

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Warringah – Round 3 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

On a day that was shrouded with the sadness of the death of one of Australian Rugby's current crop, the Highlanders travelled to the ground formerly known to some as Haemorrhoid Park in Narrabeen to take on the highly fancied Rats of Warringah. The ground was bathed in sunshine for this mid-autumn fixture and promised the kind of rugby that many fans have been longing for in the professional version of the game.

The last time that Gordon ventured to the Sydney's northern peninsula, they finished agonising close to reaching their first grand final since the glorious season of 1998, when they were run down by a fast-finishing Randwick. The last time that the Highlanders met this foe at this venue was on ANZAC Day 2008, when they won a fierce and close battle to leave with the spoils for the first time in a decade. To say that the contest was fierce is trite, as the encounters between these two clubs are always fierce. With such high stakes in this early season skirmish, nothing indicated that this game would be any different.

In a late change to the Gordon line up, 2008 colt of the year, Chris Alcock replaced Craig Thomas on the side of the scrum. With ex-Rat Nifo “Mag-nifo-cent” Nifo still a couple of weeks away from returning to the paddock, man-of-steel Lex Fairley had another chance to build on his impressive start to the season. Meanwhile Ofa Fainga'anuku was like a caged lion on the sideline, named as a fresh reserve and desperate to get on the field and rip in.

Mark Preston returned to lead the side onto the park, with returning former Warringah favourites Vinnie Byrne and Josh Keil in the halves, who were plotting the down fall of the home team to keep the men in tartan near the top of the Shute Shield ladder.

The early exchanges were bone crunching, as it was apparent to all that both sides were determined to get an advantage early to ensure victory. The Highlanders made the early running and after 10 minutes were 6 - 0 thanks to the reliable boot of Harvey.

The first major score of the afternoon came on the 20 minute mark a Gordon scrum 30



metres from the Rat's line led to. The scrum shunted to the right as Billy Ratu collected from the back and the defence split like the Red Sea to allowing the big man to gallop towards the line before he dished off to **outside centre Josh Whittaker** who strolled untouched to the line. Five minutes later Harvey added another 3 points and the Highlanders were in control 16 - 0.

Despite, the Highlanders skipping to a comfortable lead, you only write off the Rats at home at your folly. In the last 10 minutes of the half they got on the board with a penalty and the best try of the afternoon, with a beautiful sweeping back-line movement that was finished by winger Ed Doyle. In accordance with the pre-match preview there was little in it at half time.

Within 15 minutes of the second half commencing, the Rats had added two more penalties to make the score 16 - 14 and the Highlanders knew that they would need to



play good footy to get the points. With a quarter of the game remaining the biggest play of the game unfolded as prop **Tobias Gukibau** showed what it means to him to be playing in this team. From the kick off after the penalty the Rats came streaming through Gordon's defence and looked all but set to score, before Gukibau,

who had not given up the chase, ankle tapped half Layne Kelleher 10 meters from the line and the movement broke down.

Within 5 minutes the Highlanders capitalised on this magnificent effort. Great advantage was taken from a strong attacking scrum 40 out from the Rats line and of the home team's decision to leave open a very big blind side. Vinnie Byrne pinned his ears back as he headed for the south-western corner before turning the ball back inside to replacement Paulie Tuala, with a new mane of dyed hair, at the quarter line who crossed under the sticks.

Paulie Tuala (with 2008 hair style) with Vinnie Byrne



Following another Harvey penalty with 5 minutes remaining on the clock, a strong display was completed for the visitors and personally for Alcock, when the number 7 finished off a movement that started from an attacking line out at the quarter line. From the lineout, the pigs collected and took the ball into the teeth of the Rats' defence; Keil took the ball, ran to the line and then set the young openside on his way who scored the third try of the afternoon for the Highlanders under the sticks.

Gordon ran out 33 - 14 winners to leave with consecutive wins against the Rats away. The last try probably flattered the visitors, but it was a great victory, which was justifiably earned, as the Highlanders were the better team across the park.

It is difficult to pinpoint the difference on the day between two very good teams. However, the scrum was fantastic all afternoon; and tellingly for the second game in succession the front row dominated in the second half. Their back-to-back performances in getting over the top of some very heavy opposition packs will be an ominous sign to opposition teams.

The other big difference appeared to be that when ball was given to the back line at the set piece, Gordon used it with more purpose. Keil played directly at the line and put confusion into the opposition defence, whilst in comparison Kennedy drifted across a

little too often and the defence were able to get a good read on the ball runners. In saying that, in broken play the Rats were very fast, very dangerous and appeared to be a threat to score from anywhere on the ground.



With Manly accounting for Parramatta with a bonus point victory, the Highlanders are a solitary point from the pinnacle of the ladder.

Alcock made a strong showing in his first start in the top grade and was the player's player of the round. It is a fantastic sign that three rounds into the competition the best player on the ground for the Highlanders on two occasions has been a debutant, with Fairley taking the gong in round one.

2008 colt of the year & debut Players Player v Warringah, Chris Alcock

This weekend the Highlanders return to Chatswood Oval, where everyone hopes that Dave Bezer has managed to rectify the problems that beset the public announcement system in round 2. Gordon play host to the much-improved Rebels of Sylvania Waters. Souths have run

very close to both Randwick and Northern Suburbs this season and with new recruits in former Beasts favourite Tim McGann, Sydney Uni's Nathan Seivert and West Harbour's Chris Aho, this team will challenge for victory to the final bell.

It promises to be a great encounter. If you want to avoid the mania of the Royal Easter Show and you want to get some real value for money entertainment, get down to Chatswood Oval and support the boys as they aim to remain aloft the Shute Shield ladder.

I didn't know Shawn Mackay; I never spoke to him. However, he clearly touched many lives and he will be greatly missed. When sport loses one of its members, it really doesn't matter what colour their jersey was or where their allegiance lay. It is a huge loss that is deeply felt by that community and a reminder that we can only come together to play sport if another team turns up.

That Randwick has suffered the shocking fate of losing 3 current playing members in the last 12 months, must be devastating to that great club. It is with the greatest sincerity that Gordon offers its sympathy.

Shawn Mackay rest in peace. Far too young.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh