Champions in 2007, the Chicago Lions have been close but no cigar in the national club 7s scene since.

Though they did win the Club Championship Series in Las Vegas in February, the USA Rugby title has eluded them in recent years.

Perhaps most curious was 2010, when the Lions looked virtually unstoppable in pool play after being picked in these pages as potential champions. But Sunday, stung by injury, they lost three in a row, to finish a disappointing 8th.

But they did bounce back in Vegas, and it's that team, plus a group of talented collegiate, that descends on San Francisco this weekend.

Try-scoring sensation Peter Tiberio, who is quickly attaining Next Big Thing status, joins up with 2010's try-scoring sensation, Rocco Mauer, and his Bowling Green playmaking teammate, Nick Viviani to form most of their youth movement.

But those players were expected to perform. They had all done well in the USA 7s Collegiate

Rugby Championships, and Tiberio and Mauer are in the USA 7s team system. But the surprise, perhaps, had been Brad Harrington, a 6-2 15s flyhalf from Cal.

“Brad Harrington has been a godsend,” said Lions captain Eddie Bluemel. “We have had a lot of young guys on the team who haven’t played in a championship situation before. You don’t know how they’re going to react. This year we’re blessed with some good kids.”

The Lions breezed through the Midwest this year. Their only hiccup was a very rare loss to the Chicago Griffins and a tough semifinal against 1823 in the territorial championships.

“Anytime you come out of the Midwest on top you’re going to be happy, but it was hard,” said Bluemel. “It was hot, 90 to 95 degrees and humid. We struggled near the end. I take pride in my conditioning – your speed might diminish but conditioning you can control – and when I walked off the field after the semifinal I was just dead exhausted. So given all that, I thought we performed pretty well.”

That is in part because the Lions have veteran leadership. Jeremy Nash, Mark Roberts, Scott Peterson, Austin Britts, and Tommy Dolan, along with coach Aaron Manheimer, have all been there before.

“These are guys who don’t need to be coached on how to be a grownup,” said Bleumel. “We don’t have any real ego problems.”

They will need all the veteran leadership in the so-called Pool of Death as they face SFGG, Utah Warriors and Glendale.

“It’s easy to underestimate an opponent,” said Bluemel. “But I don’t think we’re going to have that problem in this pool. In any tournament one bad bounce can make bad things happen. So what we need to do is not have the game so close that one bad bounce beats us. And one other thing we’re telling each other – it’s the Pool of Death in part because we’re in it.”