Written by Jackie Finlan Monday, 09 September 2013 20:02

The most entertaining half of all the Women's Premier League games this weekend occurred during the Beantown vs. Glendale match. The teams traded scores, but the visiting Raptors took a 24-19 lead into half before pulling away in the second stanza to win 48-36. A lot of scoring, a lot of action – something the league expected, especially when memories of last year's semifinal resurface.



Glendale is one of several teams playing underneath a new coaching regime this season. The Raptors hired Steve Lynch on August 8, and he's been working with the team and former interim head coach Mark Bullock, who is still the Glendale Director of Rugby, since then. Lynch is an interesting character. After time with the Army then Corporate America, he traveled the country before "settling" in Key West, where he helped establish the rugby team there. After three years, he spent the next three years abroad coaching rugby in Italy and the Malta Women's 7s team (European 7s Championship MVP Beverie Sultana followed her former coach here), and recently returned to the states as his son readied for freshman year at Life University, where he received a rugby scholarship.

The timing was fortuitous, and so were the circumstances into which Lynch entered.

"I'm very fortunate that I have some of the nation's best players, and they have a chemistry that a coach can only dream of," Lynch said. "The program's been moving pretty smoothly, but during our goal-setting meeting, we talked about a couple of things the players wanted to implement this year and adjusting our game plan depending on our opponent."

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That mentality was put to the test on Sunday.

"We knew we were readying for a top-three team who gave us a heck of a fight during playoffs," Lynch said. "The girls are familiar with Beantown. They're strong in the forwards, and they have speed in the backs, but we decided that possession and go-forward ball were more important than territory."

Taking the game to the Beantown forwards is no easy task, but as the match wore on, it became apparent that Glendale's fitness supported the tactic.

"Beantown played great defense. We probably had a similar number of linebreaks, but our forwards were able to support them," Lynch said. "Our all-Eagle front row were able to be the first people there, so we were able to keep the pressure on with quick ball and pick-and-goes, and that allowed us to carry them into in-goal. My philosophy is that if a certain pressure continues to work, then continue to work the same channel."

Gedda Rodriguez-Howard, Hannah Stolba, Erin Overcash – a sampling of the players who were able to get through the line and start the deluge of pressure downfield. With fit forwards on their tails – Wilson, in particular, for sticking with eight 20- to 30-meter breakaways – Stolba was key to keeping the team organized, and Lynch was grateful for her influence.

"I am incredibly fortunate to have Hannah Stolba as a flyhalf," he said. "Her skills and rugby IQ and decision-making are fantastic. If I could have any 10 in the world, I would select Hannah. She manages the team so well."

By game's end, lock Kristen Shalosky scored three tries; Wilson and wing Chinyere Isaac-Heslop scored two apiece; and Stolba slotted five conversions and a penalty.

With all that said, Beantown only lost by two tries, so it wasn't the overwhelming win that is being painted.

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"This early in the season, everything can be improved upon," Lynch said. "More than anything, we could really work on team defense. We were excellent in our one-up tackles, but not as far as a coordinated defensive effort. We'll need to fix that before D.C. [this weekend]."

If Glendale sounds optimistic, then the message is coming through loud and clear. Last year, when Glendale met in the pre-season, the goal was simply not to be relegated. Glendale finished second in the league, but they approached the final with a "happy to be here" attitude rather than a "we deserve to be here" attitude.

"Part of what we talked about was setting stretch goals instead of a 'let's not have this happen' goal," Lynch explained. "One goal is winning the championship, but we also want to decide how we want to be perceived. They want to have people see us as a team above individual players – looking for a selfless set of values where we're out supporting each other versus looking for individual accolades. Last year was a huge success – well above what they thought might happen – but they set their sites too low."

Some of that new optimism comes from the work that's being done below the WPL level. Shalosky, for instance, wasn't a regular fixture on elite side last year. But she hit the weight room with a vengeance in the off season, and that changed the way she plays the game.

"She's a really hard worker ... an engine in the scrum, and she's been working on her body position in open play," Lynch said. "The game plan works around pick-and-goes, and she gives us solid go-forward with a really good leg drive."

Juliann Tordonato is another youngster about which Lynch is excited. A utility back, she played the last 10 minutes against Beantown and showed great promise. And of course there's the 22-year-old Overcash, who already has a cap with the 15s Eagles.

"The depth looks amazing," Lynch said. "We brought our second side to Beantown – 31 traveled – and none of the second side started in the WPL match. It's a true B side – not a DII team – and I think we [the B side] looked like a very experienced DI side. I'm not that concerned that if we lose a couple of players that it'll affect our abilities as a team. ... I'm confident that in the next three or four years, we can have 20 in the Eagle player pool."

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It was a good start for an eager Glendale team and inspired new coach.

On the other side of the conference, D.C. topped New York 27-15 for the first time in the WPL's five-year history ($\underline{\text{read more}}$).

2013 Women's Pre Blue Conference	mier League Standings W	- Week 1 L	т
Glendale	1	0	0
D.C. Furies	1	0	0
Beantown	0	1	0

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New York 0 1 0

Red Conference W L T

Twin Cities 1 0 0

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Berkeley 1 0 0 0

Atlanta 0 1 1 0

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