The Pacific Coast got just one club into the 2011 DI Round of 16 last year, Olympic Club, and they want back in. Provo, the Sacramento Lions and Northside Tigers want in, too. Problem is, they all have to beat someone from Southern California, which is widely considered the best DI league in the country, and is perhaps even the best club league in the country, period.

“I think Southern California is a tough league. I think it’s consistently a tough league," said O-Club coach Ray Lehner. “I think Northern California is a physical league, and every now and then someone will surprise you. You just can’t take anyone lightly up here, just like you can’t down there.”

In the last week of SoCal regular season play, only 12 points separated league champs Belmont Shore, 2010 national runners-up, from the league’s fourth-place team and O-Club’s opponent in the Round of 32 Saturday, Los Angeles. That signals Southern California, which put two teams in the 2010 Final Four last year, could be even stronger this time around.

“We have no illusions of what we face on Saturday,” said Lehner, who coached O-Club to a defeat of LA in the same spot last season. “I like to think we kind of have a handle on LA as far as knowing what they do and what they want to do. We don’t get to go see a ton of video on them, but we managed to get a look at them this year. They’re a good team. We’ll have to play well to beat them.”

Luckily for the San Francisco club, the infusion of young talent like former Cal All-American Keegan Engelbrecht has reignited the competitive flames of some of the team’s elder statesmen.

“Keegan Engelbrecht coming in has been a real bonus for us at 10, and Peter Galicz, who was playing 10, has moved to 15, and he looks like a 23-year-old Peter Galicz at 15, so that all helps when you get some personnel changes like that,” Lehner said. The fountain of youth doesn’t seem to have only serviced the backs.

“To their credit, Kort (Schubert), Andrew Armstrong and Carl Hansen have played some of the best rugby of their careers. Carl Hansen, I think, looks like a test lock. He’s physical, he’s having lots of moments with ball in hand, he’s making some big tackles in defense. I think Carl’s playing really well, so yeah, it’s great to have their leadership and experience and just that veteran presence.”

Old Mission Beach Athletic Club has also been the benefactor of some notable returns, like those of Jarvis Albury and Joe Fontana. Their presence will help soften the blow of losing two players, No. 8 Jesse Witkowicki and prop Brendan Purcell, to the Eagles domestic camp this weekend, and the potential loss of Zack Pangelinan to the 7s team next week and beyond. While OMBAC would surely rather have those guys on the pitch, losing them is an honor for the club.

“We want to push players to the highest possible level, regardless of who we’re playing or what level of competition we’re involved in,” said OMBAC coach Mike Penistone. “When I joined the club back in January, I said that in order to be successful, everyone at all three teams has to feel as though they are part of a winning environment, so the expectation for our replacements will be the same.”

OMBAC is hosting the Sacramento Lions, a team renowned for their physicality in contact, which, Penistone says, could play right in OMBAC’s hands. “They seem to be a very physical, forwards-orientated side, which suits us well, because we want to move the ball around the field. If we can gain parity up front, then we’ll move the ball around the field.”

Sharing a similar preferred style of play with the Lions are the Provo Steelers, who are looking to reach their second Sweet 16 in three years. They host Santa Monica, another fast, freewheeling SoCal team, Saturday.

“They like to run wide and try to capitalize out wide in the backline, and we like to do the opposite,” said Provo’s Dave Valeti of the Dolphins. “If we can stick it to their flyhalf, we’ll have a better chance of winning.”

Provo may be in luck, as Santa Monica’s had trouble with injuries during the long, 14-game SoCal season, including at that critical position.

“We know Provo are going to be a tough team. We haven’t really seen them much, but we know they will play a physical game,” said Santa Monica’s Doug Bratcher. “This season has been great, but it has also been tough. We have had quite a few injuries, especially at flyhalf.”

Fitness has been a problem for the Steelers in the past, but this season they’ve emphasized getting in shape.

“We’ve been working really hard, running really hard. We know who we’re up against,” said Valeti. “We’ve been running a lot and working on our fitness, and really trying to establish our game plan. We think if we keep it in tight and stick to our game plan, we’ll be tough to beat. If we let them get the ball wide, if we send the ball wide too much, we’ll be in trouble.”

The fourth crossover match in this region pits Belmont Shore, champs of SoCal, against the Northside Tigers, who finished second in Utah. Belmont has not been as dominant in SoCal this season as they were last, and the Tigers give Utah two teams in the DI National Playoffs for the first time since at least 1996.