In the opening game of the 2017 TAC Cup season, the engie Gippsland Power team lost narrowly to the Dandenong Stingrays but, did little to shake the optimism that they had generated throughout the challenging pre-season program. Coach Leigh Brown was disappointed with the fact that they didn’t get the four premiership points but was able to highlight key elements of their performance in his post-match address. The most obvious was the fact that they had several players who applied ten or more tackles in a typically hard-nosed game that has been the hallmark of Power football for their twenty four previous seasons.

Going into the match the selectors had given ten new boys the opportunity to play in the most elite junior football competition in Australia and each one showed that they were ready for such a challenge. The newcomers were Bailey Patterson, Irving Mosquito, Nick Lowden, Grady Cocksedge, Kim Drew, Liam Carroll, Kyle Reid, Will Broadbent, Jack Hudson and Brad Daniel. The top-age boys had worked very hard to ensure that the club’s rookies had a sense of being part of the team from their first training sessions in regional centres. It was obvious in the build up to the season, and in the first game, that this vital factor was working extremely well.

Early in the match, both sides struggled to execute their skills well because of the pressure being applied and it was the Stingrays who broke the deadlock first. The Power were creating unnecessary turnovers and missing scoring opportunities and the Stingrays punished them with another goal. This pattern continued the Stingrays capitalising twice on some nervous mistakes by the Power and things were looking bad with only minutes to go in the first term. Some more precise and creative ball use by Matt McGannon, CJ Changkuoth and Callum Porter allowed Tyrone Hayes to open the Power’s account and they went to the first change seventeen points down despite being highly competitive in general play.

The line coaches needed to address some fine tuning issues at the break but they seemed to remain a problem for the boys as the Stingrays kicked the opening goal. Some great pressure football by Will Leslie and Kim Drew enabled Will Broadbent to kick his first TAC Cup goal but, once again the Stingers goaled on the rebound after another turnover. Not to be outdone, Travis Brindley and Will Stephenson applied great pressure and used excellent skills to set up Broadbent for a vital reply for the Power.

Instead of capitalising on this positive passage of play, the Power again provided the Stingrays with easy scoring opportunities and, by the long break were thirty three points down and seemingly out of the match. Leigh and his assistants had plenty of issues to focus on but, determination and hardness were not on their things to address. In all of their pre-season games against other TAC Cup teams, the Power had dominated the second halves due to their focus on applying intense pressure and superior fitness. Leigh had faith in the boys because of this and subtly reminded them of it as they prepared to put themselves back into the match where it mattered most, the scoreboard.

In the first half of the vital third quarter, it was the Stingrays who continued to dominate in this area and quickly found themselves over seven goals ahead and looking ready to blow the game wide apart. To their enormous credit, the Power began to minimise the error count and some excellent creative ball use from defence resulted in Nick Hogan scoring an inspirational goal from the fifty metre line. Some typical tough football by Stephenson allowed him to kick another and ruckman Julian Patterson kicked the third in a row after the siren. With a quarter to go in the match, the Power were twenty five points down but, had the all-important momentum going their way.

Almost on cue, the Stingrays scored the opening goal and then kicked a “gift” after a dodgy umpiring decision. By the midway mark of the quarter the Stingrays were over six goals ahead and once again, looked ready to crush the Power’s resistance. Some superb finishing by Porter and Stephenson gave Cody Henness a chance for a key reply and he took full advantage of it. Debutant Drew showed poise and skill to allow Stephenson to kick his second and then a wonderful intercept mark by Irving Mosquito resulted in the side’s third goal in a row. As if inspired, Henness intercepted courageously and he found Mosquito who kicked a stunning running goal.

By the final siren, the final margin was a mere sixteen points after it had looked likely that the Power were in for a real thrashing for a large amount of the game. For the pessimistic observers, it was a matter of “what if” for the Power but, realists will be aware that despite the obvious flaws in their game, they had showed a lot of wonderful positives for the club to focus on. At no stage did they ever give up and, more importantly, had maintained the club’s unique trade mark style of intense, pressure football. They clearly won the second half despite still having costly turnovers and showed each other just what they are capable of when they focus properly.

Final scores, Dandenong Stingrays 12 goals 12 behinds 84 points defeated engie Gippsland Power 10 goals 8 behinds 68 points. Goal kickers, Will Stephenson, Irving Cockatoo and Will Broadbent 2, Tyrone Hayes, Nick Hogan, Cody Henness and Julian Patterson 1.

As the pattern of the game developed, it was obvious that the Power defence was going to be under a lot of intense pressure as the Stingrays clinically exploited the Power’s inability to finish off their hard work in general play. As he had done for much of the 2016 season, Sean Masterson took on and soundly defeated the opposition’s best attacking player. He dominated the contested aerial duels with strong marking and thumping spoils and then was able to apply intense physical pressure in contests at ground level. To cap off his superb game he won vital possessions himself and used each one effectively by hand or foot.

Travis Bindley is a no-nonsense sort of player who thrives on playing tight, hard-nosed defence against dangerous opponents. Once again he totally shut down a vital forward threat and, then backed his skill and judgement, to win and effectively use nearly twenty vital possessions in a performance that set a wonderful example to the rookies. One such debutant was Kyle Reid and he showed quickly that he too relished the responsibility of nullifying the impact of a tall opposition forward. He never allowed his opponent easy possessions with a wonderful combination of tight physical pressure and dominant aerial skills. Statistically his fifteen contested possessions, six contested marks, five tackles and ten spoils accurately reflect his impact on the match.

Jack Hudson was yet another debutant who adapted quickly to the unique tempo and pressure involved on TAC Cup football. He was given the opportunity to contribute in a variety of positions and responded positively to the faith that the coach had in him. His strength at ground level and in the air were key elements of a fine opening game. Kim Drew missed selection in the 2016 squad but used the pre-season to demonstrate that he had adapted his skills and fitness to be worthy of selection in round one. He too is a “hard-nut” who can play tight one-on-one football as well as be able to generate positive play when he wins the ball himself.

CJ Changkuoth has benefited from his time with the AFL Academy squad and applied his unique skills to telling effect. He took contested marks, won many possessions at ground level and applied over ten crunching tackles often when running down opponents with his great pace and desire to apply intense pressure. Young rookies Baillie Patterson, Grady Cocksedge and Liam Carroll had thoroughly deserved selection after responding manfully to Leigh’s challenges in the pre-season matches. Each boy demonstrated clearly that they had what it takes to be highly competitive at this level of football and will now have the all-important self-belief that will enable them to continue to climb up the steep learning curve that they have begun under Leigh’s guidance so far this season.

As if there was a need to demonstrate Leighs impact on Power players, 2016 captain Ben Ainsworth showed in his amazing AFL debut with the Gold Coast Suns that he has learned his lessons well. He had fourteen possessions, kicked 2 goals and was named in the best by the Suns. What was even more critical in terms of his impact was the fact that he had the third highest tally of pressure acts for both sides. This is typical of Power football and Ben’s individual game and was also reflected by Josh Dunkley, Clay Smith and Tom Papley, the ex-Power players in the 2016 AFL grand final when they each had match high totals of twenty plus such acts.

The Power now go to Princess Park next week to take on the Murray Bushrangers. Obviously Leigh and his assistants have some key issues to address from the opening game to minimise unnecessary turnovers because of poor decisions or “iffy” skills. When the boys had these areas under control, they dominated general play and the all-important scoreboard and will have not lost their crucial self-belief as a result of the loss. With key players Austin Hodge, Callan McKeon, Keiran Jones and Rylan Henkel closer to full fitness after minor injury, the selectors will have plenty of positives to address as they prepare the side for the Bushies match.