

Top-Ranked Life Travels to No. 3 ASU

Written by Pat Clifton
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Arguably the best rivalry in American rugby is renewed Saturday in Jonesboro, Ark., as No. 3 Arkansas State hosts top-ranked Life. The Running Eagles swept this series last season, beating the Red Wolves 30-14 in Marietta, Ga. and 17-13 in Jonesboro, but Arkansas State advanced a step further in the postseason, reaching the DI-A final.

Arkansas State has a new head coach this season in Alex Houser, who is 0-0 as such against Life. Houser assisted Matt Huckaby in Jonesboro last season and Dan Payne at Life the year before.

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“It’s been good since I’ve come to Arkansas to see those guys and the [Life] program progress,” said Houser. “Some of those older guys like Colton [Cariaga] and guys like that I even played with when I was still playing.”

The lineups will be largely the same this season for both teams, but some guys are playing at new positions. For Life, Colton Cariaga is lining up at flyhalf instead of in the centers.

“He’s obviously dangerous in space. He’s an athletic young man and he’s a smart rugby player. He’s played all over the backline for them, playing wing for the Super League team the year before the college team got started, and obviously he was an All American caliber center last year,” said Houser of Cariaga.

“So he’s got a good skill set. He doesn’t have quite the huge foot that [Joe] Cowley’s got, but he’s got a good angle kick that he can put into space if the back three’s out of space and things like that, so we’ll have to be wary of him on attack and make sure our deep three is in sync and getting their defensive rotations down.”

For Arkansas State, Dylan Carrion is healthy and playing scrumhalf instead of wing.

“He’s a rugby player. He takes care of the ball. He fights way above his weight,” said Payne of Carrion. “He can pick and dink and dab there, so you have to be really wary around the fringes and not give him much space because he can shoot right through it, so we’ll have to watch that this week.”

Life is coming off an impressive 53-0 defeat of Davenport last week, during which the Running Eagles offense was given too much time to operate.

“Davenport got caught on their heels a little bit not launching aggressively off the line, and that kind of played into Life’s hands and let them play some quick ball, especially early on,” said Houser.

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“The first try that Life scored against Davenport, I think they rattled off 13 phases to score. They maintain integrity in their attacking structures for a number of phases, so you’ve got to get up off the line and knock them down and try to slow their ball down, if not steal it, so that’s what we’ll try to do on Saturday.”

Arkansas State’s midfield is as dangerous as any in the country, even with Zac Mizell laid up with injury. Zinzan Elan-Puttick will likely slot into the outside center position in Mizell’s absence, and he and inside center Dean Gericke should combine for a lethal pair.

“I’d say their midfield is pretty imposing. You’ve got [All American Pat] Sullivan to Gericke to Zinzan, I assume, that’s a pretty good 10, 12, 13 connection there,” said Payne.

“Put Dylan on the front of that and their 9-13 is challenging. Arkansas State is never really at a shortage for forwards, either. If you start worrying about the backs too much, the forwards can get up into you as well.”

While poor weather has marred the beginning of the spring season for much of the country, it should be in the mid-60s and sunny Saturday in Jonesboro – perfect weather for a big game.