

Women's DII Preview - Pool C&D

Written by Jackie Finlan
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Pools C & D of the Women's DII College Championships won't be as lucky as their counterparts in San Diego as far as the weather is concerned. None of the eight teams heading to Kissimmee, Fla., will be prepared for the 85-90 degree weather, and that could definitely affect the outcome of the games.

But reigning DII champion Washington State isn't looking for any excuses that might deter their path back to the podium. Pool C's Washington State returns to nationals as the second-seeded team in the Pacific Coast, a bitter pill considering the circumstances surrounding its regional qualifier. Its PCRFU championship opponent, Western Washington, had received a bye through the Pacific Coast semifinals, since Utah State failed to show, and was fresh for its final against WSU, which played a grueling game against Santa Clara the day prior. WSU lost that game 30-21, but has rechanneled that disappointment into drive.

The road to last year's national final wasn't easy either, and WSU played close games against Winona (5-3 win) and Norwich (15-5) before defeating Temple 37-0, but the return of key players like Megan and Alexis Bonny should help WSU to an opening round win against UNC Charlotte. The South #2 seed has never been to nationals, but has some good athletes in Meghan Bradsher and Courtney Jessamy, who were invited to the USA U20 winter camp and helped their team to a South #2 finish (17-7 loss to Lee in the final). It'll be a nice warm-up match for WSU as they prepare for the winner of Winona State and Stonehill.

Both teams played at nationals last year and it's safe to say their opening round experiences won't be duplicated. Stonehill (Northeast #2) faced eventual champion WSU and lost 68-7, while Winona (Midwest #2) dominated Lee 51-10. This game won't be a blowout.

If all things remain even, then Winona is favored in this matchup. The Black Katts have looked good the last month, ending its friendly season with two tournament finals and a 2-1 record against participating DI teams. They have all but one (kicker extraordinaire Caitlin Froh broke her leg last weekend) of their big players ready and healthy, and will be led most notably by the dominating Hilary Pletta at No. 8.

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Stonehill coach Derek Jenesky is much more confident in this year's team, however, and the squad has bolstered its spirits with three wins and a 203-5 point spread.

"This is the deepest team I have ever had here, and we are really playing well at the moment," Jenesky said. "We have looked very sharp in all three tune-ups, so I am very happy as we head to Florida."

Stonehill has proven that it can play with the best, going blow-for-blow with Northeast champion Norwich, and will be a difficult opponent for Winona, but the edge has to be given to the Black Katts, who are also playing extremely well right now.

Should Winona and Washington State win their Round of 16 games, a rematch of last year's two-point quarterfinal will ensue.

In pool D, the easier match to predict is the Norwich v Mary Washington game. The Northeast champion advanced to last year's semifinals before falling to WSU by 10 points, and they're showcasing as much firepower as last year. Coach Austin Hall sent two players two Bryn Chivers' USA U20 camp - try-scoring phenom Joya Clark and Corinne McElroy - but has a wealth of depth that produced triple-digit scores against its NERFU opponents.

The team only had one warm-up tournament, however, while Mary Washington is coming off a longer preseason and MARFU championship series, where the team lost to Shippensburg 22-5 in the semifinals and defeated Temple 10-5 for third. That said, Norwich is our pick to move onto quarterfinals against the victor of UW La Crosse and Radcliffe.

Although UW La Crosse is the Midwest champion, the team has not been at full strength the last few weeks. The team has not performed at top form the last two tournaments, the same two that Winona won and advanced to the final, and UW La Crosse's success against Radcliffe will depend greatly on its depth and return of starters.

Radcliffe on the other hand has looked solid in its preseason, winning the Four Leaf 15s Tournament in New York City, then bullying Boston University 46-19. Its final tune-up came

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against Women's Premier League Beantown Bs, a game that ended in a 17-7 loss. If there was a game to go against the rankings, this is the pick.

So we're going with a Winona v Washington State quarterfinal match in pool C, and a Norwich v Radcliffe Round of 8 game in pool D.