GIPPSLAND POWER FOOTBALL CLUB

MATCH REPORT BY BRYAN MITCHELL

After having played only three matches in the past seven weeks of the NAB League competition, engie Gippsland Power met the Oakleigh Chargers in a qualifying final at Ikon Park in what started as ideal conditions on Sunday. The Chargers went into the game with their full squad as their many private school players were finally available after being committed to school football for much of the regular season. Consequently, they presented the Power with a serious challenge to be competitive against their most elite team.

In contrast, the Power were without three key players due to injury and their absence put even more pressure on the team. Missing were NAB League team of the year member Charlie Comben, captain Brock Smith and bottom ager, Mason Hawkins who had made stunning progress in the latter part of the season. On a positive note however, 2019 All-Australian member, Caleb Serong, was available after his school football requirements. Despite the disadvantages of not being at full strength, the Power coaching panel were very optimistic about the team’s prospects in such a crucial match.

The Chargers won the all-important toss and kicked with a very strong wind that was favouring the east end of the oval. After a tight opening to the match, the Chargers had two quick goals on the board after the Power had made simple errors when going into attack. The Power appeared to be a little “rusty” early and missed gettable goals as a consequence. This issue became even more relevant as the Chargers added two more goals and applied even more pressure on the Power.

It took some more efficient ball use by the Power up forward to give the Baldi brothers a deserved chance to get it right. Riley found his brother Trent with their brand of “twin-telepathy” and finally the Power were in the game. Soon after, Ryan Angwin went long and direct into attack and Harvey Neocleous used his unique reading of the play to win the ball and then craft a clever goal. Just when it appeared that Power were going the first change within two kicks, the Chargers kicked a vital goal on the siren to go to the break seventeen points up.

Rather than focus on the sluggish start, coach, Rhett McLennan encouraged the boys to keep applying their trademark pressure and highlighted how well they played when following the game plan in the latter part of the quarter. In the opening moments of the term, the ball was deep in attack for the Power and Neocleous used his “magic” to kick an uncanny goal from nothing. Almost immediately, the Power were in attack again and Fraser Phillips applied intense pressure to win a free kick which he fed off to Leo Connolly who goaled from outside fifty.

Youngster, Keith Robinson took a fine mark and then found Sam Flanders who kicked truly to give the side the lead for the first time in the match. With the Power defence in total control, the ball went forward again and some excellent forward pressure resulted in the Chargers struggling to cope. As if inspired by this intense play, disciplined defender, Ben Maslen found Flanders with a superb long kick and he kicked his second. The ball was in the Power attacking area again and more intense pressure allowed Caleb Serong to find his close mate Flanders and he did it again.

Late in the quarter, the Power were using the ball with great vision and precision and the uncanny Flanders finished it off once again with his fourth for the term. At the resultant centre bounce, Flanders went long and direct and Phillips kicked a fine goal on the run to allow the Power to go to the long break twenty three points up. It had been a stunning quarter of disciplined, direct team football by the side and they had not only kicked seven straight but had also kept the Chargers goal-less at the same time. It was the “one-percent” stuff that really stood out for the Power which allowed them to keep the Chargers on the back foot for the whole quarter.

Rhett went into the rooms with his main focus being the need for the boys to keep up the pressure as the Chargers had the advantage of the strong wind. Obviously, there were many positives to recognise but, there two terms to go and the boys needed to remain on-task against such highly rated opponents. This need was reinforced immediately as the Chargers kicked the first goal of the term. Once again Flanders had an impact on play from the midfield as he found Tom Fitzpatrick who took a fine contested mark and then took advantage of a fifty metre penalty to restore the side’s half time lead.

Ominously, the Chargers kicked another and the Power responded with Serong clearing quickly from the centre bounce and allowing Phillips to kick a fine goal on the run. It appeared as if the Power had the initiative again for much of the term but the Chargers kicked two late goals to regain the momentum going inti the last quarter. The Power went into the last term eight points up and with the even stronger wind at their backs. The coaches were still positive and stressed the need for intense one-on-one pressure to minimise the Chargers chances of getting back into the match.

Once again the Chargers kicked the all-important first goal and were within one kick in the deteriorating conditions. It took some clever reading of the play by Riley Baldi to get the Power’s first and it was back to the status quo with twenty minutes to go. Just to make it even harder for both sides, heavy rain began to fall and precise ball us became much harder. A goal by the Chargers on fourteen minutes tied the scores and the Power were starting to show signs of tiring and losing the ability to maintain the sort of pressure needed in the closing minutes.

The Chargers missed gettable opportunities but the Power were just bombing into attack rather than using it precisely as they had done in the first three quarters. It was obvious that they being effected by the lack of recent match practice and several cramped in the closing minutes. In the closing minute, the Chargers kicked another to extend their lead to eight points and give themselves a week off in the NAB League’s finals series. The Power now face the Western Jets next Saturday as they attempt to regain their impressive momentum and earn a chance to play in a preliminary final.

Final scores, Oakleigh Chargers 12 goals 11 behinds 83 points defeated engie Gippsland Power 12 goals 3 behinds 75 points. Goal kickers, Sam Flanders 4, Fraser Phillips 2. Riley Baldi, Leo Connolly, Tom Fitzpatrick, Trent Baldi 1.

If analysis of the match focused on Sam Flanders’ four great goals then he deserves to be in the Power’s best. However, closer reflection also highlights his impact in the midfield to win vital clearances and then pinpoint team mates accurately. He rounded off a wonderful team game with the ability to apply intense pressure in the tightest contests with his willingness to tackle ferociously. Sam’s partner in crime, Caleb Serong made a fine return to the side and was in the thick of the action from the opening bounce. They were both named in the NAB League’s team of the year and Caleb’s class was on full show in this match. He read the pattern of the match perfectly and won and effectively used many crucial possessions as well as applying intense pressure in contests.

With the side’s two most effective ruckmen missing, the responsibility to do the bulk of the work fell on Zac Reid’s young shoulders. He responded manfully to the challenge and not only won many tap outs to the team’s advantage, but also worked equally as hard when the ball was at ground level. His ability to have the agility and desire to apply intense pressure in tight contests was also impressive and helped the side to win many clearances. Key forward Fraser Phillips is another who is highly effective in aerial contests with the ability to take contested marks against tough opposition. He, like Zac, also has the ability to be equally as competitive once the ball is at ground level and wins many intense contests. His quick hands and vision help him to become a key playmaker as well as being a highly effective finisher for the team.

While many of his teammates racked up high totals in key statistics like possessions, tackles and score involvements, Mitch Bentvelzen achievements had a more singular focus. He had a stunning total of pressure acts against one of the Charger’s best players to the extent that he had no impact on the game and will have nightmares about Mitch in coming evenings. His selfless, disciplined application was outstanding. Fellow defender Tye Hourigan was another who had a vital role and he too responded to the challenge with great purpose and intensity. He minimised the impact of dangerous opponents with the right decision at the right time as well as having the poise and confidence to win many vital possessions himself. This has been his trademark for two seasons and highlights why he is so important to the side.

The coaches were not only pleased with the significant contributions of these boys but also singled out Leo Connolly, Tom Fitzpatrick and Sam Berry for recognition. Leo was a vital cog in defence as well as having the ability to set up attacking moves on the run. Tom contested fiercely in aerial contests as well as at ground level and provided a positive avenue into attack for the side. Fellow bottom ager Sam Berry was one of the hard working midfield unit and stood out in terms of the one-percenters in the tight contests as well as being a link player for teammates.

At the end of the match Rhett was full of praise for the boys and focused on the many positives from their performance. He said that they will work to minimise simple errors but stressed that they were at least as good as the Chargers and would be highly competitive if they met them again. He was excited about finally having a game in six days’ time as they really needed this level of competition and would be much better as a result. The final key is the availability of Mason Hawkins as he will add great flexibility to the taller brigade as the side prepares for the Jets next week.