A close up of a sign

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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Engie Gippsland Power recorded their most convincing win in the 2019 NAB league season after defeating the Calder Cannons by fifty points on Sunday. The Power went into the match with Sale City youngster, Tom Mann, making his debut while Jack Hume came in after Luke Williams withdrew due to a slight injury. Although still not at full capacity due to VFL and school football commitments, the Power appeared to have the advantage if relative ladder positions were taken into account.

Since the start of the season, Power coach Rhett McLennan, has worked closely with the boys to assist them to understand the individual and team requirements needed to effectively apply the team plan that he believed fitted their strengths and capabilities. Week by week they have attempted to follow the basic plan and have shown pleasing improvement on the way to recording five wins and a narrow loss in the first six matches. He saw the Calder clash as the prefect stepping stone in this development and challenged the boys to take full advantage of this opportunity.

In the opening minutes of the match neither side looked like scoring as the defensive units held sway despite being under intense pressure. However, the Power took the initiative with a long, penetrating forward thrust by Josh Smith and Sam Flanders marked strongly to open the scoring. Soon after this, a similar line of attack by Flanders and Riley Baldi was finished off by Josh with precise ball use. Rhett would have been delighted with these goals because the boys perfectly used key elements of the game plan to set them up.

As is the habit of Power sides, the boys were applying intense pressure in contests all over the ground and the Cannons were unable to kick goals as consequence. Late in the term some excellent ball use from deep in defence resulted in another strong mark by Josh and he again kicked truly. By the end of the quarter the Power led by sixteen points and had really played some excellent team football in the process.

Despite the positive start to the match, the Power began the second term on the back foot and were beginning to struggle to get effective passage of play started. Luckily the defence was withstanding the resultant pressure and limited the Cannons to one goal. In contrast, the Power wasted their fourteen forward fifty entries and could only manage three points for the whole quarter. This meant that the Power still led but the margin was reduced to eleven points by the long break.

Unsurprisingly, Rhett was displeased with the lack of focus in the second term and very quickly and strongly repeated his challenges to the boys with respect to the application of the team plan. The request “to park their egos” in the change rooms was his summation of the address and the boys appeared ready to refocus as the third term began. From the opening bounce the Power were on the offensive but were unable to kick goals on their early forward forays.

A long and direct attacking move by Will Papley and Riley Baldi resulted in a fine contested mark by Fraser Phillips and he kicked truly. As if inspired, Mason McGannon took a similar mark on the fifty metre line and then goaled with the assistance of a fifty metre penalty. Against the run of play, an atrocious umpiring decision gifted the Cannons with their only goal for the term but the Power were far from done as they went into overdrive in terms of team focus and adherence to the coach’s requests.

Long, penetrating attacking play by Tyran Rees and Phillips allowed Trent Baldi to kick a fine running goal and he then did it again after similar ball use by Charlie Comben and Tom Fitzpatrick. The boys were playing their best football for the season and the Cannons seemed powerless to cope with the intense physical and mental pressure being applied so ruthlessly. Some of this pressure in attack resulted in a rare scoring opportunity for captain Brock Smith and a goaled with great relish from outside the fifty metre line.

As the term progressed, the intensity of the pressure continued and Fraser won a free kick as the result of excellent forward pressure and kicked his second for the match. To put the seal on a disastrous term for the Cannons, Harry Pepper won a stunning free kick on the goal line and took full advantage of his “gift” opportunity. At the end of the quarter, the Power had extended their lead to forty seven points but had achieved far more in terms of what the coaches had asked for in the long break.

Their efforts in the third term were as impressive as they were ordinary in the second and they had been achieved by total commitment to the team plan as a unit and, more importantly, as individuals. In the initial minute of the final term, the Power were in attack but only scored points from these opportunities. It was the Cannons who goaled first on a rare forward foray and the Power then wasted more chances to resume their control of the momentum.

It took a fine intercept mark by Jake Van Der Pligt to allow him to put the ball deep into attack and, once again, Phillips was able to mark strongly in a contested situation. A late major by the Cannons reduced the Power lead but, on the siren, Phillips again took a wonderful contested mark and went back and kicked another long goal. His fourth goal extended the Power’s lead to fifty points and gave their supporters the result that they had been waiting for all season based on the potential ability that has been so obvious this year

As well as the on-field highlights of this match, there was one off the field where former Power player and now Sydney Swans star, Tom Papley watched his brother Will playing for his old team. Tom has justifiably had his life-sized photo put up in the club’s Centre of Excellence. He, like Leigh Brown and Dyson Heppell has played sixty or more AFL games in his first three seasons and joins a very small and highly elite group who have achieved this.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 12 goals 11 behinds 83 points defeated Calder Cannons 4 goals 9 behinds 33 points. Goal kickers, Fraser Phillips 4, Josh Smith and Trent Baldi 2, Mason McGannon, Sam Flanders, Brock Smith and Harry Pepper 1.

With the intense pressure being applied consistently by the Power, the midfield was where much of it was initiated. Leading the way from the opening bounce was Sam Flanders who worked tirelessly to win many contested possessions and then even harder to ensure that they were used to the team’s advantage all over the field. After excelling last week, Brock Smith continued to dominate dangerous opponents in the air and at ground level. He tackled ferociously and once again took many strong contested marks against Calder’s best forwards. The only down side in a stellar performance was the fact the he kicked a goal and his team mates will be told about it endlessly in the coming weeks.

Midfielder, Riley Baldi continued his return to his best form after an early season injury and was back to his competitive best in the tight contests all over the field. He won many contested possessions and ensured that he put them to effective use by kicking long and direct and handballing with vision and team focus. Another continuing to lay claim to being a vital cog in the team machine is key forward Fraser Phillips. He has always been a threat in attack but has been able to add highly competitive marking prowess to his ever increasing repertoire. His aerial skills and unique abilities at ground level make him difficult match up with for any opposition team.

Fraser’s partner in attack, Josh Smith, is also a key to the side’s excellent form with his competitiveness in the air as well as his intensity in contests at ground level. His second and third efforts are a vital element to his unselfish and team oriented approach to his role in the side. Josh’s leadership stands out especially when he goes on-ball and is as effective in terms of team focus. Trent Baldi joined his twin Riley in the best with a fine game in the mid-field unit. He was able to win many contested possessions, apply intense pressure as well as kicking two clever goals due to his astute reading of the play. He was important in many of the positive passages of play by being able to win and then effectively use the ball by hand and foot.

Once again, the coaching panel had justifiable cause to want to include several other players in their list of more positive contributors. On-ball, top-agers Jake Van Der Pligt and Ryan Sparkes have always been vital members of the team’s defence and have taken it up a notch as they moved into the mid field this season. Bottom-agers Tyran Rees and Zach Reid have started their NAB league careers like Jake and Ryan. They both seem to have the skill, and poise under pressure of veterans and are un-phased in accepting greater responsibility each week. After missing last week, Leo Connolly returned in fine style and coolly generated many of the positive passages of play from defence.

The Power now goes to Melbourne for its next match against the GRV Rebels at Windy Hill. On paper this again appears to be a winnable contest but Rhett and his coaching panel will be working hard to ensure that the boys are prepared mentally for what’s involved in adhering to the team plan that they are developing. For an increasing amount of time in recent games, they have stuck to the plan and, for much of the Cannons match, they did so brilliantly.

Without going over the top, Rhett will “remind” them of what went wrong in the second quarter against the Cannons and will be working with them to help them to develop the self-confidence and skills to make the team plan work more flawlessly. The intensity in contests, bringing the ball quickly out of defence and effective conversion of scoring opportunities are the basics of the plan and it’s obvious that they now understand their roles in each of these aspects.