

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Prologue – Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

Well that was quick!

It seemed like only yesterday that those of us lucky enough to be at the ground on the last day of the club rugby season last year saw Ed “Horse” Gower welcoming the 2nd XV on to Concord Oval in nothing more than a sombrero and underpants. Certainly a magnanimous gesture from the 1st XV captain in support of the reserve graders, although some of the ladies at the ground were heard to say: “well they don’t call the man Horse for nothing!” Such comments seemed a little crass. I really wish that someone had a photo to add here.

The new season is upon us, and it is a chance to get out of Sydney’s shark-infested waters and get back down to Chatswood Oval to watch the team in the tartan jumpers do all that they can to erase the agonising memory of the last 8 minutes of the game against Randwick at Rat Park, on the day that David Harvey clinched the Catchpole Medal.



Dave Harvey – winner of the 2008 Catchpole Medal

Certainly the mood at Chatswood amongst the players and the coaching staff is that the squad has what it takes to at least take one step beyond the penultimate weekend of the season. None of us really want to see Horse in the same outfit again, lest it be on the day after the grand final with a winner’s medal around his neck to complete the ensemble. This could certainly be the case with Ofa Fainga’anuku, Nath Nicol, Marty Plokstys, Kingsley Seale and Mark Preston all palying for the Junior Waratahs this pre-season, while Dave Harvey and Lachie Mitchell have both turned out for the Barbarians. Centre Matt McDougall was flown over to Perth for a weeks training camp for the Western Force and ‘Horse’ has been with the Brumbies Academy until badly breaking his arm and requiring surgery. Look out for his return in the 1st few rounds!

The season was officially launched during the week, with many good judges predicting an even better competition this year. With the heights of rugby that were reached in the competition last year, an improvement will be well worth seeing. It was good to see at the launch that the major sponsor of the competition, through its representative who clearly attends a lot of lunches and mustn’t work that hard – whatever it is that he does, talk like he knew what he was on about. Poignantly, he identified the Highlanders as being major contenders in season 2009. It is hardly surprising that Tooheys wants Gordon to do well, considering that the two share the same logo.

Of course it is not just for the happy coincidence of the Irish-born Toohey brothers in 1869 picking the emblem of their local pub in Leichhardt, the Bald Faced Stag, to adorn the products of their brewery business, that the sponsors are looking at the Highlanders as contenders this season. The team rightfully has demanded attention.

But for the high-profile loss of Sisa Waqa to the mungos to play for the Roosters, the Highlanders have retained all of the squad that played for the majority of the 2008 series, bar two. After a couple of fantastic years at the Club, the experienced, hard-running centre, **Billy Rainima** has relocated to work in the mines in Western Australia. The Club wishes him all the best; but with the Chinese slowing down



their desire to put an Australian-sized hole in the ozone layer, and the economy in slow down, Billy Ray could be back in a few weeks!

Steve Taylor, prop-at-law and all round ... well just all round ... guy, decided not to play this season. Reminiscent of Michael "the King" Spalding the big man has pulled the pin but has vowed to return to Gordon after a year break in order to sort out an ongoing neck injury.

During the off season, a number of new faces have arrived to be fitted up for the famous jumper. Two players who have joined the Club and have been named in the 1st XV this weekend return in round one to Death Valley to take on their old club. Tobius Gukibau is a loose head prop who has impressed many with his hard work during the preseason and he has trialled strongly. Anyone who has followed grade rugby in the last few years will know David Alo. A hard-running, elusive three quarter. As is always the case, the Two Blues will reserve a special welcome back to Granville for their former team mates, as Vili Napa'a will attest.

The Ma'a brothers, both former Australian Schoolboys and Brumby Runner representatives, have also joined the Club this season. Lamarn is a tight head prop who played with Penrith, and Rodney is an open-side flanker who will tussle with Craig Thomas for the starting spot throughout the season. The way Thomas performed throughout the season, it would appear that the bloke who plays in the 7 jumper will be playing pretty good footy.



Former Manu Samoa and Warringah pivot, Josh Keil has joined the Club, after spending a couple of seasons with the Newcastle Falcons in the north of England. Along with Nifo Nifo, he was a Shute Shield winner at the Rats in 2005, which may be the experience that the Highlanders need to take another step this season. Keil has slotted into the number 10 jumper, with Dave Harvey falling back to the custodian's role and Mark Preston moving to outside centre. Another

former Rat, winger Andrew Wiles has also joined Gordon. Wiles was a former Australian 7's representative and has been selected in the lower grades as he comes back from an injury-ruined 2008.

Chris Tuatara is a big strong ball runner, who has joined the Club from a rugby league background. He is said to be still learning the game; but he is learning fast and heaven help any unsuspecting second grade outside backs who are asked to bring him down. Big



things are expected from the bloke who spent time with the Canterbury Bulldogs and North Sydney.

Big things are expect as well from the young brigade that are coming through from the Colts and school. **Number 8 Chris Alcock, who was the Colts' best and fairest player last year** and **Australian Schoolboys' lock Mark Johnson** are two that the coaching staff have earmarked for strong development in senior rugby. This season marks their first opportunity to show their



wares against the big boys. There is no doubt that each will give a good account of themselves.

Finally, it is great to see 2007 Trevor Allan Cup hero Greg Wade back in action. The whispers already abound as to what this cult figure will achieve this season, many apparently started by Wade himself, after enduring a stop-start 2008 season with injury.

And so to round one against Parramatta; a tough place to play and a number of players are still recovering from injury. From last season's regulars, Ed Gower, Ofa Fainga'anuku, Marty Ploktys, Sinclair Fischer-Gray, Nifo Nifo and Paul Tuala will start the season in the grand stand. At least the pies are something to look forward to at Granville. This has given players such as Gordon junior **Lex Fairley, who makes his 1st grade debut** for the Club, John Whittaker and Lachie Mitchell their opportunity to demand their respective places in the 1st XV.



The season is upon us and I urge all Gordon fans to support your club. Become a member, get involved, but if you want to ensure that players in tartan jumpers run out at Concord at 3pm on the last day of the season in 2009, do whatever you have to do to get down to Chatswood to support the boys. The first round at Chatswood is round 2 against West Harbour on Sunday 5 April.

See you from the Cedric Pike stand.

Georgie McHugh