

Metropolis, Syracuse Into DIII Semis

Written by Jackie Finlan
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Manassas, Va., was treated to two fabulous quarterfinal matches during the men's DIII club championship yesterday. Both victors – Syracuse and Metropolis – had rough first halves but adjusted well after the break to outlast their opponents.



Metropolis fights for DIII semifinal berth. (Shaun Collins photo)

Syracuse and Virginia took the pitch first, and the local side had the momentum – and scoreboard – on its side heading into the break.

“Virginia came out hard and fast, and were getting the better half of the ball,” Syracuse flyhalf Jeff Devennie said. “They were controlling the flow of the game and playing at a higher level than us in the first 40 minutes.”

Syracuse had difficulty getting good ball out of the scrum, which translated into anxious ball from the base and stagnant movement in the backline. Outside center Johnny Morse was able to put his team on the board in the first half, keeping the score at 11-5 before the break, but the team needed more than one-off tries to get back into the game.

“At the break, we talked about getting back to doing the simple things right,” Devennie said. “We knew we’d get better results once we took care of the basics and eliminated little things like knock-ons.”

It also started to rain in the second half, so that slowed down Virginia and helped even the field a bit. As the second stanza progressed, Syracuse’s fitness began to push the team through, and its set pieces were the happy recipient. Able to secure good primary possession, Syracuse was able to mount some go-forward series in Virginia’s end.

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From inside the 22 meter, lock Andrew Pelkey scooped up a ball that squirted out the back of the ruck, broke through a few tackles and scored the team's second try of the day. Devennie hit the conversion to pull within one point, 11-10.

Even as the clock wound down, Syracuse remained calm, didn't veer from its patterns, and made some good decisions when it did have possession. With about seven minutes to go, Virginia made the fatal mistake of erring in its own zone. Devennie hit a penalty for the 13-11 edge that stood to the final whistle.

It was a familiar scene for Virginia, whose closing-minutes penalty kick against Bragg Saturday broke the 22-all tie and earned the team a trip to the Elite 8. Only this time, Virginia was on the losing end.

"Virginia was fast, quick, and had a strong, fit pack," Devennie commended. "They were the best matchup we've seen all season in terms of size and speed."

"We have a couple of things to work on, maintain primary possession, more discipline around the tackle, and support running for the backs," Devennie said, "but anytime you can go out there and get a win against a solid team is great."

Metropolis' Nathan Osborne echoed Devennie's comments, as he reflected on his team's 20-10 win over Old Gaelic yesterday. The team went into Sunday after having beat Rockaway 66-8 on Saturday, and the big point margin produced a mental challenge for Minnesota-based team.

"We were coming off a game where everything went right, and everything you worked toward happened," Metropolis player/coach Nathan Osborne said. "Old Gaelic had the benefit of watching yesterday's game, so they were ready for us. They disrupted us, and suddenly we were getting penalties for silly infractions, which put us on the back foot. It's something that we mentally had to get around."

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Metropolis tried to capitalize on its mobile forwards, but Old Gaelic forced the team to commit more players than usual into the breakdown, thereby handicapping its outside attack. Disable set pieces affected quality possession, and players became frenzied as they tried to force the offense, often resulting in some ill-advised decisions and 50/50 passes.

“We didn’t adjust well in the first half,” flyhalf Osborne said. “At the half, we took a deep breath and realized that we had to settle into our established game plan in order to gain control. We didn’t need to do anything different – throwing the ball around and running around like chickens with our heads cut off. We just needed to come together and slow the game down.”

It was a turning point for Metropolis, who entered the half with an 8-3 lead. At the onset of the second stanza, a newly focused Metropolis side sent Mark Dalton and AJ Jimmerson in the try zone during the third quarter for the 20-3 lead. Old Gaelic managed another try before the final whistle, but the scoring would end there, 20-10.

“We played well, but Old Gaelic was ready for us,” Osborne said. “It was a good match for us, especially since the last four teams standing will all be really tough.”

Fortunately for Metropolis’ DIII side, they’ll have its DI counterparts available for practice sessions going forward, as well as hefty support in Glendale, Colo. It’s especially important to Osborne, who commissioned some sideline help this weekend, so he could concentrate on being a player instead of all the auxiliary duties required of a player/coach.

The final four is the farthest that the club – DI or DIII – has advanced in its history, and has the South Bay Rhinos awaiting the team at the national semifinals in two weeks time.