

Pat's Perspective: Who Wins 7s Nationals?

Written by Pat Clifton
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Since arriving in San Francisco early Friday morning, I've been asked by three people who my pick was to win the tournament. Since it appears at least three people are interested in my projection skills, I figured it warranted a writeup.

On Ruggamatrix America Show 63 (I think), I picked the winner of each pool. I believe I picked the Utah Warriors, Belmont Shore, Denver Barbarians and Woodlands Exiles. That was all before the release of the final rosters.

Between those picks and the cementing of who is actually playing for who, a lot has gone down. The Exiles nearly missed out on the entire tournament because of eligibility regulations, Utah's Mike Palefau was set to play, not set to play, and then set to play again, and Belmont Shore has added Matt Hawkins to their final roster.

After all that change, I still pick the same teams for each pool. Where could I go wrong? SFGG, Chicago or Glendale could beat out the Warriors. All of these teams have their merits, which I'll discuss in a minute.

In Pool D, really any of the teams have the potential to beat the Barbos. The Barbos are the most experienced, skilled team in the bunch, but they've had a tendency to play down to lesser opponents throughout the summer. If they do that here, it could really cost them. Still, if they lose one game I think they'll likely win the pool, and I don't see them losing two.

Who can beat the Exiles? Atlanta Old White. If this game was earlier, I would pick the Exiles with more confidence. But since they're bringing just nine players and their toughest game is the last one of the day, I think Atlanta has a real shot to knock off the upstarts out of Houston. However, the Exiles two best players -- John Moonlight and Phil Mack -- are tremendously fit.

Belmont Shore is probably in the second-toughest pool in the tournament. The Hawaii team has to scare everyone. They're a total unknown, but still a lot is expected. Belmont coach James Walker admitted his team this year isn't as big up front. Hawaii should be physical. They could gain an edge there. Boston could also knock off Belmont. They're really fit, and they've lost just one game all summer. New Orleans is intriguing. They're a true club side, and they will play like

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it, and perhaps a flawless performance could fell the mighty bunch from Long Beach.

Now, to the question at hand: who wins it all? I want to cop out and pick a pool of teams. I will give an actual pick, but first let me tell you about my pool of teams.

1. Belmont Shore is probably the most talented team in the country. Shalom Suniula is either the best or second best scrumhalf in the event (Phil Mack is the other), Matt Hawkins is the best forward, Justin Boyd is probably the fastest and Alex Ross, Duncan Kelm, Peter Sio, Taylor Howden and Toshi Palamo combine for most likely the best surrounding cast. Their only question mark is cohesion. Have they the jelled quality of a club that's played together more frequently?

2. The Utah Warriors are still trying to prove themselves, even if they don't have to. They have some Eagles, some possible future Eagles and what it takes to win. Plus, I don't think Mike Palefau walked out on a chance to play in the World Cup to lose. They also have a pair of accent-bearing brothers (at least, I think they're brothers, and I think they're British) who can play in the Nicholls. Looking forward to seeing Maka Unufe for the first time.

3. This is the second-most talented team in the tournament. I think in a few years, if you look back at the players who competed in this tournament, JP Eloff will jump off the page. He is fantastic. Peter Tiberio and Rocco Mauer are big-time talents, too, and both have a future with the 7s Eagles. Heck, Tiberio has present with the Eagles. Chicago also has a slew of battle-proven, determined veterans like Scott Peterson.

4. SFGG is at home. They may have Volney Rouse. They have depth. They have Mose Timoteo. And they're SFGG.

5. It starts to fall off here. I think the Glendale Raptors are what I'll call tier 1-b. They have a really talented team, but their top two forwards are banged up -- Spencer Scott and Shae Tamati. They do not have great depth, but they do have Ata Malifa and Dewon Reed, and both can make huge plays on their own. Raptors deserved the top ranking earlier this summer, but at that point Scott and Tamati were guaranteed to play and play well.

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6. Take your pick between the Exiles and Boston. I think they're tier 2. The Exiles, if they had a full squad, would be in the top tier, but to win six-straight games with only two subs (assuming no one gets hurt) seems like an impossibility. And Boston, well, I'm throwing them a bone a little bit. I don't really think they have much of a chance to win, but their record this summer is superb.

I ranked those teams in order, so Belmont is my pick. I have to pick them because of their depth, but 2, 3 or 4 wouldn't surprise me.