Hong Kong ‘can break into ranks of Elite’

New coach sees next month’s showpiece as an excellent opportunity for his squad to earn core-team status for the World Series

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Hong Kong have their best chance of winning IRB Sevens World Series core-team status next month, having found a new mental edge to their game, said Gareth Baber, the new head rugby sevens coach at the Hong Kong Sports Institute.

Last night’s draw for the World Series qualifiers that form part of the March 28-30 Cathay Pacific/HSBC Hong Kong Sevens will see Jamie Hood and his men come up against Italy, Tunisia and American Samoa in the preliminary round of the 12-team competition, where the winners will earn promotion as a core team next season. The 15 core teams plus Sri Lanka will play in the main event.

Perhaps inspired by the venue of the draw, Baber told the large gathering at the Confucius Hall Secondary School (the first local school to include rugby in its curriculum): “No matter what pool we play in, what matters is that we have to beat every team to qualify for the World Series. I believe we have got the group of players to do that.”

Confucius couldn’t have put it better. But Baber’s words of wisdom are tempered by the fact since rugby sevens became an elite sport at the Hong Kong Sports Institute, and since players like skipper Hood, Rowan Varty, the McQueen brothers Tom and Alex, Salom Yiu Kam-shing, Ben Rimene and Lee Jones among others, became full-time athletes, they are becoming mentally tougher.

We have come close in the past to qualifying, being thereabouts, and a lot of that is down to consistency and behaviour that is professional. Now that the players are working on their game in a professional manner everyday, this behaviour becomes second nature to them and we have already seen the results in Darwin,” said Baber. Both the Hong Kong men and women won challengel-level Cup tournaments at last month’s Darwin Sevens.

“We were not playing against international teams in Darwin like we will be in Hong Kong, but any win is positive,” Baber said. “The players found themselves in a couple of tight spots and got through them. The lessons were learned and now they will be up against tougher opposition and tighter spots, and the hope is that what they learned in Darwin is in their heads and that they can close out those games.

“We have the best chance this time as none of these teams have played in the World Series. We have to realise things are in our favour but we must to prepare the way we always prepare. Right now we are in a good mindset and a good place as a squad and we must stay this way until the end of March,” Baber said.

Meanwhile, Hong Kong’s women found themselves drawn into a pool with defending champions Canada and Kazakhstan in the Hong Kong Women’s Sevens.

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SEVENS COACH GARETH BABER

When asked about what they learned in Darwin, Baber said: “We have the best chance this time as none of these teams have played in the World Series. We have to realise things are in our favour but we must to prepare the way we always prepare. Right now we are in a good mindset and a good place as a squad and we must stay this way until the end of March.”

> SEVENS DRAW IN RESULTS

The Hong Kong Sevens squad are in for an exciting ride next month as they seek World Series core-team status. Photo: Nora Tam