A close up of a sign

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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Round eight of the 2019 NAB League presented engie Gippsland Power with a genuine challenge to maintain their steady improvement under coach, Rhett McLennan. Since the start of the season, the Power have worked hard to learn and effectively implement the game plan that Rhett and his assistants believed suited them and would make them highly competitive in this elite competition.

One of the advantages that the coaches have is the fact that the top-age boys are one of the best groups of players in the clubs long history. However, this alone wouldn’t be enough to guarantee success, and Rhett has worked with each boy to vastly extend their comfort zones by challenging them to add new skills to their existing talents within a team focus. Since the opening round they have responded well to these challenges and have taken their individual and team skills well beyond their previous comfort zones.

Six wins and a narrow loss from the first seven matches accurately reflected this improvement and, unfortunately for the Greater Western Victoria Rebels, they were the latest victims of the Power’s progress to effectively implementing the coach’s game plan. A fifty three point win is pleasing under any circumstances but, to do so with the poise, skills and team focus exhibited by the Power is far more pleasing for Rhett and his assistants.

Going into the match, the Power had Flynn Shields, Jess McGrath and Berkley McFarlane back in the team after playing earlier in the season. This meant that this definitely was the clubs oldest team in twenty eight seasons with only four of the team being bottom age. In ideal conditions at Windy Hill, the Power opened with their usually intense pressure in all contests and forward, Fraser Phillips, led the way to set up Josh Smith for the side’s first goal.

An injury to Jack Hume put extra pressure on the team rotations and, while they adjusted, the Rebels scored against the run of general play. The boys were working hard to get the game plan going effectively but weren’t as accurate as required and wasted some opportunities. It took some excellent forward pressure to set up Sam Flanders and then Phillips followed suit with a clever goal as a result of his intense pressure.

Whenever the Rebels did go into attack the Power defensive unit responded manfully and set up attacking moves with great vision. Some more of the side’s trademark pressure by Trent Baldi and Flanders allowed Riley Baldi to kick a fine team goal. Ben Maslen implemented another key element of the game plan by going quick, long and direct into attack and Mason McGannon coolly finished it off with another goal.

By the first break, the Power led by twenty six points and had achieved this by disciplined application of the game plan. In the opening minutes of the second term, Josh Smith used his uncanny ball skills to kick his second for the game but, the Rebels responded with the benefit of an “iffy” free kick. Some scoring opportunities were wasted by the Power but, after some excellent pressure by Jess McGrath he converted his well-deserved free kick.

More of the Power’s effective use of the ball and intense pressure in contests were capped off by another “Smithy” special after some assistance by Harry Pepper on the goal line. Late in the quarter another quick, long and direct attacking move was capitalised on by Harvey Neocleous and he gave the Power a forty-four point lead at the long break.

In the opening part of the third term, the Power had the Rebels on the back foot with their intense pressure and, this time Trent Baldi was able to craft a clever snapped goal as a result. Once again the Power defenders were making life hard for the Rebels by working as a close-knit unit and they had the confidence and discipline to set up many attacking moves. One of these forward forays resulted in a goal to Mason McGarrity and, then they did it again to set up Phillips for his second for the match.

In the latter part of the quarter the Power’s focus on the game plan eased off a little and the Rebels capitalised twice to remind their opponents that they needed to stay on track to keep their coaches smiling. They went to the last change forty-seven points up and had given Rhett some ammunition to use to refocus the boys. He did so with his usual low-key approach with the main element being positive.

It appeared as if Rhett’s message had been a little too low key as the boys struggled to get back to the game plan the had been so effective for much of the match. This was highlighted by the Rebels when they took the ball from deep in defence to score a fine goal without the Power having any impact on the process. Finally, the Power upped the ante and went into attack where Leo Connolly kicked an important goal.

The Power were applying better forward pressure and McGarrity, Neocleous and Charlie Comben combined artfully to give Flanders a chance to score which he cleverly converted. Just when it looked like the Rebels were on the back-foot, they scored a fine goal from the resultant centre bounce and put pressure back on the Power. With minutes to go, tall defender Zach Reid was injured while playing in attack and had to be assisted from the ground.

The Power defence was at it again with their astute reading of the play and clever generation of attacking football. The last forward thrust generated this was capped off by McGarrity and the final score indicated that the Power had won by fifty three points. This was a significant result for the Power that had been achieved by almost four quarters of the team’s game plan. The minor deviations will be addressed in coming weeks but, the pattern of the victory is an excellent reflection of the side’s steady improvement.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 15 goals 8 behinds 98 points defeated Greater Western Victoria Rebels 6 goals 9 behinds 45 points. Goal kickers, Josh Smith 3, Sam Flanders, Fraser Phillips and Mason McGarrity 2, Mason McGannon, Riley Baldi, Leo Connolly, Harvey Neocleous, Jess McGrath and Trent Baldi 1.

Fraser Phillips is one of the boys who has taken his game into another dimension as the result of hard work and incredible focus. He has added strong, contested marking and intense pressure in the forward line to his existing skills as a clever forward capable of being dangerous at times. He is now dominating many of the key passages of attacking football. Riley Baldi has always been a vital cog in the midfield unit of the side but, he too, has added to his impressive folio of skills. He has now become the “quarterback” of the team by generating highly effective ball use with his hand and foot skills despite being under intense pressure. His self-belief is the key to this development and he is thriving on the extra responsibility.

If Josh Smith’s basic stats for the match were the main focus of his game analysis then twenty five possessions, five marks and three goals reflect a fine contribution. However, being average has never been his style and once again his impact was far greater than what these stats reflect. His intense competitiveness in aerial contests and at ground level make him a wonderful leader for his mates. Yet another player who has responded to Rhett’s challenge to improve his contribution to the team is Sam Flanders. The All-Australian is obviously highly skilled but, he has added a whole range of new components to this stunning array. He is alternating between the forward line and midfield and is excelling in each area. Consequently, he makes it almost impossible for opponents to counteract.

In 2018, Jake Van Der Pligt was a highly effective back man for the side but he now has a far more expansive role as a midfielder who even goes forward as well. He has always been highly competitive in one-on-one contests due to his excellent reading of the play and fine skills. He is mow having this impact in his expanded role and is becoming more important each week. Key defender and captain, Brock Smith again led by stellar example with his disciplined focus on the game plan. He minimised the impact of a key opponent but also accumulated twenty plus possessions that he utilised to telling effect. The highlight of his contribution was his uncanny ability to take highly contested marks.

The coaches also credited Tom Mann, Berkeley McFarlane and Mason McGannon for their contributions to the fine team win. Tom again belied his relative inexperience by being calm cool and collected under the most intense pressure. Berkeley also had to up the ante in the midfield and was highly competitive in contests and cool when using the ball. Mason was one of the hard-nosed forwards as well as linking effectively in positive forward thrusts.

The NAB league now has a development week for state squad duties. At least twelve Power players will be involved this way and the other boys who have played for most of the eight rounds will be rested. They have worked very hard to be a part of this excellent team and have some tough games coming up against the Sandringham Dragons and Oakleigh Dragons. The state team has six matches in the championships and many Power players will be in the se sides. Consequently, there will be many chances for boys currently on the fringe of selection to put themselves forward for selection.