Each of the 16 teams making the trip to either Kissimmee, Fla. or San Diego, Calif. this weekend to continue the hunt for a DII national title have their own, unique stories. Some have never been to the Sweet 16. Some are perennial contenders. Some are trying to make the most of their remaining time in DII before joining DI, per the college restructure plan, and some are just happy to be in the dance.

Middlebury is certainly not the latter. For the 2007 and 2009 national champs, nothing short of a finals appearance, and if we're being honest, a third title in five years, will be considered a success. Middlebury was bounced from contention in the round of 16 in 2010, and that experience has left a less than palatable taste in the program's collective mouth.

"We have some unfinished business, as we say," said Middlebury coach John Phillips. "We got beat by a very good team. It is what it is. The game could have gone either way, and that's it. We move on. Our goal every year is to make it to the final and win the championship, so that's why we call it unfinished business. It's just like Duke basketball, they look to go to the Final Four every year."

Accompanying Middlebury on the east side of the bracket is ***Salisbury***, a fellow DII blue blood. If Salisbury and Middlebury are to collide, it won't be until the national semifinal. Sharks coach Bill Creese says he hopes to see his Vermont contemporary in Pittsburgh.

"That was my hope, anyway. College rugby is up and down, where teams kind of go up and down, but Middlebury's been at the top with us year in and year out," said Creese.

"Salisbury gets slack for staying in DII a lot, but we don't win every year. There's other teams out there that are just as good or better that beat us, and it's good to see Middlebury, because if you want to win, you've got to play the best teams. Middlebury and Salisbury used to have a big lacrosse battle with each other, too, in DIII. It's good to have a team that's there every year, too, so you hope to meet up and play them."

Attempting to oust both of the East favorites in the first round are ***Michigan Stat***e and ***St. Joe's*** , who have a combined one appearance in the DII national playoffs this century. Michigan State enters the Sweet 16 as the second seed out of the Midwest, and St. Joe's the second seed out of the Mid-Atlantic. Both could well be smarting after losses in their territorial championship matches, especially St. Joe's, who was walloped 57-12 by Salisbury.

The other two East matchups pit the Northeast against the South, as South champs ***South Florida***
draw Northeast No. 3
Bentley
, and Northeast runners-up
William Paterson
draw South runners-up
East Carolina

. For both Northeast schools, this is their first trip to the Sweet 16 since at least the turn of the century. USF and ECU have been here before, but not traditionally done so well.

USF made the playoffs in 2009 as the South champ, and they advanced to the round of eight with a defeat of the Colorado School of Mines, but were then convincingly dispatched by Middlebury.

ECU reached this stage in 2008 and 2009, and both times were bounced in their first game. Not a single player remains on the roster from those playoff appearances, but newly tabbed coach, Justin Bourgeois, who ran out of eligibility this winter, remembers how a lack of fitness bit the Pirates both times. He's made it a point to prevent a similar fate this go-round.

"We run a lot and we run through our basic things; fundamentals, hitting the sled, making sure everyone's technique's right on the set pieces," said Bourgeois. "In open play we run unopposed and making sure we have sound fundamentals. And I think if you're fundamentally sound, you have a game plan, and you're fit, in college rugby it goes a far way."

ECU has traditionally been a player-coached bunch, but Bourgeois says the program is already benefiting from having him on the sidelines only, as opposed to coaching from the fly half position. "I was able to control the field on the field, but I wasn't able to make the changes off the field and keep up with what was going on," he said, "but off the field I can see the changes that need to be made and what we're doing wrong."

In the West, one team stands alone as the favorite. ***UW-Whitewater*** became *RUGBYMag.com's* top-ranked team in November, and they've done nothing but justify that ranking since. Whitewater is completely undefeated on the season, having never lost a friendly to a men's club, a scrimmage to a select side or probably even a coin toss. And they've beaten up on some good competition along the way, like DI Truman State, UW-Stout and Wisconsin.

Wisconsin is by far the most impressive win of that bunch, as the Badgers won the regular season title of the Midwest West Conference, but were ousted in the conference tournament by rival Minnesota. Though Whitewater hasn't lost this year, coach Pat O'Connor says his team learned the lessons that generally come with losing against Wisconsin.

"What we learned coming out of Madison was perhaps we were a bit too full of ourselves, perhaps we underestimated them. When they jumped up 10-0 and then they had a 13-7 halftime lead, that's not the place you want to be against Madison if you want to win that game," he said.

"The boys realized they came out slow and started regrouping in the second half, and in the second half they brought their game to bear. I don't think we have to lose to learn. It certainly doesn't hurt to play from behind and learn on the fly. To me, that's the key."

Because Claremont Colleges won the 2010 national title, Southern California has three teams in the West side of the bracket; ***Cal State Fullerton***, ***Pepperdine*** and ***Cal State Long Beach***.

None of them have reached the DII Sweet 16 since at least 2000.

With the shift in the collegiate landscape over the offseason, six of the eight 2010 SoCal DII teams moved up to DI, leaving behind last place Pepperdine and seventh-place CS Long Beach. Cal State Fullerton, 8-0 in DIII in 2010 and 2009, moved up to DII, along with UC San Diego and Cal Lutheran. Because of the way they reached the Sweet 16, the SoCal teams will have to earn their respect this weekend.

Representing the top half of the Sunshine State are ***Sierra***, Pacific Coast champs, and runners-up ***Cal Maritime***. Sierra has been impressive all season, even turning the heads of DI and College Premier Division coaches with their overall team speed, athleticism and physicality. The Wolverines should be expected to advance easily past Long Beach, but Cal Maritime has a much tougher first-round draw.

Saint Louis University, champs of the West, gave eventual national champs Claremont Colleges everything they could handle in the Sweet 16 last season, before falling 14-10. But midway through their fall campaign in the Missouri RFU, it looked like SLU wouldn't get another shot at the postseason, as they fell 20-15 at home to a much bigger Mizzou. However, SLU rallied to crush the Tigers 46-10 in February at a neutral site to claim the Missouri title. Then they beat Arkansas and Rice won the West.

The Keelhaulers, in the Sweet 16 for the third-straight year, know they've got a tough out Saturday.

"I think we've got an extremely tough first-round playoff, and we've been saying that SLU is feisty all around the field. They're very knowledgeable, very experienced, both in their forwards and their backs. They have danger men all over the field," said Cal Maritime coach Steve Hiatt, who managed to get his hands on some SLU game film.

"We thought ***Rice*** was a really good school, and they really took it to Rice in their championship, so we think we have a giant challenge in front of us."

Rice's story is somewhat similar to those of the Southern California trio. Though not as diluted as Southern California, Texas was without its defending DII champ, Texas Tech, who moved up to DI, this season. Rice went undefeated in Texas and faced Colorado College in the West semifinal. Colorado College hails from the Eastern Rockies, where several of the top teams also moved to DI. Rice beat CC 27-7, but fell 23-12 to SLU. The Owls haven't yet defeated a 2010 playoff team.

Kissimmee, Fla. April 16-17
Salisbury (MARFU #1)
Michigan State (Midwest #2)

ECU (South #2)
William Paterson (Northeast #2)

USF (South #1)
Bentley (Northeast #3)

St. Joe's (MARFU #2)
Middlebury (Northeast #1)

San Diego, Calif. April 16-17
UW-Whitewater (Midwest #1)
Cal State Fullerton (SoCal #2)

Cal Maritime (Pacific Coast #2)
St. Louis University (West #1)

Pepperdine (SoCal #1)
Rice (West #2)

Cal State Long Beach (SoCal #3)
Sierra College (Pacific #1)