

Life Scores Late to Edge Boston

Written by
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A try by Steve Petzel with three minutes left lifted Life University to a tense 27-23 victory over Boston in the Rugby Super League semifinals.

The try capped a dramatic game that saw wild swings in momentum in the playoff match at Life's field in Marietta, Ga. Life ran out to an early 17-0 lead, only to see it disappear. Boston led 23-22 before Petzel's try gave Life the win.

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“I thought we started quite well and we were fairly clinical early on,” said Life Head Coach James Isaacson. “Up 17-0 25 minutes in we went totally off page tactically and you can’t do that against a quality side like Boston. What infuriates me the most is the fact that I warned the players of such a scenario during this week at training. Our error rate was unacceptable and we constantly invited pressure back onto ourselves.”

Life’s defense was outstanding early. They laid in some crunching double tackles and turned the ball over effectively. That put Boston under pressure, and Life took points from that. Flyhalf Aaron McMaster slotted a penalty four minutes in, and then at 11 minutes Mark Aylor’s converted try gave Life a 10-0 lead.

Life’s power game also set up space out wide and wing Clint Whittler took advantage, scoring at 24 minutes. McMaster’s second conversion made the lead 17-0 at 24 minutes.

But Boston would come back. With center Derek Wavomba playing superbly in the backline, especially on defense, and with the forwards challenging the throws more at the lineout, things began to even out.

“We worked on not giving them easy possession, and tried to stay away from their fringe defense,” said Boston Head Coach Mike Diamantopoulos. “Last year we were a team that punished turnovers. We punished you if you screwed up. We wanted to generate something offensively and we started to do that.”

Down 17-0 Boston did not wilt. Leading in to halftime Boston started to generate some smart-looking, multi-phase tries. Brennan Moore went over, with Nick Elrick’s conversion making it 17-7. Then five minutes later Kyle Marshall’s try put Boston within five at 17-12 at the break.

Minutes into the second half Boston was in the Life end again. Life defended doggedly and Elrick saw a chance for three points and slotted the drop goal.

“It was a good decision,” said Diamantopoulos. “Against a good defending team it put us in position to take the lead with a penalty.”

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Elrick may have passed up thoughts of a try, but eight minutes later Marshall scored his second to finally give Boston the lead, 20-17.

For over 40 minutes, Boston had kept Life scoreless and turned the game around.

“Boston expanded their game in comparison to our two previous meetings,” said a frustrated Isaacson. “This, alongside some great phase play on their part, allowed them to score 23 points and [take the] lead. Credit to Mike Diamantopoulos and his team. They came here today with tremendous effort and put in an outstanding and admirable performance of football.”

Brendan Thomson’s try regained the lead for Life at 22-20, but Elrick slotted a penalty with seven minutes to go to retake the lead for Boston at 23-22.

It all seemed as if Boston could pull it out.

“The guys have really improved and I’m really proud of them,” said Diamantopoulos. “We showed we’re not just a scrappy team that hangs around anymore. And I thought we could win it.”

Life pressured Boston hammering away in their 22. Boston was able to clear, but not too far and found themselves defending again. Knowing that a penalty would probably lose the game, Boston had to be careful, and Life threw everything at it. Finally the Running Eagles spread the ball out to Petzel at the wing and he scored in front of a full crowd of 525 for the win.

Boston were heartbroken, and it took Life’s coach Isaacson to sum it up:

“This is cup rugby and it can be cruel.”

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“I’m really happy with the effort of all involved today,” added Life Director of Rugby Dan Payne. “The entire program kicked in to help make today a great event. James and the players on the field earned the win and Boston displayed great effort in making it an exciting match to watch. We’re looking forward to putting on a great event for the RSL final next weekend.”

Life will host the winners of SFGG and Old Puget Sound next Saturday in the Super League final.

Life 27

Tries: Aylor, Whittler, Thomson, Petzel

Convs: McMaster 2

Pens: McMaster

Boston 23

Tries: Marshall 2, Moore

Convs: Elrick

Pens: Elrick

DGs: Elrick