Written by Jackie Finlan
Tuesday, 19 April 2011 13:13

Of the eight teams that lost their opening game at the Women's DII National Championship, only two were able to play in a consolation match ( read more ). In that sense, Mary Washington can consider itself lucky, as the MARFU #3 team was able to return to Virginia with a 17-10 win over UW La Crosse, after first losing to Norwich on Saturday.

It wasn't too long ago that nationals was a regular fixture on Mary Washington's schedule. From 2004-07, the team competed at nationals, advancing to the final four twice. Then in 2008, one of the best Mary Washington teams ever fielded failed to exit MARFUs when its star flyhalf suffered a head injury in the first five minutes of its semifinal against Delaware, a devastating game-changer that resulted in a three-point loss. The team graduated 12 players that year, and followed with two lackluster years of recruitment before hitting the jackpot on a few good players who are setting the tone for an encouraging future.

But having good, new players means the team's still rebuilding. After losing its MARFU semifinal to Shippensburg 22-5 this spring, the team rallied with a 10-5 win over 2010 national finalist  Temple for the third seed to nationals. Coming in as the #13 seed at the championship pit them against Northeast champion Norwich in the first round, a game that ended in a 55-5 rout.

Mary Washington challenged Norwich in the first half, keeping the Cadets out of the try zone for the first 25 minutes or so. But Norwich's big backs wore down the defense, and Mary Washington struggled to stay aligned, which led to poor tackling and lots of points conceded.

"We didn't expect to win against Norwich considering how highly ranked they are," Mary Washington coach Bill Lucas stated. "We're fairly inexperienced and have one fifth-year senior who's ever been to nationals before. We came out hard, gave it all we had, but Norwich did well to recognize and take advantage when we had problems, then made us have larger problems as a result."

MW was further hampered by the loss of its two senior seniors, who couldn't play due to injury. Sophomores filled the role admirably, but ball movement suffered, and the team's finishers on the wing had little time with ball in hand.

"We weren't too upset," Lucas said after the game. "I wish we kept the score more respectable, but we regrouped, aimed for a good night's rest and wanted to see what we could do on Sunday."

Lucas acknowledged that this squad isn't the best the university has ever fielded, but his players have an exceptional attitude, never get down on one another or stew over teammates' mistakes, and are always looking for the next opportunity to play and win.

"The same thing happened at MARFUs," Lucas explained. "When we lost to Shippensburg, we thought, 'That game's done. We still have a shot at nationals, so play hard against Temple. Temple was knocking on our door - right on the door - the entire second half. We played tough defense and contributed to them not getting into the try zone. If we played 10 games against them, they'd win more, but we won the one that counted. "

Heading into Sunday's consolation game against UW La Crosse, which had lost to Radcliffe 22-0 on day one, Lucas addressed some issues, namely defense, that caused major problems against Norwich. UWL worked in some of their subs who didn't see game time on Saturday, but MW stuck with its starting line, mostly because its quality reserve players couldn't make the trip.

MW ran out to a 17-0 lead with tries from sophomore fullback Lara Hampson on a weakside breakaway; prop Megan McMillan after a pick-and-go series near the goal line, a try that LH converted; and freshman wing Anna Davis, who finished off Hampson’s expert counterattack from a clearing kick.

UWL rallied with 10 points in the second half. The first came from the wing, who was able to turn the corner and catch Hampson out of position. The second score evolved out of a MW five-meter scrum, when the outlet pass trickled into the try zone, and Hampson attempted to clear instead of downing the ball. The kick landed in the belly of a UWL player and an easy try followed.

Following UWL's second try in about three minutes, MW's scrumhalf was yellow-carded and LH had to move to the halfback position.

"I was not happy at this point," Lucas said of the third-string scrumhalf having to take over. "La Crosse was coming back and my senior scrumhalf was gone. The team could've folded. My flyhalf is mentally tough and I told her, 'We don't need points; we just can't let them have any. Play good defense, clear the ball out and cover.' When my scrumhalf rejoined the field with 10 minutes to go, I knew we could hold them off."

Mary Washington held onto the 17-10 win. "This has been a really good experience for the girls," Lucas said. "We were just happy to attend."