

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Northern Suburbs – Round 5 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

The day started early for many in Sydney. At 4.30am at Sydney's Cenotaph in Martin Place more than 35,000 people gathered to mark a time when 95 years ago young men from Australia and New Zealand ran onto a beach in khaki with the first shards of daylight dawning behind them and the crackle of 5 Turkish machine guns nests coming from the sheer dark hills in front. People came to honour the great service that so many made on that day, and have continued to give since that day for their country. It is a poignant reminder that the follies of sport are played out each and every weekend because of the sacrifice of so many over so long a period of time.

ANZAC Day coincided with the Shute Shield's Local Derby Round, which saw Gordon travel to the picturesque North Sydney Oval and run out in the shadows of the Duncan Thompson Stand. A grandstand named in honour of North Sydney Rugby League club's captain and dual premierships winner in 1921 and 1922 and aptly a man who served his country in both World Wars. During the German Spring Offensive in April 1918 Thompson was shot through the chest at a battle near the town of Dernacourt on the Somme in northern France but survived. He carried a bullet fragment in his body for the rest of his life. It seemed an appropriate backdrop for the day's clash between the tartan of Chatswood and the red and black of North Sydney.

The first half was as tough as could have been expected between these two foes. The Pirates, who comprehensively defeated the highly regarded Beasts the last time that they were at the venue, presented with a very strong pack and some very exciting backs, including skipper Steve Evans at halfback and Andrew Smith who played at outside centre. It was obvious from the opening stages that the wind would effect the kicking from both sides, as it gusted from behind the multi-storey stand named after Gordon cricket's favourite son.

Vinnie Byrne has effectively controlled the game for the Highlanders in 2009 in producing a solid platform for the success that the team has enjoyed this season; but, he had to this round probably not taken a game by the scruff of the neck. However, returning take on his original club, it was clear from the outset that he was ready to take control. With Norths mounting several dangerous raids into Gordon's territory, on several occasions Byrne was there to clean up and on several occasions turn defence into attack. As has so often been the case since he arrived at Chatswood in 2007, he confounded an opposition with his



speed and guile. On at least two occasions he was well assisted by the high-stepping **Lex “Man of Steel” Fairley**, who added terrific ball carrying to complement another week of top-shelf jumping in the lineout. With Nifo Nifo waiting to return, Gordon's stocks at lock run deep indeed.

The opening scoring came from the boot of one time Highlander Jarrod Murphy, following Gordon being caught offside 10 metres from their own goal line. The Pirates had broken from midfield with a run to the corner under the Mollie Dive stand. It seemed that the Red and Blacks were bound to score; however, the

well-organised defensive line appeared impenetrable. Norths' decision to kick for goal was clearly a compliment to that defence. The dose was repeated 5 minutes later by the home team, after a terrific piece of kicking trapped the Highlanders deep in their defensive quarter. After a quarter of the game the Rosso Neri led 6 - 0; but had ignored the opportunity to capitalise on their good field position and get the ball over the line.

Not only did the Pirates make some wonderful attacking runs, their defence in mid field placed yet another new combination of Josh Kiel at fly half, Mark Preston at 12 and Cathy's current favourite Matt McDougall at 13 under a great deal of pressure. The Highlanders attempted to play the ball very flat in attack; but Norths were up to the challenge as they got up quickly and made execution of this strategy very difficult. The result was plenty of dropped ball and an ever greater sense of desperation to try to score off every play. With Norths' excellent defence, a solid scrum and an extremely good defensive line out, Gordon were struggling to attain the free-flowing game with which they had started the 2009 season.

The second quarter of the game belonged to the men in tartan, as they spent a vast amount of the remainder of the first stanza in the opposition's half. Unfortunately, two enterprising movements, which on another day would have led to two tries under the sticks, were let down by the last pass. Also a long arm penalty that was aimed for the south-western corner for an attacking lineout was kicked touch in goal. In a game as tense as this was shaping up to be, the only hope was that the inability to take these opportunities would not come back to haunt the Highlanders. The groans that emanated from the brains trust of **Fear and Dinning at the southern end of the O'Reilly Stand** served to highlight the frustration that was building in the camp.



At the break the score remained 6 - 0 in favour of the home team. However, it could have so easily been 21 - 6 in favour of Gordon; or, but for the terrific last line of defence from the visitors, Norths lead may have been significantly greater. At the half-time huddle Norths had to be thinking that they had not used the strong predominantly southerly wind to greater effect. In the second half, despite a renewed intensity, Gordon continued to make some handling errors. However, it seemed as though it was merely a matter of time before the Highlanders would break out.



With the quality of his game in the first half, it was fitting that **Vinnie Byrne** scored the first try of the afternoon. The skipper followed soon after when a short ball from Keil at the halfway line finally stuck and Preston set off towards the corner. In the blink of an eye Gordon were in front 12 - 6 and it seemed that finally it appeared that normal service had been restored. The faithful sat back in their seats and sipped on one of sponsor's products, comfortable in the thought that they would soon be witnessing the points

that the men in tartan have mounted up all season. However, if any visiting fans were naive enough to think that a local derby would produce a lopsided result, they would soon be rudely surprised.



Mark Preston slices through

Norths hit back as the impressive Smith hustled his way over the top of no less than 6 defenders from 40 meters out to reach the stripe. However, in a worrying trend for Norths one time Highlander, Jarrod Murphy was unable to convert from a relatively good position on the field. Although, to be fair, the wind did not make any kick on the day a dead certainty; but the score was 14 - 12 in Norths' favour. With less than 10

minutes remaining on the clock Gordon pressed for a winning score. However, they did not expect that that score would come in the way that it happened. The Highlanders had pushed the home team into the north eastern corner of the ground, before the Pirates earned a scrum feed. Following another good scrum the ball was delivered from the base to be cleared to safety. Unfortunately, the pass was between a couple of players, which allowed **Dave Harvey** to pounce on the mistake to score. Following his conversion, which takes his personal tally for the year to a competition high 92 for the season, the Highlanders took the lead 19 - 14.



The Highlanders were unable to put the game too bed, as they got on the wrong side of the referee's gaze and started to get hammered in the penalties. On a number of occasions in the last 15 minutes of the game Murphy had the opportunity to kick what appeared to pretty straight forward kicks, despite the caveat about there not being any easy kicks on the day. However, with no less than three kicks at goal from the middle of the quarter line, one may have expected that a first grade kicker would have kicked two of them ... well, at least one of them. It ended up hurting the hosts, who were desperate to get a win on the board for the weekend.

The score remained 19 - 14 at the full time bell, which was rung enthusiastically and possibly 10 seconds early by Dick Huey. The visitors appeared to equally as jubilant as they were relieved to have secured the points in a game that was difficult to reconcile that firstly they had gotten away with it; but secondly that they didn't win by 20 points. On the flip side, the Pirates, who were strong all game, were as dejected as if they had been eclipsed in a grand final, quite obviously showing how much the encounter means to that club. The win capped off a magnificent round for the Highlanders, who, for the third consecutive round against their southern neighbours completed a clean sweep.



It was a close and frustrating encounter for much of the day. Local derbies often are. However, the Highlanders were ecstatic to take the points against the team against whom winning means so much and to take their record to 5 from 5 for the season, only a solitary point from the pinnacle of the ladder. Manly won against Warringah to remain in the top spot; but Sydney Uni (in the only game that is contrived as a local derby in this round) lost for the second time in

3 years at Forshaw Park. Without being unfair to the Rebels who took the field on Saturday, without Tim McGann and Dave Pusey, they were not as strong as the team that was eclipsed 53 - 13 at Chatswood 7 days earlier.

After 5 rounds all of Gordon's teams are entrenched in the top 6 of their respective competitions, with all by one side running third or better; and the Club is running a mere 27 points behind Sydney Uni in second place. However, the next month presents a huge challenge as the Highlanders face Randwick, Eastwood, Sydney Uni and Manly in consecutive weeks. It is likely to be a defining period in the season.

The coming round sees Chatswood attract its first television game, when the national broadcaster's cameras will be trained on the clash between Gordon and fierce rivals Randwick. The Highlanders are highly motivated to avenge their heart-breaking loss in last year's semi final when the two sides last met. The Mag-nifo-scent One returns after recovering from injury as does Josh Whittaker, who pushes Preston to outside centre, and the rampaging Vili Napa'a comes back onto the side of the scrum. Surely it cannot be long before the biggest water boy in the competition recovers from falling off his BMX and becomes available for selection. Big "Horse" Gower can aptly be described as having been stalking the sideline in the first month of the competition. We all look forward to seeing him back in action.

There are noises that the ground record over is in jeopardy this weekend and what better way to publicly show your support for your club than to get down to the old girl in front of the nation's cameras. I recall a day in 1991, when Steve "Skylab" Cutler played his last game for the Highlanders and there was not a spare seat in the place. Coincidentally, the game was against the Myrtle Greens. This weekend could be something special at Chatswood. Don't regret that you weren't there as the boys attempt to keep their clean slate for the season.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh