

Atlanta Takes Home DI Title

Written by Jackie Finlan

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Atlanta is the Women's DI Club champion, having defeating ORSU 33-14. It was a much closer match than the score suggests, but the last quarter saw the Harlequins stretch it out and bank a well deserved title.

Atlanta did their homework and had a specific plan of attack against ORSU. That said, ORSU were not easily subdued.

"They were stronger in a couple of positions; their 12 upped her game a lot," Atlanta coach Jason Payne said of ORSU inside center Anna Symonds. "We were worried about their 13 [San Juanita Moreno] but 12 really stood out. And their captain [fullback Beckett Royce] is obviously a worker.

"They were more physical than I saw on tape. Their forwards were really tough, counter-rucked well," Payne continued. "We studied their lineout a lot and wanted to steal those and their scrums. We wanted to go after their pick-and-goes and make sure we defended that. We wanted to try to attack a little wider, and get our forwards in the 10 channel, while also having a go at the 13 channel."

Atlanta's speed was put on display early on when wing Lauren Waltz scored two minutes in. Heather Hale's conversion gate Atlanta the 7-0 lead for the next 20-plus minutes. In between and throughout, an excellent showdown between the packs evolved. Sharon Blaney and Te Awhina Ho Chee were particularly brutal for ORSU, while Atlanta breakaways like Liz Snodgrass and MVP Madeline Wilbanks ripped through the line on several occasions.

"We've gotten a lot of good, new forwards this year, and our loosies are awesome," Atlanta fullback Jess Wooden said. "Our edge was in the forward pack. They work so hard and were constantly putting them on the back foot. They were breaking the line, and once the ball got out to the backs, there was no stopping us. Their 13 was rushing up and she was out of position, so we took advantage of that."

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But ORSU played in the final for a reason, and they let up at any point during the match. At the 26-minute mark, a drive downfield was capped off by a trio of forwards forming a line and feeding back inside at pace and with great awareness of the streaking defense. Royce slotted the conversion for the 7-7 tie.

Atlanta had a couple of opportunities to potentially score, as fliers like Wooden attacked in open space, but a finishing pass here or there squashed those chances. But after one such instance, a penalty allowed Atlanta to hold onto possession, and a quick-tap put the ball in prop Carmel Glynn's hands for the score. Hale converted for the 14-7 lead into halftime.

Snodgrass and Ho Chee traded tries for their sides within 10 minutes of the second half, but that would be the last that ORSU graced the scoreboard. A couple of penalties for diving over kept Atlanta deep in ORSU's end, and Wooden capped off the series with a try in the 64th minute. Then Laketa Sutton dotted down after Snodgrass intercepted a pass in traffic, then streaked half the field before offloading.

"It was a little scrappy, but considering the pressure and circumstances, I'll take it," Payne said of the win.

"ORSU was our toughest game of the season," Wilbanks said. "They moved the ball better than any other team but that's just because they're playing at the highest level. Our season we had some good match-ups - Providence, NOVA - so I feel like we were well prepared as far as having good games coming into it. They were our best competition so far, played smash-mouth rugby the whole game, but we managed to keep our heads in it."

Wilbanks impressed Women's National Team coach Pete Steinberg, who named the 21-year-old the MVP of the final. She's really evolved in the two seasons she's been with Atlanta and has dropped 20 lbs. through MMA training.

"She's matured a bit; she tends to be a firecracker," Payne said. "We talked about getting her to calm down in spots on the game and retain the ball. But she's managed to control herself and settle down a bit more. It was a really good environment not having a doubleheader weekend,

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so your players are fresh and can play free.”

“And you can be fired up all game, and it’s OK,” Wilbanks retorted.

“It felt awesome,” Wooden said. “We’ve been working to this moment all season. We set this as our goal: win the national championship. We fell short last year in the semis so we knew we wanted to get here, push through and just blow it out.”