

Warhawks Edge Middlebury, Win DII National Title

Written by Pat Clifton
Sunday, 01 May 2011 17:12



The weather in Pittsburgh was far from pretty, and the wet and sloppy conditions made for countless knocks and handling errors in the DII National Championship match, but those who turned up at Founders Field did not leave without being entertained.

Four points was all that separated champs UW-Whitewater and runners-up Middlebury Sunday. There were no lead changes, but numerous possession, momentum and territorial changes made for a palatable championship match.

The Warhawks sported a larger forward pack than the Panthers, but Middlebury held its ground in the scrums and. Early on, though, the Panthers struggled to gain possession or a platform for attack.

“They had a very good pack. They kept the ball away from us. They did very well,” said Middlebury coach John Phillips of Whitewater. “They were well coached, and we just couldn’t get at the ball. The field was slick, the ball was slick, and we just couldn’t launch our backline.”

Middlebury’s frustration over playing defense mustered three yellow cards, all handed out for penalties at the ruck, and when the Panthers were playing with 13 men, Whitewater scored the game’s only try. The Warhawks used their large pack and numbers advantage to drive deep into Middlebury country, and Will Atkinson took the final crash that ended as a try.

“I didn’t feel like I was going to get there,” said Atkinson, “but I felt this surge and it was a total team try. My teammates pushed me over the line and I had the ball in my gut and it was over the line.”

Middlebury narrowed the gap with a penalty near halftime, making it 7-3 at intermission.

Warhawks Edge Middlebury, Win DII National Title

Written by Pat Clifton
Sunday, 01 May 2011 17:12

UW-Whitewater's multiphase possessions often began with an eight-man pick from U17 and U20 performer Chuck Koehler. A towering figure as a freshman, Koehler consistently found go-forward ball from the base of the scrum, putting the rest of his pack on the balls of their feet.

"Chuck is playing beyond his years, so we've benefited from that," said UW-Whitewater coach Pat O'Connor. "I think his time with the U17s and U20s helped him and helped us, and we're grateful for that. He was calm and kept the scrum calm, and they were able to just work their way forward."

The Panthers had their chances to take the lead, but seemingly every time they made a break or threatened to penetrate Whitewater's defense, they knocked the ball on. Feeling the clock start to wind down, Middlebury picked up its aggression at the breakdown in the game's final quarter. They were stealing Whitewater rucks and spending most of the time in the attacking end, but the Warhawks had a capable scramble defense.

"They had a few overloads on us, and we were able to slide out and just stop those," said O'Connor of Middlebury. "They never gave up. The game was never ours until the final whistle. They were down there knocking on the door the last four minutes, but we were able to work it out and get a little breathing space."

Middlebury was awarded a lineout inside Whitewater's 22 near full time, but the throw was inches off and the Warhawks recovered possession. After a short series of picks and crashes, Middlebury was called for a knock, prompting the final whistle to blow and Whitewater to celebrate the 7-3 victory and the program's first-ever National Championship.

Just months after arriving on Whitewater's campus unsure about Warhawks rugby, Koehler was named the final's MVP.

"I never thought we'd make it this far coming in. I didn't even know this school was that good at rugby," Koehler said. "The seniors that are leaving, I feel like we gave them exactly what they wanted to go out; your last game of college rugby, never being able to play with this club again, to go out after four or five years and winning national championship."

"I love the guys and I'm going to miss them. I told them before that game that we were going to play for them and they deserved a national championship under their belt."

With Koehler slated to be a Warhawk for three more seasons, expect to see Whitewater back in the dance the next few years. Middlebury won't factor in the DII title hunt next year, as they plan to join the DI East Coast Rugby Conference.