A close up of a sign

Description generated with very high confidenceA close up of a sign

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BY BRYAN MITCHELL

The return of several key players gave engie Gippsland Power the ability to cope positively with the pressure of playing the Oakleigh Chargers, one of the NAB League’s best teams. Captain, Brock Smith and Ryan Sparkes, Charlie Comben, Fraser Phillips and Harry Pepper were available for limited time after state duties while Sam Berry returned from school football commitments. Adding to the influx of talent was Koo Wee Rup’s youngster Nick Prowd who made his debut and took the number of bottom-agers in the team to ten.

Even the most pessimistic Power fan would have been excited by so much talent coming back into the side, but, still waiting on the sidelines were star state players Caleb Serong, Sam Flanders, Riley Baldi and Josh Smith. Injured players, Zach Reid, Chance Doultree, and Mitch Bentvelzen were also watching on so it meant that, in total, there were at least one-third of the team’s best possible team still unavailable. In contrast, the Chargers had all of their state team members missing but had some returning from school football needs so that they were still going to be highly competitive in this match.

Neither side could get their game going early in the first quarter and, it took some of the Power’s trademark pressure to set up Fraser Phillips for a strong lead and contested mark and goal. The Chargers replied not long after and then Nick Prowd used his first kick in the NAB League to give his team the lead. The Power’s application of intense pressure in contests all over the ground limited the Chargers ability to get any fluent play started and, when they had control of the ball, they were applying the team focus that is the key to their game plan.

More forward pressure saw the ball delivered quickly and it allowed Mason McGarrity to rove the pack cleverly and kick a fine goal. As if inspired, Charlie Comben, Jake Van Der Pligt used vision and great skill to set up Harvey Neocleous for a wonderful team goal but, the Power then wasted a couple of “gettable” opportunities to extend their lead beyond twenty points at the end of the quarter. Everything about the team’s performance would have pleased the coaches and they would have no expectation that the boys would lose the plot so badly in the next term.

Things looked positive early in the second quarter when the Power attacked directly and Tom Fitzpatrick took the advantage of a fifty metre penalty to extend the lead. A turnover gave the Chargers the opportunity to get back into the game and then the Power added to the problem by missing more chances to regain control. They then added insult to injury by not following the game plan and began to overuse the ball and complicate what, basically, was simple play. The result was that the Power were unable to create scoring opportunities but, at least they held the Chargers scoreless at the same time.

With minutes to go, the umpires intervened and, an awful decision gifted the Chargers with a freebie against the run of play. As if this wasn’t bad enough, they really compounded the problem by penalising a Power player for rightfully questioning what was the wrong decision in the first place. By the end of the term the Power were only five points up and, seemingly, had put the Chargers back into the contest. It didn’t take much to assume what Rhett and his assistants were focussed on during the break and they simply challenged the boys to get back to the hard-nosed, team oriented game plan that was the trademark of the side.

They responded quickly to the challenge issued and some of the pressure resulted in a second goal, this time on the run, to Phillips. Some opportunities were then wasted and it took some clever play by Harry Pepper to kick a fine goal on the run from defence. The boys were using the ball far smarter and Will Papley went long into attack where Fraser was able to make something from nothing to kick his third for the match. The Chargers had few scoring opportunities due to the pressure being applied on their midfield and the tightness of the Power defence.

Late in the quarter the Power upped the ante with more positive ball use in the midfield and Fraser then kicked a brilliant goal on the run from fifty metres out. They then did it again and, this time, it was Mitch Nicholas who set up Jake Van Der Pligt for another from the fifty metre line. By the end of the term the Power had extended the lead to thirty nine points as a result of a return to the no fuss game plan that Rhett had so subtly reminded them of at half time. What was so important was the fact that they totally shut down the Chargers scoring and had generated many positive attacking moves from defence.

Once again the Power started with the right sort of play and, after going long and direct into attack, Fitzpatrick kicked the first goal on the run. Some more excellent, intense pressure in the contests resulted in a goal to Leo Connolly and then Fraser hit the post for the second time from deep in the forward pocket. However, he wasn’t done with yet and kicked his fifth for the match after a free kick was transferred from up field. The umpires then gifted the Chargers with another freebie and they deservedly got another late in the term to reduce the final margin to forty-five points by the final siren.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 13 goals 12 behinds 90 points defeated Oakleigh Chargers 6 goals 9 behinds 45 points. Goal kickers, Fraser Phillips 5, Tom Fitzpatrick 2, Leo Connolly, Harvey Neocleous, Mason McGarrity, Nick Prowd, Jake Van Der Pligt and Harry Pepper 1.

When reflecting on the match afterwards, Rhett congratulated the boys for the three quarters of football that allowed them to dominate the game against such a good team. He highlighted the fact that they had responded so manfully to the challenge that he had given them at half time and had stuck to the game plan that they know works so well. What was even more important was the fact that some of the inexperienced boys had played such a positive role in defence and in the midfield when setting up the positive attacking play.

On a day when he kicked five goals, hit the post twice and missed another, Fraser Phillips obviously had a fine game. He not only did things so well as a tall, marking forward but was equally as dangerous at ground level in contests and when in the clear and on the run. His twenty plus possessions and five marks further reflect the quality of that performance as well as the obvious five goals. Captain, Brock Smith was at his best as the team’s key defender and did the basic part brilliantly by nullifying his dangerous opponents. However, he also backed himself to win nearly thirty possessions and did so by taking ten marks and backing his ability to read the play and win possessions at ground level with his brand of one-on-one intense pressure.

With some of the side’s key midfielders unavailable, Leo Connolly was challenged to take on that responsibility and he did so magnificently. He worked tirelessly all day in the contests at ground level and provided team mates with a positive and highly effective avenue into attack. His thirty plus possessions and eight marks accurately reflect the degree to which he applied himself to his increased role for the team. Midfielder, Ryan Sparkes, returned from state football duties and made the most of his limited time on the field. He thrived on the need to lead teammates from the front and also had well over twenty possessions as a consequence. As he has always done, he excelled when in high pressure contests and won many contested possessions as a result of his total commitment.

Harry Pepper was another give a more responsible role and thrived on being the team “quarterback” in defence. This meant that not only did he have to beat opponents but, more importantly, had the challenge of consistently setting up attacking play on the rebound. His marking ability and willingness to back himself to win and use many possessions with long and direct ball use was vital in the win. Maffra youngster, Sam Berry, was back after school football commitments and quickly had a huge influence in the side’s midfield. He too was at his best in the grittiest contests at ground level as well as providing a consistent avenue into attack with ten marks, many of which were contested. It was obvious that he was so happy to be back with his team mates and is looking forward to more such opportunities in coming weeks.

As he has done all season, Rhett highlighted the importance of more than the six boys named in the best. Tom Fitzpatrick has always had considerable potential and was able to use his talents effectively by following the team plan to the letter. He does the unusual instinctively and is impossible to hold when he does so. Fellow bottom ager, Brandon McAuliffe has become a key player in a good side but has really excelled in recent matches with so many missing. He once again backed himself to win and effectively use many contested possessions. In his first match, Nick Prowd was used in key positions and thrived in the tightly contested situations. His disciplined application of the team plan rules stood out in his debut game.

The Power now faces the Geelong Falcons at Dandenong next Saturday. Both sides will have their best players with state football requirements so should be equally affected as a consequence. On a positive note, the Power might get some key players like Zach Reid back from injury and will be greatly strengthened as a result. On paper, the Falcons don’t represent a severe challenge to the Power due to relative ladder positions but, the two clubs have always risen to higher levels in these matches. It would be foolish to underestimate them in this game and Rhett will ensure that the boys are positively focused on the challenges involved.