

Keep An Eye on Western Washington

Written by Pat Clifton
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Western Washington is a program on the rise. Last spring the Vikings tabbed Paul Horne director of rugby. Horne has three decades worth of high-level coaching experience, mostly in Canada. He teamed up with Adam Roberts, Western's 7s coach who also has a deep rolodex of connections north of the border, former Belmont Shore youth director Alan Law and incumbent WWU coach Colin Campbell.

The boost in organization, leadership and coaching has helped propel Western to a 4-0 start to the Northwest Collegiate Rugby Conference season and a spot in our [Top 25](#) . Increased alumni support helped land Horne and get a new soccer and rugby facility built on campus.

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“We’re changing the culture. We expect the guys to make a big commitment and we’ve had pretty good success with the commitment we’ve got,” said Horne.

“Everybody seems to have bought into the culture change. Some of the guys who have been there, four year players and a couple of fifth year players, have gone from a student-run program to where there are always three coaches on the field.”

Western has been crushing all of its conference opponents this season, winning games by 57, 31, 40 and 56. But when the Vikings ran up against DI-A Central Washington in the Cascade Cup, they lost 44-0, signaling the program is currently caught somewhere between above average and really good.

“We were in it for 50 of the 80 minutes. It was a big step up for the guys. They came away knowingly impressed with Central’s team, they were bigger, faster and stronger,” said Horne.

“The second half we had a heck of a time winning any possession. Everything we got we were going backwards under pressure, everything they got they were going forward. Our defense was well organized, but they managed to keep the pressure on, string a lot of phases together, and I think they scored four or five tries the last 15 minutes.”

The game provided a valuable lesson for the Vikings – yes, you’re winning league games easily, but there’s a whole other level out there you’re aspiring to.

“Playing teams like that is definitely an eye opener. I remember talking to [CWU coach Bob Ford] after the game, it took them 10 years to get where they’re at, and they’re the real deal,” said Horne.

“Our guys definitely see them as the benchmark. As coaches, we fully respect what they’ve done over there, and that’s what we’re shooting for. We built a partnership with the admissions department, so our recruiting has gone well this year, and I think before a lot of the local kids

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would just look at Central as a place to go to play serious rugby, now they've got another option."

Horne and his staff scored a big get when they brought in arguably the team's best player this season – freshman flyhalf Quinton Wilms. Wilms was on the Canadian U18 team and recently participated in the Canadian U20 camp.

"He's an extremely gifted kid who can play the 10 position unlike a lot of kids with a great foot, left and right, put driving spirals down in behind the wing," said Horne of Wilms. "His kicking tactics are superb. His attacking abilities are pretty hard to stop."

Western also has a couple of seniors with impressive credentials. Scrumhalf and captain Matt Jensen attended the All American camp last June, and back rower Robert Boenish played a year in Ireland at Trinity.

If chalk holds, the Vikings will make the DI-AA Sweet 16 this spring, and along with two California teams, have to travel to Austin, Texas. Getting from Bellingham, Wash. to Austin won't be easy, but the leadership group at Western seems as capable as any to raise the funds.

"When we got involved we had three goals. One of them was to travel with two full sides for every game. We've done that. We've fielded three teams at home," said Horne.

"Another one of our goals was to win the Northwest Conference, and we're well on our way to doing that. And our other goal was to have a successful recruiting year this year. We only got three recruits last year, and they're all starting as true freshmen. I think we got off to a good start."