

Eagles Improve At Sevens World Cup

Text and Photos
By Ian Kennedy

Mar del Plata, Argentina
January 26-28, 2001

The United States Sevens team departed for the Sevens World Cup in Mar del Plata in disarray, but returned home ten days later with heads higher, having gained a measure of respectability. As third-place finisher in the Americas Qualifiers held in Santiago, Chile last May, the Eagles went to the third Sevens World Cup ranked 24th out of the 24 participants. Things could only improve.

The week before leaving North America, the US experienced a number of significant setbacks. First, Tommy Smith, who had coached the team for two years and helped the team qualify in Chile, offered his resignation. Recently hired Technical Director, New Zealander John McKittrick, took over. He came to the job with respectable credentials having coached: the New Zealand's North Harbour 7s team to consecutive national championships; the New Zealand Barbarians, and the Cook Islands, who also qualified for the Sevens World Cup.

Secondly, three of the Eagles' best players cried-off for various reasons. Wing Vaea Anitoni, veteran of many Eagles Sevens campaigns going back to Hong Kong in 1994, and the National XV's team's top try-scorer and leading cap winner, as well as Nelo Lui, two of the great creators and visionaries of the US sevens game, had to be replaced. Dave Hodges, the Llanelli back-rower, Eagle captain at the World Cup qualifier in Chile, also cried-off. Mose Timoteo, Matt Kane and Craig Sim took their places. Late changes and a new coach — not the best preparation for a World Cup.

In the end, an Eagle's Sevens team led by Malakai Delai (OMBAC), and consisting of Chip Curtis (Life College), Dave DiSorbo (OMBAC), Matt Kane (Watsonians), Alexander Magleby (Gentlemen of Aspen), Jovesa Naivalu (San Jose), Jason Raven



The US Eagles at the World Cup 7s: (FRONT, L-R) Younger, Raven, Curtis, Kane, Magleby. (BACK) Mc Kittrick, Compton, Naivalu, Sim, Di Sorbo, Delai, Timoteo, Ward.

(Riverside), Don Younger (Indianapolis), Craig Sim (Old Puget Sound), and Mose Timoteo (Hayward-Old Blues) coached by John McKittrick, managed by Scott Compton, and tended to by physiotherapist Jeff Ward, flew to the seaside city of Mar del Plata, Argentina.

After recovering from their 22-hour journey, the Eagles underwent four days of preparation and in their first game Friday evening faced Samoa at 35,000 seat Jose Maria Minella Stadium.

**SAMOA 49,
UNITED STATES 19**
Friday evening
January 26

The Eagles began with a flurry against the #1 seed in Pool D, with Curtis and Delai to the fore. But

Samoa's Tanner Vili broke two tackles and sprinted home to give Samoa a 7-0 lead in the 1st minute. During this scoring play, Samoa's star winger Ron Fanuatunu lay prone on the field, suffering a concussion. His World Cup lasted but a moment and his loss severely minimized Samoa's chances for success.

After the delay to remove Fanuatunu, the US scored its first try right from the kickoff. The Eagles spun the ball wide to Jovesa Naivalu who strode round all opponents to touch down. Jason Raven converted, 7-7.

Soon after, a Samoan clothes-line tackle on Chip Curtis went completely unnoticed by New Zealand referee Gary Wise, allowing Ailaoa Samania to score to the displeasure of the knowledgeable crowd.

Mealamu followed with another try in the 5th minute, and with the score 21-7 the US came back with a cracking try off of a penalty play; a play that would prove productive throughout the tournament. With a penalty on Samoa's 10-yard line and all 6'7" and 235 pounds of Matt Kane back at the 20-yard line, the US scrumhalf tapped the ball. Kane took it on the burst at about the five and went horizontal over the line like a cruise missile, bringing the score to 21-12 at the half.

Samoa became more workmanlike in the second stanza, scoring four tries to another by Jovesa Naivalu, converted Raven, leaving the final 49-19.

"Obviously I'm disappointed," said coach John McKittrick after the match. "We worked on defense in practice, but under game pressure we failed to execute. Guys fell off in easy tackles. However, when we got the ball wide, which we hoped to do, we were threatening."

**UNITED STATES 19,
HONG KONG 0**

Hong Kong once played reasonable Sevens, but has declined in recent years due to the tightening of eligibility requirements for national players. For this World Cup they were seeded 20th of 24. They sat

one above the US in Pool D and the Eagles had to beat Hong Kong to have any chance of advancement.

The Americans would make no mistake. Jason Raven scored and converted the first US try in the second minute and Kane followed with another of his goal-line penalty plays just on half-time, giving the Eagles a 14-0 lead at the break.

Raven sealed the victory four minutes into the second half when he picked off an errant Hong Kong pass and ran the length of the field to make the final score 19-0.

"I asked the guys to show me how much they wanted this," said coach McKittrick after the game. "I'm immensely proud of them. To keep Hong Kong off the score sheet was huge."

**AUSTRALIA 49,
UNITED STATES 0**

Curiously Samoa had been seeded above Australia in Pool D, but after the Wallabies beat Hong Kong 29-5 and Wales 21-7, it became

obvious that Australia was slowly building and improving. Australian coach Glen Ella quietly molded his Wallaby side into a very solid, organized team. Its 49-0 win over the United States demonstrated the form that would later beat Fiji in the Cup semifinal and take Australia to the Melrose Cup Final. The Eagles had little chance as the Wallabies ran in seven tries, with hooker Ed Carter scoring a hat trick.

Could the Eagles re-group for tomorrow?

**WALES 19,
UNITED STATES 10**
Saturday evening
January 27

The Eagles' last victory over Wales occurred when recently retired coach Tommy Smith kicked a penalty in injury time to win 15-12 at the 1989 Sydney Sevens.

The young Welsh team at this World Cup — each player receiving 1,000 pounds a man — had been beaten 21-7 by Australia, 24-17 by



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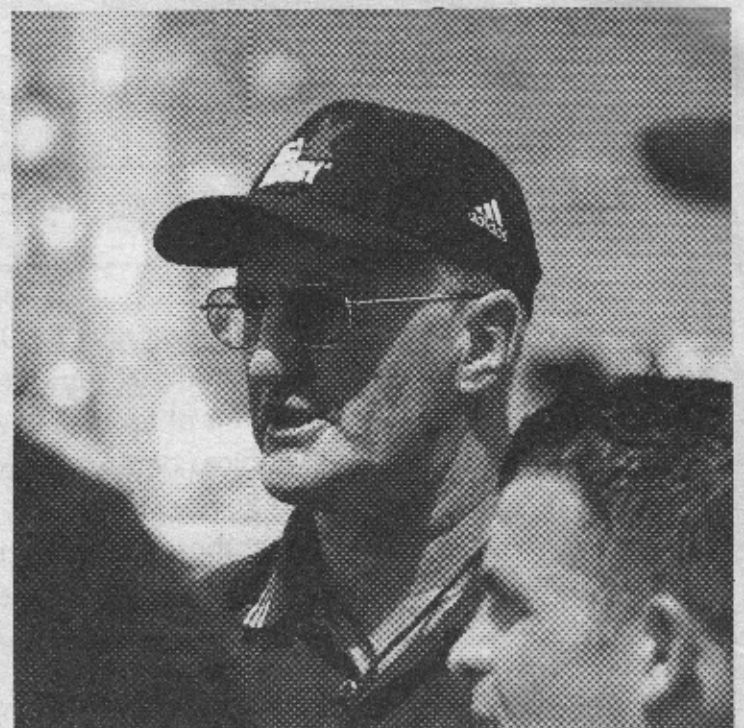
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New Eagle 7s coach John Mc Kittrick had impressive outings in both Mar Del Plata and Wellington.



Eagle Chip Curtis is caught in possession during the Eagles' loss to Wales at the 7s World Cup.

Samoa and had drawn 19-19 with Portugal in the very first match of the tournament.

The Eagles started well, patiently building from a penalty at their own 10-yard line and working and linking with each other until Alexander Magleby touched down at the other end. The Eagles' best try of the tournament gave them a 5-0 lead.

Wales replied just before the half after the US kicked downfield trying to relieve pressure. The Welsh moved the ball through hands until Will Thomas scored wide out, 5-5 at the half. The US was playing well, in with a chance.

Unfortunately for the US, right after the kickoff Gareth Wyatt scored a great individual try in the best tradition of Welsh outside halves. He took a ball at the 22, danced inside and outside all defenders, touched down under the posts and then converted, 12-5.

Not to be outdone, Chip Curtis, who played well throughout this World Cup, took a tap-penalty at center and sprinted the whole way himself to score. Brilliant. No conversion, 12-10.

With the Eagles exerting pressure inside the Welsh half, the Eagle winger lost the ball in a tackle and Gareth Barber of Wales sprinted the length of the field to score. Shane Marinos converted for the 19-10 final.

The Eagles could have won this game. The US played well enough and defended well enough to earn the victory, but in sevens the team that makes fewest mistakes in close games comes out the winner. Such was the case here.

"We would have loved to have beaten Wales, a Six Nations team, it would have given the boys a huge lift," said manager Scott Compton after the match.

"We were on attack at 12-10 down with time running out. We had options left and right and unfortunately coughed the ball up," said a disappointed John McKittrick. "We should have been able to finish off our attack. It's an experience thing, and the players will learn from it."

UNITED STATES 20, PORTUGAL 15

Portugal had recorded one win against lowly Hong Kong 26-0, a draw against Wales 19-19, and losses to Samoa 33-19 and Australia 33-0. They were beatable.

What a start! Four straight tries by Craig Sim, Matt Kane, Jason

Raven and Jovesa Naivalu gave the Eagles a 20-0 lead within four minutes. Tremendous stuff.

Portugal replied with one just before the half, 20-5.

In the second-half Portugal came back with two more, but the Eagles held on with Naivalu kicking the ball into the stands to relieve pressure and run out the clock. A wise move, 20-15 Eagles.

"It has been a long time since the Eagles scored four tries in four minutes," said John McKittrick. "And their resolve in holding on to preserve the win was absolutely stellar!"

The Eagles had won two, should have won another, and had lost two, putting it amongst the top sixteen teams in the tournament, and giving it a fourth place ranking in Pool D, and a Plate berth. It was a tremendous achievement for a team ranked 24th and not expected to win any matches.

Australia topped Pool D and along with Samoa went to the Cup competition; Wales and the USA went to the Plate, and Portugal and Hong Kong to the Bowl.

Plate Quarterfinal: SPAIN 26, UNITED STATES 5

Sunday, June 28

In the Plate quarterfinal the US drew Spain. The Spaniards had shocked England, 14-12, beaten Chile 10-5 and Zimbabwe 28-7, but lost to Japan 12-7 on a superb last-gasp try by the brilliant Japanese wing Ohata, and 26-7 to New Zealand. Spain: well-drilled and organized, fast and fit.

Spain scored two first half tries and held a 14-0 lead at the break, before Chip Curtis touched down early in the second. Matt Kane had run his usual penalty play, but had been stopped short. Quick thinking Curtis picked up the ball at the ruck, went blind, and scored in the corner.

14-5.

Unfortunately, Spain added two more tries to bring the final tally to 26-5.

The Eagles can take heart from its World Cup performance. The US improved as the tournament progressed and came together as a team after a less than optimum build-up.

"Expectations weren't high for us coming into this World Cup," said John McKittrick. "To make it into the Plate and finish in the top-sixteen, is a huge success. This team has a lot of potential, but also has a lot to learn. This performance speaks highly for the future success of American sevens."

Eagle Results

The record: Won 2, lost 4.

Top scorer: Jason Raven three tries and five conversions.

Three tries: Jovesa Naivalu and Matt Kane

Two tries: Chip Curtis

One try: Craig Sim and Alexander Magleby

Other Results

Australia went on to beat England 33-5 in the Cup quarters, upset Fiji 22-14 in the semifinal, but lost to New Zealand 31-12 in the Melrose Cup final on the strength of three tries by Kiwi wing Jonah Lomu. "He used our blokes like speed bumps," commented Aussie coach Glen Ella. Samoa lost to New Zealand 45-7 in the Cup quarters.

In the Plate, Wales fared a bit better than the US, beating Japan 21-7 but losing to Georgia in the semis 17-10.

In the Bowl, Portugal beat Zimbabwe 19-14 in the quarters and Ireland 33-12 in the semis, but lost the final 21-19 to Chile. Chile eliminated woeful Hong Kong 19-14 in its first game of the Bowl competition, leaving Hong Kong to assume the ignominy of the 24th place ranking vacated by the Eagles.

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Eagles Reach Semifinal of Wellington 7s

Wellington, NZ
February 9-10

The USA stunned the 7s world with a Cup semifinal appearance at Wellington's World Sevens Series tournament.

The unheralded Eagles upset Fiji, 12-10, and England, 17-12, on Friday. Together with a 31-5 result over China, the results put the USA top of their pool.

The Eagles then defeated Canada, 12-10, in Saturday's Cup quarterfinal. The team bowed out against Australia in the semifinal, 36-5, while the Wallabies went on to win the tournament final against Fiji.

Head coach John McKittrick called the USA's performance 'a fairy-tale.' "The boys did themselves and their country proud," he noted.

The Eagles' effort was big on tenacity. In three of its four wins, the team grabbed victory in the final moments of the match. None was more 'last-gasp' than the win over England, where the game was tied 12-12 in the last minute. Backed up nearly to the US goal line, prop Don Younger grabbed an interception and outpaced the English defense over 90m for the game-winner.

Wing Jovesa Naivalu had scored the USA's first two tries, outflanking the English for a 70m effort in the first minute, and then stepping through their defense to go 50m at the five-minute mark.

But the victory over Fiji earlier on day one was arguably the most dramatic moment of the tournament. The defending champions were up 10-0 by halftime; only to have flyhalf Malakai Delai sidestep a defender and set up center Chris Kron after 10 minutes.

The Fijians then knocked-on the ensuing restart, giving the USA one final and vital possession. The Eagles took the ball through four phases to the goal line, and scrumhalf Jason Raven sold a dummy to create

space at the edge of the ruck, darting over and tying the match at 10-10. Raven, the team's captain, then added the match-winning conversion.

Against China, the US had three more tries from Naivalu, another from Raven and one to prop Kevin Whitcher, while the Chinese got on the board with a solitary try late in the game.

The Eagles were back into close competition, however, against Canada on Day 2 of the tournament. The Maple Leafs led 10-7 at the half, with the US's first try again courtesy of Naivalu who broke from a scrum at the six minute mark.

The teams were deadlocked throughout the second period and it was literally the last play of the game that put the Eagles ahead. With the hooter already sounded for full-time, prop Don Younger stole a scrum against the feed on the Canadian 22m, and center Chris Kron looped Naivalu for the go-ahead try. It was the first 7s win over archrivals Canada since RWC 1997.

Naivalu also claimed the US's solitary try against Australia.

The giant upsets from the US made the team crowd favorites as well as media darlings, with the Eagles grabbing headlines around the world as the 'Cinderellas' of the 7s tournament. Meanwhile, the sell-out New Zealand crowd adopted the underdog USA after the team got past Fiji, lending vocal support to all of their appearances.

The Eagles next 7s appearance will be in Hong Kong at the end of March.

US Team

Malakai Delai, Olo Fifita, Dan Fitch, Craig Hartley, Chris Kron, Alexander Magleby, Jovesa Naivalu, Ben Oakes, Jason Raven, Mose Timoteo, Kevin Whitcher, Don Younger.

Coach: John McKittrick.
Manager: Chris Lippert.
Physio: Jeff Ward.

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