Due to some forfeits, there are only two games to be played in the DI West crossovers. Both the North and South's top seeds, Glendale and Austin, respectively, receive byes, as Shreveport and the Denver Barbarians opted not to travel. Austin and Glendale are expected to be extremely competitive in the Round of 16, as both have had really good seasons.

One of the two games being played is in Dallas, where the Reds host the Kansas City Blues. Last season the Blues, as the third seed out of the North, traveled to the Lone Star State and knocked off the Austin Blacks, the second seed from the South, in extra time. But, according to Reds coach Jeff Kolberg, the Texas teams have improved markedly since last spring.

Both the Reds and Blues will be missing a starter due to the Eagles domestic camp in Chula Vista, Calif. The Blues are without lock Ben Nelson, and the Reds will be without star playmaker Kelly Kolberg. The Blues have capable depth at second row, so they shouldn't be hamstrung by the loss of Nelson, but Kelly Kolberg is the heart and soul of Dallas' attack, so how will they cope without him?

"We haven't even focused on that…Our starting two wingers will be Paul Boyd and Andrew Jaeger. Both of those players have real open speed. They're not real big kids, but they're tough, they're good defensive tacklers, they handle the kicks really, really well," said Jeff Kolberg.

"We know there's going to be somewhat of a drop in the level of playing, but we're real confident they can do the job, so we're not going to change anything. We're going to run those two guys just how we run (Kelly). That's how we're going to deal with it, we're just going to pretend he's not there."

The Blues have a relatively large squad. Depending on who travels, they could seriously out mass Dallas, a possibility the Reds are prepared for.

“We’re not real big, heavy weight-wise. We’re big in the front row, very athletic, tall and lean in the second row, but our back row can play with anybody, any place, anytime in the United States, including Super League guys,” said Jeff Kolberg.

“We’ll match up really well against them. We’ve got a good idea they’re going to play most of their game off of their No. 8 (Siva Tali), who is their best back row player. They’re going to try to get him involved both offensively and defensively in everything. Defensively, we’ll go with the philosophy of one man, one tackle. We’ll try to get to the breakdown as quick as possible and try to poach the ball.

“Offensively, running against them, we won’t change anything. We’ll do exactly what we did against Austin, against the ‘Quins, against the Huns, against Shreveport. We’re going to take advantage of what they give us, and then we’ll run our game plan, which will be control the ball, control the ball, control the ball, play for a mistake, and then make a break. That’s exactly what we’ve done all year. Because we’re playing a bigger pack, that won’t affect our plans.”

In Denver, the new-look Highlanders host the Austin Huns. The Highlanders, which made the Sweet 16 last season after upending HARC (Highlanders were fourth seed out of North, and HARC top seed from Texas), have added a lot of firepower this spring, avenging a pair of losses in a big way. In the fall, The Highlanders lost to Kansas City 39-5. They beat the Blues 71-17 on April 16. The Highlanders lost 49-25 to the Barbos in the fall, and beat them 72-12 on April 9.

The reason for the turnaround is an infusion of some serious talent, both through luck and recruiting efforts. The biggest name the Highlanders reeled in was fullback Brendan Daniel, who played professionally overseas for years, including stints with the Aviva Premiership Harlequins and Bath. Domestically, he’s also played for Santa Monica. Daniel’s girlfriend is in nursing school in Grand Junction, Colo.

The Highlanders have added some meat up front with Kiwi prop Jarrod Ward, who was recruited by a Kiwi Highlander assistant, and hooker Tim Phillips.

“Although they’re front row, they’ve played a major role in our offense with rucking and mauling,” said Highlander coach Pete Shafroth. “We’ve opened up our game a lot more than we did last fall. We’re rucking and mauling really well, and we’re getting a lot of second and third phase ball.”

Shafroth said the team has added about 10 new players this spring, which helped not only their overall talent, but depth. The Highlanders have gone from a team destined to be traveling for the round of 32, to a dark horse contender.