Gippsland Power Media Release

By Bryan Mitchell

Engie Gippsland Power’s “snowball” of a ride through the latter part of the 2017 TAC Cup season continued through to the last of the home and away season. They took on the fifth placed Murray Bushrangers needing a victory to give themselves seventh spot on the ladder and a realistic chance of success in the new finals series system. Not only did they record a solid win but, did so, with the sort of team-oriented team football that has been a key to their good form in the past few games.

Coach Leigh Brown was justifiably proud of their response to his challenge to follow the basic structure of the game plan and, especially in the second half, they did so magnificently. With a combination of the club’s trademark hardness in every contested issue all over the ground and some clever attacking play, they took full advantage of their hard-won forward fifty entries and averaged on goal for every four opportunities. This is the level of efficiency that normally means victory at elite level and the boys worked extremely hard to be this effective.

Power went into the match with CJ Jiath, Will Leslie and Harrison Law back but were without key position player Cody Henness who was rested and Nick Lowden who missed after suffering concussion against the Jets the week before. The match was at Victoria Park and a very strong wind blew down the ground from the city end of the historic arena. In such conditions use of this four to five goal advantage was crucial and the Power had this opportunity in the first term.

Things looked good early in the game as the Power were in attack many times but, and it’s a huge but, they missed four chances to convert theses chances to the all-important scoreboard pressure. It took a fifty metre-plus “bomb” by Kyle Reid to get it right but, once again, gettable shots were missed. Some excellent forward pressure created half a chance for Will Stephenson and he cleverly converted it.

Later in the term more chances were squandered and by the end of the quarter, the Power led by eighteen points but had missed nine goals. Adding to the negative focus of the play was the fact that gun rookie, Boadie Motton had broken his hand and ankle in two separate incidents. He had made an excellent start to the game with his clever ball use and ability to apply extreme pressure in tight contests and would be missed from the midfield rotation unit.

In the opening minutes of the second quarter the Power gifted the Bushies with an easy goal after a poor kick-in but some outstanding defensive ball use took the ball directly into attack and Jack Hudson kicked the first goal against the wind. Not to be outdone, the Bushies kicked another on the rebound and once again the scoreboard didn’t reflect the way that the Power had controlled much of the play. Some more forward pressure by Reid resulted in Julian Patterson kicking a fine goal from deep in the pocket and things looked better for the Power.

Once again some outstanding ball use from defence by Callum Porter and Nick Hogan set up a vital scoring opportunity but it was missed from twenty metres out. Despite being very competitive in general play, the Power were caught out late in the quarter as the Bushies kicked two more goals. On the rebound, they clinically exploited over commitment to attack by the Power and by the long break the Bushies had a three point lead.

As has been the pattern in recent matches, Leigh was happy with much of the way in which the boy s played but reminded them of one of the basic tenets of the side’s game plan. He asked them to be predictable for each other and keep it simple and they seemed to respond with some excellent ball use to go forward. Although opportunities were wasted, the boys were being more purposeful and some more forward pressure was converted skilfully by youngster Sam Flanders.

The Bushies replied after the Power were unlucky up forward but the Power hit back with more intense pressure up forward. The other member of the “boy wonders,” Caleb Serong won a free kick deep in the pocket and kicked truly and it seemed as if the Power were doing exactly what Leigh had asked for, being simple and predictable. Not long after, Serong turned provider with more pressure and this time Stephenson was the recipient.

As if they hadn’t done enough, the “boy wonders” applied their amazing skills and vision and Sam set up Caleb for yet another goal. The Power were in control and Hogan went quick, long and direct to allow Flanders to kick his second for the term. Not to outdone, the Power’s trademark pressure allowed captain, Aidan Quigley, to win the ball and he kicked a telling goal from outside the fifty metre line.

In the last moments of the quarter, Irving Mosquito applied his unique skills to initially spoil a Bushies kick and then win the loose ball and kick a stunning, morale boosting goal. By the end of the quarter, the Power had kicked seven goals to the Bushies one and had their opponents well and truly on the back foot and facing a thirty five point deficit. It had been a wonderful example of strong, determined team football and Leigh’s challenge had been met manfully.

In the early part of the last term the Bushies regained the initiative by dominating the centre clearances and kicking three quick goals. Suddenly the Power were under pressure on the field and, more importantly the scoreboard. With typical grit and strength, they regained the momentum and stemmed the Bushies scoring flow. Despite the Bushies receiving a gift goal from the umpires, the boys persisted kept the pressure on every contest.

Some more of their trademark intensity up forward allowed Stephenson to snap a critical goal and it was game over as the Bushies couldn’t contend with the strength of the Power all over the field. At the final siren the Power had won by eighteen points but, more importantly had managed to finish seventh on the ladder and gain a substantial advantage as a consequence.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 12 goals 15 behinds 87 points defeated Murray Bushrangers 10 goals 9 behinds 69 points. Goal kickers, Will Stephenson 3, Sam Flanders and Caleb Serong 2, Aidan Quigley, Irving Mosquito, Julian Patterson, Kyle Reid and Jack Hudson 1.

From the opening bounce, Callum Porter set the tone for the side with his customary hardness in every contest and ability to win possessions all over the field. These achievements would have been enough for the average hard-nut but, Callum then backed himself to create time and space to deliver the ball deep into the forward line. The key difference was that his play allowed others to have clean possessions up forward rather than be in tight contests.

Matching his on-ball mate was Nick Hogan who again took the initiative when the side needed him. Like Callum he had thirty possessions, many contested, but also backed his pace and kicking skills to get it into the best position for his team mates. Nick’s form since returning from injury mid-season has been vital to the side’s winning streak as he has become like an NFL quarter back as he assume one of the roles as a crucial play maker.

Sam Flanders is one of those amazing athletes who excel at a range of different sports and, luckily for the Power, football is near the top of his potential options. His twenty plus possessions, five marks and ten tackles are an obvious reflection of his skills but underplay the significance of his impact in this match. His unique ball reading skills put him in the right spot on countless times and his electric pace meant that he was able to have telling second and third efforts in the same contest.

Despite being an under sixteen player, Caleb Serong plays like an adult with his reading of the play and ability to have a stunning impact in contests. Once again he was able to win important possessions and then use them to full effect. However, this was far from the full extent of his contribution a he was able to apply over a dozen crunching tackles. To add to the value of these impacts was the fact that most occurred in attack and helped to set up many scoring opportunities.

CJ Jiath returned from injury and school football and immediately put himself into the thick of the action with his pace and excellent aerial skills. His statistics of a dozen possessions, eight marks, four tackles and seven spoils were significant but, where they occurred added much greater value to his contribution. He was at his best across the midfield area where he often intercepted Bushie’s attacks and helped to generate many attacking moves for the Power.

When the Bushies went into attack, young defender Xavier Duursma was automatically under a lot of pressure as he played on their better forwards. Manfully, he rose to the challenge to minimise their contributions with five marks, four tackles and seven spoils but, he also backed himself to win and effectively use many possessions. The tighter the contest the better the impact of his decisions and his impact on the side’s game plan.

Fellow young defender Bailey Beck was another to rise to this challenge and he too had impressive statistics. His twenty possessions, five marks, four tackles and six spoils are excellent but the coolness and poise he used to gather these was even more impressive. On-baller, Will Stephenson, is another who has an incredible work rate and thrives on being a key member of the Bruise Brothers. His important, contested possessions are the trademarks of his game but, even more importantly, he can kick critical goals from limited opportunities and inspire teammates to follow his example.

This victory now means that the Power have a very viable chance in the finals series as they have defeated four, of the top five sides during the regular season. No matter how the new system works, they know that they have the ability to beat these teams but, crucially, these sides now have doubts about their ability to cope with the “new, improved Power” of the past five weeks. Leigh has always believed in their ability and now, crucially, they are demonstrating that they have similar self-belief themselves.

Obviously, losing Boadie Motton is a negative factor but, the possible return of Matt McGannon, Cody Henness and Nick Lowden adds greater versatility in the side and some very important experience for Leigh and the selectors to utilise. This will mean that the side is almost at full strength for the first time this season and they should keep the pressure on the Geelong Falcons in next Sunday’s game at Ballarat.