When the Denver Highlanders reached the Sweet 16 last season, their pack was full of large, doughy, not-so-mobile scrummies. When Peter Shafroth arrived as coach in the fall, he assessed his personnel and decided to play a tight game, moving the ball out wide little and using possession to milk the clock, and hopefully, gain some ground.

There has been a renaissance since then, and the Highlanders, now with serious foreign, athletic and foreign-athletic talent, both in the scrum and elsewhere, play a more modern style. Saturday, when they hosted the Austin Huns in the National Round of 32, they found themselves across the midfield-line from something that resembled the old Highlanders.

“They were such a strong forward pack, a big forward pack, and I figured it was going to take a while to wear them down,” Shafroth said.

The Highlanders led 17-14 at halftime. They ended up winning 44-14.

“I think we wore them out in the second half and that sort of made us able to open up the game,” he said, sounding a lot like the Highlanders’ opposing coaches the last couple years.

“It’s been a total role reversal. Last fall, I was really into 10-man rugby, and this year just felt that we had the athletes that we’d work off multiple phases and work it out to our backs, and I think it's paid off big time.”

The Highlanders did reach the Sweet 16 last year, so they were somewhat competitive in their league and at least better than their Texas counterpart, winning their way through the competitive region crossovers. But, you'd have been hard pressed to find a pundit who'd have given them a puncher’s chance to win a game in the Sweet 16, which proved a fair assessment when they lost 51-0 to Santa Monica on day one of Nationals and 60-7 to league rival Glendale on day two.

This time, though, they haven’t just survived their way into the Round of 16, they’ve thrived. And though they will likely draw defending runners-up Belmont Shore (who plays the Northside Tigers Sunday) next, with a little bit of luck, they may be able to win another game, or two, or more.

“It was my belief when I played for the Barbos, you had this mystique about California teams that they were unbeatable,” recalled Shafroth. “And once you played them and realized they were human beings just like us, anything’s possible. I think we’re going to have to play at our best and maybe they don’t play at their best, but I think if we go in looking at it that way, we have a chance.”