GIPPSLAND POWER MEDIA RELEASE

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Engie Gippsland Power travelled to Bendigo last weekend and emerged victorious over the Bendigo Pioneers. The win was achieved as a result of intense application the club’s trademark, hard-nosed football and had coach, Rhett McLennan, full of praise for their willingness to stick doggedly to the team’s game.

A minor shin injury to key tall player, Charlie Comben put added pressure on his fellow big men in the aerial duels. However, the return of Sam Berry, Tom Fitzpatrick, Mason McGarrity and Chance Doultree more than balanced the books in the Power’s favour in terms of team balance and competitiveness. Despite the fact that three of the inclusions were bottom agers, the club only had six “babies” in the team of twenty four.

This is an extremely rare occurrence in the Power’s twenty seven years in this elite competition but is a reflection of the high quality of the top-age group rather than a knock on that of the bottom agers. Ever since this group first appeared as the club’s under fifteen squad in 2016, they have been highly regard by the experts, some of whom are firm in the belief that they are the best group of youngsters in the Power’s history.

Conditions at the historic Queen Elizabeth Oval were perfect for football with a strong wind blowing from the west. The Pioneers had this advantage in the first term but it was the Power who took the early initiative and Sam Berry kicked the goal of the match with the vision and poise of a super star. Some excellent forward pressure created an opportunity for Fraser Phillips and he took full advantage of it.

Instead of building on the initiative shown in the first half of the term, the Power allowed the Pioneers to get some system into their play. An unnecessary turnover by the Power allowed the Pioneers to goal and then they kicked another from another error. As if this wasn’t bad enough, the Power defenders over-used the ball and went wide and short to “gift” the Pioneers with another.

By the first change, the Pioneers led by nine points but had done so by luck rather than beating the Power in general play. This was exactly why the Power had lost to the Stingrays last week when similar errors gave them four goals rather than them outplaying the Power to earn them. Rhett had plenty of things to be pleased about but, and it was a huge but, they needed to be far more thoughtful and skilful if they were going to be rewarded for their hardness all over the ground.

The Pioneers kicked the first of the second quarter via a dreadful umpiring decision and it put the Power under extreme pressure. To add to this scenario, the Power wasted hard-won scoring opportunities and it took some skill by Trent Baldi to break the self-imposed deadlock off the pack. Caleb Serong had been in the thick of the action and added to his value with a stunning goal from outside the fifty line.

The Power’s pressure had shut down the Pioneer’s ball movement and what did get through was squashed by the tight and disciplined Power defence. An intercept mark by Luke Williams typified this and he went forward long and direct to find Kyle Dunkley on the fifty metre line. As expected “Dunks” sent it through the middle and the Power went to the long break four points up. It was obviously better than the first term but, Rhett called for continued focus of purposeful play in the second half.

Just to emphasise this point, the Pioneers goaled first and had the Power on the back foot as a result. Not to be outdone, Harry Pepper kicked truly on the run after being set up with great skill and vision by Josh Smith. Another unnecessary turnover gave the Pioneers another and then the Power made this even worse by wasting their own opportunities. This wastefulness was accentuated even further when the Power’s inability to go long out of defence and the Pioneers went further ahead.

Some of the side’s renowned hardness in every contest set up a chance for Serong to take a strong, contested mark and he kicked truly. Josh Smith had stepped things up and won a vital possession and then cleverly found Will Papley who goaled to put the side eight points up late in the term. If the costly umpiring decision had been hurtful in the second term, then another “howler” had Power fans totally perplexed as the side was only two points up at the last change.

To add to this worrying situation, the Pioneers kicked a simple goal from the opening bounce of the quarter to regain the lead and let the Power know that they believed it was “game on.” Just when it was needed, Sam Flanders went long and direct to set Smith up for a free kick and goal. Despite dominating much of the general play due to their hardness and focus on the game plan, the Power began to miss gettable opportunities to put the issue beyond doubt.

As a result of their intense pressure and more direct attacking, the ball was in their attacking zone but goals were proving hard to come by. A clever intercept mark by Harvey Neocleous deep in the pocket was capped off by a skilful goal and the Power seemed to have finally seized the momentum when it mattered most. More opportunities were wasted but, Phillips applied forward pressure and goaled from the resultant free. More good defence resulted in a free downfield and Phillips was again able to kick truly.

By the final siren the Power’s winning margin had extended to twenty four points but their dominance of the quarter was shown by looking at more subtle issues. They had had nine scores to the Pioneers two but, more importantly, as the term progressed they had run the Pioneers into the ground with their persistent pressure all over the field. The Pioneers midfield were cramping and the Power were able to keep running freely in stark contrast.

Final siren, engie Gippsland Power 12 goals 10 behinds 82 points defeated the Bendigo Pioneers 8 goals 10 behinds 58 points. Goal kickers, Fraser Phillips 3, Caleb Serong 2, Sam Barry, Will Papley, Kyle Dunkley, Josh Smith, Harvey Neocleous, Trent Baldi and Harry Pepper 1.

AFL academy member Caleb Serong demonstrated his amazing talents in the Midfield and when moved up forward. His hardness in the tightest contests put pressure on opponents or won his many vital possessions. The key element to his contribution was the fact that he effectively used the ball by hand and foot as well as with astute vision and purpose. Fellow academy member Sam Flanders also had a stunning impact in the midfield unit. He too won many vital contested possessions as well as applying intense pressure with his ability to tackle fearlessly. When he had the chance to use the ball, he set a fine example by going quick, long and direct which gave team mates chances in one on one contests.

After being a key to the side’s effective defence in 2018, Ryan Sparkes has relished the chance to move into the midfield area. He applied his trademark pressure in every contest and, importantly, had the confidence to win and effectively use many possessions himself. As a member of the leadership group he again set the right example in the right scenarios. Up forward, Fraser Phillips had to play a more central role due to the loss of Charlie Comben. He responded manfully to the challenges involved and not only kicked three important goals but, far more crucially, was able to contest the aerial duels and work hard at ground level as well.

Speaking of leadership, Brock Smith again showed why he is the team’s captain. He takes on the opposition’s key attacking players and has the skill, self-belief and discipline to shut them down as well as win important possessions himself. He put himself in the thick of the action with his ability to read the play with great purpose. On baller, Zac Skinner had a huge task as he was challenged to do about seventy percent of the side’s ruckwork against skilled opponents. Not only did he respond manfully and win many of the key contests, but also had the confidence to be effectively involved in contests at ground level. His role in initiating many of the clearances by Serong, Flanders, Sparkes and Berry was critical.

It was a performance by the Power that had the coaching panel in a position to nominate many players amongst the better contributors. Accordingly, they were more than happy to have the impact of youngsters Tyran Rees and Zac Reid and old stagers Tye Hourigan, Josh Smith, Luke Williams and Jake Van der Pligt acknowledged as well. The NAB league now has a break where the majority of the squad return to their home clubs. The more elite members of the group will be involved in state squad duties with Power legend Leigh Brown.

The only negative from the impressive win by the Power is the fact that for the side’s next match, they will be will be without Caleb Serong, Sam Webb and Chance Doultree who be required to play school football for several weeks. While there are obviously negative consequences of this situation, it will give the selectors a chance to give players who haven’t played so far the opportunity to stake a claim for a spot in the team over the coming weeks.