

Preview of Women's College NASCs

Written by Jackie Finlan
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2011 is a transition year for the Women's Collegiate All Star Championship, as the competition adjusts to its new age-grade parameters. Previously named the U23 NASCs, the championship will mandate that only full-time college students within their five years of college eligibility may participate. This year's competition has allowed up to three non-collegiate players on each roster, as the event works out the kinks of eligibility.



MARFU's Cavanaugh looks to repeat last weekend's performance.

The move simply aligns the competition with age parameters with which the USA is more familiar - college v U23 - and the level of competition shouldn't suffer too much, considering the average graduating senior is 22. Otherwise, it's business as usual.

The Northeast will try to make it three titles in a row, having defeated the Midwest during the last two finals with a combined score of 68-17. Guided by Vassar's Tony Brown, the Nessies sport representatives from 15 different clubs, with the majority of players coming from DII teams. The NRU is happy to return 2010 NASC MVP Alyssa Baccarella (MIT), who plays a quick, aggressive game from scrumhalf, and who will be complimented nicely by Radcliffe flyhalf Evan Hoese, the DII championship MVP. The halfbacks will have an impressive backline at their disposal, as All American Blaine Martin (Brown), Rachel Sachs (Beantown), Shellonda Anderson (Radcliffe) and Rose Bernheim (Norwich) work in the open field.

The NRU's first match is against the USA U20s, which won Tier B over the Pacific Coast, 22-18, last year. The junior Eagles' roster has yet to be released, but coach Bryn Chivers found some good, new talent during last month's U19 and collegiate championships. Chivers invited wing Whitney White (New Mexico State), prop Monica Jackson (BYU), wing Keelia Harker (BYU) and center Ashley Okonta (Notre Dame) after the club championships, as well as younger players like scrumhalf Joanne Fa'avesi (Sacramento Amazons), prop Kim La Mons (Fallbrook) and front row Jerilyn Peko (Kent).

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In the other Tier 1 semifinal, the West and Midwest will square off. The Thunderbirds' roster was also unavailable, but the team is favored for the win considering history. The West won a NASC title in 2006, and showcases some nice talent in players like Wendy Sherman and Kate Foley from Colorado, and Sam Miller from Mesa State, and Kelley Storey from Texas A&M.

The Mid-Atlantic leads tier 2, having been relegated from tier 1 after losing to the West in the third-place final. The Sharks haven't played in the lower tier since 2005. There are a good amount of Penn State players - Annie Lucas, Lauren Poole, Jackie Cairns, to name a few - as Virginia's Erica Cavanaugh, who shook up the USA Sevens Collegiate Rugby Championship last weekend in Philly. Former junior Eagle Tanya Gouws (Maryland) should be manning the helm at flyhalf, and Megan Lamm (West Chester) will punch up the backline offense as the team takes on the South in round one.

The South has its share of big names, including UNC's Kimber Rozier, who also played some inspired rugby during the CRC, and teammate Carrie Moss. Ryan Carlyle was another one USA 7s Women's coach Ric Suggitt's discoveries last year and played very well during the Hong Kong 7s last March. Clemson's Jessica Loudermilk and Julia Schmidt are very hard workers and scoring threats in the forwards.

The West Coast teams round out the final tier 2 semifinal, with Southern California and Pacific Coast vying for an opportunity to play in tier 1 next year. The Griffins are led by the coaching duo of UCSD's Emily Ogata and UCLA's John Wooler, and their teams' players account for 12 of the 18 players making the trip to Pittsburgh. The Grizzlies are a little better off, bringing 23 players to NASCs, and are led by BYU lock Kayla Ellingson and Hannah Lockwood.

The action begins tomorrow at 1:30 p.m. EST and continues Sunday at 9 a.m.