Last year's finalist, Pittsburgh, was hard-pressed to get through the quarterfinals today, just beating Norfolk 21-12, a score that didn't expand until the final minutes of the day.

Pittsburgh stuck to their game plan in the first quarter and were rewarded with a 14-0 lead off tries from fullback Donita Thomas and outside center Lauren Rosso, and conversions slotted by Barbara Woodbury.

After the subsequent kickoff after the last score, Pittsburgh watched the ball hit the ground, and speedy wing Chinomso Asonye made the opposition pay. Four minutes later, inside center Lindsay Kinsler dotted down and added a conversion, 14-12.

"We played the first 15 minutes really well, and then it went downhill," Pittsburgh coach Anthony Chappie said. "Norfolk's good. In the four years we've been here, they're the hardest competition we've had in the first round."

Norfolk's wings, Asonye in particular, posed the most problems for Pittsburgh. The team tried to adjust their defense, but the heat and fatigue stifled their progress.

"We've been here before," Chappie responded to the pressure of watching a lead disappear. "We're tough and gutted it out. That's the hardest part – handling the pressure – and the team that typically does a better job with it is going to win."

Captain Jaime Filipek led by example, and flyhalf Patricia DiBasilio's boot did well to relieve Norfolk's perpetual attack late in the game.

The Storm had an opportunity to take the lead when a near-try scorer was all alone in the try zone and knocked on the ball when she tried to emphatically ground the ball. The theatrics cost Norfolk, as Pittsburgh waited until the final minutes to put the game out of reach. A poor pass from Norfolk put the ball in Thomas' hands for a long sprint to the try zone. Woodbury's conversion made it 21-12.

"We didn't play to our potential, but we won," Chappie said. "We've been here before, and they know when they've played well and when they haven't. We'll figure out what went wrong and how we can pick up our game, but for now they're decompressing."

But not for long. Pittsburgh returns tomorrow against Ft. Miami, which defeated Portland 20-12 today.