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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Round one of the 2019 NAB under 18 competition began positively for the engie Gippsland Power after they recorded a hard-fought, narrow victory over the Murray Bushrangers. Power went into the match with a relatively “old” team with only six bottom-age boys in the team of twenty four that was chosen for the important first match for the new season. This is a rare event for the club that was due the fact that the side’s top-agers have a well-deserved reputation as one of the best units in the Power’s history.

The youngsters chosen for their debuts were Sam Berry, Will Papley, Tom Fitzpatrick, Zac Ried, Jess McGrath and Tyran Rees while top-agers Charlie Comben and Zach Soutar also were selected for the first time. The final selection for the Bushies match was Kyle Dunkley who had been with the Power in the under fifteen and sixteen programs before going to school in Melbourne and playing with the Oakleigh Chargers. He is the only nineteen year-old on the Power list and was keen to make a positive impact at his old club.

It wasn’t just the playing group that had undergone change in the off-season as the coaching panel had also been significantly altered. With Leigh Brown moving on to bigger things in the system after five seasons as Power coach, his extremely capable assistant for four of those years, Rhett McLennan assumed the top role. Former Power and ex-AFL listed players, Hayden Burgeil and Jack Weston bought their highly regarded coaching expertise to add to the qualities already available at the club.

After originally being scheduled to be played at Punt Road on Saturday, the match was shifted to Craigieburn on Sunday. In nearly every match that the Power has played on the ground, conditions in terms of weather have been decidedly dodgy and this match was no exception. A powerful wind from the northwest strongly favoured the Melbourne end of the ground and made it crucial to kick goals at the other end if possible.

In the opening minutes of the game neither side could put their match plan into action as the defensive units applied intense pressure on opposition mid fields and forwards. It took some skilful work by Will Papley and Sam Flanders to find Josh Smith who finally broke the drought. The Bushies responded immediately from the resultant centre bounce to serve notice that they were ready to match the Power in this area.

Both teams upped the ante in terms of applying intense pressure and the scoring again dried up for several minutes. The Bushies scored a vital goal on the rebound but it was matched with some creative and quick ball use from defence by Tyran Rees, Mason McGannon and Papley to link up with Harrison Pepper who reduced the Bushie’s lead at the first break to three points.

On a positive note, the Power had applied the club’s intense band of physical pressure all over the ground but hadn’t capitalised on their hard won ability to get the ball into their attacking fifty metre zone. Two goals from eighteen such entries was nowhere efficient enough but, it did reflect just how hard the boys were willing to work to give the forwards the vital opportunities to apply scoreboard pressure.

The Bushies opened the scoring in the second term against the gale and Kyle Dunkley quickly responded with a clever snap under intense pressure. As if on cue, the Bushies attacked on the correct side of the ground to score an easy goal and it was Dunkley again who roved the pack to score another skilful major. Once again the Power’s hardness in contests was having an important impact and Leo Connolly and Dunkley combined to allow Josh Smith to kick his second goal.

A strong intercept mark by Zach Soutar resulted in him linking up with Dunkley and Kyle scored his third for the term with a huge kick from outside the fifty metre arc. With only minutes remaining, the Power looked set to lead convincingly at the long break but the Bushies had other ideas. Some unusually soft Power defence gave the Bushies and easy goal and then a very questionable free kick gifted them another so that the led by four points as the siren rang.

Rhett’s main concern at the break was the fact that the Power hadn’t followed the match plan in terms of taking advantage of the wind and he urged the boys to maintain their pressure in contested issues all over the ground. Tall forward, Fraser Phillips capitalised on some excellent Power defence and ill-discipline by the Bushies to kick a vital goal against the wind and restore a narrow lead. Mason McGannon joined in the goal scoring with a skill full goal off a tight pack but the Bushies hit back on the rebound.

McGannon turned provider this time to allow Sam Berry to take full advantage another error by the Bushie’s runner and once again, the Power found themselves well ahead late in the term. An ordinary kick-in by the Power gifted the Bushie again but they weren’t quite finished again. They really punished the Power by taking the initiative after taking the ball from fullback to score a goal without the Power touching the ball or applying their traditional pressure.

Going in to the last term the Bushies led by five points but, critically, the Power had an even stronger breeze to take advantage of. There was intense pressure in most contests being applied by both sides but it was the Power who were able to have the ball in their attacking area for much of the quarter. The only problem was that they were kicking points rather than goals. Late in the quarter Phillips found Pepper and he kicked the only goal for the term. Despite the Bushies trying desperately late in the quarter the Power held on and won by three points.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 10 goals 9 behinds 69 points defeated Murray Bushrangers 9 goals 12 behinds 66 points. Goal kickers, Kyle Dunkley 3, Josh Smith and Harrison Pepper 2, Mason McGannon, Sam Berry and Fraser Phillips 1.

It didn’t take long for Kyle Dunkley to show how much he had developed his considerable talents whilst in Melbourne and especially with the Bulldogs during the pre-season. His ability to work productively in the heat of the action was exceptional as were his vision and ball skills by hand or foot. Once he gets to know teammates even better he will be the key to the team’s midfield unit. Kyle’s former Melbourne Grammar team mate, Sam Beery was another to make a stunning contribution to the win with his hardness and ability to be in the right place at the right time. He too initiated many positive passages of play as well as minimising the impact of opponents with ten plus tackles.

Ryan Sparkes made a stunning contribution in as an attacking defender in 2018 and took it even further with some time spent in the midfield. He was rarely beaten in one on one contests and took hi defensive and creative skills to another level. He showed the youngsters how to do it against good opponents whilst under continued pressure. Ben Maslen had limited opportunities last season but, has put in a really solid pre-season to stake a claim for a spot in this strong team. He took on and soundly held dangerous opponents with disciplined play under pressure but, more importantly, had the confidence and skill to back himself to win and effectively use many possessions.

Sam Flanders has also stepped up his work rate and has moved from being a very dangerous forward to become a key contributor to the midfield unit as well. He worked hard in the tightest contests and was one of the prime movers in many positive passages of the side best team-oriented football. His mid field clearance work was a highlight of his contribution. Last season, Tye Hourigan was runner-up in the club’s best and fairest award and showed once again why he was so important to the team. His ability to nullify the impact of key forwards with disciplined, hard-nosed defence and the confidence to win and effectively use vital possessions was to the fore yet again.

Zac Skinner is one of the clubs three players to exceed two-hundred centi-metres and was eager to claim the role as the team’s number one ruckman. He worked hard to be highly competitive in many rucking and marking contests but also had the skill and self-belief to apply pressure in contests at ground level. Harry Pepper is another player who has been challenged by the coaching panel to take his game up a notch from what he was able to do last season. He is also spending time in the midfield along with more traditional forward duties. His deceptive aerial skills and long, penetrating kicking enabled him to make a significant contribution all day.

Power supporters would have noticed that two of the “newbies” this season has well-known names at the club. Kyle Dunkley and Will Papley’s brothers were Power team mates in 2015 before becoming highly rated AFL players at the Bulldogs and Swans respectively. They played against each other in the 2016 AFL grand final and have since gone on to play fifty plus games since being drafted. Both were at the game watching their brothers and represented wonderful role models for the club as what can be achieved with hard work and dedication to total commitment.

Rhett and the other coaches have plenty of positives to focus on for the side’s next game against the Dandenong Stingrays at Morwell this Saturday. Their team-focused work rate was excellent and minimised the opportunities for the Bushies to score easily. The key issue to address is the effectiveness of the team’s conversion of forward fifty entries and it has been for many seasons. In some passages they were highly efficient but, for others they squandered far too much of team mate’s hard work up filed. Fix this “little” problem and they will be very hard to beat all season.