

Magrini Reflects on USA's Narrow Defeat

Written by Jackie Finlan

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Sometimes a loss is as good as win. That's the case in the USA Women's 15-11 defeat to England this evening during the Women's Nations Cup. Although the sting of surrendering the lead on the last play of the game will linger for some time, the Eagles are pleased with their performance against the #2 team in the world.



"We're feeling good," USA captain Kim Magrini said an hour after the match. "We're recovering from a physically and mentally difficult game, but this was a fantastic step in the direction we want to go, both in this tournament and our four-year World Cup cycle. I'm really proud of the team."

It was apparent that the USA was going to win this match with in-your-face defense, then hope that the back three could retaliate England's tactical kicking with some opportunistic counters. While the latter could use some work, wing Vix Folayan did make England pay for an ill-advised cross-kick deep in its zone, when the Roses also had advantage. She fielded the ball cleanly and showcased her incredible pace down the line, not to be deterred from the corner of the try zone. That five-pointer gave the USA their first lead of the game.

"We wanted to physically take it to them, to pressure and go forward on defense," Magrini said of the game plan. "England doesn't like it when we're that physical, and we knew that was an area we could dominate. We had individuals making great tackles and the team there to support them. We got even more than we asked for and set the tone."

Focusing on defense proved to be a smart tactic, because even though the Eagles were able to stand up some goal-line drives and turnover the ball in the breakdown, the USA didn't have the majority of possession. There were some offensive miscues, a dropped pass here or not-rolling-away penalty there, that cost the Eagles. That said, this squad has only had six days total (which includes a players camp earlier this summer) to become familiar with each other. None of the backline players have played beside each other on the 15s team.

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A highlight of the match were flankers Lynelle Kugler and Shaina Turley, who were continually catching England forwards behind the gainline and smothering potential breakaways with excellent cover tackles.

"Lynelle is wonderful," Magrini said of her National U23 and World Cup teammate. "She belongs there; she brings a physical presence that we need."

The game that evolved was what the players needed, especially for those like Kugler, Magrini and six other teammates who remember the last time they saw England (39-10 loss at the Rugby World Cup).

"I try to come into games with a new plate, but you still have a reaction to the past," Magrini said. "Every time you play England, it's always a good, hard game, but we're usually on the wrong end of the outcome. Having been through that and played them four times - we didn't just stick with them for 30 minutes, or pressure them here or there; we *competed* with them - and that's different. We realized that at the half, and that gives you a different attitude toward the second half. We were there and beating them in areas of the game, and reflecting on that is really exciting. It's something new that we can build upon for the next three games and the long run."

So sometimes a loss is as good as a win, because as far as this tournament is concerned, there now a sense of unfinished business from both England and USA, which could mean a very exciting rematch (to get ahead of oneself). The game was for the USA's taking, but a series of five-meter scrums to England into injury time finally broke the Eagles' backs, and a last-play, dive-over try snatched one of the greatest upsets the Eagles would have enjoyed in recent history.

And although Magrini admitted to "a sour taste in your mouth, having to end a game like that," she also retained perspective. "You can't dwell on outcomes," the captain advised. "We're picking apart what went well, looking at challenges ahead and how we can improve, but this is just the beginning. We're not supposed to be at peak performance right now."

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Keeping that in mind, this evening's near-win against England was a confidence-boosting first step for the Eagles, and one only hopes it continues against Canada on Friday.