

US Women 22, Canada 3

by Eric Contey

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The U.S. National Women's team showed why they are considered one of the top sides in the world when they beat the Canadian Women 22-3. The U.S. used a combination of weapons to down a worthy opponent and in the process delighted an enthusiastic crowd of over 4,000 at Royal Athletic Park.

The match was the first international for both teams and a celebration for all who have played a part in the development of women's rugby in North America. The players themselves proved fully committed to this first international game, and responded to the opportunity by displaying their considerable skills in a well-played and entertaining match.

In the end, the U.S. was the stronger side, as was largely expected. Their backline was fast and powerful, especially in the centers, where Tracy Henderson of the New Orleans Halfmoons and Candi Orsini of Florida State make a truly formidable midfield combination.

In the forwards, things were supposed to be more equal and, indeed, the Canadian pack, ably assisted by their tenacious scrumhalf Corrine Skrobot, was able to win ball in the first half. Gradually, however, the U.S. forwards became dominant, and in the second spell, provided the possession to pull away.

1st Half

The U.S.A. kicked off and the opening exchanges clearly revealed the respective strategies of the two sides: Canada tried to keep the ball in tight with the forwards, while the U.S. women looked for quick ball to spin out wide.

U.S. flyhalf Tanya Fry kept Canada pinned with kicking, and then off a stolen lineout she gave to Henderson, who skipped Orsini out to wing Tony Misko. Misko broke and then fed the looping Orsini for a beautiful run to the Canada 1-yard line. Shortly thereafter, a U.S. knock-on allowed Canada to clear.

Soon after, the USA was awarded the first penalty of the match and chose to run it. The ball was dummed to the charging forwards and sent quickly out to Orsini who broke again only to miss connections with Misko on the outside.



U.S. center, Candi Orsini, breaks into the clear with Canadian defenders in pursuit. The US won 22-3. (Photo - Contey)

The U.S. spent the first 20 minutes attacking relentlessly in the Canadian end but came away with no points to show for it.

Then play started to flow the other way. The United States was having trouble in the lineouts, and their opponents seized the initiative. Canada's #8 and captain, Stephanie White, worked well with scrumhalf Skrobot, making breaks at every opportunity, and moving the ball into the U.S. end for the first time.

The U.S. stood up to the pressure and worked the ball into Canada's end. They opted to run on an offside call against Canada, with Henderson making a long run to the goal line where a desperate tackle separated her from the ball. The Canadians touched down for a 5-yard scrum, but would not escape this time.

At the 36-minute mark, U.S. scrumhalf Deborah Dennis put in, and the pack scored a convincing pushover try, credited to flanker Cindy Bystrak. Sullivan missed the conversion for a 4-0 USA lead at the half.

2nd Half

Almost all second half possession belonged to the women in red, white and blue.

The U.S. constantly pressured in Canada's end and shortly after the restart, again forced Canada to touch down in their own end zone: giving the U.S. a 5-yard

scrum. The American pack, low and straight, drove over the line and neatly wheeled for Bystrak to touch down her second try of the game. Sullivan's conversion was again off the mark but the U.S. led, 8-0.

The second pushover try, at 49 minutes, seemed to take something from the Canadian pack. The U.S. started to push them around and hooker, Mary Money, stole several tight heads.

Canada relieved the pressure, briefly, with a 10-yard penalty kick by prop Natalie Steppacher but the tide was flowing steadily against them, (8-3).

At the 60-minute mark, beautiful possession from a loose ruck on the Canada 40 gave the USA a chance to create space. This time fullback Sullivan filled in perfectly, taking the last pass to score in the clear. She missed converting her own try, but now it was 12-3, USA, with no relief in sight for the Canadians.

Canada showed their mettle, however, driving back into American territory, but the U.S. women were tackling everything that moved.

The U.S. was also winning the lineouts, thanks to some adjustments at halftime. Canada's backs, especially wings Pam Pickering and Nancy Kouwenhoven, looked capable of breaking a scoring run, but they were starved of the ball by the USA pack.

Meanwhile, holes were opening ever wider for the U.S. backs.

In the 70th minute, Sullivan, the swift fullback from Minnesota, again entered the line. She capped a long drive by breaking two tackles to score her second try (16-3), USA, no conversion.

The Americans were playing confidently now, and before full time flanker Bystrak broke to Canada's thirty, setting up nice second phase for the backs. Henderson and Orsini used the space, yet again, to get the ball down close.

The U.S. scrum was driving towards the tryline but instead of going for another pushover, Captain Flores picked up from #8 and dove across for the try. Flyhalf Fry took up the kicking chores and drilled home the conversion for a final score of 22-3, United States.

Postscript

This first USA-Canada women's test was a delight to watch. Early on, understandable nervousness kept play from being fluid, but it was more than made up for by the willingness of both sides to run the ball from the set, loose and penalties.

There is no doubt that the pace of the women's game is slower than the men's, with much less powerful kicking, but these are blessings in disguise. Finesse and teamwork are abundantly displayed, and the women's running game is far more attractive than the ghastly conservative style of the men's test which followed.

Coaches

Much credit should be given to

coaches Kevin O'Brien (U.S.), David Hooper (U.S.), and Canada's Ian Humphries for polishing their teams so well. The U.S. side was self-funded both for this match and their trials. Only the unswerving dedication of players and administrators alike made the spectacle possible.

After the match, USARFU Women's Committee chairperson and convener of selectors, Kathy Morrison, said her MVP was really the "most valuable pack," for the forwards' stellar play. The USA pack gradually took control away from Canada and provided the platform with which to spring Orsini and Co. Morrison said that the game plan had been "to get the ball out wide, and the pushover tries by the forwards made that space available in the second half." She praised the play of fullback Sullivan, who stood like a rock under high balls and entered the line perfectly to expose seams in Canada's line.

Canada threatened a number of times but just couldn't make the last pass. They won the lion's share of the lineouts, particularly in the first half, and always used it for attack. The play of Corrine Skrobot and the gutsy determination of the team drew praise from everyone.

France, Next?

Next for the American women might be France, the European champion. Supported by the FFR and sponsored by Addidas, the French women reflect the state of all levels of rugby in that country. A USA-France match-up has unlimited potential for fine running rugby.

US/Canada in June

An annual USA-Canada series is also projected, with the next meeting tentatively set for the Saranac Lake Can-Am Tournament next summer.

U.S. A.	Canada
Flavin	1 Steppacher
Money	2 Corbet
Ryan	3 Newsham
Rees	4 Fuchs
Pace	5 Alexander
Heffernan	6 Hellerud-Brown
Bystrak	7 Farrell
Flores (c)	8 White (c)
Dennis	9 Skrobot
Fry	10 Richardson
Misko	11 Pickering
Henderson	12 O'Brien
Orsini	13 Hoffman
Farwick*	14 Kouwenhoven
Sullivan	15 Kozakovich

*Replaced by Onufry
Referee: Bob Flood (CRU)



United States National Team



Canadian National Team