

DOUBLE TITLE SUCCESS FOR UNBEATEN AUCKLAND UNDER-23

TEAMS

Unbeaten Auckland celebrated double success at the national under-23 softball championships and clinched the major individual awards after two terrific finals in Christchurch.

Bree Gibson coached Auckland to a tight but deserved 3-2 win over Canterbury in the women's final and Ron McMillan's Auckland men's side secured a 7-6 comeback victory against Wellington with batting star Floyd Nola driving in the winning run in the bottom of the seventh inning at a sunny Mizuno Ballpark on Sunday.

Nola (who had three hits in the final) scooped the top batter and MVP awards in the men's section, and Dylan Tonkin, who closed out the final win, was top pitcher.

Auckland's Brooke Whiteman (top batter), Tyla Morrison (top pitcher) and Mereana Makea (MVP) collected the women's awards.

The Auckland women (eight wins/no losses/62 runs for /11 against) retained their national title while the men (eight wins/no losses/64 runs for/34 against) won for the first time since the tournament was revived by Softball NZ in 2017.

Auckland's men's final victory was their third one-run winning margin of the tournament over 2018 champions Wellington.

Women's Final

Softball is a game of fractions and millimetres – ask Canterbury batter Lucy McIntyre.

The former Southlander - one of the tournament's best batters - smashed a potential game-tying hit to cap a Canterbury revival in the fifth inning.

The ball sped from McIntyre's bat and seemed destined for the outfield expanses, but it struck Canterbury baserunner Meg Glading, who was sprinting from second base to third.

As the ball had not yet passed beyond the first fielder – in this case the shortstop – the umpires rightly declared Glading to be out, ending Canterbury's rally.

Had McIntyre's hit found the gap, Glading would have scored. Canterbury could have had the go-ahead run on second base with Bohemian Quinn up to bat, having earlier had a hit off Tyla Morrison, her former Waitakere Bears clubmate.

Auckland, however, survived that scare and pitcher Tyla Morrison (who did not give up an earned run all tournament) went on to close out the game, taking four strikeouts in the final two innings.

While Canterbury came close, the parochial home crowd could not begrudge Auckland their victory.

They led from the outset with star shortstop Mereana Makea justifying her MVP award with a first inning triple off Canterbury starter Amy Begg. Tenille Auimatagi produced a hit to third base to score Makea from third.

Junior White Sox outfielder Beth Reid drove a double for Auckland in the bottom of the second and scored on catcher Milla Glassie's single.

Begg had pitched Canterbury to an eight innings 4-2 victory over Wellington on Saturday night and a 1-0 semifinal win over Wellington on Sunday morning. Canterbury coach Nicole Baxter-Warren decided her starter was done after two innings of the final, with Auckland ahead 2-0.

Baxter-Warren brought on Celeste Verdolivo (the University of Albany (New York) graduate playing club ball for Papanui) for the bottom of the third inning. She allowed a hit to Brooke Whiteman, who stole second base and went to third on an error before scampering home on Taylor Chongnee's infield single.

Verdolivo got out of the inning with a strikeout and held Auckland scoreless for the next three frames.

Down 3-0, Canterbury needed a big inning. They got their break in the top of the fifth when Johanna Church was hit by a pitch and granted first base. She scored after a fielder's choice and two Auckland infield errors.

Glading, Canterbury's leftfielder, cracked her second hit of the game to score shortstop Alyssa Lory, and cut the deficit to 3-2. Nerissa McDowell then picked a walk to keep the rally alive and bring clean-up hitter McIntyre to the plate.

Glading could do nothing to get out of the way of McIntyre's sharply hit single to the shortstop space.

Morrison and Verdolivo both shut up shop in the final stages. The Auckland hurler racked up 12 strikeouts for four safe hits and two walks while Verdolivo struck out seven (including the final four batters she faced) for four hits and no walks. Begg had three Ks and four hits before handing over to her Canterbury colleague.

Whiteman and centrefielder Beth Reid were Auckland's top batters with two hits from three at-bats. Makea, Auimatagi, Chongnee and Glassie had Auckland's other hits.

Canterbury's Glading also had a .667 average with two hits from three while McIntyre and Quinn went one from three for Canterbury.

Canterbury qualified for the final with a 1-0 win over Hutt Valley after Amy Begg pitched a shutout and Layla Bailey-McDowell drove in the winning run.

Makea (Auckland) and McIntyre (Canterbury) were named on the tournament team for a second consecutive year. Morrison, Whiteman and Chongnee were Auckland's other selections, while Begg, Glading, Canterbury sisters Nerissa and Layla McDowell were also named.



Men's Final

Wellington had thrashed Canterbury 11-0 in the Sunday morning semi-final and carried that momentum through to the early innings of the grand final.

The Wellington top order gave coaches Johnny Stratford and Warren Stoddart the dream start they craved with four runs in the top of the first inning.

Jayden Stratford flied out to centrefield, but third baseman Josh Jacobs and DP Reilly Makea – both tournament team picks – drew successive walks from Taine Slaughter, Auckland's starting pitcher, and Zac Boyd was hit by a pitch to load the bases.

Up stepped Dylan Jackson to drive a hit to leftfield to score two runs, with Boyd adding a third with his zippy baserunning speed.

The first baseman Mardi McBride – an unsung hero for Wellington – batted in Jackson for a 4-0 lead.

Auckland, however, remained unfazed. Leadoff Seth Gibson pulled back a run in the bottom of the second after making base on an infield single and then scoring on Brock Attewell's triple to the right-centrefield gap. Attewell was left stranded on third after Makea (pitching ahead of Josh Merritt) produced back-to-back strikeouts.

McBride mustered an opposite-field hit to right field in the top of the fourth and later scored on Jacobs' second hit of the game (this time Dylan Tonkin, Auckland's substitute pitcher).

Auckland, again, responded immediately with outfielders Ryschan Thompson and Floyd Nola cracking successive safe hits in the bottom of the fourth. Thompson strolled home on a bases-loaded walk and Nola followed when Auckland's impressive catcher Max Earley nudged the ball to first base where McBride made a tricky out, but not before the runner had crossed home plate.

The Aucklanders again refused to throw in the towel despite trailing 6-3 after Andre Hart batted in Jackson in the top of the fifth.

They scored three runs in the bottom of the fifth to tie the score at 6-6 after back-to-back hits by Nola and third baseman Huw Davies.

Wellington decided Makea's mound time was done and brought on Josh Merritt in relief for the bottom of the sixth. The Miramar man retired Auckland in order in the sixth, but Wellington could not score in the top of the seventh despite a hit by Xavier Herrick because Attewell, Auckland's second baseman, pulled off a double play.

The game felt destined for a tiebreaker in the bottom of the seventh after Auckland's Harrison Valk popped up a foul fly catch to Stratford, but DP Seth Bourgeois drew a walk and Coach McMillan called on Thompson to bunt and sacrifice Bourgeois to second base.

With two-down, Floyd Nola strode to the plate and promptly carved off his third hit – a mighty blow to leftfield – to score Bourgeois and clinch a memorable comeback win.

Auckland, in the end, edged Wellington in the hits count (9-8) with Nola leading the way with three from four (.750), followed by Attewell (two from four, .500). Gibson, Valk, Thompson and Davies also had hits for the Aucks.

Josh Jacobs – who had 12 RBIs going into the final day – and McBride went two from three for Wellington. Makea, Jackson, Herrick and Hart also had hits.

Slaughter had four hits, four Ks and two walks and gave up five runs in 3.1 innings on Auckland's pitching mound. Tonkin struck out two batters and allowed four hits, two walks and one run.

Makea – required to shoulder much of the pitching load after Sam Marley was rendered ineligible on day one after his name was inadvertently omitted from Wellington's return schedule – snared six strikeouts but gave up eight hits, three walks and six runs. Merritt conceded one walk, one hit and one run.

Wellington's Makea and Boyd and Canterbury's Jackson Watt made the tournament team for the third successive year. Auckland had six representatives – Nola, Tonkin, Earley, Attewell, Davies and Thompson.

McBride, Herrick and Jacobs joined their Wellington teammates Makea and Boyd in the all-star lineup, named by national Major Sox coach Steve Deans.

Canterbury supplied Watt, Bailey Hamilton and Callum Bishop – who had an excellent batting tournament after being restricted to DP duty an elbow injury.

Hawke's Bay pitcher/second baseman Adam Woon was the only all-star from outside the top three teams, being named for a second successive year.



WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT AWARDS

NATIONAL CHAMPIONS

*** AUCKLAND ***

RUNNERS UP

CANTERBURY

MINOR PLACINGS

3 Hutt Valley
4 Counties Manukau
5 Wellington
6 Southland
7 Waikato

TOP BATTER

Brooke Whiteman, Auckland
10 hits from 19 at bats. Batting Average .526

TOP PITCHER

Tyla Morrison, Auckland

MVP

Mereana Makea, Auckland

TOURNAMENT TEAMS

Amy Begg, Canterbury
Tyla Morrison, Auckland
Miriam Potter, Wellington

Otila Tavite, Hutt Valley
Layla Bailey-McDowell, Canterbury

Lucy McIntyre, Canterbury
Kiri Winiata-Enoka, Hutt Valley
Paiton Koko-Lutau, Wellington
Mereana Makea, Auckland
Lily Nielson, Counties Manukau

Nerissa McDowell, Canterbury
Brooke Whiteman, Auckland
Meg Glading, Canterbury
Wanaka Noanoa, Wellington
Taylor Chongnee, Auckland

Coach, Bree Gibson, Auckland
Manager, Priscilla Abraham, Counties Manukau

MEN'S TOURNAMENT

MEN'S NATIONAL CHAMPIONS
*** AUCKLAND ***

RUNNERS UP
WELLINGTON

MINOR PLACINGS
3 Canterbury
4 Hawkes Bay
5 Southland
6 Hutt Valley

TOP BATTER
Floyd Nola, Auckland
11 hits from 19 at bats, Batting Average .578

TOP PITCHER
Dylan Tonkin, Auckland

MVP
Floyd Nola, Auckland

TOURNAMENT TEAM
Reilly Makea, Wellington
Dylan Tonkin, Auckland
Adam Woon, Hawkes Bay

Jayden Stratford, Wellington
Max Earley, Auckland

Mardi McBride, Wellington
Brock Attewell, Auckland
Huw Davies, Auckland
Zac Boyd, Wellington
Joshua Jacobs, Wellington

Bailey Hamilton, Canterbury
Xavier Herrick, Wellington
Ryschan Thompson, Auckland
Jackson Watt, Canterbury
Callum Bishop, Canterbury
Floyd Nola, Auckland

Coach, Ron McMillan, Auckland
Manager, Zivana Hopa, Southland

