

Finland Women's 7s Report - Season 2017

Programme Brief

In recent years the women's 7s national team has led the way for Finland in European competition. The squad were elevated to the Grand Prix series to take on Europe's best in 2016, only to fall agonisingly short of retaining their place. Thus in 2017 the team competed again in the Trophy series - Europe's second-tier competition. Following relegation, the programme underwent large changes due to the resignation of the head coach and the SRL's decision to terminate the contract of the Team Manager.

Staffing

Lauri Ylonen stepped down as Head Coach late in 2016 and Ric Hennessy was appointed to the position by the SRL board. Early in 2017 Giles Cooper was appointed as Team Manager, Mikko Aalto as Assistant Coach and Marika Nieminen as Physiotherapist.

Players

Only 12 players from the 2016 training group returned to the 2017 squad, of whom 3 suffered season-ending injuries. This presented a large challenge for the new staff, who began recruitment through the 'try-out' camp (organised by the previous staff but run by the new coach) and through scouting at the domestic tournaments. At the first camp of the season, the squad consisted of 18 players (12 from 2016 and 6 new players). This number grew over the course of the season as more players were recruited to camps. In total 22 players from Finland represented the national team in games. 12 players made their debut for Finland.

Tournaments

With a new and relatively inexperienced staff, it was decided that the team would follow the same pattern of tournaments as in 2016. This consisted of 2 warm-up tournaments in Paris and Amsterdam, before the Rugby Europe Trophy series in Ostrava and Ezstergom. The season finished with the Scandinavian 7s in Copenhagen.

Centrale 7's (Paris) - 9th-15th May 2017

This was an excellent tournament organised by Centrale University, featuring a host of international and university teams from around Europe and as far as Fiji. It presented an excellent opportunity for the new players and staff to explore methods both on and off the field. Four players earned their debuts and the entire team began to test their new playing philosophy against competitive opponents. Results were mixed, which was encouraging for both staff and players. The team earned victories against Tunisia (x2) and Georgia, whilst suffering defeat to France development, TUKS and Windmills.

The staff learned much during this tournament. Particular mention must go to Giles Cooper, whom in his first tournament did an outstanding job. We faced many challenges from a hospital visit, to a lack of gluten-free food available on campus. Those challenges gave us excellent opportunity to establish what processes we were well prepared for and how we would react to those which we weren't. Giles excelled in both cases and drew much praise from within the team and from the tournament organisers and other teams.

Squad: Anna Soiluva, Emmi Ovaskainen, Heidi Koskinen, Jonna Ritala, Kaisla Parkkinen, Kati Miettinen, Oona Tolppanen, Miina Porkka, Mira Saarikoski, Sanna-Kaisa Lintu, Sofia Ukkonen, Milla Ryhta.

Staff: Giles Cooper (Manager), Ric Hennessy (Coach), Marika Nieminen (Physiotherapist).

Significant injuries: Fractured eye socket. Broken nose.

Amsterdam 7's - 26th- 29th May 2017

Amsterdam 7s presented excellent opportunities to play against high-level competition. However, the staff felt overwhelmingly that the tournament was not the best environment for us to return to in 2018. With the sheer size of the tournament we felt that the organisers were unable to properly ensure player safety in difficult conditions. On the first day the team played four games in 30+ degrees in five hours. There was a lack of locker room space or shade and a low number of officials available for the games. We felt that this impacted heavily on our ability to maintain player safety.

Significant thanks again must go to the staff on this point. Both Giles Cooper and Marika Nieminen worked tirelessly to ensure that players were kept as safe and cared for as possible. This ranged from locating shade, food and ice for players to the treatment of injuries immediately including one head injury that required immediate removal of the player from further play.

The results in Amsterdam were not in the team's favour. Encouragingly, there was a victory against Switzerland, however there were losses against Mo Sistas (International), Phoenix (USA), RC Bassetts (Holland), Dambusters (Scotland), Shangdong Province (China) and a draw against AAC Amazonas (Holland). The team's spirits remained high and positivity was retained throughout.

Squad: Anna Soiluva, Emmi Ovaskainen, Heidi Koskinen, Emilie Merilainen, Kaisla Parkkinen, Kati Miettinen, Lilli Tikkanen, Miina Porkka, Mira Saarikoski, Ida Herrgard, Sofia Ukkonen, Milla Ryhta.

Staff: Giles Cooper (Manager), Ric Hennessy (Coach), Marika Nieminen (Physiotherapist).

Significant injuries: ACL rupture, Concussion.

Rugby Europe Trophy 1 - Ostrava - 8th - 12th June 2017

At the squad's first ranking competition of the year, Ostrava marked the start of the competitive season. The 12 players who were selected to represent Finland excelled both on the pitch and as ambassadors for Finnish rugby off it. The team's final ranking of 7 / 12 came following an excellent first day with victories over Malta, Hungary and Switzerland. A quarter final loss on day 2 against Romania and a subsequent loss against Czech Republic set up a 7th place final against Switzerland, which the team won.

The team's growth up to this point was extremely evident in their play over both days. Improvements in ball handling and a clearly structured game plan led to the team retaining possession of the ball for long periods. Defensively the team played very well but a weakness was identified in defense at set pieces.

The staff again performed wonderfully well. With each passing tournament, lessons learned enabled us to perform better for the team, creating a happy environment. As this was a Rugby Europe tournament, the amount of bureaucracy increased but Giles Cooper was fully prepared for this and the entire tournament went smoothly. Again Finland earned praise from tournament organisers for our conduct off the field.

Squad: Anna Soiluva, Emmi Ovaskainen, Heidi Koskinen, Jonna Ritala, Kaisla Parkkinen, Kati Miettinen, Lilli Tikkanen, Sanna-Kaisa Lintu, Mira Saarikoski, Ida Herrgard, Sofia Ukkonen, Ulla Tuomainen..

Staff: Giles Cooper (Manager), Ric Hennessy (Coach), Marika Nieminen (Physiotherapist).

Significant injuries: None

Rugby Europe Trophy 2 - Ezstergom - 20th - 25th July 2017

The deciding leg of the Trophy series saw Finland again finish in 7th place, claiming 7th overall and a European Ranking of 19th for 2017. Losses on day 1 against Scotland and Czech Republic along with a victory against Malta put the team into a quarter final game against Germany on day 2. Playing for the majority of the game with only 6 players due to an unfortunate red card, the team excelled and fell short by only one point. Losing again to Czech Republic in the semi final left another 7th place final, this time against Latvia. A tired, but driven team put in a great performance to finish the season with a victory.

Once again the staff faced a number of challenges, from an impromptu rock concert being hosted behind the team hotel to a pitch sprinkler system that raised concerns about player

safety. The red card received in the Germany game raised questions about whether the team should appeal or not but a well conducted staff meeting came to the decision that it would be ill advised to do so. This was for the benefit of our player, whom it was felt was unfairly punished for the offence and raised questions about consistency in the refereeing of the tournament.

Squad: Anna Soiluva, Ida Myllymaki, Heidi Koskinen, Jonna Ritala, Kaisla Parkkinen, Kati Miettinen, Milla Ryhta, Sanna-Kaisa Lintu, Mira Saarikoski, Oona Tolppanen, Sofia Ukkonen, Ulla Tuomainen..

Staff: Giles Cooper (Manager), Ric Hennessy (Coach), Marika Nieminen (Physiotherapist), Mikko Aalto (Assistant Coach / Manager)

Significant injuries: None

Scandinavian 7s - Copenhagen - 11th - 13th August 2017

The final tournament of the year gave an opportunity for some of the players who had not made the squads for earlier tournaments to finally represent their country. The squad was an excellent blend of experience and youth that outdid all expectations to finish in 3rd place overall. 8 of the players were in their first year playing for Finland and of those, 5 were playing their first tournaments. Victories over Boras Ravens (Sweden), Sagene IF (Norway) and Pink Socks (Malta) on day one were followed by further wins over Kalmar Sodra (Sweden) and RK Speed (Denmark). A semi final game against Susie's Saloon (International) proved to be a step too far but left the team with a 5-1 record for the weekend and a place as the best nordic team of the tournament.

This was the first tournament in charge for the interim Team Manager Mikko Aalto, who stepped in following the departure of Giles Cooper. Despite going into the job with little experience, Mikko excelled in his new role, ensuring that everything before, during and after the tournament ran smoothly. The players and other staff members reported their happiness at the job that Mikko had done.

Squad: Laura Kultala, Ida Myllymaki, Riikka Nurminen, Sarianna Haavisto, Susanna Haavisto, Heidi Tuomisto, Emmi Ovaskainen, Sanna-Kaisa Lintu, Mira Saarikoski, Oona Tolppanen, Sofia Ukkonen, Ulla Tuomainen..

Staff: Mikko Aalto (Team Manager) Ric Hennessy (Coach), Marika Nieminen (Physiotherapist)

Significant injuries: None

Successes

In all, the first season under the new staffing structure was a resounding success. Results have been slightly below the level of previous years but with a very new squad and many older players moving on, it is little surprise. Having said that, the improvement in performance from the first tournament to the last has been wonderful to see and the emergence of new players to challenge for Trophy squad places is an encouraging development.

In addition to this, a culture of professionalism continues to grow within the programme. Players set standards for themselves and as a group that are extremely high and reflect a real ambition to reach the top level of competition. This is matched by the work of the volunteers within the programme who have a clear vision that one day Finland will compete in rugby at the Olympic level. It is without a doubt the work of the volunteers and the investment of time and money from the players that keep this programme alive and set a platform for it to flourish.

Finally, the time investment made by the volunteers to make the programme run this year has been fantastic. Marika Nieminen has given many hours to players to work on player welfare, Giles Cooper and Mikko Aalto have done what could amount to a full-time job at times in order to plan and execute camps, tournaments and finances.

Challenges

Of course, the biggest challenge with a programme like this will always be financial and it has certainly been tough to work hard to keep costs down. It is estimated that spending was reduced by about 50% this year, although figures are unclear for previous years. This reduction is entirely due to the great work of Giles Cooper and Mikko Aalto. Attracting athletes from other sports is going to be tough until we can do so without putting a price on participation. Last year the team was without a major sponsor and that is due simply to the fact that volunteers did not have the time to pursue any in an effective way.

There were a number of issues that caused tension between the SRL and the programme last year. That also caused unnecessary difficulty and ended with volunteers to having to invest financially in the programme. This is something that has been addressed in the off-season and will be something for us to work on.

Injuries were also a large problem for the squad this year. The squad suffered heavily from traumatic injuries that ended the season and cause real issues with squad size. This has been addressed already with injury prevention programmes from the coaching and medical staff.

Finally the lack of a youth rugby is probably the most significant challenge that will face the programme in coming years. All of the unions at our level and above are introducing girls to rugby at a much younger age than we do in Finland. If we are to pursue high performance goals in the coming years and create a sustainable platform for elite level rugby then we must

prioritise youth rugby. Once again this will take investment from the union as well as support for volunteers at club level.

Final Comments

The new programme made a good start in 2017. The knowledge gained along the way has enabled the staff to set out the vision for the programme in the next six years in the strategic plan 2018-2024. Already big steps have been made in 2018 which will help to drive growth of the programme towards Olympic competition.

Ric Hennessy
Head Coach
Finland Women's 7s National Team