

## Zons Back to Form in NorCal

Written by Jackie Finlan  
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For the last couple of years, the Sacramento Amazons have been replenishing the team that won the 2010 Girls High School Championship. That team was special, and veteran-heavy, and the Northern California squad has struggled to recreate that magic.



Fortunately for Sacramento, there's a vibrant youth program that continually exposes more and more local girls to rugby, and the Amazons are welcoming them with open arms. Those middle-schoolers who joined in 2011 are now freshmen in high school, and that well of young, experienced athletes continues to develop.

"They're on schedule, but they're surprising us, too," Sacramento coach Sefesi Green said of the veteran freshmen. "We have a good balance of experience and youth now: seven upperclassmen – three who were reserves on the 2010 championship team – and the rest are freshmen and middle schoolers. But even our first-years, the ones who come from youth programs, they've got some skills."

Leading the charge is Suliana Tausinga, who was a reserve in 2010 and now captains the team from No. 8. She's joined by younger sister Melelea at flyhalf, and the two are an absolutely phenomenal duo. They're big, fast, hard to drag down, but are also smart and know when to pass. The Tausinga sisters were the highlight of the Amazons' nationals campaign last year.

"Recently, we've been known for our forwards," Green said of his team's physically dominating size. "But our backs are always very creative, which comes from our Pacific Islander heritage. We look to our backs for some flair, and this year, our backs have that. They're fun to watch. The difference is that they're working hard and have been putting it together early this year."

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Part of that excitement comes in the form of Malieti Haungatau. The newcomer is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and scored five tries against Bullard last weekend. She's currently playing wing, but Green envisions her at center soon.

"She has the potential to be the best player I've ever coached," Green said. "She's got a lot of power for a 7<sup>th</sup> grader – in fact, you look at her and think she's a senior."

But Green is careful not to overextend his team right now. They're still in the building process and should start realizing the rewards of their years of hard work by the end of the season.

"We've still got a couple of more years before we peak, but our current makeup will give us a strong year," Green said. "With the group we have now, we'll have a strong showing for at least the next seven years – and that's not even counting the youth players coming in. We're reaping the benefits there, but it's up to us to bring them in and develop their game. That's what will give us a good core."

Green is also keeping an eye on the competition, keen to match the pace of the ever-improving girls high school landscape. There are still a few Amazons playing who can contrast the 2010 and 2011 national championships against Fallbrook, and that perspective has also kept the team focused.

"In 2011, losing to Fallbrook in the final by such a large amount was discouraging, but that just shows how good Fallbrook was that year," Green said. "Every nationals is a great learning experience, and we make a point of leaving everything on the field. However, if you finished up the season and you didn't win the championship, then you didn't work hard enough."

During the last couple of years, Sacramento have received good competition from Mother Lode and Bishop O'Dowd, and the same should be the case in 2013. Saturday will be the Amazons' first test (they're currently 1-0, defeating Bullard 75-5 and Alameda 81-0 in a friendly), as they face Dixon, a two-year-old team that pushed BOD in their 20-17 loss.

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“In the past, we’ve only had six games, but now we have a nine-game regular season before playoffs, then the state championship and NIT,” Green explained. “That alone will help with playing experience, build depth and give us some good looks. I also coach the women’s team, and we scrimmage them a lot. Puts the girls under some pressure.”

NorCal watch out - the Amazons are nearly back to form. And by the sound of it, they've got a steady flow of players to make it a norm, rather than the occasion.