Written by Shalom Suniula
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Editor's note: We are delighted to unveil this, this first of many regular columns by USA 7s team captain Shalom Suniula. Shalom will be updating readers on life in the 7s team, the players, the coaching, and notes from the IRB World Series. This column was available on preview to all our Premier Subscribers and is now available to all readers. - AG

With Gold Coast 7s rapidly approaching, the team has been putting in overtime at training. We've spent the past four weeks fine-tuning certain areas in our game that need improving since our last encounter against the Canadians at NACRA 7s.

Shalom Suniula has been a regular with the USA National 7s team since late 2008, appearing in the 200

As the selection date looms, nerves have started settling in at camp, but the general vibe among the players is a healthy competitive spirit. More and more frequently players ask questions about personal workons to better their game, or stay on doing extras to make sure they take full advantage of their opportunity to be one of the 12 lacing up their boots in Gold Coast Australia.

Going into my fifth IRB series with team USA, I believe this season has been the best preparation we have had both personally and as a team. Coach Alex Magleby has slowly integrated future stars of our game into the team. Training alongside exciting young talent such as Nate Augspurger from Minnesota, Brett Thompson from Arizona, Carlin Isles from Ohio and Mike Te'o from Long Beach has been a tremendous experience for me over this summer. They all have raw talent that, if nurtured correctly, will make them a threat for which to keep out an eye in the near future.

What has allowed this preparation and the development of players coming through has been the newly-introduced full-time contract environment. This system now in place installs stability and depth in our 7s program, which is essential for success in a challenging IRB series with a duration of up to 11 months. Those who have played or know the game of 7s well know that the more time spent together playing and practicing, the more you're able to anticipate effectively each other’s movements on the pitch. Cohesion is key in the game, and playing together throughout the summer, as well as having two tournaments under our belts before Gold Coast, has been very beneficial. Now Coach Mags can put together the best 12 to take on the first leg of the 2012 series.

Along the way my leadership role remains challenging. I often come across the question "How does team culture develop?" For a while I slept on that thought, trying to come up with ideas on how we can create a culture in a team that players want to play in. I found my answer this summer. We went through some grueling training sessions with Strength and Conditioning Coach David Williams. Players were going through adversity as trainings got harder in what felt like never-ending fitness sessions. So there it was: without even knowing it, culture was being developed as we figured out what habits were necessary for us in order to achieve our team goals. As a result, key players could point out or live out the lifestyle, showing the newer faces in the program the team’s direction.

Every day I'm learning about my role as captain of the team. Encountering new challenges such as dealing with different personalities and emotions has been by far the biggest undertaking for me. It's important for the players’ voices to be heard, but more importantly for them to be included, which increases their confidence levels both on and off the field. Strategies such as

sitting down one-on-one with the players, being the voice connecting to the coaching staff or simply taking the time to be available or approachable to discuss almost anything are vital in a healthy team environment.

A few days from now a team of 12 will be on their way to Australia to take on New Zealand, South Africa and Canada in pool play. This week we have been putting in a lot of work to string together the right combination for the task at hand. I'm confident the team has had the best preparation yet and will produce fine results if executed right.

Until next time...

Shalom