GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

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Going into their sixth match of the 2018 TAC Cup season, engie Gippsland Power were facing a severe challenge of their ability to deal with the threat of playing against one of the competition’s best ever teams, the Sandringham Dragons. The Dragons had made a typically solid start to the season, as had the Power, but, closer analysis of the current reality for both sides indicated that the Power were justifiably the favourites for such a crucial match.

In their most recent game, the Power had been very impressive in terms of their trademark hardness in contests but, more importantly, had then converted these hard-won opportunities to scoreboard pressure due to highly effective ball use. Adding to the confidence in the Power camp was the fact that three key players, Austin Hodge, Harvey Neocleous and Rylan Henkel returned after minor injuries putting the side at almost full strength for such a challenge.

The Dragons were in exactly the opposite situation despite, theoretically, having seventy four players on their list to select from. However, a long injury list and many players unavailable due to private school football commitments meant that they were far from their best to take on the highly rated Power team. To ensure that the boys were properly focused to respond to this scenario, Leigh reminded them about the necessity to maintain the “elite standards” that they had been successfully exposed to in recent times.

In the opening minutes of the first term, it was the Power who took the initiative with precise ball use by Tye Hourigan set up Boadie Motton to kick truly. Some typically strong forward pressure by Hodge, Fraser Phillips and Sam Flanders then allowed Josh Smit to kick another. In contrast, the Dragons were struggling to kick straight due to fine defensive pressure by the Power and had missed three chances before kicking their opening goal.

Once again, Hodge was in the thick of the action and converted a hard-won free kick before the Power wasted several “gettable” opportunities with poor finishing. Neocleous and Phillips cleverly combined to allow Fraser to kick a “blinder” from deep in the pocket and then more excellent forward pressure by Fraser and Motton saw Noah Gown kick the sides’ fifth for the term. Not to be outdone, the defenders set up a goal for Smith with some excellent ball use.

By the end of the first quarter, the Power led by thirty one points as a result of stout defence and highly effective use of their inside fifty entries. These factors were evident early in the second term as Xavier Duursma, Hodge, Bailey Beck and Flanders combined to set up Neocleous for a stunning goal. Their excellent ball use was matched by the Baileys, Beck and Patterson, who created the chance to kick a second off the resultant pack.

Instead of building on this effective finishing, the Power missed three “sitters” before gifting the Dragons with a goal after some sloppy ball use. When the team needed a hint of what to do, Hodge and smith combined to allow Hodge to kick a stunner from the pocket. It was now Flanders’ turn, and he kicked a long goal from the resultant centre bounce. Once again the Power wasted further chances to kick goals and then added insult to injury by gifting the Dragons with another after more awful ball use.

By the long break, the Power led by forty-eight points but, few would have believed that this lead was adequate considering the number of chances they had wasted. Four goals from nineteen inside fifty entries typified the problem and Leigh used the break to highlight the need to get back to the effectiveness typified by their first quarter efforts. He wasn’t finished with this “discussion” and, then added further spice to his address, by referring to the “elite standards” scenario.

His “messages” had obviously hit home as Hodge and Gown made the right decisions to allow Riley Baldi to kick truly from the pocket and then the intense forward pressure resulted in a clever snap by Flanders. Once again, more excellent pressure by Motton and Flanders set up Hodge; and he made a difficult shot look easy. As if inspired, the ball came efficiently from defence via Matt McGannon and Duursma and this time it was Beck who finished it off truly.

The Power were well and truly on a superb roll and Mitch Benveltzen and Gown created another fine goal for Flanders. After kicking some truly stunning goals it would have been easy for Power supporters to be content, however Harvey Neocleous had other ideas and, kicked what could become the goal of the season from deep in the pocket with not much daylight visible between the posts.

It took the umpires to break the Power’s brilliant run of goals with an “iffy” free kick but they went into overdrive from deep in defence and Patterson finished it off with style and class. By the end of the term they led by eighty-six points but, far more importantly, had got back to the sort of team-oriented football that was so evident in the first quarter. They had kicked seven goals from fifteen forward fifty entries and had maximised the return for the hard work in contests all over the ground.

Early in the last term Hodgey did it again with another “impossible” snap from an acute angle and it looked as if the Dragons were in for a real thrashing. However, this was far from the truth as both sides struggled to get the ball into attack for the next fifteen minutes. The midfield units enjoyed their time in the lime light and it took some more direct ball use by Tyrone Hayes, Hodge and Flanders to create an opportunity for McGannon to kick a rare goal.

Instead of building on this more productive approach, the Power then squandered several “gettable” chances before Motton, Phillips and Zac Skinner used the ball cleverly to allow Flanders to kick his fourth for the match. By the final siren the margin was one hundred and nine points and it could have been even higher with a little more care and purpose. Despite this, it was truly wonderful performance and really demonstrated the potential that this side has to play a significant role at the business end of the season.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 20 goals 18 behinds 138 points, defeated Sandringham Dragons, 4 goals 5 behinds 29 points. Goal kickers, Sam Flanders ad Austin Hodge 4, Harvey Neocleous 3, Josh Smith 2, Riley Baldi, Bailey Patterson, Bailey Beck, Matt McGannon, Fraser Phillips, Noah Gown and Boadie Motton 1.

On a day when the words “team performance” truly reflected the way that the boys played, there were several who set stunning examples for the others. Bailey Beck has had a consistent year but has relished a recent move to the wing. He went into defence to effectively support others but excelled when providing a consistently effective avenue into attack by backing his skills and judgement to telling effect. Young defender, Tye Hourigan, has taken the responsibility to quell the impact of key opposition forwards as well as being a key prime-mover for the side with his highly effective use of the ball by hand or foot. He is a natural midfielder but has the discipline and team focus to accept the challenges that Leigh provides him.

AFL Academy member Sam Flanders is a multi-skilled sportsman who is beginning to thrive now that he is focused on football. He has the pace, vertical leap and evasive skills to create opportunities from seemingly hopeless situations. His twenty plus possessions, eight contested marks, six tackles and four goals indicate the impact he had on the match. “Old Timer” Austin Hodge relished his return from injury and was at his versatile best from the opening bounce. His aerial skills are exceptional but it’s when the ball is at ground level that he can be equally as important. He not only kicked four very skilled goals but played a significant role in several more with hi unselfish team focus and clever ball use.

Another to set the tone from the start of the match was Boadie Motton who once again was the initiator of many effective passages of play with his unique ability to win, and efficiently use, the ball in the tightest contests. His key stats of thirty plus possessions, ten marks and seven tackles represent a very effective day’s work but the fact that so many were in contests is the true worth of his contribution. Noah Gown has also thrived since moving into a key forward position. He excels when leading up the ground and proving a highly effective avenue to attack with his aerial skills and clever use of the ball at ground level. His ability to kick long and direct is vital in the side’s improvement in ball use in the forward fifty.

Captain, Xavier Duursma won twenty plus contested possessions and had the skill and self-belief to create run by playing on in most situations and then making effective use of the ball by hand or foot. His ability to play the “quarter back” role has been a key to the side’s good form this season. Brock Smith is another youngster who has been an instant success in this elite competition with a combination of incredible individual skills and the self-belief to take on and soundly defeat dangerous opponents. His twenty possessions, nine marks, five tackles and seven spoils reflect this amazing contribution.

Smithy’s young defensive team-mate Ryan Sparkes, is another who appears to have been playing at this level for a long time rather than six weeks. He too has the skill and self-confidence to make the right decision at the right time and is never beaten when one out. His ability to generate effective passages of play was matched by Bailey Patterson who also thrived when backing his judgement effectively as well as ensuring that his opponents were unable to win or effectively use the ball in contests.

The side now faces another excellent challenge when they take on the Great Western Victoria Rebels at Craigieburn next Saturday. Although relative ladder positions don’t signify that they will be competitive against an in-form Power side, Leigh is well aware of their improvement this season and will have the side well prepared for a true contest. The fact that the boys have been so focussed in recent games is a real positive but they will need to work hard to ensure that they apply the clubs’ trademark intense pressure from the opening bounce.