

## DII East Pool 1 Up for Grabs

Written by RUGBYMag Staff  
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East Pool 1 in the Men's DII Club Round of 16 is looking to be the hardest pool to pick a favorite. While Tampa Krewe is the defending champion, Middlesex (Mass.), Chicago Blaze and Rocky Gorge (Md.) all have a shot at advancing to the Final Four.



A Tampa Krewe player breaks off of a maul. (Photo by Colin Watson)

Middlesex Barbarians coach Josh Smith knows that the pool is wide open and full of talented squads. "Our pool is a pool of death," he said. "Three returning Sweet 16 teams [Blaze, Middlesex and Tampa] including the reigning national champs."

Smith's team goes up against Tampa first and is confident about what his team can accomplish. "This is by far the best club we have brought to nationals," he added.

Middlesex has been to nationals the past four years, twice in DIII, and their goal has always been a national championship. They made it to this point last year, but lost to Brandywine 28-24 in the first round. "Last season we spotted Brandywine a three-try lead before we came to life in the second half," Smith said. "This year we won't be watching for 40 minutes, like we did last year. Our boys have played in big matches, no more 'deer in headlights'."

This will be the biggest match yet because Tampa Krewe is probably the most favored team,

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having won the competition last year. The Barbarians will look to get the game going in the loose, playing a southern-hemisphere brand of rugby.

Smith is aware of what Tampa can do and says that if his team comes out and executes, they can be in the mix at the end. "My guys are extremely fired up to get a shot at Tampa," he said.

It won't be an easy task though, because Tampa picked up where they left off last year and have been sweeping the competition. "The first goal was to win the Florida Cup in preseason... we did that," head coach Dai Morgan stated. "Winning the league was next... we did that. Winning the South came after that and we just achieved that. But we're not looking past Middlesex; on any given day anything could happen."

Morgan said that Tampa's big athletic forwards tend to wear teams down and he wants them to do the same this weekend. "We've also got a very talented group of backs. People sometimes underestimate them and they've been quality finishers for us this season," he added.

"We expect to repeat... It would be an absolutely fantastic achievement for the club. It's always very very difficult to repeat, especially with the quality of teams this year."

The other match up in the pool is Rocky Gorge against Chicago Blaze. Chicago was another team to make it to the Round of 16 last year, but fell victim to Tampa on their way to the title. The Blaze have performed well enough this season to earn a promotion to DI in the fall.

Tampa, Middlesex and Chicago were all in the same pool together last year, with Rocky Gorge being the only newcomers. This year, Rocky Gorge beat Jersey Shore before losing to Doylestown in the regional playoffs, but it was enough to earn them the Mid-Atlantic second seed (fourth overall) and a berth at nationals. The East pool matches will be played this Saturday in Manassas Park, Va., with Tampa taking on Middlesex at 10 a.m. and Chicago playing Rocky Gorge at 11:45.