

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v West Harbour – Round 13 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

The Highlanders travelled to Concord to take on West Harbour in a week in which the meteorologists forecast rain ... again. And yet by game day the rain had not arrived. On Saturday morning on the eastern side of the Pacific Highway it looked ominous; but the further west from Chatswood one drove, the further behind the grey clouds were left in the rear-view mirror. After weeks of playing in saturated conditions, it was almost beyond belief that Saturday at 3pm may be dry.

After running away with the fixture against the Pirates in the first Sunday game of season at Chatswood, Gordon knew that they were in for a far tougher assignment in the return game. The teams posted on Thursday revealed that the men in tartan were due to face Wallaby duo Lote Tuquiri and Timana Tahu and the Brumbies' Salesi Ma'afu to join his



brother in the front row. However, come the kick off Tahu had succumbed to a stomach bug and was not able to take his place. For the important task at hand, Gordon **welcomed back Josh Kiel** and Nifo Nifo from trialling for Samoa and Australian under 20s' duo, Dane Haylett-Petty on the wing and hooker Ben Whittaker, who joined Nifo and Ofa Fainga'anuku as fresh reserves on a very strong bench.

Prior to their back-to-back victories against teams at the wrong end of the table, Penrith and Parramatta, the Highlanders had stumbled in games against Eastwood and Manly, where they had been in the fixture right up until the final bell and on other days might have won. The results in those games made the outcome of this fixture vital to keep the 2009 season on track. However, Gordon was in trouble immediately of the kick off as Wests spread the ball to the right side of the paddock and made inroads down the eastern touchline. From a short arm penalty on halfway, impressive five eighth Jai Ayoub exploited a gap on the opposite touchline, where he found Tuquiri 35 meters out, galloping down the touchline before the Wallaby winger drew **Dave Harvey** in the last line of defence before delivering to Tahu's replacement, Henry Seavula, 10 metres out and the big centre stormed to the line to score within the first minute of the opening whistle. Massey added the extras and a shell shocked Highlander outfit returned to the halfway line 7 - 0 down.



Harvey pulled back 3 points almost immediately as shortly after the restart Wests' winger Metui Maile, after hitting Mark Preston solidly in defence 30 metres out in front of the posts, decided to add a punctuation mark to his tackle and hit Preston in the jaw with a short stiff arm. Frankly, Maile was lucky to stay on the field as he committed the indiscretion directly in front of relocated Kiwi referee Steve Walsh.

In the early confrontations, the massive West Harbour pack exerted their influence and gave the Gordon pack a difficult time. However, this pack has built a reputation as one of the best scrummaging units in the competition and the crowd mused how the points would tally between the two packs at the end of 80 minutes.

Upon the 10 minute mark Wests' pressure caused the Highlanders to infringe and Wests' halfback Steve Massey had an opportunity 20 in from touch on the quarter line to add 3 more points. Massey was unable to convert the relatively easy shot at this level, and like the first time that these teams met, the gathered crowd wondered if Wests lack of a top line kicker would ultimately affect their attempt to secure the win. Two minutes later, a loose ball from a scrappy Wests' lineout saw Massey fumble a ball on the ground and open side flanker Dan Thomas pinged for playing the ball in an offside position as he was coming back from the lineout. Harvey had no problem doing what Massey had failed to do minutes earlier and piloted the ball home from the 40 metre line to make the contest a one point ball game.

From the restart, probably the most important play of the game. The Highlanders failed to secure possession and Ayoub released his outside backs, which led to winger Tito Mua, who was replacing try-scoring machine and groom for the day, John Sinisa, as he charged 30 metres down the western touchline before Campere Ma'afu bullocked his way to within five meters of the line. The next phase saw the ball spread left and it was only Gordon's excellent defensive line that prevented a try in the left-hand corner, with the ever-present Craig Thomas dragging down a player who was destined to score. Although, the referee blew a penalty five metres out in the middle of the field, Wests opted to continue attacking. The decision was ultimately very costly for the home team, as after five phases Tuquiri went to ground with the ball eight metres from the try line; but as Massey attempted to clear, skipper Ed Gower and Marty Plokstys counter rucked with devastating efficiency to



put the ball back on the Highlanders' side, whereupon Billy Ratu picked up and off loaded to Kingsley Seale who ran 20 metres before releasing **Mark Preston**. Preston completed the 60 metre journey to put the ball down under the sticks and, with Harvey's conversion Gordon was delivered a 13 - 7 lead. It was at least a 10, if not 14, point turn around in the space of a

minute and, understandably, it appeared to take some of the wind out of the Pirates' sails.

Despite the disappointment, the home team continued to attack and after they turned over Gordon ball on the attacking 40 metre line, following a midfield bomb, the ball was quickly

spread to the eastern touchline. The Pirates found another gap in the Gordon three quarter line, before Tito Mua charged the line and defeated Harvey's best attempt to thwart his effort to score. Massey was again unable to convert and the score was once more returned to a one point margin in favour of the visitors with 13 minutes remaining in the half. Again, in the pattern of the game, almost immediately Gordon came storming back as Wests failed to secure the ball from the kick off, under huge pressure from Gower. An ensuing scrum penalty to Gordon, as the tartan scrum started to show signs of getting on top in the contest, saw a quick tap from Vinnie Byrne who passed to Kiel, as he drifted across field, before picking up **try-scoring machine Matt McDougall** on the inside, as he cut back on the angle, 30 meters out and scythed a path with a blistering turn of speed and put the ball down under the sticks to allow the Highlanders a 20 - 12 with 10 minutes remaining in the half.



The Pirates spent the final 10 minutes of the first half virtually omnipresent in the Highlanders' quarter. Resolute defence was the order of the day, as the men in tartan thwarted waves of black and white attack. Twice, the Pirates were awarded long arm penalties; but, perhaps concerned with the uncertainty of converting penalty kicks, they opted to continue their attack on each occasion. Unfortunately for the home team, the tactic resulted in no points and, despite the statistics suggesting the lead should have been the other way, the teams took their breather with the score 20 - 12 in favour of Gordon. In the first half Wests enjoying 55% of possession, enjoying the ruck and mauls 50 to 15 and spending nearly 14 minutes in comparison to their oppositions 54 seconds in the opposing 22, they found themselves on the wrong side of the ledger. It was as curious as holding the joker, both bowlers, a suited King and two off-suited aces and still being unable to make a call of 7 hearts. Possibly Wests needed an open had to brush up on their tactics to make the most of their BAG OF tricks.



With a game of such importance to both sides, both coaches reported that they were happy with the score line at the break. Whilst both sides ran the ball with great enterprise in the second stanza, defence and the set piece were the most prominent features of the last 40 minutes. **Ben Whittaker** ran on for his first first-grade cap for the Highlanders, after spending the first part of the season with the Western Force, when he replaced Nath Nicol who picked

up an ankle injury. Together with Ofa, who replaced Tobias Gukibau, the Highlanders' pack exerted their dominance against a pretty useful Wests' unit. Thirteen minutes into the

second half, following a sweeping backline movement that found Gower and Ofa on the wing and unable to finesse the ball over the line, Gordon were awarded a penalty after Wets failed to keep up a scrum on their own feed. Harvey was unable to convert the penalty from the spot that Massey was twice unsuccessful. However, within 5 minutes Harvey made amends for his miss as he guided home a penalty from 45 metres out and the Highlanders led 23 - 12.

Both teams continued to attack; but each defence was more than up to the challenge. With 15 minutes remaining the Mag-Nifo-cent One replaced Kingsley Seale, who had put in a terrific performance. Almost immediately he lined out and smashed opposing lock



Damien Lloyd returning a kick. **Terry Preston nearly set up the killer blow**, in another strong performance since returning to the first XV, as he gathered a kick near his own 22, before weaving in an out to five metres the attacking side of halfway, where he found Harvey who attempted to draw the last line of defence. Harvey's pass to McDougall on the quarter line was intercepted by a desperate Massey, who turned to kick but was not

able to find touch and the Pirates gave away another penalty. There must have been something wrong with that area of the field, because Harvey missed what was collectively the fourth relatively easy kick from the spot for the afternoon.

There was no more scoring in the game as the Highlanders held out for the final 5 minutes to record a rare victory at the ground 23 - 12. This was, without doubt, the best performance of the season from the men in tartan and the players and coaches were justifiably pleased with their effort and the result. To a man, every player's performance was first class. Whilst some of the movements broke down, it was to be expected with so many new combinations. However, if the team continues to defend like it did during this game and continues to dominate the scrum, the chances that they created but could not finish in this game will see the Highlanders finish near the top of the table.



If it is possible, Gower and Whittaker were standouts in a pack that was at the top of its game. **However, none in the pack or on the field bettered Plokstys who had his best game in the top grade**, playing 80 minutes of high-intensity rugby. The backs were led by terrific performances by Byrne, Harvey and

Mark Preston, with Kiel having a sublime game in control and Haylett-Petty and Terry Preston cutting up their opposition when given the opportunity. But it was McDougall who again grabbed the limelight and scored his eleventh try of the season and must be making the right noises with those that count at the next level. In the absence of Sinclair Fischer-Grey with injury this season, McDougall has certainly taken his chance.

The Club finished agonisingly close to recording its third consecutive clean sweep on Saturday, with only fourth grade failing to eclipse its opponent. All teams are now firmly placed third or better in their competitions, with reigning premiers 3rd grade holding top position, as the Club runs into a very tough next two months, that will determine each teams' and the club's success for the season.

This week Gordon returns to Chatswood for another ABC match of the day, as they host Warringah. With no easy games left in the competition (if there are any to start with) this is a vital game to cement the first XV's position in the top three. Gordon beat the Warringah in the first round of the year, but the team from the northern peninsular of Sydney have welcomed back a host of Super 14 players.

With punchy Wallaby halfback, Brett Shehan wearing the colours of his beloved Rats, this is a game that the Highlanders will have to be at their best to win. Whilst sitting outside the top six on points differential, Warringah are many people's "smoky" for the premiership and it cannot be said that such a view is without merit.

With such a strong ex-Rat contingent in the Highlanders' ranks, with Thomas, Byrne, Nifo and Kiel, as well as coaches Fear and Dinning, there is no love lost between these two teams. This promises to be one of the fixtures of the season.

Make sure that you get to Chatswood Oval to get behind your team and cheer the boys on as they do their best to maintain their lofty position of the Tooheys NEW Shute Shield ladder. The Club is hell bent on showing to the rest of the competition that it has the biggest following in the game. Gordon needs you!

See you from the Cerdic Pike Stand.