A close up of a sign

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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Engie Gippsland Power faced their most challenging match in the 2019 NAB League season when they took on the Sandringham Dragons last Sunday. It wasn’t the relative ladder positions that set the Power such a problem, but the fact that they went into the match without fourteen of their best starting team due to a combination of a phenomenal nine having state duties, two being involved in school football commitments, two with minor injuries and newly selected AFL player, Kyle Dunkley.

The boys who were in the team which defeated the more esteemed Metro side were Caleb Serong, Sam Flanders, Riley Baldi, Brock Smith, Ryan Sparkes, Josh Smith, Charlie Comben, Fraser Phillips and Harrison Pepper. Sam Berry and Chance Doultree were required for school football while Zach Reid and Jack Hume were those missing due to injury. Never in the club’s history has such a situation occurred and it presented the perfect test for the ability of the team to respond positively to the challenges involved.

Given such a rare scenario, Rhett and his selectors went deep into the available playing stocks to find a team that was capable of matching a highly rated Dragons team. Rhett had to set a range of tasks for the individuals in the team due to the wide range of experience that they reflected. His easiest task was to work with the established top-agers who had already developed the awareness, skill and endeavour needed to be highly competitive in the elite competition.

Rhett’s main role here was to ask for the same application again plus, high level leadership to show the way for their many inexperienced team mates. He was obviously very confident with this aspect of his challenge as they had already raised the bar in terms of these situations this season and had the character necessary to go one step further. The second group within the team were those boys who had been played some games this season but weren’t regularly selected.

Those facing the greatest challenge were the five bottom-age players who were to make their Power debuts. Ryan Angwin (Foster), Harrison Dawson (Wonthaggi), Sage Tapner (Bunyip), Dean McRae (Wonthaggi) and Mitchell Nicholas (Korumburra-Bena). These boys were already on a very steep learning curve and really had to be ready for the toughest football that they had ever played. Rhett encouraged them to back themselves and take risks as they would be so well supported by the “old boys” and, more importantly, that he had faith in their ability to cope.

Both teams were obviously undermanned but it was the Power opened the match well. However, due to some minor errors in terms of skills and decision making hadn’t finished it off with what mattered most, goals. In stark contrast, the Dragons kicked an easy goal to claim the early lead. Finally the Power got their game going due to the standard formula of QLD (Quick, Long and Direct). Mason McGannon and Zac Skinner combined this way to allow Leo Connolly to score a vital goal.

The Power were applying their trademark pressure very effectively but, unfortunately, couldn’t convert these hard-won possessions to what they really deserved, scoreboard pressure. By the end of the term the Power led by three points but easily have been three or four goals ahead. This fact was reinforced by the Dragons in the opening minutes of the second quarter when they scored a goal from the opening bounce.

Jess McGrath found Moe team mate Zac Skinner who took a stunning contested mark which converted to a vital six points. As if inspired, Sage Tapner went QLD but, this time Zac missed the goal. For much of the next ten minutes, the Power were in control of play due to their endeavour and application of the team plan. However, they again wasted several chances to put pressure on the Dragons due to poor finishing.

This fact was then reinforced when one of the errors resulted in a turnover that the Dragons gratefully exploited with another critical goal. More skill and decision making blunders saw the Power miss more gettable scores missed and it took a good mark and goal by McGannon which gave the Power a two point lead. Rhett and his assistants had much to be pleased about in terms of the key elements of the game plan like hardness in contests but, the poise and confidence in finishing things off efficiently was the one factor that had let them down.

In the early part of the third quarter the Power continued to squander possessions and the Dragons scored two easy goals as a result of the consequent turnovers. The Power were working really hard to get things right but the Dragons scored again to extend their lead to almost three goals. In response to the scoreboard pressure, the Power upped their work rate and some excellent forward pressure by Berkley McFarlane and McGannon was finished off by Mason McGarrity.

Just when it appeared the Power were back in the contest, the Dragons kicked a fine goal from deep in the pocket. To add insult to injury, the Power missed another opportunity and the Dragons went to the last break seventeen points up. Once again, much of what Rhett had to say was very positive but he needed to reinforce the need to finish off their hard work with more poise and precision. Endeavour and hard-nosed pressure were still evident, especially amongst the debutants so there was still hope for the boys to get back into the match.

Both sides were hard at it early in the last term but the Dragons broke the deadlock from a free kick. Some wonderful handball under pressure by Harvey Neocleous found Zach Soutar and he kicked the vital reply. For much of the rest of the term the Power began to struggle with momentum and turnovers allowed the Dragons to seize the initiative. They were able to score two relatively easy goals as a result and had the game won. Better ball use by the Power allowed Luke Williams to mark and goal and, consequently, the final margin was twenty five points the Dragons way.

Final scores Sandringham Dragons 10 goals 8 behinds 68 points defeated engie Gippsland Power 6 goals 7 behinds 43 points, Goal Kickers, Mason Mc Gannon, Leo Connolly, Mason McGarrity, Zach Soutar, Luke Williams and Zac Skinner 1.

When the team needed leadership from the “old boys” it was captain, Tye Hourigan who led by stellar example. He has always thrived on responding to challenges both physically and mentally. Once again he was never beaten one out but, really excelled with his ability to win twenty possessions and five marks and use each one with the maximum of impact. After only a couple of games Tom Mann has quickly adapted to the unique demands of NAB League and took his contribution to a stunning standard in this match. He was rock solid in defence and took eight mostly contested marks. He won nearly twenty possessions and had the confidence, pace and skill to initiate a lot of attacking play.

After missing two matches due to injury, youngster, Tyran Rees thrived on the opportunity to be part of the vital midfield unit. He belied his relative inexperience with his willingness to work hard to win nearly twenty possessions and take ten vital marks. His self-belief was evident when he used each possession positively. Jake Van Der Pligt has already taken his game to another level this season and once again worked tirelessly in his new role as a midfielder. When it really mattered, his ability to apply intense pressure was reflected by nine crunching tackles as a crucial part of his all-round contribution.

Line Tyran, Brandon McAuliffe has quickly won and consolidated a place in the team despite being the youngest on the list. He was challenged to play the quarterback role in defence where he had to have the skill and self-confidence to win many possessions and then initiate positive passages of team play. He did this faultlessly all day to indicate that he was ready to accept the vital role. Top-ager Luke Williams is another who has upped the ante this season and he too was given even more responsibility in this game. Like Tye and Jake he thrived on this challenge and was able to be highly competitive in contests in the air and at ground level. In a fine game he had the determination to win and use many possessions effectively.

Zac Skinner was given the vital task of being the focal point in attack and he too had the discipline and work ethic required to do so consistently all day. If he couldn’t mark the ball he contested well and ensured that small forwards had chances to win the ball. Debutant, Dean McRae was also given a touch task in defence and backed his skills and judgement to soundly defeat dangerous opponents. He too won many possessions and used them intelligently.

Rhett and his assistants now have to work with the boys to eliminate the unnecessary turnovers and to build on the many positives that were so evident in this match. The situation regarding the state team will continue for several weeks so this group will need to respond to these challenges. On a positive note, the injury list should reduce and the rookies will now be better prepared to cope with the pressures of elite football. Next Saturday, the Power take on the Western Jets at Morwell and this will also need them to be on task from the opening bounce.