

2019AUG16Fromthe300LevelFall2019LeaguePreview

# League Realignment a New Challenge for Buffalo Rugby Club

By **Matt O'Rourke** - August 16, 2019  665  0



Buffalo defeats Newport, RI for the D2 North Atlantic Championship | 5.4.2019 – Cranford, NJ  
| Photo courtesy of Ron Astridge

The defending Empire Geographic Union (EGU) Men's Division 2 (D2) Upstate and overall EGU champion, North Atlantic champion, and National Elite 8 competitor Buffalo Rugby Club (BRC) will look to this fast approaching fall season to capitalize on a busy summer of rugby and erase the memory of a stinging loss from earlier this spring that knocked Buffalo out of national championship contention.

With the new rugby season starting only a week from Saturday, BRC finds itself in a new division completely redesigned by the Union at the conclusion of the spring playoffs.

The new Men's Division 2 features only eight of the top seventeen D2 teams from a season ago, pulled from what were three separate Division 2 leagues in the EGU. All three of the teams BRC met in the 2019 spring playoffs on the way to Union championship are in the new league.

"The new season comes with new challenges as the EGU completed a much-needed restructure," said club president and assistant coach Jeff Qualey. "In 2016 the Union tried to spur competition in each region by promoting local groupings to the same division. This season Empire D2 and D3 will be much more competitive."

The new league features plenty of old cross-conference rivals Buffalo has met over the years in EGU playoff competition. The conference schedule will pit teams like Fairfield, New York Rugby Club, and Montclair against the locals on a weekly basis rather than only at the end of the season. Also, the high-powered defending Empire GU D3 champion Long Island joins the Division 2 league this year. The other clubs rounding out the league are White Plains, Union, and New Haven. Buffalo is the only club not from the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut tri-state area.

The Division 3 side of the club is the defending Upstate champion and Empire GU D3 conference finalist. The new league format will very much affect Buffalo in the post-season, however they will see some familiar foes in the regular season portion. The Division 2 sides from the Syracuse Chargers, South Buffalo, and Rochester Aardvarks all made the jump down to D3 for the upcoming season and will face Buffalo's D3 side in league competition. Buffalo will also meet familiar local foes Ken-Ton Misfits, Southtowns Saxons, and Rochester Colonials, and new to the league will be the Genesee Creamers who play out of Batavia, formerly the Tri-County Tridents.

Head coach Steve Caruana is back leading the club after an extremely successful first year as head man in 2018-2019. Qualey is back as well for his second year as assistant coach. Jon Garbin has been the team captain for the past three consecutive seasons.

A huge strength for Buffalo over the past few seasons has been the front five of its forwards. Prop Mike Dean and locks Matt Schuster and Scott Chown are all back this fall to lead one of the most experienced tight five units in the conference. Dean will again be the leader of a front row that also includes the young but talented duo of hooker Colton Kells and prop Mike Barkachy.

In the pack's back three positions Garbin and Maninderjit Singh will cover the outsides at the flanker positions and versatile 8-man James Stewart will be looked to again as force on both offense and defense.

After his first season as the D2 scrum half for Buffalo Matt Webber should be the go-to guy again to start the season. Next to Webber is Luca Wrabetz in the fly half position, who also started in that role for Buffalo a season ago. Rounding out the back line are Chris Wells and Evan Castellani at inside and outside center, respectively; two very experienced and cerebral players.

In the wing positions Mike Lang and Kyle Johannssen are always a threat to score and the length of each player make them very difficult to tackle. Finally, Chris Weir returns as the top fullback playing the deep position for Buffalo. Weir's athleticism and ability to make plays in the open make him a matchup nightmare for any team.

With the highly experienced group of returning players supported by a cast of competitive and knowledgeable teammates who are always vying for starting roles, Buffalo should be the pre-season favorite to repeat as Empire GU Division 2 champion. Some notable additions to the club are Simon Honig, Brian Battenfeld, Justin Cerne, Sam McCraine, Joel Hornbeck, Jack Gawrys, Demetrios Papazaharias, and Charlie Ehlers.

Club competition begins on Saturday, August 24th when Buffalo D3 visits the Southtowns Saxons in Orchard Park. The first test for Buffalo D2 is on Saturday, September 7th at home in Delaware Park against Long Island. D3 will also play home that day against Rochester Colonials.

