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The Chicago Blaze v Rocky Gorge was another one of those games you hope to see at nationals, and the DII contenders didn't disappoint. The game was never out of reach for either side, but it was Chicago Blaze that pulled off the 15-13 win, despite the voracious Rocky Gorge attempts at the try line.

The entire game was even, and the first half saw a one-point lead, 6-5, in Rocky Gorge's favor, thanks to the hefty boot of fullback Andrew Kendall. Kendall's expert placement not only contributed to the Maryland team's lead, but stifled Chicago's momentum whenever the team entered Rocky Gorge's half.

Chicago struggled with the heat and the lack of composure showed itself in the team's breakdown in organization.

Chicago Blaze gets past Rocky Gorge. (Andy Wagner photo)

"We needed to tighten it up," player coach Lance Houia. "They were sending their big boys into the backline, so it was cutting off our running lines. We started to pick around the fringe to commit their bigger guys and so we could give our backs some more running room. But even when our backs stepped it up, [Kendall's] foot pinned us down."

Chicago outside center Kevin Garbis started to make his presence known. The slippery 19-year-old is able to make meters out of nothing, and really got his team in the mood to score. Chicago was leading 10-6 when Rocky Gorge had a beautiful try recalled – one that began with a Kendall break and was kept alive through excellent offloading. Rocky Gorge lost possession in a ruck near the five meter, but when Chicago tried to clear, the kick was blocked and dotted down in the try zone. A previous penalty pulled the ball out for a Chicago scrum.

The ball was cleared out of danger and meandered into Rocky Gorge territory. The ball moved out to the backs, got isolated on the sideline, where the outside backs grappled for messy ball in the loose ruck. Somehow, Garbis sidestepped here, ducked there, and snuck his way down the sideline for the try in the corner, 15-6.

“He’s fast, young, creates and has huge heart,” Houia beamed. “He carries the weight on his shoulders, but he does it well; he’s mature. He was making noise last year when he came to nationals as an 18-year-old, but he’s smarter now and runs beautiful lines. He’s still maturing and has a bright future.”

Rocky Gorge kept it interesting and ran in a breakaway try, but there wasn’t enough time left to further its comeback, 15-13.

Houia credited his forwards for initiating the turnaround in the second half. They tightened up the game, played as a unit, and took Chicago Blaze’s big boys to ground when they needed to. Now Chicago Blaze is looking ahead to Tampa Krewe in tomorrow’s quarterfinal.

“They have holes and seams, but so do we,” Houia said. “But we want our revenge from last year. We had them 17-0 and they took us through the forwards to beat us. We’ve worked hard to step up our forwards, so we’ll have to see how the ball rolls tomorrow. We were hungry for this one, and we’re hungry for tomorrow.”

Stay tuned for the 2010 rematch tomorrow from Manassas, Va.