Written by Jackie Finlan Saturday, 13 April 2013 16:44

Allendale, Mich., was cold, wet and snowy the past two days, and those DI and DII women's colleges followed difficult paths to the national semifinals. The teams that adjusted and then executed their modified game plans proved the most successful, and that group includes the reigning DI champ.



A young Penn State earned their return trip to the Final Four, and players must be pleased that the opportunity to defend their title will be staged in sunny Palo Alto, Calif. The Nittany Lions started their campaign with a 58-5 win over West Chester yesterday, but it took some time to build that point differential. PSU put their patented strong scrum to work, and that dominance allowed the team to starve West Chester of possession. It was the breakdown that posed some issues for the defending champs.

"We were pretty happy yesterday, but we actually didn't start very well," Penn State coach Pete Steinberg said. "We're pretty confident in our defense, but all weekend we really struggled giving away penalties and working off of the refs. Some of that might be the way the Midwest referees referee, but they had a different interpretation of the tackle area, and it took us a long time to adjust. The first 30 minutes, West Chester put us under some pressure – we were only up 17-0 – and we weren't playing very well. But then we had 30 minutes where we really turned it on and were able to play some really good rugby."

The wind and slick conditions produced a lot of handling errors, so Penn State decided to play a simpler game, focusing on going forward and taking care of the ball.

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"We have some really good leaders," Steinberg said as he reflected on a team that graduated 19 seniors last year. "We're feeling pretty young, so it takes some time for us to make those adjustments. Scrumhalf Brie Barto did a really good job of tightening things up; it was a very difficult weekend to be a scrumhalf. Our captain Kelsey Harris did a good job of pulling everyone together and telling teammates what they needed to do. It was a gut check – a reminder of how we play. And once we got that reminder, everything worked much better."

Freshman lock Katie Miller also did well to take up the shift in strategy and is becoming a strong player for the perennial powerhouse. Senior Olivia Lindsay, a natural center, also stepped up and into the flyhalf spot to aid the second-half success.

Women's Cougar Rugby (aka BYU) was a different story. The teams played each other in last year's final four, but the Cougars were much improved for the rematch. WCR held Penn State in the scrum, and the Nittany Lions didn't win a clean lineout all game. But again, penalties in and around tackle area handicapped the teams.

"We had some real challenges with the tackle contest again, and it was making things pretty difficult for us," Steinberg said. "Both teams had players sin binned for tackle contest issues. The ref was very strict in that area, and we weren't able to generate much fast ball. That really prevented our attack from working. Defensively, we just gave away too many penalties. Our defense is not about attacking the ball; it's about positive tackles. BYU was presenting the ball to us, and we were going for it, and we were giving them go-forward."

The result was a game that was never firmly in Penn State's favor. WCR has their share of well known, successful players, and they did well to overwork the PSU defense. And with the shaky lineouts, Penn State was less inclined to kick for territory, and therefore, had to take on WCR's attack under more pressure.

"I look at these games partly with a Penn State eye and partly with a national team eye," the Women's National 15s Team coach said. "Inside center Jordan ... is a physical, aggressive player, and she was very difficult for us to deal with. Monica Jackson played really well, too. She's someone we've seen in the Eagle pool, and her athleticism around the field is really special."

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The leadership of players like Hope Rogers, who set the example with a physical, tackle-hungry performance all around the field, helped center Penn State. Rogers, along with Bianca Dahl, Kelsey Corbett and Meya Bizer (who also slotted the conversion) dotted down for the 22-10 win.

"Today's game was disappointing for us," Steinberg said. "We won, which is good, but we really didn't play our best. WCR was probably the best competition we've had in the last two years. They really caught us in the breakdown. We were able to play some moments of really good rugby that created our tries, but WCR had the upper hand for good parts of the game.

"It keeps us humble," Steinberg considered the positives of a close win. "This game was in doubt. A different bounce of the ball, and who knows. I was really proud of the team in the second half. Under difficult conditions and the level of penalties we were conceding, we kept our shape and were able to play, so that's something good."

Penn State will build on that good over the next couple weeks and prepare for the winner of Navy v Virginia in the semifinals come early May. The Midshipmen defeated Brown 27-12 for the quarterfinal berth, while Virginia trounced Central Florida 46-7 this afternoon. The two Mason Dixon teams saw each other a couple of weeks ago, and Navy edged UVA 21-20 in the conference semifinals.