

United Survives Two Challenges

Written by
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Utah-based United made it back to the National U19 championships thanks to two victories this past weekend.

But it wasn't easy. Despite being the most polished of the four teams playing for the Pacific Coast #2 seed, and despite having brought in several recent additions, including a player CIPP'd this past week, and despite playing a better team game than their opponents, United were within a try of going home each day.

That was in part due to the hard work, toughness, and athleticism of their opposition, as Liberty pushed United to the brink on Friday and Hayward did the same on Saturday.

Hayward went to their team strength all day keeping the ball in the forward pack and running pick-and-goes and single-pass charges all day. Using their size and this straightforward game plan they did well to recycle ball, which was key if they were going to rein in the United offensive threats.

But Hayward's hard-charging style was thwarted in part by the fact their runners were rarely running onto the ball when they caught it. Their size and power helped them get away with this most of the season, but against a committed United defense, it wasn't as effective.

Still, while United usually made the first hit behind the gainline, Hayward's size and strength often carried those tacklers further downfield.

New Australia arrival Savern Rapana did not start against Hayward due to a slight injury he had picked up the day before, but he did step on in the second half and played well. Player of the game, however, was United's excellent flyhalf, Russ Parai.

Eleven minutes in United took a lineout seven meters from the Hayward line. United opted for a short lineout and then dropped the ball off the top to their extra forwards coming in from ten meters back. No. 8 Sione Hausia powered through for a try and a 5-0 lead for United.

Hayward's good ball retention prevented further damage through much of the first half. The Griffins pressured the United line, and from a five-meter scrum, No. 8 Atoni Sunia thumped his way over. 5-5.

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United replied quickly, catching the Hayward forwards napping on a penalty. A quick tap put the ball in Pariri's hands and the flyhalf angled out to the corner. With dummy runners attracting attention Pariri sent a skip pass to center Maka Unufe, who blazed in for the score. 12-5 United.

Hayward did not hang their heads, however, and after a couple of penalties by United sent the forwards down the defense's throats. Sunia crashed over for his second. 12-10 United.

Hayward took the lead ten minutes into the second half. Several more pick-and-goes ate up meters for the Northern Californians. Finally Flanker Chris Fotu picked and dove over from three meters out, knocking some defenders on their backsides in the process. 15-12 Hayward led.

But it was short-lived, as United unleashed Unufe again. The quickest payer on the field, Unufe split the defense and then offloaded to Savern Rapan for the try. 19-15 United led.

Pariri made it a seven-point game with a penalty kick, and then one more with time winding down. Hayward tried to rally in the closing moments, but it was too little, too late.

Hayward and Liberty both tried to take down the defending champs, but found the task a tough one. Both teams failed to capitalize on key scoring chances, and also betrayed the tendency for young players to rely too much on their physical abilities as opposed to their teammates.

United, meanwhile, have been criticized in some circles for bringing in players from overseas in mid-season, but they have made a team out of that group nonetheless (and broken no rules according to officials). And their much tougher schedule, which included games against Highland (twice) and Red Mountain.