Gippsland Power Media Release

By Bryan Mitchell

Deja-vu has become a term that the players’ coaches and supporters of engie Gippsland Power are starting to dislike intensely as they suffered their fifth loss of the 2017 season by less than one goal. If this wasn’t enough of a psychological burden, the fact that they were in front for much of the match made it even a more devastating scenario. The final aspect of this “curse” was the fact that their opponents, the highly placed Sandringham Dragons, hit the front with about one minute to go in what was an epic match of hard-nosed, competitive football from both sides.

Throughout the season the key factor for the Power’s narrow losses has been their ineffective use of the ball once entering their forward fifty zone. Analysis of the match statistics led to the theory that this could again be the reason for another loss that shouldn’t have happened. Initial reading of these key stats showed that the Power once again had significantly more scoring opportunities but, for the first time, it wasn’t due to poor ball use once in attack.

It was the continual pressure applied by the Dragon’s defence that made it became extremely difficult for the Power to create the chance to effectively convert hard-won opportunities. Both defensive units operated in this fashion with the result being that only nine goals were scored all day. The Power’s renowned hardness in contests was again the vital reason for why they were able to keep a top four side to only five goals. They applied a club record of well over one hundred and fifty tackles and had several players having ten plus in a stunningly hard-nosed performance.

Going into the game there were vital positives and negatives impacting on the Power’s ability to be competitive against such a good side. On the upside was the fact that key hard nut midfielders Nick Hogan and Callan McKeon were finally back from injury and key position player, Cody Henness, returned after state football duties. Adding to these plusses was the fact that tall Cora-Lyn youngster, Levi Munns, made his TAC Cup debut after being restricted by niggling injuries.

Importantly, the negative was the fact that the Power’s most recent match was a massive loss to the all-conquering Oakleigh Chargers and, in theory, this should have shattered their vital self-belief. This is the critical aspect of player management by coaches and Leigh and his assistants had done a wonderful job in developing this to the point that they had defeated two top four sides. Gutsy wins over the Falcons and Dragons, despite seeming to have no chance of doing so based on respective ladder positions, indicated how much they believed in themselves and the game plan.

Given this situation, the Power’s chance of being highly competitive was questionable but, for ninety-five percent of the match, they did so magnificently. Things started well for them as they applied their trademark intensity in close contests to put the Dragons on the back foot from the opening bounce. As has been their habit all season, they wasted some goal-kicking chances after the Dragons scored one almost against the run of general play. It gave them a five point lead at the first break but they had been under stunning pressure throughout.

Leigh would have been delighted with two critical aspects of their performance based on their self-belief they had almost doubled the Dragons number of forward fifty entries and had over thirty gut-busting tackles. Their commitment to work hard and to apply the team’s game plan was outstanding and it was obvious that the Chargers hadn’t flattened their self-confidence. The big question was just how far were they prepared to go playing this way.

It didn’t take them long to answer this when they went into attack early in the second term. Some outstanding pressure applied by Rylan Henkel and Kyle Reid resulted in a goal to Matt McGannon. Despite having had nine entries into the attacking zone in the first half of the quarter, the Dragon’ defensive pressure was outstanding and the Power couldn’t reward themselves on the scoreboard. In stark contrast, the Dragons converted their second such chance at that time and the pressure was right on the Power.

They responded magnificently and Will Leslie took full advantage of a fifty metre penalty to regain a narrow lead for his team. Not to be outdone, Nick Hogan went long and direct and Jack Hudson was able to extend the Power lead to eleven points at the long break. The key statistics that had pleased Leigh so much at the end of the first term were repeated in the second and once again he had the belief in them to challenge the boys to keep it going.

The third quarter appears to have been boringly lacklustre if the scoreboard is to be taken as an indication of what happened. The Dragons kicked the only score of the term, a point, but both coaches would have been pleased with their side’s work rates. The Power had a club record of over fifty tackles which meant that the Dragons had little or no a chance to have an easy possession let alone get any cohesive play going.

What really pleased the Power coaches was the fact that, despite the Dragons having many more scoring opportunities, the Power defence had manfully stood tall and stopped them kicking a goal. It was all down to what happened in the last term and the Power were able to respond positively to such a strong mental challenge. They were able to create two rare scoring chances early but missed both and the level of intensity in the match went up a notch.

It took a long bomb from Leslie from outside the fifty metre line to give the Power vital breathing space and with only a few minutes to go they looked ready to record another stunning victory over a top four sides when it appeared that they had no chance going into the match. Almost against the run of play, the Dragons kicked two quick goals and that ugly Deja-vu scenario loomed to spoil what had been a stunning performance.

To rub salt into the final wound, the Dragons were “gifted” with the winning goal after a free kick was awarded to them for an action that wasn’t covered by any rule in the AFL rule system. The umpiring decision was a gut buster for Leigh and his boys as anyone who watched the match would have said that the Power deserved to win and that the Dragons had been well beaten by a much more determined side.

Final scores, Sandringham Dragons five goals three behinds 33 points defeated engie Gippsland Power 4 goals 8 behinds 32 points. Goal kickers, Will Leslie 2, Matt McGannon and Jack Hudson 1.

In a match where the ball constantly went backwards and forwards through the midfield the on-ball brigade were under constant pressure. Youngster, Bailey Beck responded to this physical and mental challenge brilliantly in his best game for the club. He was in the thick of the tightest contests and won many vital possessions as well as applying many tackles. He capped off his great effort with the poise and skill needed to make effective use of the ball despite often being under pressure.

Fellow on-baller Matt McGannon has consistently been a key member of the Power’s engine room with his deceptive aerial skills, pace and astute use of the ball by hand and foot. Once again he did it all with twenty plus possessions, vital intercept marks, ten pus tackles and seven spoils. He totally minimised the impact of opponents as well as being able to generate many positive passages of play.

Callum Porter is the inspiration leader of the side when assessing the all-important contests at ground level or in aerial duels. His ability to win the tightest contests and then work even harder to have time and space to use the ball was again outstanding. He gathered over twenty such possessions but had even more tackles in a performance that clearly demonstrated why he is the hardest man in the competition.

It appears as if Boadie Motton is ready to join Callum as his an apprentice in the club’s “Bruise Brothers” after another significant contribution in the midfield unit. He too thrived in the tightest and hardest contests with the ability to apply intense pressure with ten plus tackles and five spoils. However, his willingness and skill to win the ball under pressure and then to make quick decisions about how to use it effectively was a highlight.

Yet another of the side’s amazing bottom-age group, Liam Carroll responded to the challenges in such a tough game manfully. He took on and soundly defeated taller opponents with his disciplined aerial skills and then had the agility and poise to be as competitive at ground level. Importantly, he had the confidence to take opponents on with his pace and ability to use the ball with depth and precision.

The dominance of the Power’s midfield unit was enhanced by the stunning form of regular contributor Kim Drew. He has also earned the coveted role of being a member of the side’s “Bruise Brothers” and once again put himself on the line in the tightest contests. He won nearly twenty contested possessions as usual as well as the customary ten pus tackles necessary to be a member of this elite Power group.

The Power now faces the Eastern Ranges and has a vital opportunity to make key contributions to their 2017 season. The first, and most important, is the opportunity to establish a position in the top eight of the competition as the Ranges are similarly placed to the Power. The second is the fact that they lost to Eastern earlier in the season in a “Deja-vu” situation and “owe” them for it. Leigh has many positives to focus on after the Dragons game and the boys now know that they have the skill, desire and hardness to be viable contributors in this year’s finals series.