A close up of a sign

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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Round nine of the 2019 NAB League saw engie Gippsland Power again with the vast majority of their best team missing and, subsequently, a lot of pressure being placed on the least experienced members of the squad. State duties, injuries and school football commitments meant that there were ten bottom agers in the team with most of them having only played a couple of these elite matches. Phillip Island’s Daniel Bourke came in for his debut while fellow bottom-ager Tom Fitzpatrick returned after having played earlier in the season.

Western Jets, their opponents, similarly had several missing due to state football as well but represented a severe challenge to the Power as they were similarly placed on the ladder to the Power. Rhett and the assistant coaches were well aware of the need to minimise the turnovers that were so costly last week and had spent a lot of time building up the boys self-belief needed to allow them to be more competitive. Unfortunately, for much of the game, they were on the back foot and allowed the Jets to dictate terms. For only one quarter they backed their coach’s belief in them and almost pulled off a stunning win against the odds.

Things looked good for the Power early in the match when some of their trademark intense pressure saw Zac Skinner set up Harvey Neocleous for the opening goal. Instead of following up this effective play, they wasted gettable opportunities by poor decisions or ball skills and a resultant turnover gave the Jets a simple reply. An iffy free kick added to the Power’s woes but they were still not making the most of their hard work to win tight contests. It took some more precise ball use by Mason McGarrity and Jess McGrath to find Leo Connolly and he finished their good work off.

Late in the term it appeared that the Power had realised what was needed and, led by the defence, seemingly had stemmed the flow of Jets goals. However, the Jets had other ideas and kicked to easy goals after exploiting lapses in the Power’s level of application. By the first changeover the Jets led by fifteen points and Rhett had plenty of issues to discuss with the boys to address the problems that had been so costly. It didn’t take long for him to realise that there were still problems as the Jets scored the opening goal from the first bounce.

It took some time, but the Power upped their work rate and once again the Jets couldn’t kick goals. Instead of capitalising on this the boys really struggle to make effective use of the ball and were going far too short or missing targets. This continued for much of the term and the ball rarely entered their forward fifty zone, let alone resulting in any scoreboard pressure being reduced. To add insult to injury, the Jets scored a late goal after more indecision and went to the half time break twenty nine points up and well and truly in control of the match.

Blind Freddie would have predicted that the half time address by the coaches wasn’t going to be focused on many positives and they firmly reminded the boys what was needed in terms of capitalising on good defence. More long, direct and precise ball use was an obvious need but it was addressed in terms of the coach’s belief that they were capable of making the changes. Once again, the Power didn’t start well and more wasted opportunities “gifted’ the Jets with a vital goal. Adding to the problem was the fact that the umpiring wasn’t first rate and both sides had increasing trouble understanding decisions.

After forty-five minutes of being unable to score a goal, the Power, via Mason Mc Gannon, set up Neocleous to kick a crucial goal by the sort of play that the coaches had called for all day. Harvey then took things into his own hands and outfoxed two opponents to create a stunning goal to put the Power back into the contest. As if inspired, the Power were using the ball better and Fitzpatrick went long and direct to allow Captain, Jake Van Der Pligt to kick a great goal. Some more vision and precise ball use by Tyran Rees, Trent Baldi and Brandon McAuliffe resulted in a critical goal to youngster Ryan Angwin.

The Jets lead was now ten Points and it appeared that the Power had finally got back into the style of play that the regular side had been so successful with for much of the 2019 season. Things got even better at the start of the last quarter when Neocleous, with great pressure, kicked his fourth for the match. Yet again, the poor umpiring decisions were impacting on play and further confusion was felt by both teams. For example, after eighty five minutes of play, they rewarded an effective tackle for the first time and then paid four more for the rest of the term.

Against the run of general play, the Jets scored two goals to seeming put the issue beyond doubt. The Power had other ideas and maintained to more productive play but couldn’t convert where it mattered most, the scoreboard. Two “posters” didn’t help and by the end of the match, the Jets had held on for an eighteen point win. Obviously, the loss was disappointing for the club, but, and it’s a crucial but, the younger Power team had shown themselves how effectively they could compete when they backed their ability to win and use the ball.

Final scores, Western Jets 9 goals 11 behinds 65 points defeated engie Gippsland Power 7 goals 5 behinds 47 points. Goal kickers, Harvey Neocleous 4, Ryan Angwin, Leo Connolly and Jake Van Der Pligt 1.

Harvey Neocleous has always been a skilled small forward and in recent matches has been given a vital role in the midfield rotation. He combined both brilliantly by generating play from twenty plus contested possessions and then using his uncanny skills to kick telling goals when the team used it the most. He has expanded his value for the Power for the next few matches and, more importantly, once the team gets the key players back. Jake Van Der Pligt is another thriving on greater responsibility and, when given this week’s captaincy, took it to an even higher level. His on-ball duties saw him win many vital possession in tight situations and then ensure that he used them to the best of his ability. His no fuss but hard-nosed style isn’t pretty but his intensity makes him a key prime mover for the side.

Since his first match for Power in 2018, Tye Hourigan has been one of the side’s best defenders, especially when given the role to minimise the impact of the opposition’s best and tallest forwards. He achieves this with disciplined defence but also uses his skills and judgement to win and effectively many possessions himself. The fact that he took eight contested marks reflects how well he did this. Ben Maslen is another to respond to the challenge to move well up on his NAB League learning curve by responding to the need to take greater responsibility. He leads by example and is rarely beaten one-on-one due to his work ethic and disciplined play. In recent games he has backed himself to generate passages of play with pace, skill and good ball use.

Relative “old-timer” Leo Connolly was another to lead by example and capitalise on an expanded role as a mid-fielder. He too relished the chance to generate effective ball use as well as being an efficient avenue in attack for his team mates. His twenty five possessions indicate how hard he worked in both roles and how important he is in setting the tone of the team’s play. In his second game for the Power Wonthaggi youngster, Dean McCrae was asked to take a significant role in defence against the Jets taller forwards. Like he did in his debut, he responded manfully to the challenges involved and was very competitive in doing so. The key to his contribution was the fact that he backed himself and also won and effectively used vital possessions.

Coach, Rhett also praised the contributions made by youngsters Tom Mann, Ryan Angwin and “newbie” Daniel Bourke. Tom had roles in defence and the mid-field and was able to make a telling contribution in both areas with his willingness to use his skills and pace. Ryan belied his inexperience in aerial contests and at ground level to win many possessions against bigger and more experienced opponents. Daniel impressed the coach by responding to the need to play as a key forward and in the ruck and he did so very competitively.

The Power now has another bye and, with a bit of luck, will be able to regain some of the state players and reduce the injury list. Most of the regular players will have a well-deserved rest while a few will return to their home clubs. After the break there will still be national championship matches and the Power will be well represented throughout. Therefore it’s vital that those who have stepped up in the Power side learn from the past two matches and continue to minimise the errors and paly the sort of team focused football that was evident in the third quarter.