

Cupboard's Always Full at Belmont Shore

Written by Pat Clifton
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Belmont Shore is still expected to do well. Belmont Shore is still the champ of Southern California. But the Belmont Shore at 7s Club Nationals Aug. 6-7 in San Francisco will not be the same Belmont Shore you saw in the same event last year, or recently, for that matter.

Though selections aren't final and there are still a couple roster spots to be won, Belmont coach James Walker says this year's Nationals squad could have as many as 10 players who weren't sporting the navy and gold in 2010.

Nese Malifa and Tai Enosa are out, as they'll be assembled with the 15s Eagles and possibly on the pitch against Canada at BMO Stadium in Toronto. That also makes Dallen Stanford unavailable, because he's serving as the Eagles media manager now through the World Cup.

Peter Dahl, married Friday, is also out.

Matt Hawkins, captain of the 7s Eagles and the heart and soul of Belmont when he's available, is also likely to be out due to some nagging injuries. Walker assures there's nothing majorly wrong with Hawkins, and there's still a chance he'll get the all-clear from the team doctor, but the prop is not expected to be on the field.

"He's got a couple of different things going on. He's got an ankle that he's been dealing with the past couple of years on the circuit, and he's got a groin injury. The fact that he's just played a lot of rugby over the last couple years, his body just needs a bit of a break," said Walker.

"We have to put the player's health first. If you asked Matt, he would go. He would go if we needed him in a pinch, but I don't see the point in risking a guy's long-term career for national championships of club rugby."

The rash of unavailability has hit Belmont particularly hard in the scrum, with Dahl and Hawkins

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out of the mix.

"We might not be as physically dominant in the forwards. We're a slightly smaller pack, but probably more mobile than we've been for a long time," said Walker. "Peter Sio's been moved permanently to the forwards, which helps us a lot."

Also making the transition to the pack is Duncan Kelm, the San Diego State All American.

"He's been used predominantly as a utility player in the past, but we've really focused on him in the forwards this year, and we think he gives us a lot of range of mobility," said Walker. "He's good at ball retention in the kickoffs, he's got good skills, he's fast for a forward, and he plays very good defense."

Joining Kelm in Long Beach is Alex Ross, a former Aztec teammate. Ross has had his shot with the Eagles before, in spring 2010, but wasn't tabbed for any international action during the 2010/2011 IRB World Series. Walker says the speedster has improved this summer.

"Alex is playing with a lot of confidence again, and he's really been working on his defense, and I think he's becoming a much better all around player."

Perhaps the two biggest additions Belmont has made this year are Shalom Suniula and Taylor Howden. Suniula is a known commodity to most in American rugby. He's been selected regularly as the Eagles 7s scrumhalf, and he's a pint-sized playmaker.

Howden, however, isn't as much of a household talent. The Kiwi has been playing in the States for years, spending most of his time in the West, playing for Denver-based teams like the Barbarians and Glendale. In the spring, he was a starter for the Barbos in the Super League. In search of a change of scenery and perhaps a fresh start, he moved to Long Beach.

"He intimated maybe he was ready for a change to reignite his rugby career," said Walker of Howden, who he first met on a Tigers tour to Tahiti.

"Al (Caravelli) thinks really highly of Taylor, but the key for him is just to get his fitness back. He's worked at it very, very hard, and his fitness levels are higher than they've been for a long time. He's just such a good, all-around asset.

"He'll be playing a bit of flyhalf, a little bit of center. He could step in at scrumhalf if needed, and quite frankly, he could step in at forward because he's a big guy. But the most important thing is his speed is coming back now because he's shed a few pounds, and he's a lot quicker than people realize."

Despite the fracture in continuity, Belmont Shore is expected to be one of, if not the, most talented teams at Nationals. They're expected to challenge for a National Title.