GIPPSLAND POWER FOOTBALL CLUB

MATCH REPORT BY BRYAN MITCHELL

The footballing enigma that occurs each year due to the impact of the under eighteen national championships, played out its 2019 version for engie Gippsland Power with what appeared to be a comprehensive loss to the Northern Knights. On paper this appears to be disappointing for the team but, closer analysis gives everyone involved the rightful expectation the Power is extremely well positioned for the rest of the NAB League season. The positivity is based on the fact that for the rest of the season the incredibly talented youngsters will return and help to make the team one of the clubs best in its twenty five year history in the nation’s most elite junior competition.

For the past five matches the Power has been without up to nine of the best youngsters in the club’s recent history and has been able to win two games and be incredibly competitive in two others. Coming back will be AFL Academy and current All-Australian members Caleb Serong and Sam Flanders as well as Riley Baldi, Brock Smith, Ryan Sparkes, Josh Smith, Charlie Comben, Fraser Phillips and Harry Pepper. What makes things even more exciting is the fact that many of the other boys have responded magnificently to the challenges involved by having the extra responsibility due to their absence. Progress up several learning curves has be formidable and overall, the whole team will be much better prepared for the rest of the season.

For the Knights match, Fraser Phillips was back from state duties while Chance Doultree had recovered from injury and Zac Skinner had won his place back in the team. Conditions for the Knights were far different than those for the Power as they were at full strength with all of their state players back and every one with school football commitments back as well. Conditions at Morwell were ideal for football and both sides opened with intensity. It was the Knights who broke the initial deadlock and then Tom Fitzpatrick took advantage of a free kick and fifty metre penalty. The Power were playing their trade mark hard-nosed game but at times were wasting this intensity with a lack of cohesion when it really mattered.

The Knights goaled again midway through the term and were making the Power pay for turnovers on the rebound. They goaled again due to a lack of manning up in these circumstances the pressure was on the Power. They upped their work rate and some more intense pressure and purpose by Mason Hawkins and Sam Berry allowed Fitzy to score his second. Mason had added some spark to the rucking contests in his second match and suddenly the Power was right back in the contest. After bringing the ball cleverly out of defence, they applied great forward pressure to set up Zac Skinner for a vital goal late in the quarter. They trailed by two points but, vitally, had been competitive for much of the term.

Early in the second quarter, they missed and easy goal but hit back hard with more pressure by Zach Reid to give vice-captain, Jake Van Der Pligt a rare goal. It was the Knights who then took the initiative and they had two goals in a row as a result. Better ball use by the Power enabled Fraser Phillips to weave some magic and Trent Baldi snapped a clever goal as a consequence. Ominously, the Knights hit back quickly and it took some great second-effort pressure by Flynn Shields to allow Jake to kick a skilful clever goal. Jake then turned provider with his normal “hard as teak” pressure and allowed Jack Hume to capitalise on being in the right spot at the right time.

Just when it appeared as if the Power had the momentum going their way, the umpires impacted on the situation with an incredibly soft free kick that the Knights converted to scoreboard pressure. Consequently the Knights led again by two points and the match was up for grabs. Some typically fierce pressure by Fitzy resulted in a free kick and he cleverly found Mason McGaritty who kicked the critical goal. The pattern of the match then took a pivotal turn as, initially, the Power would miss hard-won scoring opportunities and the Knights would capitalise on the rebound as they exploited the Power’s inability to maintain the pressure on their play makers.

By the end of the third term the Knights led by eighteen points but it could easily have been much closer if the Power had been able to reward themselves with better accuracy. On paper it appeared as if the Knights dominated the last quarter as they kept the Power goalless. However, this wasn’t the true situation as for much of the time they resisted the Knights attacks well. More simple goals were missed and the Knights more systematic ball use finally took its toll. Although the Knight’s winning margin was forty-three points, the Power had been highly competitive for almost three and a half quarters.

The coaching panel now has the onerous task of rebuilding the game plan based on the return of the talented state players. Some will still be missing due to school football commitments but they will have most readily available for the next NAB match in two weeks’ time. It will be a much stronger and intensive unit than earlier in the season as so many of the supposed ‘”lesser lights” are now far more prepared to play a significant role for the rest of the season due to their response to the challenges they have faced in the past five games. The hardest job for the selectors will be to decide not only who plays but equally as important will be what positions they fill.

The captain for the match was Tye Hourigan and, typically he responded to this challenge in his cool but highly effective fashion. He led the defence with his customary effectiveness as well as being the key to many of the side’s positive attacking forays. His twenty plus possessions and nine marks reflect his work rate and his purposefulness enabled him to use them effectively all day. Sam Berry again thrived on be given the responsibility to lead the midfield unit and he did so by setting a stunning example to teammates. He too won over twenty possessions but was even more effective when using his strength and determination in the one-on-one contests by applying continuously intense pressure to win the ball or control the influence of opponents.

In his second NAB League match, Sale bottom-ager Mason Hawkins was given the task of assuming the first ruck role. He responded manfully and won many knock outs but, far more importantly, was equally as competitive when the ball was at ground level or in the hands of the opposition. His second and third efforts in the same contest where a real highlight of his major contribution. Small forward Mason McGarrity has risen to the need to lift his game in recent weeks. He has continued to read the play well and then make himself highly competitive when in the tightest contests. Mason often takes on bigger opponents in physical contests and his seven tackles were as important to the team as his nearly twenty hard-won possessions in this match.

As stated earlier, Jake Van Der Pligt is no stranger to having a key role for the team. Once again he continually put his body on the line to either put intense pressure on opponents or win the most contested possessions for his team. Importantly he not only initiated many passages of play this way but was able to be on the other end and finish them off in rare forward entries. Another “less than tall” Power player, Tyran Rees again belied his stature to thrive in the midfield and when venturing forward. He has been in both elements of the Power team and has taken great steps forward when needed to in recent weeks. His nearly twenty possessions and six marks reflect his work rate and importance in setting up positive passage of play.

At the start of the 2019 season, Kyle Dunkley had returned to the Power to play as a nineteen year old. His contribution in early games was outstanding due his combination of hard-nosed competiveness, excellent ball skills and team focus made him a key to the team’s early success. Since being drafted mid-season, he has become the first player in AFL history to play Nab League, VFL and AFL in the one season due to his selection for the Demons against the Blues on Sunday. He is highly regarded by all at the Power and is another “old Boy” who has successfully made a rapid rise at the highest level.