

Eagles Go 3-1 at Benidorm Sevens

by Steve Finkel and Emil Signes

Villajoyosa, Spain
May 23-24, 1992

It's never a disgrace when the only team you lose to at an international sevens tournament is Fiji, and that was how the Eagles fared at the sixth annual Benidorm International Sevens.

The Eagles began with a shaky showing in two preliminary matches against the Ukraine (the second match was arranged as a friendly, because the third member of the Eagles' pool got in trouble with authorities and was unavailable).

In Sunday's quarterfinal round, however, the Eagles thoroughly dominated the Public School Wanderers, a class invitational side from Britain featuring several internationals (including speedy Welsh wing Glen Webber), 36-0, before being knocked out by Fiji.

The Benidorm International Sevens
Benidorm is a tourist town (mostly British) on the Mediterranean in Southeast Spain. The Benidorm Sevens are actually held in the smaller town of Villajoyosa, about 10 miles to the south, but use the Benidorm name to attract English and other European teams.

The Benidorm Sevens have been in existence since 1987, and have grown in stature since then. In 1992, Benidorm drastically upped its level by inviting several national teams, including Fiji, Western Samoa, the Ukraine, and the U.S., as well as the Public School Wanderers. In addition, several national sides — Spain, Portugal, Hong Kong, Tunisia, and Kenya — were using the tournament as a warm-up for the Rugby World Cup Sevens qualifier in Sicily the following week.

Fiji was actually represented by a club side, Nakelo, plus two "guests", one of whom was Waisale Serevi, described recently in *Rugby* as "the greatest rugby player in the world." Nevertheless, members of Fiji's entourage felt that Nakelo was one of about a dozen Fijian clubs that on a good day could beat the national side.

An Opportunity Nearly Missed
The Benidorm Sevens first offered to sponsor the Eagles in February of this year, but in late April the sponsor dropped out and Eagle



The Eagle 7s side came in 2nd at the Benidorm 7s. (FRONT, L-R) - Finkel [coach], Conahey, Billups, O'Brien, Bateman. (BACK) - Hinkin, Stephens, Ridnell, Hein, Puloka, Signes [manager]. (Photo - Mary Beth Spirk)

participation was in jeopardy. Additional help from the tournament organizers, and the Villajoyosa Rugby Club (and its club president Ignacio Davila), helped make the tour a reality.

The Bus Trip From Hell

Part of making the trip affordable was the six and a half hour bus ride from Madrid to Benidorm. The team had no sleep and was crammed into a 20-seat bus with members of the Women's Atlantis team. Exactly 20 tiny seats, exactly 20 people, none of whom had slept, made for an excruciating trip. Fun was had by none.

The Team

Gary Hein, Old Blues. The third most capped Eagle in 15s, Gary was the tour captain and did an excellent job. He kept the team in focus and maintained a positive attitude after a less than satisfying performance against the Ukraine.

Tony Ridnell, Old Puget Sound Beach. A veteran of Hong Kong since 1989, Tony is on the verge of being a world-class 7s player.

Scott Stephens, Washington. Probably the fastest flanker in the U.S., it is a wonder that Scott has never achieved all-star status in 15s. He is one of the few 7s forwards in the U.S. with world-class athleticism.

Finau Puloka, Old Puget Sound Beach. An exciting open-field runner who can dominate a 7s game, Finau was the subject of an experiment — he played prop in this tournament, and did a good job.

Tom Billups, Old Blues. One of the most fit players in the game and one of the most successful in sport:

a four-time national champion with Augustana College (Division III football), a member of the Quad Cities National Sevens Club Championship team in 1986, and most recently a member of the Old Blues national 15s champions in 1992. Tom obviously knows what it takes to win.

Dave Bateman, Old Puget Sound Beach. For all extents and purposes, Dave retired as an all-star player, but the Pacific Coast selector returned to compete for a spot at this year's camp. He made the team, and played well in Sunday's match against the Public School Wanderers.

Chris O'Brien, Old Blues. The Eagle flyhalf in 15s is another veteran 7s player who is now fulfilling his promise as a team leader and playmaker.

George Conahey, Belmont Shore. A first time Eagle who broke open the 1991 All-Star Sevens with devastating running, George was an alternate for the Eagles' match with Hong Kong and is a serious contender for the 1993 World Cup 7s squad.

Jon Hinkin, OMBAC. Another first time Eagle and a former Collegiate All-American, Jon likes to score tries and is an excellent finisher.

GAMES

Eagles 10, Ukraine 4

Although a win, this match had to be considered a disappointment. The Eagles were constantly forcing breaks that weren't there, and the Ukraine's excellent defense shut them down. The Eagles were in control most of the game, however, because their defensive pressure kept the Ukraine in its own half most of the time.

- 1 Ridnell
- 2 Billups
- 3 Puloka
- 4 Bateman (try)
- 5 O'Brien (try, con.)
- 6 Hein
- 7 Hinkin

Eagles 16, Ukraine 12

A "friendly" arranged when the third member of the pool was unavailable, the Eagles hoped to get back to form in this match. It was, however, a repeat of the first, with a clutch try by Puloka pulling the game out in the final seconds.

- 1 Stephens
- 2 Billups
- 3 Puloka (try)
- 4 Bateman (try)
- 5 O'Brien (2 con.)
- 6 Conahey (try)
- 7 Hein

Eagles 36, Public School Wanderers 0

After an evening's rest, the Eagles played perhaps their best game in the last two years, keeping the Pub-

lic School Wanderers in disarray. The Eagles played deeper, were more patient, and kept the ball virtually all 14 minutes, Stephens' commented, "It was one of those games you wish would never end."

- 1 Ridnell
- 2 Billups (try)
- 3 Stephens (try)
- 4 Bateman
- 5 O'Brien (6 con.)
- 6 Hein (3 tries)
- 7 Hinkin (try)

Fiji 30, Eagles 4

The Eagles have now played Fiji five times, with the following results:

- Fiji 30, Eagles 4 - Hong Kong 1982
- Fiji 26, Eagles 0 - Hong Kong 1986
- Fiji 26, Eagles 4 - Sydney 1988
- Fiji 28, Eagles 6 - Hong Kong 1990
- Fiji 30, Eagles 4 - Benidorm 1992

Get the picture?

Nevertheless, the Eagles played well in this semifinal loss. Athletically Fiji is simply in another universe. The lone Eagle try was by Stephens, who dragged a Fijian defender several yards over the line to score only the fourth Eagle try against Fiji.

- 1 Ridnell
- 2 Billups
- 3 Stephens (try)
- 4 Bateman
- 5 O'Brien
- 6 Hein
- 7 Conahey

Tournament Champions: Fiji
Fiji defeated Western Samoa 15 in a rousing final that had spectators buzzing until the last moment.

Summary

The tour must be considered success: inconsistent play was replaced by excellence as the week end progressed; always the goal of touring side.

Combined with the Eagles it represented the U.S. at Hong Kong in April. 14 players represented the Eagle sevens program in 1992. The players, plus a small number of others, will provide the nucleus for which the 1993 Rugby World Cup Sevens team will be chosen.

Accommodation of the Sexes

One of the most gratifying aspects of the tour was a positive shift in relations between U.S. rugby men and rugby women.

Given the highly tenuous relationship between the two communities, both the Eagles and the All-Women were unsure whether they even speak to each other during tour.


In point of fact, however, both teams were present at the other games to cheer their compatriots and by the end of the week, both I gained respect for each other: rugby players and as human beings. It was a refreshing change from so of the attitudes that prevail at home.

Where Do We Go From Here?

With the Sevens World Cup nine months away, the Eagles have more work together. Nevertheless with the exception of Hong Kong 1993, there is no financing in place to guarantee any more fixtures.

The Eagles have been invited to an international sevens tournament in Moscow in September, but the observers are cynical about the tournament's ability to fulfill promise of sponsorship.

Other tournaments — in Haw Dubai, New Zealand, Fiji, and Australia — abound, but finances continue to be our stumbling block. Hopefully, we can get some help in this area prior to the World Cup. U.S. has a successful sevens program; hopefully some funding be forthcoming to support it.



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