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The North-West University Eagles forwards were in a mood to destroy in the second half of their clash with the Ixias of the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State. PHOTO: Asem Engage – Hannes Naude

Eagles fly high with blitz over gutsy rivals

The Eagles of the North-West University (NWU) turned a 17-point deficit into a comprehensive 59 - 42 triumph as Thelw Prins' sensational hat-trick headlined a breathtaking second-half comeback at a packed CUT Park, home ground for the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State, rugby team in Bloemfontein.

One hundred and one points. Fifteen tries. And a second-half surge that will have the rest of the competition taking notice.

The two-time champions on Monday 16 February announced their title intentions in spectacular fashion, weathering an early storm before unleashing an attacking masterclass that left the home faithful stunned.

While the Eagles pack provided the grunt work up front with some serious hard graft in the trenches, it was winger Prins who grabbed the headlines with a scintillating hat-trick. Every time the speedster touched the leather, something magical seemed to happen. That is the kind of X-factor that wins championships.

The opening 40 minutes delivered absolute chaos in the best possible way. End-to-end rugby had supporters on the edge of their seats as both sides threw everything at each other in a frenetic opening stanza that set the tone for the try-fest to come.

The visitors from Potchefstroom drew first blood through hooker Jordan McLoughlin, who powered over from a driving maul to get the scoreboard ticking. But the Ixias were not about to be intimidated on home turf. Jade Muller crashed over almost immediately, with Kehan Myburgh adding the extras to level proceedings and ignite the CUT Park faithful.

From there, it became an absolute shootout. Prins crossed for the Eagles, showcasing the blistering pace that would torment the CUT defence all evening. Winton Abrahams responded with a brilliantly executed point of origin try for the Bloemfontein outfit, keeping the momentum swinging back and forth like a pendulum.

Then the CUT squad hit the accelerator. Raydon Swartblooi dotted down before Malcolm

Lamont grabbed a powerplay score that saw the Ixias surge into a commanding 31 - 14 advantage. The home crowd was in raptures. The upset looked on.

The NWU Eagles refused to panic. Luyolo Doyi hauled them back into the contest before captain Stephan Krugel led from the front, crashing over during a powerplay to keep the visitors within striking distance.

A Myburgh penalty ensured CUT carried a 34 - 24 cushion into the sheds, but the gap felt vulnerable.

The second half told a completely different story.

The Eagles emerged from the break with renewed purpose and clinical intent. McLoughlin completed his brace to spark the fightback, and suddenly the momentum had shifted decisively. The visitors struck twice in quick succession to edge ahead for the first time since the early exchanges, silencing the previously raucous home support.

Emlyhn Jacobs kept CUT in the fight with a crucial try, refusing to let the Ixias go quietly into the Bloemfontein night. But the two-time champions from Potch were just getting started. They had found their rhythm, and there was no stopping the juggernaut now.

Guhan du Bois crossed as the Eagles tightened their stranglehold on proceedings, before Hanro Venter applied the exclamation mark to seal an impressive victory that showcased the depth and quality in the NWU arsenal.

The final scoreline of 59 - 42 reflected the attacking brilliance on display, but also exposed defensive frailties on both sides that rival coaches will be eagerly exploiting in the weeks ahead.

The opening round of the 2026 Varsity Cup has delivered in spectacular fashion. Four matches, 311 combined points, and enough attacking rugby to fill multiple highlight reels.

The powerplay innovation has added tactical intrigue and high-stakes decision-making to an already explosive format.

- Dustin Wetdewich

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