Written by Jackie Finlan Friday, 11 November 2011 21:19

The best finish that the Minnesota Valkyries and Keystone could have hoped for was fifth place at the Women's Premier League championship, but spectators would have thought the title was on the line watching this thrilling overtime contest. After a 24-all tie, Keystone ran in three tries to Minnesota's two for the 43-38 win.



"We knew we had to come down here and win this game," Keystone's Kim Magrini said. "When we started we were flat and lost momentum. It always seemed like we were trying to catch up and get ahead. But I think we warmed up a little as game went on. It was really back and forth, even in the 100th minute."

It was always going to be an interesting game, especially with the positional changes on either side of the ball. For Keystone, Kim Magrini moved from scrumhalf to flyhalf once Devin Keller's absence required some realignment in the backs, and Minnesota flanker extraordinaire Kristin Zdanczewicz contributed from the scrumhalf position. Both did incredibly well, as one would expect from Rugby World Cup Eagles.

Despite the lineups, Minnesota was ready to play and went up 7-0 early on thanks to flyhalf Sarah Chobot, who shoved her way into the try zone from 10 meters out. Hooker Libby Berg hit the conversion.

Keystone found themselves on Minnesota's five meter, after Magrini made a long break into enemy territory. Although it looked like inside center Frankie Male was going to score, the territorial gain eventually turned into a five-meter scrum. Phase after phase, Keystone attempted to gain ground inside the 22 meter, but excellent pressure from Zdanczewicz in particular kept the team on its heels. Finally, a Keystone penalty went to Stacy Baker, who saw a gap and trotted into the try zone from 10 meters out, 7-5.

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The last score of the half resulted from a mental error on Keystone's part. Minnesota sent a deep kick into Keystone territory, and an error in the try zone-grounding awarded the Valkyries a five-meter scrum. After a series of pick-and-goes and with the help of some penalties, Berg eventually dove over the line for the 12-5 lead.

But the fun had only just begun. After a Keystone try was held up about 10 minutes in, flanker Alison Worman converted another long goal-line attack into a try that Baker converted, 12 all. Eightman Michelle Kirk broke through the line for a massive gain into Minnesota territory, but nearly turned the ball over in the two-on-one situation. The team recovered then slowly built toward the line before finishing the series with a dive-over try, 17-12.

As the line breaks became more frequent, Zdanczewicz got in on the action, and made good on a two-on-one situation in open field. Fullback Tracy Call was there for the pass and finished it off easily, 17-all Valkyries. A little déjà vu occurred shortly after as Keystone regained the lead (24-17) with a similar move.

With no time remaining on the clock, a series of penalties allowed to Minnesota to retain possession as they worked toward the try line, eventually diving over for the try. Berg's conversion tied it up 24-all and necessitated overtime.

"I didn't realize that when they scored there was no time left, and then the kick sent it into overtime," Magrini said. "We were a little deflated after that, so we took the opportunity to regroup. We knew the Valkyries were going to come out hard since they just scored and had momentum, so we had to be on top of everything and come out better. People took that to heart, and we did [come out better]."

Male cherry picked a pass and ran the ball in for the 29-24 lead.

"Both teams had trouble scoring tries against the wind, so when we scored that try right off the bat, people were ready to go and that was it," Magrini said. "When we got that second try, we were a little more confident in ourselves that we could make it through the next 20 minutes."

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Outside center Rachel Sachs added another try, and Baker added a conversion for the 36-24 lead to end the first 10-minute overtime. Another Male break set up Keystone's final try, 43-24.

It looked bleak for the Valkyries, but to their credit, they kept hammering away at the Keystone defense. Two more tries, one from Zdancewicz, made it interesting to the final whistle.

"I have to give the forwards so much credit for the entire year," Magrini said. "They work so hard. Most of our games have been forward-centric, but we're trying to get more back involvement and get our forwards to play off of our backs. Today, our centers made breaks with forwards in support. The highlight of the game for me was when we scored a try with all of the backs – they executed the play and scored."

Keystone will need to shore up its execution as it looks ahead to the 5th place game against New York on Sunday.

"There were some dropped balls that shouldn't have been dropped, miscues that set us back," Magrini said. "We have to have the mental focus to do what we all know how to do."

If all that comes together in a day's time, then Keystone will retain its fifth place ranking.