GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

The business end of the 2018 TAC Cup season began positively for the engie Gippsland Power with a comprehensive win over the Geelong Falcons in ideal conditions at the historic Ikon oval. Under the competition’s odd finals system their opponents had finished two games out of the eight but had won a wildcard position by defeating the Calder Cannons. Like many teams the Falcons were able to have many highly rated players available as their school football commitments were finished.

As a consequence of this scenario, their form from the regular season was irrelevant so the on-paper difference with the Power needed to be forgotten as Leigh and his assistants prepared the boys for the knock-out final. A real positive for the Power came with the return of key players Austin Hodge and Boadie Motton from the VFL and illness respectively. Despite the Falcons being a relatively unknown opponent, the Power went in as deserved favourites for the match and Leigh had the right factors as his focus for the game.

The simplicity and intense pressure he wanted were evident early as some clever ball us resulted in Josh Smith kicking a long goal in the opening minutes of the term. Nick Lowden had used his strength and determination well to create a situation where Irving Mosquitos pace a skill resulted in a goal off the ground. Ruckman, Rylan Henkel, then kicked an inspiring running goal and seemingly, the Falcons were out of their depth against a rampant Power side.

It was Leo Connolly’s turn to inject himself into the match as he and Noah Gown combined twice with vision and skill to put the Power up by four goals with ten minutes to go in the term. The Power began to get away from their focus with too many short options and an unnecessary turnover allowed the Falcons to kick their first for the match. Similar ineffective play gave the Falcons another and they were now within reach of the Power against the run of general play.

Some more direct and long ball use meant that they went forward quickly and Smith was in good position to take a strong contested mark. His goal gave the Power a sixteen point lead at the first break and there were plenty of good things for the coaches to address as they worked with their players. The key factors were the five goals from only eight inside fifty entries and the thirty plus tackles. Despite the Falcons winning a fair share of possessions, they were unable to convert many to goals due to the intense pressure being applied by the Power midfield and defence.

Early in the second term, some skill and vision by Sam Flanders and Riley Baldi set up Xavier Duursma to kick a vital goal. Instead of capitalising on this excellent ball use, the Power gifted the Falcons with another goal after some poor decision making. Further errors meant that they were within two goals despite the dominance of the Power in the tight contests. They went quick and long into attack and Harvey Neocleous kicked truly as the result of a free kick.

It appeared as if the boys were back to the team plan and Harrison Pepper used stunning second and third pressure acts to give himself a chance for a stunning goal. Although he missed the coaches were delighted with his adherence to the pre-game requirement of intense pressure. Duursma then turned provider to allow Connolly to kick a long bomb from the fifty metre line and the Power went to the long break twenty points up.

The coaches seemingly only had some “fine-tuning” to do during the break as for the majority of the two quarters, the boys had followed the key elements of the game plan to perfection. Minor lapses involving imprecise and short use of the ball were an issue but it appeared that the Power had the answers when it mattered most. Young on-baller Mitch Benveltzen suffered a back spasm injury and was out of the game but, even more importantly, several key players had had little or no influence on the game.

In the opening minutes of the third term neither side could kick goals they both struggled to use the ball well enough to shake off the opposition. It was the Falcons who managed to get it right and they kicked two goals after the Power had wasted many inside fifty entries. At the end of a stunningly lack-lustre quarter, the Power hadn’t kicked a goal and were only eight points up after playing some of the most ineffective football for the season. No goals from ten inside fifties and only twenty tackles were the key statistical factors backing up this situation and the coaches had plenty to “discuss” with their groups.

If Leigh was under control at the long break, he moved into overdrive at three quarter time and “reinforced” his pre-match focus on simplicity, predictability and intense pressure. He moved Gown into the ruck, put Kyle Reid up forward and asked the “passengers” for extra efforts. It was a real challenge for the Power considering the knockout nature of the game and some wonderful intensity and purpose by Gown, Mosquito and Reid resulted in Duursma kicking the vital opening goal for the term.

Some more intensity in the contests all over the ground put the ball into attack and Caleb Serong was on hand to kick a crucial goal on the run. Not long later, Serong set up Bailey Beck for a well-deserved goal from outside the fifty metre line and it appeared as if the sting had gone out of the Falcons. The intensity of the Power was back to their very best and players all over the ground were winning contested possessions and then using them with greater purpose.

Henkel had been put up forward as well and he goaled as the result of a hard-won free kick. The Falcons kicked their only goal late in the term after an incredibly soft fifty metre penalty but Power regained the initiative with even more intensity in contested situations. Serong and Reid used strength, skill and vision to win the ball and allow Gown to kick a fine goal in the dying minutes of the term. By the final siren, the Power had extended their lead to thirty-five points but, far more critically had responded wonderfully to the challenges “subtly issued” to them at the last break.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 13 goals 10 behinds 83 points defeated Geelong Falcons 7 goals 11 behinds 53 points. Goal kickers, Caleb Serong, Leo Connolly, Josh Smith and Rylan Henkel 2, Xavier Duursma, Bailey Beck, Irving Mosquito, Harvey Neocleous and Noah Gown 1.

After a consistent contribution all season, it was Bailey Beck who continued to set a fine example for teammates from the opening bounce as he ensured that he strictly followed every element of Leigh’s game plan. He was at his best in tight contests as well as being a consistent avenue into attack as he found space as well beating opponents one-on-one. His twenty plus possessions and eleven tackle reflect the importance of his influence.

Key forward Noah Gown has had a stunning second half to his season and was excellent early with his ability to take strong contested marks and apply intense pressure at ground level. When he was asked for even more in the last term, he stepped up and was the key person in getting the side back to the game plan. His fifteen possessions, eight marks and six tackles were similar to Bailey’s stats and accurately reflected his impact.

Midfielder Boadie Motton made a very welcome return to the side and was at his no fuss and unobtrusive best from the opening bounce. His uncanny ability to put himself into the most intense contests and then win and effectively use hard won possessions was highly influential. His disciplined and determined willingness to nullify the impact of talented opponents was the finishing touch to another fine game.

Captain, Xavier Duursma has led by stellar example all season and did so once again in this vital match. His ability to put himself in to the thick of the most intense action and use the ball effectively was highly evident. His statistics, Like Bailey and Noah, indicate just how hard he worked to have a highly influential impact on the game. He had twenty five possessions, nine marks and seven tackles in another wonderful leader’s game.

As the season has progressed, youngster Tye Hourigan has responded manfully to increasingly challenging requests to be the team’s key defender. He again took on and soundly defeated the opposition’s best forwards and did so with a combination of discipline, intense pressure and the ability to make the right decision in every contest. He won every one-on-one contest as well as confidently backing himself to win, and effectively use, individual possessions in tight situations.

On-baller Riley Baldi is another who has responded positively to the responsibility of being a key player in the game’s most vital area. He put himself into the thick of the action all day and ensured that he either won the contests or minimised the ability of opponents to do the same. Thirty plus possessions, six marks and eleven tackles indicate just how well he has adjusted to this elite competition’s challenges and, more importantly the needs of his team in the vital midfield area.

Josh Smith began the season effectively as a key forward but has excelled when moved into the ruck. Once again he was fiercely competitive in every aerial contest and helped to initiate many of the side’s effective passages of play. He was equally positive in negating the impact of his opponents as well as making a vital contribution when in attack with two goals and his team focus when he couldn’t win the ball.

Nick Lowden has been able to take on the role of a utility player for the team all season. He has moved from the midfield to defence and back again and has used his strength, discipline and team focus to respond to the challenges involved. His manful contribution against the Falcons was exceptional due to the fact that he had some personally challenging experiences during the week but had focused his attention strongly to the match.

Leigh and his assistants will now prepare the boys for the next challenge that sees them take on the Oakleigh Chargers at Ikon Park at 2pm on Saturday. As it was with the Falcons, the boys will be playing a totally different Oakleigh team the one that they defeated early in August. As they do every season, the Chargers have two groups of players and play for most of the season without all of their private school boys. The big challenge for their boys is that they have to quickly adjust to the very much higher standard of football that the TAC cup represents.

Despite this obvious problem, the Chargers have done this well for many seasons and Leigh and his assistants will need to do their homework well to select a side that will have the ability to threaten the Chargers ability to play the more skilful and intense football that is needed in the TAC Cups finals. They defeated the Western Jets by twenty goals in their knockout game and Leigh, Scott, Peter, Allan and Rhett would have watched this game many times by the time that the boys play on Saturday.

They have several positives to focus on in terms of the personnel available and what sort of commitment they are capable of giving to the required game plan and individual challenges. As they did against the Falcons, when they focus on the game plan they can dominate matches but, and it’s a vital but, they can allow sides to get goals far too easily. They won three of the quarters against the Falcons by thirteen gaols to six but had a goal less quarter as well. Adding further confidence for the coaches is the fact that they were effectively without the normal impact of usually very reliable key players.

Going into this match they will have what is their best possible team for the first time for the season with the only issue being the availability of talented bottom-ager, Mitch Benveltzen due to his back injury. In an amazing season, Leigh has been able to rely on the stunning contributions of up the thirteen bottom-agers each week. Their impact to such a huge challenge form game one has been outstanding and many have played with the poise, confidence and skill of veterans.

Caleb Serong, Sam Flanders and Brock Smith are already recognised amongst the best in the competition while Riley Baldi, Leo Connolly, Tye Hourigan, Ryan Sparkes, Josh Smith, Harvey Neocleous, Jake van der Pilgt, Mitch and Harry Pepper have made some wonderful contributions to the team’s focus and Leigh’s individual challenges. Club officials have been aware of their vast potential for three seasons and hoped that 2018 would see some of them fit in effectively. They have outdone even the most optimistic “experts” expectations and will be vitally important against the Chargers.