

Whitewater, Middlebury Avoid Comebacks

Written by Pat Clifton
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(Brad Davis photo)

Middlebury and UW-Whitewater jumped out to firm early leads in Saturday's national semifinals, but had to stave off compelling comeback bids in their second halves to advance to Sunday's final.

UW-Whitewater led Sierra 19-5 at intermission of their game, getting three forwards tries (two from prop Joe Epping and one from U20 No. 8 Chuck Koehler). The Warhawks were outscored 15-10 in the second half, but emerged 29-20 victors.

Middlebury rode a four-try first half to a 26-12 halftime lead over Salisbury, but the Sharks outscored them 14-3 in the second.

"They played very well in the second half," said Middlebury coach John Phillips of Salisbury. "No side deserved to lose, it was just one of those games. It could have gone either way. Salisbury played very, very well."

Middlebury slotted its only three second-half points to take a 29-19 lead, and after a late converted try, Salisbury cranked up the pressure. The Sharks even breached Middlebury's five-meter line, but stiff defense from the Northeast champs eventually forced a knock, allowing a line clearance that preserved Middlebury's 29-26 win.

"They were just pounding us, and we were able to hold out," said Phillips. "Our boys showed tremendous courage. We played great defense. We were driving them back, and they ended up knocking the ball on and we were able to clear it."

Whitewater coach Pat O'Connor was able to watch Middlebury's win, and he was impressed with the fellow finalists.

"They look like a very disciplined team," he said. "They are great at the ruck, have some skilled runners in the backs and good tactical kicking."

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A win Sunday would give Whitewater their first National Title and Middlebury its third in five years.