

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Parramatta – Round 12 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

Another week and another deluge in Sydney. It was lucky for Australian Rugby that the test against the Azzuri was being held in Melbourne under a roof. The last time Italy played a test against the Wallabies in Melbourne, the surrounds were not so grand as in June 1994 the game was conducted in the ramshackle Olympic Park. On that day Gordon's Tim Wallace controlled the game from number 10 as the Wallabies ran out 20 - 7 winners.

Once again it was a marvellous credit to Glen and his team on the Chatswood Oval ground staff that they were able to turn the ground out in such a playable state, as the Highlanders hosted the Two Blues, for the first round of the second half of the competition. When the teams met in the first round of the season at Death Valley, the men in tartan ran out convincing 66 - 0 winners. However, with only 2 wins from 6 starts, Gordon was desperately keen to ensure that they claimed the victory and the trophy named in honour of Rod Batterham and Peter Sullivan. Since that first meeting in March, Parramatta have put in some pretty competitive performances, including the eclipsing of Warringah at Rat Park in round 8.

Adding spice to the encounter was coach Fear pointing out in the pre-match program, in his ever-increasingly silky style with the pen, that several of Gordon's premier line up had



connections with the Two Blues, being props Lamarn Ma'a, recent acquisition Dave Alo and the man that everyone at Parramatta loves to hate, **David "Hollywood" Harvey**. Of course also in the lower grades, Tobias Gukibau, Rodney Ma'a and Vili Napa'a, returning from injury, also previously played for the team from Granville. Fear challenged last year's Ken Catchpole medallist by stating that the encounter would go a long way to being decided by whomever of

Harvey and his opposite number Josh Weeks came out on top. Unfortunately for the contest, the very talented Weeks was a late withdrawal from the fixture. Rumours that he incurred the facial lacerations at the Woolpack Hotel after training during the week are unfounded. Seemingly for the entertainment of the crowd in the Cedric Pike stand, Weeks joined the coaching staff, and the paying public were regaled with their view of the game for the full 80 minutes. The woman from Granville Park who gets stuck into everyone was not spotted in the crowd; but the Parramatta coaching staff was more than her equal.

Despite the herculean effort of the ground staff to once again see all grades get on the field, it was another game that saw the players forced to hoist the ball and look to secure possession at all costs. Within a minute of Gordon kicking off, the Highlanders contested a line out 2 metres from their opponents' line. Parramatta diffused the situation and that was as close as Gordon got for the next 10 minutes as the visitors spread the ball along their own try line and advanced the ball deep into their hosts' territory.

During that period of time, the Two Blues had a number of opportunities. A team with more experience of putting away such opportunities would have likely put points on the board. One gilt edged opportunity was squandered by Parramatta when a final pass 15 metres from the line somehow managed to elude two unmarked players in an acre of space. However, to Gordon's credit they scrambled in defence and it was not until the 26 minute mark that big Wise Gavidy was the recipient of confusion at the back between Harvey and Lachie Mitchell, who were collectively unable to gather a loose ball and the score was 5 - 0. Weekes could barely contain his pleasure; but seemingly more as a result of the former Parramatta player's mistake as opposed to the 5 points.

The Highlanders continued to make incursions throughout the half, set up by a very strong performance from the pack. With skipper Ed Gower now having been back for a month, his leadership from the front has added an edge to a unit that has been in the top couple of the competition and only bettered by Eastwood thus far. It was plain that as the game wore on in the heavy conditions, Parramatta would find it more and more difficult to continue to compete at the set piece. However, despite the good-quality ball that the pack presented, the Highlanders were either let down by being unable to hold onto the final pass or they hoisted the ball high to capitalise on difficult handling conditions. It was a difficult day to try to "play" rugby. This also provoked glee in Weeks, as it became more and more obvious that the Parramatta coaching staff were far more interested in Gordon mistakes, Queensland referee Stephen Hill's supposed mistakes and whatever Harvey was doing at any given point in time, rather than concentrating on what they had to do to win the game. Curious!

As the teams must have been looking to the half time break, with a minute remaining, Vinnie Byrne delivered from a scrum 40 metres from the line to the much maligned fly half, who wrapped around with Alo before sending centre Matt McDougall crashing through the first line of Defence. McDougall should still have been claimed; but he continued to smash his way towards the line and eventually put the ball down next to the sticks after breaking no less than 4 tackles. The tartan faithful, who sitting in the proximity of the Parramatta coaching staff, didn't miss the opportunity to point out that Harvey had been the architect of the most enterprising movement of the half, which allowed the Highlanders to take a 7 - 5 lead to the break.

Gordon were probably a little fortunate to take a lead to their half-time huddle, as the Two Blues had played pretty well, including two terrific back line movements that saw the ball advanced more than 50 metres on each occasion. However, their lack of finishing ability costs the visitors dearly. **Paulie**

Tuala had another very impressive half of football as he invariably broke the first tackle and created chances for the home team to try to get something started.

Tuala's decision to stay in Sydney and not follow Keil and Nifo "Baby Cino" Nifo to Samoa, looks to have been a terrific decision from the man

with the caramel 'fro. Super 14 scouts can only be sending back positive reports about the blind side flanker who always broaches the gain line.



Ten minutes into the second half the score was suddenly 17 - 5 in favour of the Highlanders, as first Harvey slotted a penalty goal, following a high tackle, and then the home team were the recipients of a healthy chunk of luck. The Queensland referee missed what appeared to be a pretty obvious forward pass from Gordon's number 10; but the home side played the whistle and after three further phases **McDougall chalked up his tenth try of the season**. He is now equal second on the try-scorer's list behind Manly's Adam D'Arcy, who has 13.

The crowd had to wait for another 20 minutes for more points; but in that time the indications from the first half that the Gordon scrum would be a force to be reckoned with came to fruition, as they repeatedly bashed the Two Blues' pack, including three tight head wins. For a team that needed everything to go their way if they were to secure an upset win away from home, it was not a good sign. In fact **the scrum was so dominant**



that it was to the Highlanders' detriment on a number of occasions, as number 8, Billy Ratu stepped over the ball at the back of the scrum with such momentum that he left it behind and either he or Byrne were caught as they bent to recover the ball that was metres behind the last feet. Eventually more points were scored when, loose ball from a Parramatta throw to the line out near the half way line, was seized upon by Ma'a, having come back on to replace the



injured Marty Plokstys. He charged down the Orchard Road touch line, before off loading to his front row brother Ofa Fainga'anuku, who continued the charge, before delivering to big "Horse Gower" who rampaged to the line to score his first try of the season. Harvey kicked magnificently to steer the conversion home to make the score 24 - 5.

Also in that period of 20 minutes, coach Fear

cleared his bench as the mountain Jared Barry, Josh Whittaker and Dan Robinson ran onto the field with one of the dominant colts of 2008, Bryan "Bubba" Perry, who was making his first grade debut. A bigger back rower than the man that coach Fear has favoured to come off the bench, Chris Alcock; but a player who has been turning in some very impressive performances in the reserve grade side, he is a player with a big future. And all of the reserves who came on, including Perry, had an impact as they demonstrated to all at the ground that they will take every chance that they can to get a position in the first XV. With all lower grade sides all currently holding second position in their respective competitions, the battle for spots will continue to be intense.

With five minutes remaining in the game the Highlanders were able to claim a bonus point, when they scored a fourth try. After a penalty to Gordon 40 metres out from the Paramatta try line, the Highlanders plugged the ball into the south-western corner. After a number of phases, where the Two Blues defended resolutely, number 8 Winney Paulo lost concentration and/or faith in his mates and killed the ball with hands in the ruck. A penalty ensued and Paulo was directed to the sin bin with a yellow card. After listening to the Parramatta coaching staff whinge about every decision and telling the referee to go back to Queensland because he was useless, it was strange to hear the same people chastise Paulo for his act of



"stupidity". It was stranger still to hear one coach say that the player in question had a problem because he spent too much time arguing with the referee. Argue with the referee; I can only imagine where he may have learnt that trait! From the ensuing line out, the ball was secured and the forwards charged the ball at the Parramatta line. The Highlanders played to a short blind side, where **Lamarn Ma'a** took the ball and bullocked over just in front of the cricket nets. The score remained at 29 - 5, with Harvey unable to add the extras.

There was still enough time for Parramatta to finish the game as last scorers as the very talented lock, Steve Mafi collected a cross-field kick and ran around from near the eastern touch line to score near the posts. Whilst the kick was being delivered, the Parramatta coaching staff were howling that the play hadn't been halted because the referee had not blown up a minor Gordon infringement quickly enough; but had allowed play to go on. It seemed that they were very hard done by in those circumstances. The game finished 29 - 12. Parramatta never game up; but they were out muscled at the scrum, out

jumped at the line out and lacked the polish required to finish off the chances with which they were presented.

Bubba Perry was given the honour of skolling from the Batterham / Sullivan Cup following his debut. I think that it is universally agreed that the promise that he demonstrated on the field was destroyed by the appalling choice of apparel that he chose to wear to the after-match function!

It was the second consecutive clean sweep by the Club, albeit that the Two Blues do not field a 4th grade or a 1st grade colts side. The Highlanders now sit only five points behind Manly in third spot and 259 points ahead of fourth-placed Randwick.

This round Gordon travel to what was the head quarters of Australian rugby in the 80's and early 90's at Concord to take on West Harbour. Not since prior to Billy Melrose took over the reigns of Wests in 2001 can I recall the Highlanders triumphing at the ground, apart form the grand final of the Trevor Allen Cup in 2007. To make matters more difficult, the Pirates will



count Lote Tuqiri and Timana Tahu amongst their number. Whilst the two have only been able to achieve a close win against Southern Districts from three starts, since arriving back in black and white, one would have to think that they are going to be primed for a big game. Tuqiri must now know that Robbie Deans requires some pretty special performances from him at club level to get a spot in his squad, now that the real international season has started.

Wests have hit a slight bump in their season in the last month, such is the quality of this year's competition; but they only sit a win behind Gordon. They will boast a slick back three, who refuse to kick the ball away, a massive pack and a quality number 10 in Jai Ayoub. This will be a belter.

Regardless of how much rain falls in Sydney this week, and thankfully it has been mostly dry so far, this track is always good and, thankfully, it does not have a cricket pitch. The scene is set for a hell of a game as the Highlanders welcome back Josh Keil and the Mag-Nifo-cent One from their stint in Samoa and Australian under 20's duo Dane Haylett-Petty and hooker Ben Whittaker. Whatever you do, make sure you get to this game. What could possibly serve as a better entrée to the Wallabies - French test on Saturday night than to see Gordon get the points and continue their climb to the top of the ladder.

The next home game will be the following week when Gordon and Warringah renew hostilities. After their own problems in the middle of the season, Warringah are in a rich vein of form with Brett Sheehan and Josh Holmes standing either side of five eight Brock McGarrity, having returned from a stint with the St George Illawarra Dragons. The prospect of the encounter is enough to bag right off!

See you from the Cerdic Pike Stand, where hopefully it will be more pleasant to watch the rugby with Josh Weeks and the Parramatta coaching staff.

Georgie McHugh