

Highlanders on to Round of 16

Written by Bernie Decker
Sunday, 08 May 2011 12:35

The Denver Highlanders advanced to the Round of 16 with a decisive 44-14 defeat of Austin Huns Saturday on a warm spring day at Glendale's Infinity Park turf field.

Huns drew first blood with a spirited dash into goal by fullback Gus Maclean after the forwards turned over ball at Highlanders 10 meter line. Outside center Trent Jones fended off a Highlander tackler and found space at the hosts' 22 meter line before passing inside to finisher Maclean, who also converted for a 7-nil traveler lead at 8 minutes.

Canny long range boots for territory by the Highlander standoff and well-supported back row spurts from the maul enabled the hosts to level the scores when flanker Josh Slater snatched ball from the loose, brushed off a tackle, and dove into goal to touch down: conversion by flyhalf Leif Gibson and everyone at seven, 16 minutes in.

The wily Highlander halfback got his side on the front foot as he found a lane at Huns 10 meter line and brought the action 25 meters from goal, though ball lost forward at the breakdown appeared to stymie that effort. But the Highlanders pack were able to wheel the ensuing scrum sufficient to exact turnover, and half dozen tight mauling phases later the visitors were pinged for coming over the top, and Gibson struck well to give the home squad a 10-7 lead.

Now it was Austin slamming away at the Highlanders forwards, with their big pack players, and though they were able to sustain drives inside the Highlanders 22, handling errors and violations ultimately blunted their advance and Gibson was able to clear the Highlanders lines.

The home team got out of the box swiftly after the re-start. No. 8 Clinton Camp picked up from the base of the scrum at Huns 30, and twisting and shimmying his way inside the 22 where his pack supported well and brought the action to five meters from goal. Outside center Paea Kaevelaka, in support at the breakdown, slipped from the loose and darted into goal for the try converted by Gibson: 17-7 at 43 minutes.

A territorial boot by Gibson was mishandled. The Highlanders won that scrum and set up a maul that led to loosehead prop Bryan Gustafson bulling across for Denver to make it 24-7 at 46

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minutes.

But Huns got one back as wing Chris Wood brought turnover ball 60 meters in a streak down the sidelines and into goal for a Maclean-converted goal and Huns drew to within ten at 51 minutes.

Gibson increased his side's margin with a pair of penalty conversions at 53 and 57 minutes as altitude slowed the play of each team and replacements scrambled onto the field. Austin were to bring the ball twice more to the Highlanders five meter line, but each time were denied points and after turnover ball was achieved, Gibson banged the ball away to safety.

Highlanders were to dot down twice more as Gustafson and Kaivelaka each picked up his brace and with the error-free goal kicking of Gibson, the final went into the books at 44-14.

Of note for Round of 32 Denver Highlanders: absence of formidable fullback Brendan Daniel, away on business, and a shoulder injury to scrumhalf Tim Guerra sidelining him for the playoffs. Daniels will return for the next round and halfback Zach Dickerson filled in well for the injured Guerra, but Highlanders' next opponent, Belmont Shore, will present a different level of play altogether one would think.

Highlanders 44

Tries: Slater, Kaivelaka (2), Gustafson (2)
Cons: Gibson (5)
Pens: Gibson (3)

Huns 14

Tries: MacLean, Wood
Cons: MacLean (2)

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Officials: M. Nelson, C. Tarr, J. Zevin