GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Key officials of engie Gippsland Power have been eagerly waiting for the first TAC Cup game of the 2018 season for over eighteen months. They were rewarded handsomely for their optimism as the side played some outstanding football to score a stunning win over the Murray Bushrangers in the opening game of the season.

The basis of their enthusiasm was the fact that, from the time that the bottom age boys began playing with the under fifteen squad and moved on to the under sixteen program, they have demonstrated the skills, endeavour and hardness to rank them amongst the best in the club’s twenty five year history in the elite competition.

A reflection of this enormous potential was the fact that twenty five of these tyros won a place in the Power squad this season and it meant that the final squad had to be extended to forty four rather than the regular group of forty to fit them in. Going into the opening match, Leigh and the coaching panel were suitably impressed by the youngster’s progress through the pre-season program but had one negative to focus on as they prepared them for their debuts.

A revised program only gave the Power one inter club practice match for this season and it meant that the initial team went into the Bushies game severely under done in terms of knowing each other’s game. However, it only took one term of football for this adjustment to be effectively made and they outscored the Bushies by forty four points in the last three quarters of the game. In a wonderful team effort, the fourteen bottom agers made stunning contributions to one of the clubs’ best opening match performances.

Because Caleb Serong and Sam Flanders had made their TAC Cup debut’s in 2017 the team had twelve bottom age first gamers in this match, and were joined by Noah Gown who played his first game as a top ager. Neither side could get their game flowing early in the match and the Bushies goaled first as the result of a free kick. The Power responded with some excellent ball use that allowed Jake Van Der Pligt to kick the vital reply.

As if inspired, the forwards began applying traditional “Power Pressure,” and Van Der Pligt converted the resultant free kick truly. It was the Bushies who regained the initiative from the resultant centre bounce and by the end of the term led by one point. Regardless of what the scoreboard reflected, the Power had played some wonderful team football but had let themselves down in their finishing.

Leigh had plenty of positives to address in his analysis and it was more a situation of encouraging them to fine-tune rather than make wholesale changes to what they were doing. It didn’t take long for him to see that the boys had been focussed on the key parts of his challenges as Serong, Irving Mosquito and Xavier Duursma used some stunning skills to allow Fraser Phillips to kick his first goal.

Once again the boys used the ball skilfully and with vision to give captain, Duursma, the second in the opening minutes of the quarter. The Bushies replied with a crucial goal but Flanders and Ryan Sparkes were on the end of some fine skills and wonderful pressure that allowed Harvey Neocleous to join the list of debutant goal kickers. Not to be outdone, the Bushies scored on the rebound after the Power had squandered another chance but they were far from finished.

Some typically clever and strong work in the thick of the action by Flanders gave Josh Smith his chance to open his goal scoring and then Kyle Reid, Boadie Motton and Sparkes to cleverly bring the ball from defence to allow “Smithy” to kick another. Josh became provider this time as he found Mosquito to use his amazing skills to score another superb goal. The Bushies made sure that the Power didn’t claim all the glory and reduced the Power’s lead to fifteen points at the long break.

Some Power pressure and poor finishing meant that the Bushies squandered vital opportunities to get back in the game and the Josh’s Wykes and Smith used their considerable strength in packs to give Smith his third. The ever dangerous Flanders joined the party with a brilliant goal off the pack but, once again, the Bushies hit back to limit the damage on the scoreboard. As is his habit, Nick Lowden was at his best in the tightest scenarios and he used crucial vision to finish off with a vital goal.

As if they were following a script, the Bushies kicked another goal at the end of a quarter and reduced the Power lead to twenty points and still within reach of an unlikely win. Leigh was once again rapt with most aspects of the boy’s individual and team performance’s and challenged them to finish off their efforts over four full quarters.

It was very apparent early in the last term that they were ready to do what he wanted as some excellent forward pressure gave Austin Hodge the chance to kick an absolute stunner from deep in the forward pocket. Some more stunning forward pressure didn’t result in goals but it made it obvious that the Bushies were running out of legs. To add to the amazing contributions made by the youngsters, Mason McGannon took a wonderful contested mark and then kicked his first goal for the club.

Not to be outdone, the Bushies kicked another against the general run of play before some more outstanding ball use by Mosquito and Mason McGannon saw Hodge kick his second for the term. Instead of following the Bushies’ previous script, it was the Power who kicked the last major for the term when some fine rebound football allowed Mosquito to kick a stunner on the run.

By the final siren the margin was forty nine points but, could have been much larger, if the Power had been accurate in their finishing. They had dominated all the key statistical factors with over one hundred possessions for the quarter that resulted in fourteen scoring shots. It was a wonderful start to the 2018 TAC Cup season and gave all Power players, staff and supporters justifiable belief that they have what it takes to be highly competitive in this elite competition.

Final scores engie Gippsland Power 15 goals 14 behinds 104 points defeated Murray Bushrangers 8 goals 13 behinds 61 points. Goal kickers, Josh Smith 3, Irving Mosquito and Austin Hodge 2, Mason McGannon, Sam Flanders, Xavier Duursma, Nick Lowden, Fraser Phillips and Harvey Neocleous 1.

In such a stunning team focussed performance, Matt McGannon led by stunning example. Playing mainly in defence he accumulated nearly thirty possessions but took sixteen marks, many contested. To finish off what was his best ever game for the club, he totally shut down several vital opponents as well as outplaying the poor Bushies who tried to run with him. Captain, Xavier Duursma, showed that he sees leadership as a verb rather than a noun and was at his best in the tight contested issues generating drive with his wonderful work ethic. He finished off a fine game with some excellent link work to reward team mates who gave him options up field.

After a wonderful debut season in 2017, Boadie Motton staked a claim for the key on-baller for the team with his typically no-fuss performance. He consistently won crucial possessions in the tightest situations and then had the poise, skill and self-belief to make sure that used each one effectively. He capped off his fine game with his crunching tackles on his opponents. Moe youngster, Brock Smith was one of the debutants who showed how important he will be for the Power this season. He took on and soundly beat the best Bushies key forwards and had the skill and confidence to win many possessions. He never wasted one of these hard-won possessions and took twelve telling marks, many of which were contested.

His Moe team-mate Riley Baldi was another who belied his inexperience with a fine debut as part of the Power’s match-winning on-ball brigade. He too won crucial possessions in the thick of the action as well as having the strength and ability to use tackles to apply pressure on opponents all over the ground. On the opposite side of the experience ledger “old-timer” Austin Hodge was another to lead his teammates by stunning example. He was in the thick of the action in the contested issues of stoppages and rarely conceded possessions to any opponent. When “tired” he “rested” up forward and used his amazing aerial skills to telling effect.

Normally after such a significant victory Leigh will acknowledge extra players for these reports. He was unable to do so after this win because he rightly recognised the fact that so many of the team deserved this “reward” in what he felt was one of the side’s best ever team performance. What did really please him was the fact that the boys were as hard as has become the side’s trademark but, more importantly, they had finished off this hard work by being so efficient up forward.

The Power now take on arch-rivals the Dandenong Stingrays at Morwell next Friday. The five day gap will test many of the youngsters but Leigh will prepare them well for the physical and mental challenges that this entails. What will be a highlight for him is the fact that the team has so much scope for further improvement in terms of experience at this level and with each other and the Stinger’s will have even more to worry about that what was shown last week.