GIPPSLAND POWER FOOTBALL CLUB

MATCH REPORT BY BRYAN MITCHELL

Engie Gippsland Power’s “magical mystery tour” through the 2019 NAB League season took another positive step with a resounding win in the elimination final against the Western Jets last weekend. In generally ideal football conditions, the Power started quietly but moved into overdrive from midway through the opening quarter. In doing so, they served notice to the remaining teams that they are ready to realise the enormous potential that they have excited Power officials with for the past four seasons.

After playing exciting football for much of the match against the Oakleigh Chargers in the first round of finals, they ran out of steam to lose narrowly. Rhett and his assistants worked closely with the boys to get them back into the correct mindset and level of touch after missing several weeks of competitive football due to the vagaries of the NAB Leagues structure at the end of the season. An added bonus was the return of number one big man, Charlie Comben as well as the inclusion of youngster Nick Prowd who has made stunning progress up his football learning curve in that latter part of the season.

In was a tight and very competitive opening to the match with the Power seemingly far more prepared to apply themselves to the team’s game plan than they were against Oakleigh early in that clash. However, the Jets scored first with a long bomb from fifty and the Power wasted opportunities by going short into attack. Ten minutes into the term the Jets kicked another and the pressure was on the Power to put vital scoreboard pressure on them. They missed an easy opportunity and heavy rain then added to the difficulty to convert their chances for the rest of the quarter.

Finally they went long and direct via Leo Connolly and Tom Fitzpatrick and small forward, Harvey Neocleous kicked the first goal to reduce the Jet’s lead to five points by the end of the term. The coaches focused on the positives of the second half of the quarter and encouraged the boys to keep the pressure on the Jets where it really mattered, the score line. They responded immediately from the centre bounce but missed a sitter. More long and direct play by Ryan Angwin and Connolly provided a chance for Caleb Serong and he put the team in the lead for the first time in the match.

It was the Power who were applying excellent pressure all over the field and it resulted in a free kick to Neocleous who kicked his second for the match. What was pleasing the coaches most was the fact that the Power was applying intense pressure to get the ball inside fifty and then, vitally, keeping it there. Yet again they went into attack directly through Ryan Sparkes and Nick Prowd took a strong contested mark and kicked a fine goal. In stark opposition, the Jets made a rare forward foray and, one of their supposed stars, missed a sitter for fifteen metres out.

At the long break the Power led by fifteen points and had done so by keeping the Jets scoreless due to a combination of intense pressure and excellent use of the ball when going into attack. Leading the way was the Power defensive unit led by Tye Hourigan and Mitch Bentvelzen who had totally nullified the impact of two of the competition’s best tall forwards. They were being well supported by the other defenders and inspired the midfielders to use intense second and third efforts to make the Jets look very ordinary. The coaches again focused on maintain the pressure in the vital third term and not to waste the control that they had so worked so hard to achieve for much of the first half of the game.

Things looked good early in the quarter with intense midfield and forward pressure and strong contested marks but missed two relatively gettable opportunities. The backline was still impassable and wonderful ball use by them resulted in Riley Baldi finding Charlie Comben who finished it off with aplomb. From the resultant centre bounce, Sam Berry found Josh Smith who took a strong contested mark to kick another for the side. More intense pressure and effective ball use saw Riley Baldi find Sparkes who kicked a rare goal to finish it off well.

As he had done so well against the Chargers, Sam Flanders had taken control of the match by winning and effectively using the ball from the tightest contests. He had been severely tagged but continued to have an impact in the first half. He upped the ante in this quarter and, not only was he directing play with his amazing skills, but was also like an on-field general with his voice. To add to what had been a dominant quarter of football he roved a pack up forward after another direct attacking move and kicked the team’s fourth for the term. They went to the final change thirty nine points up and had again prevented the Jets from kicking a goal for another twenty five minutes of football.

It had been a wonderful display of committed team football starting in defence and finishing off well in attack. Not only were the defence dominating their opponents but they were using the ball with purpose and vision when setting up attacking play on the rebound. Leading them by stellar example again, was Bentvelzen who, for the second game in a row, had totally blitzed a taller and extremely dangerous key forward. Not only was he goal less but he hadn’t had an effective possession and Mitch had frustrated him with his intense and disciplined application of the team’s game plan.

Almost against the run of play, the Jets kicked their first goal for seventy minutes of play but the Power hit back quickly with clever ball use by Neocleous and Zach Reid and Sparkes kicked a blinder form limited space. The midfielders were controlling centre clearances but the umpires intervened and awarded a dodgy free to the Jets close to goal. Once again the supposed gun forward missed the golden opportunity but the umpires again got it very wrong with a series of incredibly poor decisions which gifted the Jets with a totally undeserved goal.

Initially they missed a blindingly obvious free kick to Serong for a head high tackle and then made it an even worse scenario by penalising justifiably aggrieved Power players with two fifty metre penalties. To add insult to injury it was Hourigan’s opponent who kicked the goal and put his name on the goal kickers after doing nothing to deserve it. Not to be outdone, the Power again went into attack and some excellent ball use by Mason McGarritty under extreme pressure allowed Comben to kick a rover’s goal on the run. They won the resultant centre clearance and the jets spoiled the party by touching right on the goal line.

For one of the rare occasions, the Jet kicked a deserved goal on the rebound but, once again the Power applied their trademark pressure through McGaritty set up Neocleous for a fine small forward’s goal. In junk time the Jets kicked the last of the match but, by the final siren the Power had recorded a well-deserved and vitally morale boosting thirty-five point win by almost playing four quarters of the sort of intense, team oriented football that Rhett and his assistant coaches had believed that they were capable of achieving in the preparations before the match.

Final scores, engie Gippsland Power 11 goals 9 behinds 75 points defeated Western Jets 6 goals 4 behinds 40 points. Goal kickers, Harvey Neocloeus 3, Ryan Sparkes and Charlie Comben 2, Caleb Serong, Sam Flanders, Josh Smith and Nick Prowd 1.

As he has done so manfully for his entire Power career, Tye Hourigan was given the responsibility to take on the opposition’s best key forward and he responded in his usual, low key but total effective manner. He stopped their best forward from winning a single one-on-one contest as well as winning may individual possessions in aerial contests and in the tightest ground level passages of play. His stunning performance was matched by Mitch Bentvelzen who played a stunningly disciplined role to stop another dangerous forward from kicking a goal on him for the entire match. He wore him like a glove and totally frustrated the opponent with the right decision in every contest that they were involved in considering the fact that he missed so much of the season due to injury, his amazing efforts in the past two games has been outstanding.

After being a tight and very effective defender in his first Power season, Ryan Sparkes has thrived on the opportunity to move into the midfield and play a more attacking role. His ability to make the right decision in contests was obvious and he used his pace, strength and ability to kick the ball long and direct to stunning effect. The time in defence has given him the ability to play a complete game no matter what the situation requires. While Tye and Mitch looked after the big blokes in defence, Harry Pepper did the same on the dangerous small forwards for the Jets. He totally dominated contests aerially and at ground level but, vitally, had the confidence, pace and skill to win may possessions and then set up many attacking pieces of play as the side’s “quarterback.” To round off his fine team game he backed Tye and Mitch and became a rover when they spoiled the Jet’s in marking contests.

After playing well in the national championships, Riley Baldi has maintained his form as a key on-baller for the team. Once again he read the play brilliantly to put himself in the right position in contests all over the ground and then won vital possessions and used them with precision and purpose. He relishes the fact that he can thrive even more when opponents put pressure on Caleb Serong and Sam Flanders. Small forward Harvey Neocleous consistently plays a significant role for the team with his ability to read the play cleverly and put himself in the right place at the right time. Like Tom Papley did in his time with the Power, he kicks “lucky goals” each week. He did so three time against the Jets but also was able to apply defensive pressure on opponents when they won the ball in a complete team game.

Despite being closely tagged all day, Sam Flanders still made a significant contribution as an on-baller. However, when his leadership was needed most in the third term he upped the ante and took control of the game in his unique way. Tall youngster Zach Reid doesn’t have a lot of physical strength yet but, his ability to dominate aerial contests was crucial in the Power’s ability to win vital clearances. He belies his 200cm plus height with uncanny agility at ground level as well. Leo Connolly was another smaller defender who totally blitzed his opponent but also became a vital play maker with his pace, evasive skills and long penetrating kicking.

The Power now move into the preliminary final phase of the season and take on top side, the Eastern Ranges. Rhett was delighted with their performance against the Jets and stressed that they were nearing their best form at the right time in the season. Despite his obvious pleasure with them, he challenged them that there was still some scope to get even better with further “fine tuning.” They are now deservedly in a position to take their unique skills to the next level in the toughest situation and appear to be ready to continue to meet such a challenge.