

Some Impressing at Extended 7s Camp

Written by Pat Clifton
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18 players have been training with the men's 7s team at the Olympic Training Center in Chula Vista, Calif. this week. The extended camp ends Friday.

The experience of the guys in camp varies drastically. There are a few capped Eagles in Rocco Mauer, Peter Tiberio and Zach Pangelinan. There are some age-grade guys like Pila Taufa, Madison Hughes and Hunter Leland. There are players with overseas experience like Tyler Spitz and Michael Garvey. And there are some crossover athletes like Nick Schwieger and Gabe Adler.

Taufa has impressed greatly with his speed. He's tall, about 6-3, for a speed guy, but he can really fly. It would be a surprise to see the Hawaiian resident make the squad right away, but not a shock to see him incorporated in the Olympic Development Program or wooed to the mainland.

Also turning heads is Dean Gericke. It's unclear what Gericke's availability is at the moment. He's still enrolled at Arkansas State, but found a way to wiggle free for a few weeks for the Americas Rugby Championship in the fall. The Eagles could use him on the circuit, and they might be contemplating how to make that happen.

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Spitz has shown a lot of rugby prowess and ability, but not much 7s acumen. He has an American passport and is still pretty young, so perhaps the New Zealand-based player will find his way Stateside post-camp to become immersed in the American rugby scene and hone his 7s skills.

Another guy at camp who has made his way to national relevancy via the club 7s circuit is Kyle Hitt of the Denver Barbarians. He played DII college ball at the University of Northern Colorado, making a few West All Star camps but never an All American camp. This week has been his first introduction to a high performance setup.

“The guys are great, the coaches are good, food’s good, weather’s good, obviously some good rugby. Can’t complain,” said Hitt. “It’s pretty good experience for me to have a higher level of rugby and see it and experience it, the size and spend and talent, obviously.”

The coaching staff at camp, which has also expanded to include multiple guest coaches helping out, has covered everything from the fundamental skills to the Eagles game plan.

“[They’ve] gone through anything from the basics of quick hands and passes to the basics of tackling and rucking. Their offensive scheme, defensive scheme, how and why we run it, and then pretty much running that from walking through to full pace. A lot of tackling, a lot of contact, a lot of conditioning,” said Hitt.

“They were critiquing everyone from Colin Hawley and Matt Hawkins to any other small guy such as myself. If they make a bad pass or if it’s not quite on center, they’ll coach them up right there, critique them right in the middle of practice. Everybody’s fair game, so it makes it fun because it’s not like anybody’s getting picked on. Everybody’s getting coached up, which is good, because that’s what everybody came here for.”

They also came to play in front of head coach Alex Magleby and his staff, in the hopes of impressing. Earlier in the week they split the camp into four teams and scrimmaged, using a winner-stays-on method of rotating teams.

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“It was fun. It got pretty competitive,” said Hitt. “Teams were pretty evenly matched, so it made it a lot of fun.”

Hitt can run and tackle and ruck with everyone in camp. But he has some catching up to do in the skills department, and he knows it.

“The only difference between them, say the top end guys that are starters, are better skills, better timing. They’ve played with each other more, know the little tricks,” said Hitt. “They know the little ins and outs in scrums or lineouts. When they run plays or when they run with each other, especially, it’s really hard to stop them, because they’ve been playing with each other for a little bit.”

Some of the extended campers, like Hitt, could get a chance to play a little more with each other soon. The USA Falcons, Tiger Rugby, Serevi Selects and Atlantis will be competing at the Las Vegas Invitational in the men’s elite bracket against several National Teams. Like it was for Jack Halalilo and Carlin Isles, playing well with one of these pipeline teams could be the next step on the path to becoming an Eagle.