Early Sunday morning University of Utah coach Blake Burdette was shaking his head.

Utah's Don Pati looking for space to attack. (Marvin Dangerfield)

“I don’t know,” he said, ominously. “The vibe of the team, it’s hard to gauge what they’re thinking.”

Could it be that the underdog Utes, 2-1 on Saturday of the USA 7s Collegiate Rugby Championships, would fold against mighty Cal, which had finished the first day 3-0? Or could they pull off a surprise.

That second thing.

In a superb match where the Utes dominated possession most of the time and certainly dominated the field of elusive running, Utah defeated Cal by the astonishing score of 21-5 to move on to the CRC semis.

Cal made mistakes, missing some key tackles, but were simply outplayed.

“We got beat by the better team,” said a disappointed but philosophical Cal Head Coach Jack Clark.

Utah started the game with the ball and did a superb job keeping it. They probed the Cal defense carefully, got the right guys to the rucks, and kept working. Finally, Don Pati, who emerged once again as a true 7s star, cut around the perimeter, escaped some grasping hands, and the simply pushed Connor Ring away to score. Ring, conscious of the importance of the first try, slammed the ground in frustration; Pati pumped his fist.

“Some pretty good patience,” said Clark. “It was stringing together 15 passes or so and hanging onto the ball touchline to touchline until they found a matchup.”

Down 7-0, Cal broke through. Ring set up Blaine Scully for a long run. Scully was hauled down

after 60 meters but he popped the ball to Sean Gallinger. As Gallinger reached for the ball, streaking in was Kave Lauti, who knocked Gallinger's hand and forced the ball to the ground.

Suddenly a potential Cal try was a turnover for Utah, and the Utes moved the ball to Tonata Lauti, who raced through a gap, sidestepped the Cal sweeper with graceful ease, and was in under the posts.

14-0 Utah.

Cal got the ball back, but Utah, their tails up, now buckled down on defense. They didn't let the Bears through, and when the hooter went, Pati was just happy to boot the ball into touch and take the lead.

"In sevens you can go either way you can be up in the first half and down in the second half, so when you see that opportunity you take it," said Pati. At the same time, I wanted to hold that lead but not only that, conserve the energy for the first half. You have the points in hand, kick it out and come back."

It was the right move. Utah kicked off, pressured Cal, got the ball back, and Pati dummied Dustin Muhn out of the way and sailed in to score the killer try.

"That try was really important," said Pati, and Clark concurred.

"What we had to do was score right away at the beginning of the second half, and instead what they did was find another matchup," said Clark. "And they got some guys who, in space, they can just flat beat our guys. It's not a surprise to us. We knew that coming in. But when those matchups didn't favor us, we needed to box that guy up with a second defender, and we just didn't do that very well."

And that was the game at 21-0. Cal had time, but needed to score at least three times in the space of five minutes. Utah did not slack on defense, and made sure that, unlike on Saturday, their tackles were legal. Cal got a try back from James McTurk, but in the corner where the conversion was difficult. Down 21-5, they still needed to score three times, and Utah was able to hold on.

"We've been working hard with the group of guys we have right now," said Pati, who was outstanding. "I had a lot of confidence with the boys. We came in with a lot of heart and a lot of work put into it. Yes we came here without one of our best players [Thretton Palamo] but I knew the boys could raise their game."

"For us to get better we've got to play the best so I thought today was going to be a good challenge for us," said

“I think every play in 7s is critical; it’s always nice to get a score in early,” said Pye, who also, like Burdette, was assessing his team’s mood Sunday morning. “I take a lot of pressure on my shoulders. I have been tough on the guys all week and really hard on them. But it’s really about the boys and if they’re not having fun they’re not going to perform well. Blake and I talked about it. I told the guys, don’t worry about the result, all the pressure’s off, let’s get some music on in the locker room, let’s relax.”

Utah did a superb job of dictating the game and making Cal worrying about what Utah would do. Pye said he was happy with how his team had started, and knew also Cal was starting somewhat slow.

“I told the guys we haven’t played a second half yet,” he said.

In the end it was a stunning victory. Utah is in the semifinals, and Cal’s tournament is over in the quarterfinals.

Utah 21
Tries: Pati 2, T. Lauti
Convs: Miller

Cal 5
Tries: McTurk