

## Game-Ending Conversion Sends USA to Cup Quarters

Written by Jackie Finlan

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When Folau Niuva missed the conversion in the sixth minute of the USA's game against Spain, one hoped that the game's outcome wouldn't rely on that mistake. But as the Eagles pulled away during their third pool play game at the USA 7s, the question wasn't whether they'd win but if they'd beat Australia's point differential to qualify for the Cup quarterfinals.



Niuva made up for his first-half error, and in injury time, converted Nick Edwards' second try from 10 meters off the sideline. The Eagles won 22-7 to finish 1-2 in pool play and earned a berth to the Cup quarterfinals against Fiji.

The game opened with a couple of USA penalties and the teams trading clearing kicks. The Eagles looked to have a promising quick lineout around their 22 meter, as ample support hustled down the field, but the referee called it back. Spain made good use of the favorable territory, however, and turned over the ball shortly after the lineout. Shortly afterward, Julen Goia Iriberry cleaned up a messy pass to step inside two defenders for the opening score. Pedro Martin slotted the conversion for the 7-0 lead.

Matt Hawkins was yellow-carded for a dangerous tackle during the next possession, and the USA found themselves a man down. The Eagles enjoyed a bit of luck as Spain worked the overload, but a forward pass killed the scoring opportunity. The USA had a scrum deep in their end, so Blaine Scully attempted to clear, but the kick was blocked, and the crowd collectively gasped.

But the Americans recovered the dribbling ball and shipped it to Carlin Isles, who carved through the heart of the scrambling defense. He broke toward the sideline for a straightaway,

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gauged his pursuer's pace, then eyed him as he angled to beneath the posts. That's when Niua missed the conversion, making Isles' risky running line go unappreciated, 7-5 Spain.

With a little lift in their boots, the USA kept their kickoff, as Zach Test flew above the receivers, but came down hard and remained out of play for a minute or so. The Eagles crashed around the breakdown for a bit, but Spain's aggressive defense stressed the Eagles' now five-man roster. Isles dug out the ball, saw no support, so took off for the sidelines. He was aptly marked, but not aptly challenged in speed, and took the corner for his second try, 10-7 into the break.

Spain kept pummeling away and the wily Martin made the Americans fall off tackles on several occasions. He gave Spain their most promising break in the second half, stepping past Luke Hume, who later hustled down the field to make the momentum-stopping tackle. Spain was also good about making the USA pay for slow support and forced some not-releasing penalties in the tackle.

About five minutes into the second half, Spain had a midway scrum off of which to build, but the USA did well to disrupt the outlet pass and Hawkins was in perfect position for a dropped ball. He quickly sent it wide, and Nick Edwards fought and pushed his way toward the tryline. He lobbed a pass to Shalom Suniula back inside, but the pass was tipped, and Suniula had just enough ups to reign it in for the try, 15-7 USA.

A minute remained in regulation, and while the USA's win appeared to be intact, they needed a converted try to beat Australia's point differential, as they would both finish pool play 1-2. Spain was yellow-carded near their 40 meter, and the Eagles worked the sidelines to spread Spain's defense. Inside the 22 meter, with Niua eyeing the green behind the posts, the scrumhalf could have chanced a lane to the try zone then and there. but there was an obvious overload out wide, and the ball worked to Edwards for his second try.

Spain tracked Edwards well and the wing dotted down 10 meters off the sideline, making for a difficult conversion for Niua. But Niua finished the game like a professional, calmly slotting the two-pointer, as his teammates – and stadium – erupted into cheers.

The USA is off the Cup quarterfinals, where they'll face Fiji.

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### **USA 22**

Tries: Edwards 2, Isles 2

Cons: Niua

### **Spain 7**

Tries: Iriberry

Cons: Martin

*[Photo: Zach Test prays for Folau Niua's final conversions. Ian Muir photo.]*