

Radcliffe Best in DII

Written by Jackie Finlan
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After three amazing playoff games apiece, Radcliffe and Notre Dame prepped onlookers for an amazing DII College Championship final, and the two didn't disappoint. Rallying from a deficit, Radcliffe won its first DII title with a 22-10 win over the Fighting Irish.



Radcliffe wins its first-ever DII championship.

But Radcliffe had to battle for every point, every inch, and the team struggled for an upper hand early on. Notre Dame took the first lead with a converted try.

"For us, penalties were part of the reason why Notre Dame got as far as they did," Radcliffe forwards captain Janelle Lambert said. "That first try helped us focus. We were so hyped up and wanted to take it to them hard for the first 20 minutes to tire them out. We were really energetic and that led to some stupid penalties, like coming in from the side, offsides. We calmed down, played our own game, and stayed aggressive."

On offense, Radcliffe attacked around the breakdown in an attempt to wear down Notre Dame, and then employed a kick-and-chase game that sent intimidating wing Shallonda Anderson into the faces on the receivers. The Notre Dame defense did well to neutralize Anderson, who is typically seen breaking down the sideline fending trailers en route to the try zone. But Anderson's pressure during the chase forced some handling errors that sent the ball back into Radcliffe's possession.

The scrums were pretty even, and Radcliffe was able to build some nice attacking platforms from the set piece. One such kick-and-chase fumble set up a Radcliffe scrum in Notre Dame's end, and fullback Xanni Brown broke down the weakside for the try, 7-5 into the half.

Radcliffe picked up the pace in the second half and Notre Dame started to show fatigue - but the Fighting Irish play with a lot of heart, continually encouraged one another, and stressed

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Radcliffe with an interesting offense.

"Notre Dame's offensive strategy was something we've never seen before," Lambert said. "They have an interesting set-up where a mix of backs and forwards line up on either side of the breakdown, so you don't know where they're going. They'd game two to five meters with each phase, and that's how their second try evolved."

Notre Dame was up 10-7, but that was the last lead the team would enjoy. But even as Radcliffe pulled away, Notre Dame kept knocking on the door. During one goal-line series, Radcliffe held up three tries in the try zone.

"Our defense was amazing," Lambert said. "It became our offense." The team produced some more turnovers as the game wore on, and provided Radcliffe with some more possession.

Tournament MVP Evan Hoese accounted for Radcliffe's second try (12-10), which turned out to be the winning points. "We're all in awe of Evan," Lambert said. "She was all over the field, everywhere she needed to be. She plays really good heads-up rugby, tackles really low, makes every tackle, and is a great rucker. She's a great decision-maker and all-around great player."

The forwards were rewarded for their hard work during the last try of the game, a score that Lambert dotted down herself. One more penalty before the whistle and Radcliffe won its first-ever DII title 22-10.

"Bryan [Hamlin] was so proud of us," Lambert said of her coach. "He had been telling us since the fall that we were a great team and could win Nationals. It's been our focus since last year when we lost to Stonehill [during the NRU Championships], and we really felt like we could've competed at nationals. We've worked so hard for the last year, and we couldn't have peaked at a better time."

Lambert was effusive in her praise for Notre Dame, a positive, athletic but young team. As soon as their rugby skills catch up with verve for the game, they'll be a regular fixture on the national stage. But for now, Radcliffe is 2011's champ, and they have a whole year to enjoy it, and work

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toward defending it next year.