

## All Eyes On Bowling Green in Bowling Green

Written by Pat Clifton  
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Bowling Green has always been good. With three Final Four appearances, the Falcons are one of only four programs in the Sweet 16 to have ever reached a semifinal (Harvard, Stanford and Kansas State are the others). But they enter this tournament, like never before, as the odds-on favorite.

They've been perched atop the RUGBYMag.com rankings since the very first preseason publication. They have arguably the best player in DI in flyhalf Nick Viviani, they've beaten three other Sweet 16 participants this season, and last but not least, they're playing at home in the first and, hopefully, second rounds this weekend.

There's one small built in excuse for Bowling Green: Rocco Mauer is not playing. He has recovered from his torn ACL, and he's been in contact at practice, but he's decided to take the weekend off to stay healthy for the approaching Eagles 7s camp. "I didn't think playing full back-to-back games coming right off an injury a week before camp would be the best idea," said Mauer. "Especially, when I haven't made the team, yet."

Still, BGSU has been playing without Mauer the bulk of the season, and he'll be on the sideline acting as the team's biggest cheerleader Saturday. His, along with Viviani's girlfriend's, scrumhalf Ben Marshall's family's, fullback Max Narewski's dog's, and the vast majority of every set of eyes in attendance, will be affixed on the Falcons, expecting them to topple Temple.

"There is more added pressure, I have to agree there, but I'm up for the task," said Viviani. "I like the pressure. It actually makes us play better when you don't want to let people down."

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“Usually we’re the underdogs, but previous years we’ve lost every year. We might as well try something different.”

Despite the added pressure of playing at home, Viviani says the benefits outweigh any possible distractions.

“It definitely feels a little better when you’re playing in your home court. Got a lot of advantages from just sleeping in your own bed the night before, and I know these winds pretty well around here, so it could be helpful.”

Of course, the pressure won’t be the only thing weighing on Bowling Green. The defending DII National runner-up Owls will be there as well, and their household name, Gareth Jones, will be on the pitch.

Jones spent the majority of the spring semester studying abroad in Limerick, Ireland and playing for semi-professional Young Munster. He says his tactical kicking has gotten much better, and he seems eager to display all that he’s picked up while training on the Emerald Isle.

“I am always honored to represent my university in any capacity,” he said, “and I can’t wait to pull on that jersey again.”

In the other Bowling Green match, Florida, champs of the South, go head-to-head with Maryland, champs of the Atlantic Coast. Maryland is fresh off the heels of their season, having just beaten North Carolina Saturday in Charlotte to secure a bid to Bowling Green, while Florida’s season has been done for three weeks.

Adding to the potential bad timing factor for Florida is the fact that Saturday is graduation day in Gainesville, and several Gator seniors are missing their commencement ceremonies to play.

“We’re definitely going to have our own graduation party when we get back to Gainesville,” said Florida coach Ken Simmons, “to thank those guys for all that they’ve done for the program and all that they’ve given us this year.”

The ACRL produced a 10-minute highlight reel of its championship game, and Simmons says he’s studied that reel as exhaustively as one can study a 10-minute tape. He’s concluded that Maryland looks a lot like UF’s rival, Florida State.

The most obvious similarity between the Seminoles and Terps? Their best players are their flyhalves. Simmons and his boys have been going against FSU’s Dylan Hamilton for years, so he thinks that should’ve served as good practice for Maryland’s Matias Cima.

In addition to advancement toward a national championship, Saturday’s first-round bout between UF and Maryland could prove to be for conference bragging rights. An SEC-based conference is being formed, and if the Gators join, Saturday could be the first measuring ground between two conference’s aligned in the spirit of major BCS conferences.

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