

Chicago Blaze D4 v. ISU

Short Notice; Big Result

Having a last minute cancellation a day before the match is hard. Gathering up the troops after plans have been made to go out and play a match is even tougher, but that's exactly what the Blaze D4 team did within a short window over the weekend.

After learning their original opponents, the Evanston Exiles, had cancelled due to lack of personnel, the Blaze had a hard run on Thursday and were set to rest bodies before the last push of matches before playoffs. All that changed at about noon on Friday when talks led to the possibility of an impromptu match with Illinois State University.

Illinois State, or "Blaze University" as it is affectionately referred to around the clubhouse, has as a number of recent graduates that are scattered all over Blaze rosters. It goes without saying that the organization has a great relationship with the club and will continue to after hard-fought matches like last Saturday's.

Illinois State plays in the South Division of the Great Midwest Conference, which consists of teams from Minnesota to Michigan, and is currently tied with Northern Iowa sitting at 3-0. The squad came into Saturday under dire circumstances, with their most difficult opponents on paper at the beginning and end of the schedules and having not played in three weeks.

For a team that hadn't played significant rugby since mid-September, Illinois State came out with some intensity and took it to the Blaze within the first 15 minutes of the first half. Their aggressiveness in the rucks and their ability to kick out of danger helped them immensely and even set up a scoring opportunity as fly-half Derrick Weidner drilled a penalty kick that put ISU ahead 3-0.

"Thank you, ISU, for coming to get a match, especially on such short notice," Blaze captain Erik Otten said. "They came out, ran fast, hit hard and gave our boys all they could handle.

"I am very proud of the boys for overcoming adversity and the point-deficit and pulling together as one in the second half to come out on top. Our effort in the second half will be needed as we finish out the rest of the season with two very tough matches."

The Blaze responded and answered with a try by rookie Jaden Johns, as he found paydirt in the 26th minute to put them on the scoreboard. Chris Chrencik converted the kick and the Blaze were up 7-3.

The rest of the first half, though, was not the best for the Blaze men. Having grown accustomed to scoring 70 plus points a game, the Blaze seemed to be too eager and got out of their shape. A large number of errors and penalties kept taking them out of scoring range.

Eventually the kicking battle from the back 3 resulted in points for Illinois State as fullback Conor Cesarreti knifed his way through the Blaze back line to set up the next try scored by flanker Luke Lapsey. The ensuing kick converted after the try and made it a 10-7 game at half.

Lapsey, a Blaze player a year ago, left the club in the spring to return to school still plays with the Blaze for Summer 7s.

After a bit of soul searching and a stern talking-to by coaches, the Blaze came out and set the tempo in the first 15 minutes of the half.

Jerry Vassalla scored quickly put the Blaze on top, 12-10. Both teams played back and forth for the next 10 minutes until Blaze flanker Dave Mahl started the scoring rally. His try at 63 minutes was the first of four more Blaze tries, as Ty Dickerson (67'), Jordan Travis (73'), and Chris Chrencik (80') all scored in the last quarter of the game bringing the final score 38-15.

The biggest change was the tenacity of the forwards, who started to take more passes going forward instead of sideways. They had a day, as they won 100% of their own scrums and lineouts. The effort put in by this group week in and week out is definitely starting to show, and the hard running opened up the backs to do a lot more work with a lot less traffic, and the Blaze took advantage.

"With the unfortunate event of having our conference matchup cancelled, we were lucky to be able to set up a match with the Chicago Blaze D4 side on very short notice," Illinois State captain Scott Labine said. "I want to thank West Jackson for reaching out to us to set up the exhibition and also officiating the match himself.

"I also want to thank the entire Blaze organization for allowing us to use their facility for the match and hosting a great social afterwards. This match was a great opportunity to test ourselves against a high-caliber team similar to ones we will see in the playoffs."

While Illinois State prepares to round out its division schedule, up next for the Blaze is Homecoming weekend, as it hosts three different clubs on Saturday.

"Despite the disappointment of having our original game canceled, it was great to have this matchup against ISU," co-captain Kyle Bryant said. "Being able to play against former teammates is always fun in and of itself, but it was the game that made it a good day for both teams.

"Thanks to Scott, Zach and Stutzman for bringing out their team to fill in our mutual open weekends. Time for a hard week of practice as both D2 and D4 need to take care of business this weekend."

D4 faces off against the Chicago Riot at noon, setting the stage for the D2 side to match up against the SouthSide Irish at 2 p.m. With big playoff implications for both teams, these are very important matches for the Blaze.

The last game of the day sees the Blaze Fossils, the 35-and-over squad, host the Austin (Texas) Huns at 4 p.m. in the Mike Martin Memorial, which celebrates the life of Martin, who played for both clubs.

Tries: Jaden Johns (1), Victor Vassalla (1), Dave Mahl(1), Ty Dickerson (1), Chris Chrencik (1), Jordan Travis (2)

Conversions: Chris Chrencik (4)

Starting XV

ISU

1. Eric Jones
2. Mikey Stutzman
3. Cade Kerns
4. Kyle Cobb
5. Max Gregor
6. Matt Moroniak
7. Luke Lapsey
8. Scott Labine (C)
9. Demond Shavers
10. Derrick Weidner (VC)
11. Tom Nevara
12. Issac Ruiz
13. Dan Huber
14. Zach Rudsinski
15. Connor Cesarreti

Blaze

1. Ke Xing
2. Erik Otten(C)
3. John Medina
4. Brad Bendle
5. Aaron Sanderson
6. Dave Mahl
7. Lil' Mitch MasterCard
8. Kyle Bryant (C)
9. Rene Salinas
10. Chris Chrencik
11. Mikey Slabenak
12. Jaden Johns
13. Jordan Travis
14. Ty Dickerson
15. Brandon Hamilton

Finishers: D4 Nation