

## 2019 Homecoming Weekend

### Blaze Roll to Huge Homecoming Victories

All of a sudden it feels like fall. As the area saw the temperature dip into the 40s, the Chicago Blaze kicked off a huge day of rugby with a tripleheader Homecoming event on Saturday afternoon.

With the biggest crowds of the year behind them, the Blaze did not disappoint the crowd, as the D4 impressed in a 58-6 win over the Chicago Riot, and the D2 notched a hard-fought 29-14 victory against the Southside Irish.

Fans were also given a third match, as the Blaze Fossils and the Austin (Texas) Huns played in the Mike Martin Memorial Tour.

The day started with the undefeated D4 side (5-0, 4-0) getting things going with hard runs, quick counterattacking, and very fast paced rugby.

It felt like the backs took a big step forward, and the 12/13 pairing of centers Jaden Johns and Jerry Vassalla took the challenge head on and made many open field tackles and lots of big runs that punished the Riot.

It was Blaze rookie Johns that scored a pair of tries, both on runs that were set up by the team's constant attack and pressure applied to the opponent's zone.

The game was played with a heavy wind that did affect some of the line outs and kicking, and with the field essentially being condensed, the Blaze big boys gave the backs a great platform and quick ball all afternoon.

Additional first-half tries were scored by Mitch Mastercard, Josh Runge, Marcus Green, and Gage Palmer, while Johns' second try occurred at the end of the half, giving the Blaze a 38-6 lead at the break.

The second half had very much the same feel as the first. Hard lines were run by the backs and forwards, and even with substitutions, the level of play didn't drop.

"The guys really stepped up to the challenge of playing well against a very tough team in front of huge homecoming crowd with all the Blaze Fossils in attendance," Blaze captain Erik Otten said.

The Blaze quietly scored four second-half tries, tallying three in a ten-minute window. Tries by Ty Dickerson, Mike Slabenak and a second try for MasterCard showed that the Blaze were on good form.

A final try by Dan Hart was the icing on the cake, as the D4 ran away with the game in a final 58-6 result.

The Blaze Man of the Match was eight man, Quinton "Rampage" Jackson, whose hard-running, one-on-one tackling and smart decision-making set up many of the team's tries. Even though he was not in the stat column, it was continuous play like that that championships are built on.

The second match featured the D2 squad looking to bounce back from a tough defeat a few weeks ago at Pittsburgh, but they knew it wouldn't be easy against longtime rival, the Southside Irish.

Though the teams played last month, this was a very different Southside group, which competed with great intent and really tried to get the Blaze on the back foot, kicking for territory and being extremely aggressive at the breakdown and physical at the point of attack.

The Blaze knew that the 43-5 win from September was a distant memory.

As it stood, the home side did open up the scoring after an errant Irish pass led to a charge down-ball, which set up the Blaze to scrum on the Irish 5 meter line, where Zane Jackson scored the first of his two afternoon tries. With Joe Dillon quickly kicking the conversion, the Blaze were up 7-0 - a lead that would last only a few moments.

After the kickoff, the Blaze would be turned over, and following a miscommunication, the Blaze let up the easiest of tries, allowing the Irish to knot it up at 7-7 just 10 minutes in.

The Blaze kept constant defensive pressure on the Irish, which resulted in the Blaze winning territory and ultimately taking the lead. Propelled by a wonderful fake by fly-half Eddie Smith, the Blaze forwards powered the ball inside the 5 meter line before flanker Chris Lamberton made a heads-up move and dotted the ball in the middle of the goal to help them jump ahead 14-7 and take that advantage into the intermission.

After a few adjustments, the Blaze returned to the field ready to capitalize on Irish mistakes and earn the victory. That vigor, however, was met with a little sloppiness, as the Blaze surrendered a bit of field position due to some handling errors and tackling miscues.

Once they steadied the ship, the Blaze took off and scored 3 tries in a 15-minute span. The first was Jackson taking a pass and running up the left sideline for his second score of the day, while the second saw front row Kieran Palmiter make a heads-up play off a penalty and rush in for the score.

The last scoring play came in the 55th minute, as substitute Kevin Koch made an immediate impact and scored in the left try zone. Behind that flurry of scoring, the Blaze saw themselves up 29-7 with bonus point in hand.

“It’s always a good feeling winning at home and against our rivals,” Blaze captain Kyle Bryant said. “Saw a lot of good things on the field from our team. Looking forward to our last league match this upcoming weekend and seeing how prepared we are as a team heading into playoffs.”

The team did surrender a late penalty try, but the Blaze held on for a 29-14 victory that secured them a playoff berth.

The Blaze Man of the Match was Derek “D-Mo” Mohler and fittingly so, as he informed the team that this would be his last home game.

Mohler still expects to be around the team, but a full-time commitment would be difficult for him. Luckily, he delivered one last inspirational talk for the troops before the game and even had a few good runs off the bench, which helped seal the game.

In the last match of the day, the Blaze Fossils took part in an “old boys” game.

This, however, wasn't just a run-of-the-mill, last-second match between the two clubs. The Blaze and the Austin Huns had scheduled this months in advance, deeming it the "The Mike Martin Memorial Tour."

Martin, a member of both clubs, was loved by all his teammates, and they saw no greater way to remember the man than to play on Homecoming.

Each team had some hard runs and big hits, and while the affair was very back-and-forth, the Huns scored with no time left to take the win, 24-22.

Up next, the Blaze squads are their regular-season finales. The D2 travels to Diversey Harbor in the city for a 1:00 kickoff against Lincoln Park on Saturday, while the D4 closes things out at home versus the Silverbacks.

These matches Saturday will have postseason implications. Depending on the outcome, it may determine how much each team will travel come playoff time.

Blaze D4

Gabe Ramos

Erik Otten(C)

Jim Talley

Josh Runge

Aaron Sanderson

Matt Martenson

Gage Palmer

Quinton Jackson

Dain Krug

Chris Chrencik

Marcus Green (VC)

Jerry Vassalla

Jaden Johns

Ty Dickerson

Brandon Hamilton

John Cameron

Dan Hart

Ke Xing

Jayson Stewart

Mikey Slabenak

Caleb Pelletier

Jordan Travis

Wes Muntz

Tries: Jaden Johns (2), Mitch (2), Josh Runge (1), Marcus Green (1), Gage Palmer (1), Ty Dickerson (1), Mikey Slabenak (1), Dan Hart (1)

Conversions: Chris Chrencik (4)

Blaze D2  
Kieran Palmiter  
Matt Kopala  
John Needham  
John Medina  
Kyle Bryant(C)  
Jake Reed  
Chris Lamberton  
Jim Moscato  
Brandyn Crotty  
Eddie Smith  
Andrew Kallas  
Joe Dillon  
Zane Jackson  
Matt Borchardt  
Vidal Martinez  
Neil Hart  
Ben Kipp  
Aaron Sanderson  
Gage Palmer  
Rene Salinas  
Derek Mohler  
Kevin Koch  
Alex Binetti (VC)

Tries: Zane Jackson (2), Chris Lamberton (1), Kieran Palmiter (1), Kevin Koch (1)  
Conversions: Joe Dillon (2)

Coaches:  
DJ Williams  
West Jackson  
Alex Baro