GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

After playing some very ordinary football in recent weeks, engie Gippsland Power returned to their most impressive form to soundly defeat the third placed Murray Bushrangers. What made the performance even more stunning was the fact that it was achieved without four of the Power’s best players who were rested after participating in the recent National Championships. All-Australian defender, Kyle Reid, captain Xavier Duursma, amazing goal sneak Sam Flanders and “old stager” Matt McGannon were amongst the spectators who enjoyed seeing the team come back to their best form for the season.

Caleb Serong was able to return from the championships and made it very clear why he had been selected for the big V as a bottom-ager. Also returning was youngster, Fraser Phillips, while Harold Hood finally made his TAC Cup debut after shaking off a series of niggling injuries over the past year and a half. As a consequence of this scenario there were thirteen of the club’s highly-rated bottom-agers in the team and they continued to demonstrate how well they had adjusted to the challenges of most elite junior competition in the nation.

Weather conditions at Morwell were terrible, with a strong wind from the South east, continuous rain and freezing cold atmosphere to ensure that both sides were made to work incredibly hard to play any sort of cohesive football. It didn’t take long to realise that it was the Power who were adapting best and they went into attack with the advantage of the gusting wind. Early in the term they went to the wrong side of the ground and struggled to hit the scoreboard despite dominating much of the play.

It took a “long bomb” by Caleb Serong on the correct side of the ground to break the deadlock and then Irving Mosquito spun onto his left side to kick another long goal. The Bushies were applying the sort of pressure expected by such a fine team but, they couldn’t contain the intensity of the Power’s in response to the challenges that they were facing. Some strong work by Boadie Motton set up Irving for his second goal and the Power’s typically intense forward pressure resulted in another to Austin Hodge.

The scoreboard indicated a lead of twenty seven points for the Power but it didn’t reflect the degree to which the Power had dominated so much of the play. Scrutiny of the key statistics made it clear just how hard the boys had worked to get back to the very best of their 2018 form. Their thirty plus tackles were a good sign but, the comparative inside fifty counts were the vital indication of the strength and quality of their efforts.

They had gone into attack twenty two times compared to the Bushies three forward forays and Leigh would have been so pleased that they had learned the lesson of the loss to the Pioneers two weeks earlier. The midfield had been awful in terms of applying pressure when the Pioneers rebounded after Power turnovers but, inspired by Serong, they rarely let the ball get into the Bushies half of the ground, let alone their forward fifty zone.

Early in the second term it was a case of more of the same as the Power dominated contests where it mattered most, in the midfield. They were in attack for much of the term but, unlike the first quarter, they couldn’t transfer this dominance to where it mattered, the scoreboard. They wasted eleven forward thrusts without a goal until second gamer, Marcus Toussaint marked and goaled half way through the term.

More hard-won chances were wasted but, by the end of the quarter, the Power led by thirty eight points. More importantly, the Power had kept the Bushies goal less and had done so by sticking rigidly to their game plan. Unlike recent games, they had applied their trademark intense pressure all over the field which meant that the Bushies rarely had easy possessions no matter how hard they worked. The stats backed this up again as they had thirty more forward fifty entries than the Bushies and this was largely due to their sixty plus tackles.

Just when it seemed that the boys had got the message, the Bushies reminded them that they could be competitive if allowed, and kicked the first goal of the second half. This was answered by a clever snap off the pack by Serong but once again the goal scoring stopped despite the ball being in their attacking area for much of the time. What was import however was the fact that the Power were maintaining their intense pressure everywhere and the Bushies were on the back foot all the time.

It took a goal from a free kick and fifty metre penalty for Bailey Beck to get back on track but, once again, they were missing relatively gettable goals. More of the team’s intense forward pressure allowed Noah Gown to kick a vital goal and they went to the last break fifty points up. It was a case of “Deja-vu” in terms of tackles and comparative forward fifty entries but one minor negative had emerged. For the second and third quarters the Power had kicked four goals and eleven points from thirty four entries and, seemingly Leigh had reason for concern. Closer analysis eased his worries as the Bushies were applying strong pressure and the boys were having to deal with the impact of strong, gusting winds.

The endeavour of the Bushies was obvious as they had the advantage of the wind in the early part of the last term. The Power defence were continuing to with stand the intense pressure but were being assisted by the on-ballers. They had upped the ante in terms of tackles and made the Bushies work incredibly hard to get any passages of positive play started. It wasn’t until the sixteen minute mark of the term that they were able to shake off the Power’s pressure and they got another five minutes later.

In the dying seconds of the game Harvey Neocleous kicked the Power’s only goal for the quarter but they still ran out winners by forty-five points. Leigh and his assistants were justifiably overjoyed with the win and especially the way in which the side was able to apply pressure in the right places for the entire game. Over one hundred and twenty tackles and twice the number of forward fifty entries indicated the depth of their application to the vital elements of the game plan but, the quality of the opposition really reflected just how well they had responded to Leigh’s challenges.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 9 goals 16 behinds 70 points defeated Murray Bushrangers 3 goals 7 behinds 25 points. Goal kickers, Caleb Serong and Irving Mosquito 2, Bailey Beck, Austin Hodge, Harvey Neocleous, Noah Gown and Marcus Toussaint 1 each.

AFL Academy member, Caleb Serong, returned from state and school football commitments and quickly made his presence felt. He controlled the all-important midfield area picking up twenty plus mostly contested possessions. His ten tackles reflected the intensity he applied as he led the side by stellar example. Young key forward, Josh Smith was moved to an on ball role and he too had a vital impact on the game from the opening bounce. Not only did he win the majority of the ruck contests but also made an impact at ground level in the tightest contests. His strength and team focus enabled him to generate many positive passages of play.

In his debut at TAC Cup level, Harrold Hood showed how quickly he could adjust to such a challenge by playing a consistently effective role in the midfield unit. His ability to read the play and be in the right place at the right time was exceptional. In the process he amassed twenty plus possessions and more importantly applied twelve tackles. Noah Gown was in defence early and, due to the way in which the side limited the Bushies forward play had little to do. However, when moved up field, he was a vital contributor in aerial contests as well as being equally as effective in hard ball situations.

Once again young defender, Tye Hourigan took on and soundly defeated the Bushies best forwards. His ability to win every one-on-one contest with his disciplined application of the team structure was reflected by five tackles and ten spoils. He helped to set up many forward forays with his effective use of the ball. Fellow defender Zac Hurley also had a vital role to play against dangerous opponents and was another to make the right decision on each occasion. His self-discipline and team orientation meant that he backed his judgement unerringly and always ensured that each hard-won possession was effectively used.

Midfielder, Boadie Motton continued to make a vital contribution with his selfless style of play where his ability to win the ball in the tightest situations sets up many positive passages of play. With so many others making such a contribution he was able to get more time and room to win and effectively use the ball. Jake van der Pligt is another of the bottom agers who has stepped up to the standard of TAC Cup with amazing levels of intensity. He too has the discipline to take on and soundly defeat opponents and is often the last to get up from the tightest on-ball contests. His ten plus tackles were an accurate indication of the importance of his contribution.

The Power now has another week off and will then step up to the important part of the 2018 season. Leigh and his fellow selectors will have the unenviable task of slotting the four top liners back after such a wonderful team based win by the side. The most important task however, will be to maintain the focus that was so evident against the Bushies. Top ager Austin Hodge spoke about knowing that the boys would play well based on their attitude pre-game and will be able to work with Leigh to ensure that they keep it up from now on.