

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Christmas Wrap

And so the fat bloke dressed in red and white with the long white hair is about to come down the chimney again, and, no, I'm not talking about Welsh prop, Duncan Jones.

The end of 2009, gives one a great chance to reflect on the season that was and the expectation of the first season of the new decade.

The Highlanders had a great year on the paddock. All teams in the finals, three grand final appearances, two premierships and second in the Club Championship to the evil marauders in blue and yellow hoops - who would gladly see the competition destroyed to maintain their grossly unfair advantage - was a fantastic effort.

The First XV had another very strong year, finishing third, in what was the best standard of rugby seen in the Shute Shield for nigh on a decade. Unfortunately a disrupted team for much of the season again failed to pass the myrtle green examination set for them at Woollahra Oval in the penultimate week of the season. However, the positives in unearthing some young stars of the future. The Club welcomed Western Force trio Dane Haylett-Petty, Ben Whittaker and Justin Turner (who was coaxed across from an ill-conceived stint at Norths) to the ranks. The two showed glimpses of what they will do in the future, with Haylett-Petty mentioned among the top rookies in the Super 14. It is only hoped that the two will again feature in a tartan jumper.

Ofa Fainga'anuku had another dominant season in the front row and it is difficult to see how Super 14 teams can continue to argue that he is not good enough to see game time at the next level, when he continues to destroy Super 14 and International starting props every week. His endeavour was enhanced by a bigger and stronger Marty Ploktys. It was no more evident than against a very strong Manly pack at Chatswood that the game was turned on its head when Ploktys came off the bench, at the very moment that the season was on the line. The game will be best remembered for Dave Harvey's 79th minute 50 metre drop goal to put Gordon in front for the first time in the afternoon.

However, arguably the best new performer of the season was 2008 Colt of the Year, Chris Alcock. Alcock, an openside flanker, was the start of the season behind both Craig "Buckets" Thomas and new recruit, former Australian Schoolboy, Rodney Ma'a. In response Alcock played everywhere in the back row. Too short to play number 8 and too small to play on the other side of the scrum, Alcock showed that he had the ability and the tenacity to compete in all of those positions. With a happy knack of scoring tries, Coach Fear consistently rated him the team's top performer. It is fantastic news for him and the Club that he has been rewarded for a great year with a contract with the Waratahs in 2010.

The two games of the season were against the same opponent, traditional bitter rivals, Warringah. The second half of the season saw the Rats come to

Chatswood and both teams put on a display that should be used as an instructional manual to the professional game. The men from the Peninsula kicked out to a very handy lead at the half-time break, prior to the home team grabbing the momentum, storming back to within a handful of points, and on the attacking quarter line, before an extended break for a scrum injury allowed all players to catch their breath. The tartan attack was thwarted but Gordon's danger man Dave Harvey continued to attack down a skinny blind in front of the Donnelly Stand. His chip kick from the halfway line landed inches out on the full. If it had not, it would have heaped pressure on a tiring Rat's team. The ensuing lineout saw displaced halfback Josh Holmes break through the defensive line and run 50 metres to put the contest to bed. But, in a trait that has continued for the last two seasons, the home team battled to the end and ignored a relatively easy kick for penalty goal after the bell and scored a try to garner 2 bonus points.

There was no penalty kicks or drop goals, there were not even any attempts in that regard, just terrific running rugby that produced 8 tries and a bucket full of tension. Both teams should have been very proud of the game that they produced. And I think only Greg Growden found fault with the theatre of that windy day in July, when the TV cameras caught the representative of the competition's major sponsor carrying on like a fool near the game's conclusion in support of his team. It was the ABC match of the day and the number of comments made to this correspondent from neutrals who watch the game on TV, showed that if the Shute Shield is a product, it is a product that plenty would be pleased to watch if it was of this high standard.

Not to be denied, the Highlanders had their revenge in a "home" qualifying final against the rats at Mt Druitt by the Sea. It was, without doubt, the most polished performance that a Gordon side has put in in the considerable part of a long time. Marred by ugly violence, which spilled into the crowd, The men in tartan put their eastern neighbours to the sword, despite the Rats fielding 7 Super 14 players. Graciously, Warringah had no excuses and paid credit to Gordon for their win which curiously extends the record of no home team winning a fixture between these sides in the last 5 encounters.

It is now only three months until the start of the new season and the tension is already starting to build. A new (but familiar) coaching ensemble take over from what was a very fruitful tenure by Lachie Fear. Expectation is a difficult commodity to deal with and a high level of performance is a difficult thing to maintain. But many are thinking that, just maybe, 2010 could be the year of the Highlanders. The signing of former Emerging Springboks second-rower and new Waratah, Hendrik Roodt will strengthen a squad who have been building well over the last three seasons.

I hope that all the tartan army has a very happy and safe Christmas. I will be spending mine, thwarting the warnings posted by Willoughby Council, drinking a six pack of Tooheys NEW in the Cedric Pike Stand.

See you in the new year, from you know where

Georgie McHugh