(Sierra wing soaring for possession. Dave Barpal photo)

UW Whitewater is bigger, but that's OK, because compared to semifinal opponent Sierra, everyone has always been bigger.

“We’re not a big team. Our strength, to be honest, is speed, fitness, skill, so that’s what we depend on,” Sierra coach Michael Taylor said.

Whitewater also prides itself on its skill. The Warhawks employed a pair of high kicks, which they gathered for scores, in their quarterfinal to help them best Cal Maritime and earn the trip to Pittsburgh for this weekend‘s DII Final Four.

The high ball is not a new or special tactic, but it’s one you don’t often see used, or used effectively, on the DII collegiate level. However, Whitewater coach Pat O’Connor trusts his players to pull off more advanced maneuvers.

“They pretty much give us free reign to do what we do,” said Whitewater fly half Darin Heinrich of his coaching staff.

“More so this year than in the past. Even a lot of our forwards, they make plays that probably a lot of other teams coaches wouldn’t like their forwards doing. We have props out on the wing scoring tries. Our forwards mix in well with our backs, and they can do a lot of different things, whereas I don’t think a lot of other programs would have their guys doing what we’re doing.”

Sierra, though, isn’t one of those programs. They have the overall athleticism, one through 15, to play an open game, and they’ve done so very well all season. As a two-year school, Sierra is used to having teams overlook them, and at least this season, they’ve gotten used to beating those teams.

The other semifinal, both to be palyed at Pittsburgh's Founder's Field, pits postseason stalwarts Middlebury and Salisbury against each other. These two, with three national championships between them, are the blue bloods of the tournament, and have been all along.

Middlebury plays a very sound game. Flyhalf Brian Sirkia uses his boot to pressure the opponent when necessary, and if that pressure produces penalties, he’s more than capable of taking advantage. Middlebury also plays smothering defense, the hallmark of any championship team.

Salisbury, too, hangs its hat on its defense. Defensive mentality being equal, what may push the Sharks past Middlebury is their cohesion. Globetrotting Salisbury has played an awful lot of rugby this spring, including on a tour of Ireland. That time together has strengthened their bond.

“Our team is all about playing good defense and just playing hard. Heart, however, is the biggest thing on our team,” sophomore Clinton Holley told the Salisbury student paper.

“There are no cliques; we are all brothers and as best of friends as you could be,” said Co-Captain Josh Brown of the team’s chemistry. “I played other sports, and this is completely different. We all love each other and have each other’s back.”

Who are the favorites to win in Pittsburgh? We like Whitewater and Middlebury, but at this point, they're all very good.