

The Eagles' Sicilian Adventure

by Emil Signes

Catania, Italy
May 25-June 7, 1990

Imagine:

- taking a U.S. national team to an international sevens tournament in which 100 of the country's top players were excluded from consideration.

- taking a team consisting primarily of Easterners to a tournament in Sicily where the required route was San Francisco - Hong Kong - Rome - Catania.

- having a team quartered in a hotel where "you can't get there from here" was the universal rule and where practice was an hour away on a pumice field.

- being part of an event where manana (or, more correctly, domani) was the organizers' approach to management, and you'll have some idea of the problems the Eagles' encountered at the inaugural Sicilian International Sevens.

Nevertheless, despite the sometimes serious, often hilarious, organizational difficulties and on-field results that didn't reflect the quality of our play, this Eagle side, my last as National Sevens' coach, is probably the side of which I'm the proudest.

We did great!

Background

One would think that a December invitation and January selection would provide time enough to prepare for a June event.

But on April 23, as we were going over the team's travel plans (we'd leave on Tuesday, May 29 from DC or NY, to avoid conflict with the ITTs), we received a FAX from Sandro diSanto, the secretary of the Federazione Italiana di Rugby (FIR). Sandro was "delighted" to announce our travel arrangements via sponsor Cathay-Pacific: leaving Friday, May 25 from San Francisco via Hong Kong to Rome and returning to San Francisco on Thursday, June 7th via the same route.

Needless to say, we didn't believe him but after two weeks of FAXing and telling ourselves that there had to be an easier way, it was go this route or not at all.

Furthermore, several intense conversations with national selectors and territorial coaches convinced me that I would have to drop from the squad all players participating in the ITTs, which have become the sine qua non of U.S. rugby.

I spoke with the selectors, received their recommendations, and was given the authority to make the ultimate selections myself.

As I called around for potential replacements, I realized just how deep our pool of top-level players really is.

THE TEAM

Of the final 10-man squad, only two original selections remained — LaPorta and Dujakovich (who had to be excused from the West junior ITT squad).

The ten men who ultimately made up the Eagle squad were:

Mark Miller, 31, 6'4", 225. Maryland Old Boys, prop. Mark was a key member of MOB's championship effort and has been a territorial player, both sevens and fifteens, for the last



7s Eagles in Sicily. (FRONT, L-R) Dixie Dean, Tom Smith (captain), Tom Billups, Steve Siano, Andy Dujakovich. (BACK) Karl Weiss (doctor), Steve LaPorta, Robard Williams, Scott Stephens, Mark Miller, Bill Downing, Emil Signes (coach).

ten years.

Bill "Hoover" Downing, 33, 6'3", 225, Bethlehem, prop. Bill was on the border of being selected to the Eagle sevens' side in the mid-80s, despite 265 pounds on his 6'3" frame. After a bout with fitness in the late 80s, he weighs 225 and had a great year with Bethlehem's undefeated 15s' side this spring.

Scott Stephens, 29, 6'2", 195, Washington, prop./hooker. One of the most underrated flankers and certainly among the fastest forwards in the U.S.

Tom Billups, 25, 5'10", 195, Quad Cities (and Whakatane Marist, NZ), hooker. Tom was on the Eagle squad in 1989, but was not selected this year. Now playing in New Zealand, Tom has been selected to the Bay of Plenty provincial side (at wing!).

Andy Dujakovich, 24, 5'7", 155, Kansas City scrumhalf. An exciting player who can make things happen, Andy was a member of the 1989 Eagle squad in Hong Kong.

Tom Smith, 34, 5'9", 165, Santa Monica, scrumhalf/ly-half. An Eagle since 1981, it appeared to some that Tommy might have played his last Eagle match. But Tommy has tremendous desire and faith in himself and is already pointing toward next year. A third time Eagle captain and a great one.

Steve Siano, 30, 6'1", 195, Philadelphia/Whitemarsh, fly-half/center. Played territorial 15s regularly throughout the 1980s and in the All-Star 7s in 1989. A member of the Junior Eagles squad that toured Europe in 1985.

Steve LaPorta, 29, 5'10", 175, Denver Barbarians, center. One of the steadiest players around and a defensive standout, this is Steve's third year as an Eagle.

Robard Williams, 22, 6'0", 175, Boston, wing. A member of the Collegiate All-American team in 1989. Robard ran a 10.5 100-m for Haverford College.

David "Dixie" Dean, 25, 5'10", 160, Northern Virginia, wing. One of the most exciting sevens' players in the U.S. today, Dixie scored 11 tries in the 1989 National Club Championships, and says he can't remember a sevens' game in which he hasn't scored a try.

Carl Weiss

Doctor Carl Weiss accompan-

ied the team but, together with his wife Nancy, took a far more conventional New York - Rome - Catania itinerary. Carl was an invaluable member of the tour party.

Itinerary

What originally seemed like a "Free ride" for East Coast players got expensive quickly, as \$551 airfares to San Francisco were the norm.

The squad met in San Francisco on Thursday evening, May 24, and departed at noon the next day. By early Sunday afternoon we were in Catania.

For Hoover and me, that meant 65 hours and 45 minutes elapsed time from the Bethlehem airport to the Catania airport 33:20 with wheels off the ground certainly not the most efficient way to get to Sicily from Pennsylvania.

"It's never too early or too often to dress in your number ones" became the first tour saying; a reference to the requirement to wear formal dress to and from Sicily.

We met the Fijian and Samoan teams in the Hong Kong airport and were to develop a friendship with them as the week went on.

On our arrival in Rome, we were met by Maurizio Montalto and his daughter Margherita, a student at Loyola Marymount, who was to be our liaison for the entire week. Without her constant assistance, the week might not have been salvageable.

Magic Wand

The trip from the Catania airport to our hotel, an hour north in Acireale, was a foreshadowing of Sicilian driving. Escorted by a police car waving some sort of "magic wand," our bus must have forced 100 vehicles off the road as it rushed to the hotel in needless haste. The troops loved it. And so, apparently, did the driver.

La Perla Ionica

We were lodged at La Perla Ionica, a large but isolated resort hotel on the Ionian Sea, where due to many eruptions of Mount Etna, the sea was met by volcanic rocks rather than sand. The lack of sand was made up for by a huge pool with a topless environment.

There was only one problem with the hotel: you couldn't get there from here (no matter where "there" was). There were no

buses, and our hosts acted as though there were no taxis. On the one day we insisted on getting to Catania to do some shopping, the hotel charged us \$100 round trip.

Match 4 games, dominated by Andy and Robard, and large expenditures on video games, were among the most exciting activities at the hotel.

Catania

An old city which has been destroyed six times by Mount Etna, Catania is, to say the least, an unexciting town. This impression was compounded by the fact that on our one visit we wandered into a less-than-desirable part of town where we did not feel very welcome. Sicily seems to be a very closed society and, language barrier aside, it was quite difficult to imagine ever getting close to the locals.

It Never Rains In Sicily

We were told that Sicily was going through a serious drought but after half a day of sunshine, it began to rain continuously; a steady two days of rain that was to make the isolation of our hotel even more pronounced. In addition, we were forced to practice on a pumice field that punished bodies with which it came in contact. Needless to say, I heard the quote "It never rains in Sicily" many times during the tour.

Agrigento

Getting out of the hotel accounted for many of our better moments. Probably our best day in Sicily occurred when seven of us decided to rent vehicles and go in search of LaPorta's long lost relatives in Raffadali.

Raffadali is near Agrigento, home to some of the best preserved and impressive Greek ruins in the world (to quote a local saying, "If you want to see Greece, come to Sicily.")

Agrigento was wonderful, as was the drive through Sicily's beautiful interior; the tournament organizers who imprisoned us at La Perla Ionica certainly weren't doing a good job of public relations for their island.

Following a couple of hours traversing the ruins, we jumped back into our rent-a-cars and made the final 10-mile leg to Raffadali.

Raffadali

Raffadali is a small, conserva-

tive Sicilian town which we encountered in the midst of a seemingly important funeral.

Realizing that fuchsia shorts and a muscle shirt were probably not the most conducive apparel in which to befriend the locals, we changed into (slightly) less outer-space clothes.

We parked our cars on a large square in which a memorial to World War II dead listed numerous LaPortas ("Forget it Steve, they're all dead!"). There are numerous LaPorta families in Raffadali but the information that a certain Clemente LaPorta left Raffadali in 1920, leaving behind a brother Vincenzo, was not sufficient to locate the correct relations, although we were interviewed by at least half a dozen LaPorta families. Maybe next year, Steve.

Practices

We trained in the hotel parking lot on our Sunday arrival, and then twice on Monday, followed by single practices for the remainder of the week.

Scrimmages

On Wednesday and Thursday, the Eagles scrimmaged Western Samoa and Italy. In both matches they showed that they could win possession, handle, and play defense at international level. Their inexperience at maintaining possession under pressure showed, however, and several turnovers were converted into opponent tries.

THE SICILIAN SEVENS

June 2-3, 1990

Three countries were represented by non-national sides: Wales (Welsh Academicals), Ireland (Irish Wolfhounds), and France (Stade Toulousain). In keeping with the national-team intent of the event, I will refer to these by their national names.

Bracket A:

Fiji
Western Samoa
USSR
Sicily

Bracket B:

Ireland
Spain
Hong Kong
Tunisia

Bracket C:

Argentina
Romania
France
U. S.

Bracket D:

Wales
Italy
Netherlands
Sri Lanka

To anyone familiar with Pacific Island rivalries, putting the Fijians and Samoans in the same bracket was a bad decision. And one for which the tournament was to suffer.

The Sicilian team included four South African national players currently playing in Sicily, including current Springbok captain Johannes Breedt.

The Irish team, featuring Australian and Irish international Brian Smith, English speedster David Trick (possibly the fastest player in the tournament), and Irish standouts Brendan Mullin and Michael Kierman, was among the pre-tourney favorites.

The tournament was played over two days (with four-hour lunch breaks!), on a beautifully kept field, in front of crowds ranging from one to five-

thousand people. The weather was clear and 80-ish.

EAGLE MATCHES

France 28.

Eagles 4

Despite the score, this was a match-up that, if repeated, could easily have been won by the Eagles.

The Eagles demonstrated vastly superior sevens' knowledge and were able to win their own kickoffs and French scrums on several occasions.

Eagle nervousness and the tremendous athleticism of the French, however, caused numerous turnovers. All 5 French tries came from Eagle possession.

The first French score came after a ball stolen from a French scrum was recovered and run in for an 80-yard try.

Following another turnover, the French got a 2 on 1 on rookie Robard Williams and scored an 80-yard try.

Williams, however, followed immediately with his first try as an Eagle. Tommy Smith's grub kickoff was won by Steve LaPorta who got it back to Tommy who put the sprinter away to make the halftime score 12-4.

Second Half

In the second half a long Steve LaPorta break was stopped about a yard from the French line and countered for a 99-meter French try. A fly-hack and an errant pass led to two more tries, making the final score 28-4.

It left the Eagles feeling shattered and wondering if they were over their heads in international waters.

U. S. Lineup

- 1 Miller 4 Dujakovich
- 2 Billups 5 Smith
- 3 Downing 6 LaPorta
- 7 Williams

Eagles 24, Argentina 6

This game is etched in my mind as one of the finest of any team I have coached.

Argentina, the ultimate winner of this bracket at 2-1, was thoroughly defeated by the Eagles in one of the best games any Eagle sevens' side has ever played.

The game started with Argentina exploiting a 2 on 1 for a 6-0 lead.

It was then that Argentina's wing, their dominant force against both France and Romania, got his comeuppance from a skinny, little guy with the moniker of Dixie Dean.

Dean's first play was a clutch tackle following a counterattack in which the Puma wing threw every move he had at Dixie. Immediately following that, Dean put a step on his man and beat him for a 50-meter try.

The Argentinian wing never did anything with the ball again but return it to his center.

Second Half

Going into the second half tied 6-6, Argentina's kickoff was won by Eagle rookie Mark Miller, who fed Scott Stephens looping around him towards the touchline. Stephens, possibly the fastest forward in the U.S. today, and certainly the fastest Eagle sevens' prop since John Fowler, simply smoked his way to the goal line for a try that put the Eagles away for good.

At the next Argentinian scrum, the Eagles' "Georgetown" defense, developed at Sydney in 1989, worked perfectly and

forced Argentina into a bad pass. Steve LaPorta got to the ball first and fed Tommy Smith for a 25-meter try.

With time running out, Scott Stephens was waffled between 2 defenders as he caught the next kickoff. Mark Miller blasted Stephens free, enabling the ball to come out to the backs and ultimately resulting in a Steve Siano try.

Tommy Smith converted all four tries.

Eagle Lineup

- 1 Miller 4 Smith
- 2 Billups 5 Siano
- 3 Stephens 6 LaPorta
- 7 Dean

Concluding the morning portion of the tournament, and going into the 4-hour lunch break (!), the Eagles' bracket had seen:

Argentina crush Romania, Romania crush France,

France crush the Eagles, and the Eagles crush Argentina.

The evening's matches would decide the bracket.

Confident that they had finally found the right mixture, the Eagles put the same group on the field vs. Romania. The winner would go to the Cup division, the loser to the Plate.

Romania 24, Eagles 10

The Eagles gained possession early in the game and held the ball for over a minute. When a Tom Billups' break upfield was halted, the Romanians ended up with a scrum. The Eagles' "Georgetown" defense forced the Romanian flyhalf into a bad kick but it took a crazy bounce back into a pair of Romanian hands. That was followed by a missed tackle that led to Romania's first try.

The Eagles never saw the ball again until early in the second half when a 50-meter Dixie Dean try reduced the score to 20-4.

The Eagles added one more try on a great individual effort by Steve LaPorta and came off the field disappointed but knowing that they'd been beaten by a class team.

U.S. Lineup

- 1 Miller 4 Smith
- 2 Billups 5 Siano
- 3 Stephens 6 LaPorta
- 7 Dean

As a result of pool play, Argentina and Romania were 2-1 and the U.S. and France 1-2. The Eagles were paired on Sunday with the USSR, a much stronger side than the one which the Eagles trounced 30-4 at Hong Kong.

USSR 12, Eagles 10

The only thing the USSR did wrong on Saturday was play in a bracket with both Fiji and Samoa. They fielded a team with excellent speed and tremendous commitment to support play. Had they been in a bracket with European teams, they probably would have made Cup play.

Mark Miller's shoulder had stiffened up overnight, and our props for this match were Downing and Stephens.

Both teams played tentatively throughout the first half, until the Soviets finally put the ball across the line in the 6th minute. The try was converted and the USSR led 6-0.

The Eagles came right back, however, when Tommy Smith got the ball to Dixie Dean. With room to beat his man, Dixie scored with ease and the halftime tally was 6-6.



Captain Tommy Smith moves in on a Soviet ballcarrier in the Eagles 12-10 loss at the Sicily 7s. (Photo - Weiss)

Second Half

Another scoreless 5-minutes was followed by an Eagle knock-on that was fly-hacked ahead for what proved to be Russia's winning margin.

The Eagles came back again on a tremendous break by Tom Billups. When no one else seemed willing to test the Soviet defense, Tom simply broke through and outran the defense for a 40-meter try.

Normally a "gimmie" for Tommy Smith, the conversion bounced off an upright and left the score at 12-10.

A final Eagle comeback attempt was thwarted when the ball was knocked on with a promising 3 on 1 in sight.

Hey, it's only a game, huh?

U. S. Lineup

- 1 Downing 4 Dujakovich
- 2 Billups 5 Smith
- 3 Stephens 6 LaPorta
- 7 R. Williams*

*Dean

Eagle Scoring Summary

| | T | C | Pts |
|----------|---|---|-----|
| Smith | 1 | 6 | 16 |
| Dean | 3 | | 12 |
| Billups | 1 | | 4 |
| LaPorta | 1 | | 4 |
| Siano | 1 | | 4 |
| Stephens | 1 | | 4 |
| Williams | 1 | | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 6 | 48 |

Scores against: 13 tries, 9 conversions: 70 points

OTHER MATCHES

Fiji/Samoa Pool Match

Whoever put Fiji and Samoa in the same bracket had rocks in their heads. Not only were they among the top 2 or 3 in the tourney, but there is such an intense rivalry between them that a peaceful encounter can never be guaranteed.

In this match, Samoa trailed 16-10 in an intense, hard-hitting encounter, when the longest, most violent rugby fight I have ever seen broke out.

Samoa made a break from a mid-field scrum following a kickoff and at Fiji's 22, the ball carrier turned back to look for support. He saw — nobody — because 10 of the 14 players were back in the Samoan end of the field duking it out.

Duking it out? Well, fighting to the death would be more like it. Players were being punched, drop-kicked, and when the benches cleared we were witness to atavistic tribal butchery acted

out on the rugby pitch.

In the end, people stopped fighting, the referee awarded a penalty try to Samoa, and the match was tied at 16.

Samoa, playing a truly inspired match, ran through the Fijian defense to take a 22-16 lead. Only a last-ditch Fijian try ended the match at 22-22. Based on total number of tries, Fiji was awarded the bracket championship.

The scene later in the parking lot was none too pretty, either, as the Samoan contingent waited, debris in hand, for their rivals to exit the stadium. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed, the teams were put on separate buses, and all survived Saturday with their lives.

Soviets Win

Plate Competition

After defeating the U.S., the Soviets went on to easily whip Hong Kong and Tunisia for the Plate Championship. Tunisia, which defeated Canada at the Hong Kong Sevens, once again proved that it is a team to be reckoned with.

Hong Kong, which played so well at home in March, was less formidable on the road (and was also missing All-Black candidate Ian Calder).

Cup Competition

Samoa and Fiji made their way through the Cup Competition for a rematch.

Perhaps the best Cup game was the quarterfinal between Fiji/Romania. Romania played the Fijians as well as anyone, forcing them to the outside. Fiji's response was to move the ball back to the center of the field, which was well covered. In the end, however, Fiji put the Romanians away, and then did the same to the Irish, certainly the 3rd best team in the tournament.

Cup Final

Samoa led in the Cup final 9-0 with fierce and total commitment. In the end, however, Fiji's superior athleticism proved too much and the final score was Fiji 34, Samoa 9.

MVP

There was no official tournament MVP, but the Eagles had their own poll. While there was some sentiment towards two-time Hong Kong MVP Waisali Serevi of Fiji, most leaned toward one of several Samoans who had played so well. My own preference was a player we nick-

named the prince (because of his tattoo-covered body), hooker Alefaio Vaisui, whose tremendous commitment and fitness kept Samoa in their games against Fiji. It was only when he left the final with an injury, that Fiji really poured it on.

Rome

Unlike most tournaments, where the organizers stick you on a plane at 7 AM the morning after, we were to be housed at La Perla Ionica until Wednesday when the first Cathay Pacific plane headed for Hong Kong!

Needing desperately to get away, however, the Fijians, Samoans, Sri Lankans and Americans managed to rearrange their flights from Catania in order to spend two days in Rome.

As she had so often in the previous days, Margherita came to the rescue.

Her mother is on the faculty at Loyola Chicago's Rome campus and got us rooms at very reasonable rates. Since most of the dorm residents were Americans, we also got an American view of Rome's nightspots.

On Tuesday, Katie Montalto, an art history major, took the entire group for a day-long walking tour of Rome. We got to see Hadrian's tomb, Vatican City, the Pantheon, the towers of Hadrian and Trajan, Piazza Navona, the Spanish steps, the Forum, the Monument to the unknown soldier, the balcony from which Mussolini spell-bound the Romans, the Coliseum, the Arch of Constantine, and other famous sites. Miscellanea, an "American" bar near the Pantheon, was the evening banquet of choice.

Final Stage

Finally, on Wednesday morning, June 6, our two-week saga entered its final stage. The 30 hours from Rome to San Francisco were divided between bouts of power drinking and sleep. Following our 10 AM arrival at San Francisco on Thursday in our tattered "number ones" ("You can't get too many stains on your number ones" was our slogan on the trip home), we parted company.

Farewell

Farewell, Eagles, and a fond good-bye to four great years as National Sevens' Coach.

Farewell to all those unique phrases and memories that are a part of every tour: to Dewey Cento and Aimless, to a thousand Raffadali LaPortas, to six fewer people eligible to be Eagle rookies — and to the ugly American Steve Siano, to Match 4 and Operation Wolf, to beautiful inner Sicily, to the pillars of Agrigento, to the littered craters of Mt. Etna, to stained but well-worn number ones, to il signore Castagnuola, to Maurizio, Katie and Margherita Montalto, to pumice fields, to our South Pacific friends, to Romanian vodka, to the highly regarded Philly/Whitemarsh club, to the Rinaldo bar at Loyola, to Palermo and the Atlantic, to the art museum known as Rome, to yet another "Sunshine Mountain," to Cathay stewardesses, to "reds," to unimportant muscles, to everything, in fact, that makes a rugby tour a great experience.

With a few weeks' perspective, I can not only reconcile a 1-3 record with success, but I can honestly say to anyone who asks, "We did great!"

Ciao.