GIPPSLAND POWER MATCH REPORT

BY BRYAN MITCHELL

After a NAB League season where the engie Gippsland Power were the best country side in the competition, it concluded ingloriously with a loss to the Eastern Ranges in the preliminary final round of the most elite football competition in Australia. It was not their best performance for the season but, they gave it their best shot on the day but couldn’t contain a well drilled and highly focused Ranges team.

Things started ominously for the Power as they went into the match without three of their best team who were unavailable due to injuries suffered in the previous match against the Western Jets. After being dominant as a run-with defender in both rounds of the finals, Mitch Bentvelzen had a minor injury that needed a weeks’ rest. Fellow defender Leo Connolly had a minor hamstring injury that also required time off while young key forward, Tom Fitzpatrick suffered a more serious injury to his shoulder.

On a positive note, there were three players available who had played several games during the regular season. Coming in were Will Papley, captain Brock Smith and Mason Hawkins. Obviously the return of Brock was a huge bonus for the team as he had missed several games due to illness. His experience at state level and natural leadership skills gave the players and coaches plenty to be positive about going into the match. The only negative from this scenario was that they had all missed five weeks of highly competitive football and faced a severe test of their ability to adjust quickly to the increased pressure involved.

In ideal conditions at Ikon oval, both sides were applying great pressure in all contests and it was difficult to get any systematic passages of play going. It took nine minutes for the Ranges to open the scoring but the Power hadn’t taken full advantage of their own hard-won opportunities. They continued to be highly competitive for much of the term but continued to be ineffective in finishing off what was excellent defensive and midfield pressure. To add insult to injury, the Ranges kicked another on the twenty minute mark.

Late in the quarter, more determined pressure by Mason McGaritty and Riley Baldi allowed defender, Harry Pepper, to finish it off with a fine running goal. It meant that the Ranges led by five points at the first change over and it was a real finals type of competitive match. There plenty of positives for the coaches to focus on like the fact that the boys applying intense pressure on the Ranges all over the field but some fine tuning was needed to finish off their commitment to the team’s game plan.

It was the Ranges who hit the scoreboard first and immediately the pressure was on the Power to use the ball more effectively. They were still kicking too short and overusing handball but their application of pressure was outstanding. They were having second and third efforts in contests to limit the Ranges ability to get any system into their play and one of these resulted in a vital goal to Caleb Serong. Just when it looked that they were back in the match, a dodgy kick-in gifted the Ranges with an easy goal against the run of play.

By the end of the term, the Ranges led by eleven points but the Power still had plenty of scope to improve their finishing and apply critical scoreboard pressure on the Ranges. This was the obvious message given to the boys at the long break and there were still plenty of positives to be focused on as well. The only downside was the fact that Brock Smith was unable to come back on the field after injuring his shoulder in general play. His absence put even more pressure on the defence as they were already missing key players Mitch Bentvelzen and Leo Connolly.

In the opening minutes of the third quarter the Power controlled much of the play but were still not finishing their work off effectively. They either missed shots or were too easily beaten in aerial contests by indirectly delivering it to their key forwards. To make things even worse, the Ranges were able to exploit another error and kick the first goal on the ten minute mark. Things then went further downhill when the Ranges clinically exploited turnovers and kicked two more goals to seemingly put the issue beyond the Power.

It appeared even worse when the Power again wasted scoring opportunities but, their defensive pressure resulted in the ball moving with purpose and direction to allow Nick Prowd to kick the side’s first real team focused goal for the match. They obviously hadn’t given up and, after hitting the post in another good passage of play, Fraser Phillips kicked another major on the siren as the result of a fifty metre penalty. The margin was still just fifteen points at the last change and it appeared as if the Power had gained the momentum for the first time in the game.

This fact was clear in the opening minutes of the last quarter but they missed chances or wasted hard-won opportunities to finish of forward forays. Almost on cue, the Ranges kicked another on the rebound and then another was missed by the Power. More indecision resulted in another turnover and the Ranges finally put the match beyond the Powers reach. The frustration for the Power was obvious and some rare ill-discipline resulted in a fifty metre penalty which gave the Ranges another late in the game.

The Power still didn’t give up and on the final siren were able to kick another as a result of a free kick to Serong. The final margin was five goals but it was not a true reflection of how competitive the Power had been in general play. Yes, they had made a lot of unforced errors in terms of decision making and effective ball use. They were at their best in terms of applying their trademark pressure but hadn’t rewarded themselves where it mattered most, the scoreboard.

Final scores, Eastern Ranges 10 goals 8 behind 68 points, defeated engie Gippsland Power 5 goals 8 behinds 38 points. Goal kickers, Caleb Serong 2, Fraser Phillips, Nick Prowd and Harry Pepper 1.

Despite the fact that the defence was under undue pressure, Harry Pepper was able to totally blitz his opponents with his disciplined play as well as win and effective use many possessions as well. His pace and long. Penetrating kicking were on display all day and he never deviated in terms of his commitment and determination to do the team things. Midfielder, Caleb Serong worked hard in the tight and highly competitive contests from the opening bounce to the final siren. His uncanny ability to read the play and then put himself in the right place to win, and effectively use the ball, was excellent and truly reflected why he will be so highly rated in the 2019 National Draft.

Once again intense pressure was on Tye Hourigan in defence and he responded brilliantly to the challenge in his normal low key but highly effective manner. He again defeated their best key forwards and backed himself to use his aerial skills and hard-nosed work in tight contests to win many possessions and then attempt to set up attacking moves. Caleb’s midfield partner in crime, Sam Flanders, was under great pressure again but kept working hard to have a positive impact in this vital area of the game. He too can put himself in the right place at the right time and rarely wasted these hard-won possessions.

A lot of pressure was put on the team’s tallest player, bottom-ager Zach Reid due to the fact that he had to assume the responsibility of being the side’s key ruckman. Despite giving away a lot of weight to opponents, he won many of these contests with his leap and uncanny ability to get the ball to the midfield unit at ground level. As the injury list rose during the match, midfielder, Ryan Sparkes, had to go into defence and he too responded to this challenge in his typical, no fuss manner. He easily quelled the impact of good players as well as having the self-confidence and skill to win, and effectively use many possessions himself.

Despite the fact that the ball was rarely delivered effectively into the forward line, Fraser Phillips put himself into many contests and was able to win vital possessions as a consequence. He pushed himself up field to provide a contest for team mates with his aerial skills and work ethic at ground level. Riley Baldi was another hard working member of the team’s highly rated on-ball brigade. Once again he won many possessions with his ability to read the play and commit himself to be at the work face in the tightest situations all over the field.

The end of the match allowed Peter Francis and Rhett McLennan to reflect of the boy’s performance on the day and during the whole 2019 season. They focused on the many positives and the level of commitment that they boys had so freely given to the team’s game plan and each other. They will come back together soon for the annual presentation evening when the highs of the season will be recognised as the boys are rewarded for their application to the club and its values.