Written by Bernie Decker
Monday, 02 May 2011 16:36

In a match featuring four lead changes and one which a single point separated the sides at the 73rd minute, the visitors held on for a 35-29 victory at a chill and blustery Infinity Park Saturday evening. Air Force's swarming opportunistic style of play was countered well by the patient methodology of the Arizona forwards and the ghostly kick returning capability of the Wildcat fullback.

Zoomies got on the front foot early when a probing Garryowen off the toe of the 'Cats halfback, Rob Cardiff, was collected by the Academy wing and returned inside the travelers' 10 meter line where the Zoomie pack brought the action to Arizona's doorstep. After a couple of knocks on the door, Air Force spun the ball wide where outside center Sergio Lazano brushed off a defender at AU's 22 meter line and charged into goal for the grounding and a 5-nil host lead in the 3rd minute. Air Force got right back at it, bringing fullback Jake Byworth crashing inside, then standoff Carson Cleveland missed two with a long fling to #14 Tony Belviso who stepped inside his opposite number and scrambled into goal for the try converted by Cleveland, and it was the Zoomies by 12, seven minutes in.

Wildcats got theirs back directly when an Air Force clearance kick found neither space nor touch, but was gathered well by fullback Peter Tiberio who then returned 55 meters into goal as he slapped away hand tackles and jittered through the Zoomie line to touch down for a 12-5 scoreline.

And the battle was joined as both teams worked their schemes: Air Force banging with their fast forwards and slinging ball along their competent backline, and Arizona countering patiently with short gains by its scrummies led by lock David Samons and the stealthy, sinuous returns of Tiberio.

Wildcats were next to score when wing Mike Getzler struck a penalty goal at the 27th minute. The travelers got their first lead as Tiberio fielded a kick into space and sped 30 meters to the Air force 22 before dishing to 8-man Andrew Lundahl who finished for the Getzler-converted goal and a 15-12 margin to AU.

Air Force got back on top as centers Anthony Ruize and Lazano shared a 60 meter sprint with Ruize dotting down. Cleveland's two-pointer made it 19-15. Zoomies increased their lead when wing Aaron Schuetze turned the corner at AU's 10 meter line and scooted 40 before handing off to hooker Ryan Russomanno who tried, extending the lead to 24-15 at the half.

Arizona drew within six when Getzler slotted his second of the day after the re-start and each side probed with their powerful forward packs, slipping and barging the short yards, seeking chinks in their opponents' defense. A clearance kick ahead of the AU 22 and directly into touch had Air Force pressuring, but a pair of penalties assessed not releasing enabled the Wildcats to clear their lines and soon found them with a lineout inside the Zoomies 22. A yellow card issued to the Academy's scrumhalf Derek Fiebig had the home side short one player at 54 minutes, but effective work by their forwards at the breakdown had the servicemen turning ball over and on the attack until they were pinged for hands-in and Arizona marched upfield.

With the Wildcats at Air Force's 22 and the defense spread thin, replacement wing Cody Naber broke into space and raced into the corner for a Getzler-converted goal and AU regained the lead, 25-24 with 20 left on the ticker. Arizona increased its lead as inside center Jack Arnold sped to the three meter line before popping the ball to Tiberio in support who crossed and dotted for a 30-24 margin at 65 minutes.

A yellow card issued to AU #19 had Air Force with a player advantage as Fiebig returned to the pitch. A won scrum at the Wildcat 40 saw flanker Brennan Gallagher break a tackle and he was through into space and galloping over goal to draw the Zoomies within a point at 68 minutes as a fantastic finish loomed.

But Fiebig picked up a red card for repeated infringement and was seated for the remainder of the contest, and Arnold broke gained space before putting Naber away for his brace, the match's last tally and a final of University of Arizona 35, Air Force Academy 29.

Air Force 29
Tries: Lazano, Belviso, Ruize, Russomanno, Gallagher
Convs: Cleveland (2)

University of Arizona 35
Tries: Tiberio (2), Lundahl, Naber (2); Con: Getzler (2)
Pen: Getzler (2)

Officials: T. Luscombe, L. Johnson, D. Hattrup