarroll responded by hurling a two-hitter and taking seven strikeouts in St Pat’s 12-2 five innings win.

Batting in the No 3 slot, he had four hits from four at-bats for a perfect 1.000 average off two singles, a double and an infield single.

The Junior Black Sox prospect also drove in five runs for good measure.

McCarroll won both the top batter and MVP award at the prize-giving. His .750 (15 safe hits from 20 at-bats) is the highest on record since the tournament began in 1980.

His top batter prize came 38 years after his father, Grant McCarroll (a two-time Black Sox world champion team manager) won the same award playing for Christchurch’s Burnside High School in the 1984 schools tournament in Auckland.

All up, St Pat’s produced 12 safe hits, including a triple to centrefielder Thompson Tukapua, who had blasted a two-run automatic home run against Shirley BHS in the semi-final.

Tukapua, catcher Jericho Wharehinga and shortstop and leadoff batter Zahr Shaw-Wallace all had two hits while Keenan Easthope (a standout all week at second base) and Tyrone Robinson, who pitched much of the week but played third base in the final, cracked doubles.

St Pat’s were well-coached all week by a team led by Craig Wallace, a former Black Sox player who was guest coach of Denmark at the 2022 senior men’s World Cup.

St Pat’s became only the second Hutt Valley school to win the Des McCammon Trophy after Taita College’s triumphs in 1982, 1983 and 2007.

Alfriston College, from south Auckland, led the field for most of the week but had to settle for the silver medal in the final.

They had just two hits, a double by pitcher Hunter Bailey and a single to centrefielder Nate Murray.

Alfriston were bidding to add a boys’ title to the girls’ crown won by the school in 2018 but will have to set that goal now for 2024.

Shirley Boys’ High School, unbeaten in their section initially, performed well, with a young team, to clinch third place.

**The champion St Patrick’s College Silverstream team was: Zahr Shaw-Wallace, Thompson Tukapua, George McCarroll, Jericho Werahinga, Keenan Easthope, Noah Krynen, Tyrone Robinson, Cruz Maui-Kea, Jude Dawson, Harry Muir, Owen Englebretsen.**

**Final Placings:** 1: St Patrick’s College Silverstream, 2: Alfriston College, 3: Shirley Boys’ High School, 4th: Southland Boys’ High School, 5th: St Bede’s College, 6th: St Bernard’s College, 7th: Rolleston College, 8th: Dunstan High School, 9th: Kaiapoi High School.

 **GIRLS’ FINAL**

The Lyndsey Leask Trophy girls’ grand game was a thriller from first pitch to last.

No North Harbour school had made a girls’ final before and Westlake were aiming to create history.

One Tree Hill were also striving for fourth-time lucky after finishing runners-up in 2017, 2019 and 2021.

Westlake, coached cannily by NZ Major Sox Under-23 men’s team assistant Fergus McAlpine, jumped out to a perfect start.

No 2 hitter Talia Murray picked a walk in the top of the first inning and scored on co-captain Jayah Lee’s triple to centre field.

Unfazed, One Tree struck straight back, batting through the order in the bottom of the first and collecting three hits to score Savanah-Lee Farrar, captain Loma Weatherley and Skye Weatherley for a 3-1 lead.

But Westlake pitcher Charlotte Graham quickly recovered her poise to shut out One Tree for the next four innings.

One Tree starter Skylah Breeze Joyce was also in command of her pitches, keeping Westlake at bay until the top of the fifth when the Harbourites tied at 3-3 after a hit by catcher Kalani Mariner, a couple of walks and a savvy short game.

With their tails up, Westlake went ahead for the second time with two further runs in the sixth. Hurley drew her third walk of the game and Mariner drove her second safe hit, scoring on an error and a fielder’s choice, respectively.

But One Tree showed why they were unbeaten all week with a superb bottom of the sixth rally.

An error allowed first-up batter Tui Panui to make base and she swiftly stole to second before scoring after hits by Loma Weatherley (her third of the game) and Graham, who cracked a single after an earlier double in the fifth), who also scored Weatherley for two RBIS.

Suddenly, One Tree were back level at 5-5 before Skye Weatherley, who had walked, got the go-ahead run after a fumble by the Westlake infield.

One Tree had made a pitching change midway through the sixth, bringing Savannah-Lee Farrar in from centre field (where she’d made an outstanding shoelace catch) to relieve for pitcher Joyce.

Needing three outs for the ball game, the One Tree coaching staff kept faith with Farrar, who repaid the faith by taking three strikeouts (one batter made base on a catcher’s error), and did her own fielding to snare the game-winning final ground out.

One Tree Hill topped the batting with nine safe hits to Westlake’s five, Loma Weatherley batting 1.000 with three hits from as many at-bats while Farrar and Tiana Graham went two from four.

Mariner had two hits from five for a .400 average while Lee’s triple and a double by No 9 hitter Rori Seymour were other Westlake highlights.

Charlotte Graham - later awarded top pitcher - hurled a fine game for Westlake, facing 34 baters for eight strikeouts, four walks and eight hits.

Skylah Breeze Joyce (6) and Savannah-Lee Farrar combined for nine Ks for One Tree while jointly conceding seven walks and five hits.

Westlake left 13 runners on base to One Tree’s 10 in a game which featured plenty of on-diamond action.

Adding to One Tree’s trophy haul, Loma Weatherley shared the top batter award with Kaiapoi High’s Tui van Pelt with a .667 average while Skylah Breeze Joyce took out the MVP accolade.

**The champion One Tree Hill College team was: Savannah-Lee Farrar, Loma Weatherley, Skye Weatherley, Tiana Graham, Skylah Breeze Joyce, Jesse-Lee Upu, Tyler Graham, Tui Panui, Elyse Harod-Fasi, Lillie Rose Pinn, Arahia Tukukino, Milla Eckford**.

Final placings:

National Division One: 1: One Tree Hill College, 2: Westlake Girls’ High School, 3: Kaiapoi High School, 4th: Rosehill College, 5th: Rolleston College.

South Island Division 2 Girls: 1: Avonside Girls’ High School, 2: Riccarton High School, 3rd: Dunstan High School, 4th: Queens’ High School, 5th: Southland Girls’ High School, 6th: Ashburton College.

 **INDIVIDUAL AWARDS**

**Boys**

Top batter: George McCarroll (St Patricks’ Coll Silverstream), .750 (15/20).

Top pitcher: Tyrese Kennedy (Southland Boys’ High School), 0.00 ERA.

MVP: George McCaroll (St Pat’s).

Caltex Good Sports Award - Max Moyles (Southland Boys - Coach).

NZ Carbon Farming Award (Player's Sports Award) - Ashburton College.

Bayleys $500 Travel Award - St Bernard’s College

**Girls**

Division 1:

Top pitcher: Charlotte Graham (Westlake Girls’ High School).

Top batter: Loma Weatherley (One Tree Hill College) and Tui van Pelt (Kaiapoi High School), .667.

MVP: Skylah Breeze Joyce (One Tree Hill College).

Division 2

Most Valuable Players

Avonside Girls High School: Madison Dysart & Sydelle Samuelu.

Ashburton College: Briar Clark & Tia Double.

Dunstan High School: Madie Hill.

Riccarton High School: Tui Pau'u & Anahera Algar.

Southland Girls High School: Ashlee Roberts & Caitlyn Wallace.

Queens High School : Ambah Robinson.