The 5th place game at the Women's DII Club Championship was one of the most thrilling across all three divisions in Ft. Myers, Fla. The contenders - Las Vegas and Norfolk - lost heart-breakers in their opening round: The Slots gave up a 10-0 halftime lead to lose 12-10 to Severn River, and the Storm missed sure scoring opportunities against Pittsburgh to lose 21-12. Both of their losses reflected the newcomers' inexperience at nationals.

The teams regrouped during the consolation semifinals on Saturday, and saw Las Vegas top Albuquerque 20-5, and Norfolk topple Portland 39-0. With momentum on both their sides, the teams pounded each other in pursuit of that final victory.

But it was Las Vegas that triumphed in the end, holding off a resilient Norfolk 24-19 for the win.

"Our team has come a long way," Las Vegas flyhalf Tina Tela said. "We went a whole season without winning, teams kept canceling on us and didn't want to play, and we had to play a lot of 7s. You saw that lack of experience in our first game, when we were up two tries to zero. We were playing as individuals and came into our game plan slowly. But then we realized we can't do this without each other, and our teamwork came together yesterday [Saturday]. Everyone came together, and we locked it up."

Norfolk came into the match knowing that they had to wear down Las Vegas' big forwards, banking on their superior fitness to make a late surge on the scoreboard. It was a tactic that Las Vegas encountered in their previous matches, especially against Severn River in the quarterfinals, but they had learned their lesson.

“We were going too fast and realized we had to play at our pace and not everyone else’s,” Tela said. “We slowed our game down, and that was our power right there. We pushed on our forwards in support, and once we settled into our pace, everyone started getting their groove in.”

Norfolk took the first lead when Lindsay Kinsler slotted a penalty, but then Las Vegas took over the scoreboard for the next 25 minutes. Scrumhalf Lo Stender scored two tries and conversions, then converted Khristy Gaines’ five-pointer. Up 21-3, Las Vegas got a little comfortable.

Norfolk ended the half on a Kinsler try for the 21-8 scoreline at half and brought that momentum into the second stanza. Kinsler hit a penalty for 11 points on the day, and Roe DeLutis dotted down to pull within five points.

“They challenged us on the same things that we like to do as forwards,” Tela said, “but I don’t’ think their forwards were as powerful as ours. In the backline, we had an advantage. We pressured it more and we hit harder. No one wants to run the ball against you.”

In particular, no one wanted to run the ball against Tela. She was one of the hardest hitting players across the entire field at nationals, and she left lasting impressions on ballcarriers. DeLutis’ score was a result of avoiding contact with Tela. Attempting to gain ground out wide, Norfolk actually stopped in their tracks as Tela zeroed in on the ballcarrier, and the Storm smartly fed the ball back inside for some really pretty hands and quick support.

There was some vulnerability out wide for Las Vegas, but as long as Tela was free, then the sideline was safe.

“Everyone has moments like that,” Tela said modestly. “We play for certain things – one is passion, and one is family. So you go hard all the time in whatever you do. You do what you can to have people look up to you and be a leader.”

Norfolk were closing in, down by only one try and with much of the last quarter staying in Las Vegas' end.

"We brought it together in those couple of minutes when people got hurt and said, 'Just lock it up,'" Tela said. "We've got to keep progressing up to the last minute."

A very important score followed, when Tracy Bowers hit a penalty to make it a two-score game. To Norfolk's credit, Kinsler came back three minutes later for an excellent penalty to restore the five-point margin.

The last 10 minutes were agonizing. Norfolk stayed in Las Vegas' 22 meter, and the defense kept absorbing the attack. Only meters from the line and good possession that allowed Norfolk to keep pummeling the tryline, Tela put a nice driving tackle on a ballcarrier that quickly turned the ball over. However, the clearing kick only went a few meters into touch.

Now, Norfolk had a great launching platform in great field position. But with no time left, Norfolk knocked on the lineout and the kick to touch ended the game.

A little more time, and maybe Norfolk could have taken the game, but credit to Las Vegas for inaugurating their first nationals with a 2-1 record and 5th place finish.