GIPPSLAND POWER MATCH REPORT

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

A match without nine of its best players due to national championship commitments. Their opponents, Geelong Falcons, also had key boys missing but nowhere near the number that Power were without. Consequently, the Power had their youngest side for several seasons as they had thirteen bottom agers in their team. One of those, Mason Hawkins, made his debut in the elite competition while several of the boys had only played a handful of games between them.

Conditions at Shepley Oval in Dandenong were atrocious with pouring rain and a strong wind blowing towards the Gippsland end of the ground. The Falcons won the toss and kicked with the gale and, subsequently had an early goal despite some hard work by the Power defence. A turnover gave the Falcons another opportunity which they gratefully capitalised upon. For the next fifteen minutes the Power stemmed the flow of goals but created few opportunities for themselves. They were overusing handball and not really playing the sort of football needed in such conditions.

Late in the quarter, the Geelong boys received an absolute gift goal from an “iffy” free kick and an even more dubious fifty metre penalty. They led the Power by 22 points but, far more importantly, had limited their number of forward fifty entries to a handful with nothing on the scoreboard as a result. It appeared that it was at least a three goal wind advantage in operation but the boys needed to be far more effective in setting play up if they were to take advantage of the “breeze.” Rhett and his assistants had plenty to discuss at the first break but were quietly confident that they were capable of responding positively.

The rain was continuing and the wind seemed even stronger as the Power began to get their game plan going. Bottom-ager, Sam Berry capped off some good work with a crucial goal from the fifty metre line and it was game on. The boys had upped their work rate in terms of pressure but were still struggling to finish off their increased effort where it mattered most, the scoreboard. Midway through the quarter, the Falcons capitalised twice on such wastefulness and extended their lead to over four goals on a day when low scores were the trend of the matches.

Rhett had plenty of issues to “discuss” with the boys and an analysis of some of the key statistics reflected these points. The most obvious was the fact that the Falcons had had nearly twenty more forward fifty entries than the Power and even more importantly had drawn a comparison to the old “Bourke Street tram” analogy. It referred to the number of passengers in such a conveyance and the Power had eight non-contributors who had had either one or no possessions in a half of football. Rhett highlighted the fact that it appeared that they didn’t have the character to meet the challenges of such a match but, encouraged them to believe that they could respond positively.

Although the rain had disappeared, the wind was still a major factor and the Power needed to minimise the Falcons opportunities to exploit it. All day the Power defence had been manful in their efforts to reduce the scoreboard pressure but, crucially, the onballers had struggled to apply the club’s trademark intensity in the usually dominant midfield. Rhett and his assistants made some very important changes to this structure and some of the younger, inexperienced boys were set intense challenges as a result.

The impact was immediate and the Power were far more competitive in these crucial contests. Against the run of play, the Falcons scored a gift goal on the eight minute mark but the Power responded well and further upped the ante in contests all over the ground. The second and third efforts of bigger players like Mitch Nicholas and second-gamer Nick Prowd minimised the impact of the Falcons midfield and their scoring opportunities disappeared. After some excellent forward pressure, Trent Baldi kicked a critical goal and the momentum had swung in the Power’s way when it mattered most.

The Falcons still led by twenty seven points at the last change but, mentally, the Power were right back in the contest and the pressure was on the Falcons well and truly. Obviously Rhett focused on the many positives of the third term and further encouraged the boys to continue to back themselves in the contests all over the ground. They responded immediately with the trademark forward pressure and Mason McGaritty took full advantage of his well-deserved free kick. As if inspired, they kept up the intense forward pressure and this time it was Tyran Rees who belied his size with another free kick and goal.

The Falcons seemed to be shell-shocked and couldn’t win easy possessions anywhere due to the pressure from the Power defence, midfield and then forward line. After even more forward pressure it was Berry’s turn to set the tone and he kicked his second as a result. Suddenly the Power were within two kicks of the Falcons and totally controlled the initiative all over the field. It looked as if Sage Tapner had scored a unique “freak” goal from deep in the pocket but it was supposedly touched off his boot. However, this was a mere side issue as Berry again tackled fiercely to win another free kick and the margin was now less than one goal.

With ten minutes to go, Tapner found Dean McRae who the kicked cleverly to give Brandon McAuliffe a chance to capitalise on a rare visit to the forward line. He finished it off as expected and the Power were four points in front with not much time left. Totally against the run of play, the Falcons went into attack and took advantage of an “iffy” free kick. It was now crunch time for the Power and they again responded manfully with their intense pressure. Tom Fitzpatrick deservedly won a free kick and then went long and direct to find Zach Reid who was back in the side after missing several games due to injury. He too never looked like missing and then the boys dug even deeper to ensure the win in the dying minutes.

If ever there was a match in two distinct halves this was it for the Power. The first half was nothing like their normal game plan and intensity and allowed the Falcons to basically control the match. However once the “reminder” was given at half time and they were challenged to have faith in themselves, they took control of the key elements of the match and emerged victorious. Importantly the Power returned to the best components of the game plan and the longer the game went, the better they played. Crucially, it also meant that they limited the Falcons application and effectiveness all over the field.

To kick six goals in the last quarter and have the ball in attack for well over eighty percent of the time was wonderful, but when you consider where they had come from before that it really was an exceptional win. This point was highlighted by Rhett after the game as he heaped praise on them for their ability to regain focus and play so well in the second half. He reflected that when they are old men with grey beards and remembering the “good old days” they will always remember this performance and their contribution to it. He stressed that pride in performance will be the key to this memory forever.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 8 goals 5 behinds 53 points defeated Geelong Falcons 7 goals 7 behinds 49 points. Goal kickers, Sam Berry 3, Brandon McAuliffe, Zach Reid, Mason McGaritty, Tyran Rees and Trent Baldi 1.

In the inclement conditions the hard-nosed players were the key for both sides and Sam Berry led the way for Power. His return from school football has been critical and once again he led by stellar example to be the sides main prime mover with twenty plus possessions. However, in the gritty contests he really stood out with his ten plus, fierce tackles that had the Falcons on the back foot and put the Power in vitally important positions. After being competitive as a key forward in the first half, tall youngster Nick Prowd went into the ruck and had an immediate impact on the game. His fierce aggression in aerial contests and, more importantly, at ground level with second and third efforts gave the Power momentum that helped to initially quash the Falcons and then put the Power in the driver’s seat. It was his second Power game and reflected enormous potential for his future.

Leading the way in the defence was the “iceman” Tye Hourigan. Once again he took on the oppostition’s best forwards and stood firm under the intense pressure. He took several contested marks and won critical possessions at ground level. As has been his habit in his thirty games with Power, he was clinically efficient and rarely made a mistake in terms of decisions and skill levels. Tall defender Zach Reid’s return was vitally important for the side as he also provided defensive stability with his dominance of the aerial contests when taking marks or spoiling opponents. However, once the ball was on the ground he continually belied his 200 centimetre plus height by winning possessions or applying intense pressure like a midfielder. The inspired move to put him up forward late in the game won the match for the side and the coaches are still debating whose brilliant decision it was.

Diminutive young midfielder Tyran Rees has relished the greater responsibility in recent matches and once again was a vital cog in the side’s engine room. He not only provide a consistently effective avenue to goal for the team, but was also highly competitive in the tough stuff at ground level with his crunching tackles and relentless pressure despite the size of the opposition players involved. Another to thrive on increased responsibility is fellow youngster Brandon Mc Auliiffe. He was his reliable best in defence in the first half but rose to the challenge from the coach in the second when he went into the midfield. His ability to apply intense and effective pressure in these contests helped to give the Power vital momentum. It further demonstrated why he has quickly become an important member of the side no matter where he plays.

On a day when effective leadership was required, Jake Van Der Pligt again responded with his customary no fuss manner, leading by stellar example. He was his ruthless best in the tightest situations with enormous pressure being placed on opponents in contests all over the ground. Importantly he also won and effectively used many contested possessions in yet another team-focused performance. Matching Jake’s hard-nosed approach was Ben Maslen and he too has become a leader by example and not just words. His ability to be a playmaker from defence was vital in the win as he was never beaten in a one-on-one contest. As has been the trend for some of the less experienced boys, Flynn Shields played his best game for the side and was able to quell the impact of opponents as well as back himself to win vital possessions that helped to generate drive for the team.

The Power will be without the state boys next week as they will be involved in the “grand final” match of the championships against WA at Marvel stadium on Wednesday. Once again responsibility for the side’s prospects will be taken by the obvious regular contributors but, and it’s a vital but, the coaches will have even greater faith in some of the supposed lesser lights to step up and expand what are their normal comfort zones. In recent games their movement up what is a very steep football learning curve has been exceptional and, because of this, the untapped potential has all at the club very excited for the rest of this season and for what is to come in 2020.