GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

In ideal football conditions in Bendigo, engie Gippsland Power again displayed the sort of quality TAC Cup football that had been so obvious in their opening match win over the Murray Bushrangers. Leigh had subtly “reminded” the boys of the sort of commitment that was necessary to redress the wasted opportunities that caused them to lose against the Stingrays when victory was well within their grasp.

They went into the match against the Bendigo Pioneers with the return of key big man Rylan Henkel and, still had the thirteen bottom-age tyros who had been so prominent in both matches. Early in the game, the Power had applied intense pressure on the Pioneers all over the ground but were unable to exploit their control of play where it mattered most, the scoreboard. Ominously, the Pioneers kicked the first goal as a result of a turnover by the Power and alarm bells were ringing for the coaches as this was what had been so costly against the Stingrays.

Some excellent forward pressure by Austin Hodge allowed Sam Flanders to kick a much needed goal but further chances were wasted. The Pioneers did it again on the rebound but the Power continued to squander hard-won scoring opportunities. The Power defence stood very firm against intense pressure when they were being attacked on the rebound and minimised the damage being done on the scoreboard. Some more precise ball use by Irving Mosquito set up Josh Smith for a vital goal late in the term and scores were level when the siren blew at quarter time.

It wasn’t hard to work out what Leigh’s concerns were at the first break but it appeared as if the boys hadn’t been listening when the Pioneers hit back after the Power had been so dominant early in the quarter. Finally a Quick, Long and Direct attacking move by Caleb Serong resulted in Mosquito kicking a fine goal off the resultant pack. This seemed to inspire the others and this time it was Xavier Duursma who went QLD to set up Flanders to kick another after taking a great contested mark.

When it mattered most, the Pioneers kicked a vital goal to let the Power know what happens when you don’t take advantage of hard work when attacking. They quickly went back to what was required when, Noah Gown went QLD and Smith kicked his second as a result of this positive attacking play. Some more effective ball use by Riley Baldi and Nick Lowden saw the mercurial Flanders kick a stunning major and then more intense forward pressure by Hodge resulted in a fine goal by Fraser Phillips.

Just when it seemed as if the Power had finally got it right, they again wasted some excellent preparation with dodgy finishing. However, they persisted with their intense pressure and, this time, Flanders was the provider for his AFL Academy teammate, Caleb Serong. Another star “junior”, Riley Baldi brilliantly intercepted some nervous Pioneer defence and kicked another for the side late in the quarter.

Although it had been an amazing term of hard-nosed football by the Power, it could have been even better if Flanders had been more efficient after cleverly winning so many opportunities to add to the two goals he did kick. He missed thee “sitters” within thirty metres of the goals but this was the only negative from what had been an excellent term of team-oriented football by the Power. At the long break they led by thirty four points and seeming had the Pioneers well and truly on the back foot.

As if following a perverse script, the Pioneers again kicked the opening goal for the term and it took some really quick QLD play by Brock Smith and Flanders to allow Duursma to restore the scoreboard status quo. “Old timer” Hodge did the QLD thing and Flanders finally got it right to extend the Power’s lead. However, instead of building on this momentum, the Power again allowed easy chances for the Pioneers to capitalise on turnovers and they did so twice. To add insult to injury, the Power then wasted gettable scoring chances and went to the final change thirty one points ahead when it could, and should, have been much further in front.

Once again Leigh needed to fine tune the game plan for the boys and they got it right early when Baldi was rewarded for a fine tackle after some more effective ball use by those up field. A clever intervention by Bailey Beck allowed Harvey Neocleous to kick a crucial goal that finally extended the lead to an unattainable level. They then kicked their first for the term but, it was to be their last as the Power went into overdrive for the rest of the quarter.

Kyle Reid was moved from defence into attack and kicked a well-earned goal from a free kick. From the resultant centre bounce, Phillips found fellow youngster Mason McGannon for another fine goal. With everything going so well, the Power then wasted several more chances to extend their lead but, fortunately found their way back to the “accepted” way to finish off hard work. Some more positive ball use allowed McGannon to kick another and then Serong kicked a “stunner” on the run.

By the final siren, the margin was sixty four points in Power’s favour but, it even could have been a lot larger with some more precise finishing. The Power had again dominated general play with their traditional tough and intense pressure and rarely allowed the Pioneers the chance to get any passages of play started. Leigh was very pleased with the endeavour that they exhibited all day and, especially excited by the contributions of so many of the side’s stunning bottom-age group.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power, 17 goals fifteen behinds 117 points defeated Bendigo Pioneers 8 goals 5 behinds 53 points. The Power had ten goal-kickers in their fine team-oriented performance. They were, Sam Flanders 4, Caleb Serong, Mason McGannon, Riley Baldi and Josh Smith 2, Xavier Duursma, Irving Mosquito, Fraser Phillips, Harvey Neocleous and Kyle Reid 1.

After returning from minor injury, Rylan Henkel took his already impressive game to another level as he dominated the rucking duels all over the ground by using his height and strength to telling effect in each contest. He then had the “cheek” to win plenty of contested possessions at ground level and ensured that he used them effectively. Captain Xavier Duursma again led by stellar example in all aspects of the game. He thrived in the hard-ball situations with his courage and determination as well as being a key link player in many positive passages team play. He finished off his effort with some tight defence against the Pioneers best on-ballers.

When the side needed composure in defence, Matt McGannon set another fine example with his ability to total blitz dangerous opponents with disciplined decision making. He added to his impact on the match with the ability to win effectively use well over twenty possessions, won either in aerial duels or with his confidence to back his pace and skills at ground level. But for inaccuracy, Sam Flanders could have kicked ten goals from the many opportunities he created for himself with his stunning aerial skills, strength in one-on-one contests and amazing reading of the play. He used his twenty plus possessions inside the forward fifty zone to help teammates to score goals as well as giving himself twelve scoring chances.

Moe youngster Riley Baldi has quickly established himself to be a vital cog in the Power’s impressive on-ball brigade. He has the strength, vision and self- belief to win crucial contested balls and then to work even harder to use them effectively. He had nearly thirty hard-won possessions in only his third game in this elite competition. Inverloch’s youngster Ryan Sparkes is another who has made a really impressive start to his TAC Cup career with an amazing set of defensive skills and the confidence to win, and effectively use, vital possessions himself. He took on and soundly held dangerous opponents as well as taking strong contested marks and applying crunching tackles.

Austin Hodge is relishing his role as a nineteen year-old along with his teammate Matt McGannon. He too has led by amazing example with his aerial skills as well as strength in the tightest contests at ground level. His twenty seven possessions, most contested, and many tackles were critical in many of the side’s positive passages of team play. The other stunningly skilled junior defender, Brock Smith, continued his rapid rise up a steep TAC Cup learning curve with his amazing natural skill set as well as the ability to read the play like a wily “veteran.” He too, soundly nullified the impact of opponents as well as winning and cleverly using the ball to generate attacking pieces of team work.

Boadie Motton has a well-deserved reputation for being one competition’s hardest, and most effective competitors in the tightest contests. Once again he was at his gritty best ensuring that he won the hard-balls and then having the poise, vision and skills to get it moving quickly and effectively when it really mattered.

The Power now has a Development Weekend where most of the boys can return to their home clubs for their first local matches this season. Leigh could rest some boys due to the intensity of their work so far this season and to prepare them effectively for the challenges of the next phase of the season. Their next match will be against the Northern Knights at Morwell and they will be ready to exploit any deficiencies in the Power’s application of the key elements of the game plan.