

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Eastern Suburbs – Round 18 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

Ladies Day at Chatswood Oval and in the perfect winter conditions, the injured Brian "Bubba" Perry masqueraded as the hired entertainment for the fairer sex as he paraded, shirtless in front of the marquee on the southern terrace. Considering the shirt he wore following his first grade debut, possibly it wasn't such a bad choice of attire for him. The



Highlanders welcomed Eastern Suburbs on the day that **Terry Preston played his hundredth game in tartan.**

With their season on the line, and in the next 4 weeks facing teams ensconced in the top six, Gordon were desperate to beat the fourth placed Beasts. At Woollahra in round 7, Gordon were frustrated as Easts capitalised upon a defensive miscommunication between a new centre combination as they scored three tries in 10 minutes to kill off the Highlanders' challenge, despite a comeback. Such a lapse in defence in this game could have proved fatal to Gordon's season.

The opening of the encounter was fierce and it was obvious that the set piece would be crucial to the outcome of the game. Equally obvious was the fact that the visitors dominated the line out, with 6'6" skipper Tom Egan Easts' fourth jumper in the line out and the home team an irresistible force in the scrum. Easts brought new English prop Lawrence Marsh in to replace former Highlander Aaron Tawera, who has gone to the UK to try his luck. However, the Englishman could not better Marty Plokstys, who had another dominant game. Those at the ground recognised that the battle at the break down could determine where the points would go come 4.30pm.

In the opening quarter of the game, both sides engaged in some enterprisingly attacking play. However, neither side was able to convert their attacking raids into points as, despite some clean breaks by both sides, the defence held the upper hand. In that time both kickers missed long-range attempts at penalty goal. But it was the Beasts who opened the scoring on the 25 minute mark as they broke from the halfway line and then after phase play winger, Joe Azar slipped through a tackle close to the line to make the score 7 - 0.

With some opportunities having gone begging, the Highlanders got on the scoreboard with five minutes remaining in the half. Easts halfback Luke Irwin cleared a ball back to the half way line, where Terry Preston and Dave Harvey looked like they had got themselves into an awful mess; but Harvey put his body on the line and was able scoop back to the centurion, who swept the ball laterally along the 50 metre stripe to Vinnie Byrne, who looked up to be confronted by a wall of tri-coloured jerseys. As he so often does, without any other option, Byrne took on the biggest men on the field bearing down on him. The little man with the giant's game did fantastically well to hold up the ball to wait for his forwards to get back around him. The ball was recycled and McDougall was able to tear through the defensive line to put Billy Ratu away to score in the south western corner.

Harvey expertly added the extras to deadlock the teams at 7 all when the oranges were brought onto the field.

Vinnie Byrne probing

Off the kick off in the second half, Gordon tried a switch to Ratu standing on the opposite side to his forwards. The big man flew to get first hands on the ball; but he lost the handle despite his massive mitts and as has seemingly happened on every occasion that the Highlanders have tried the switch kick from the kick off in the last two seasons, their opposition scored after regaining the ball. The worst possible start as the Beasts made it 14 - 7.



Twelve minutes into the second half and with the season on the line, Coach Fear replaced workhorse Craig Thomas, who was tireless as usual, with new Waratah Chris Alcock at openside flanker and was forced to replace hooker Ben Whittaker, who succumbed to the ankle injury he sustained at Coogee the week before, for Tobias Gukibau. It is a worrying trend that all three of the first-choice hookers for the Highlanders are currently unavailable with Whittaker and Nath Nicol on the sideline with ankle injuries and Alex Gluth battling with Customs to get back in the country.

Alas, almost immediately after the replacements were introduced, Easts scored to take the score out to 21 - 7 and the game and 2009 were quickly slipping away from the men in tartan.



as he imposed himself on the opposition, running hard at the line. A hungry tartan outfit, with a renewed sense of urgency, recycled the ball with Lachie Mitchell breaking free before he sent McDougall away down the eastern touchline. From ensuing phase ball, **Kiel, in his most commanding performance since his return from Samoa,** put doubt in the defensive line before Alcock fought his way over in the Trumper Stand corner. Harvey converted

and the Ladies' Day crowd averted their gaze from Perry and his extroverted antics and sensed that something was about to happen.

The Highlanders started to get on top, as they carried the ball with conviction, attacked the break down and stung in defence. The Beasts, sensing that the home team would not go away, appeared to shun attack and started to look to protect their lead.

It was Nifo "Baby Chino" Nifo again who charged at the defence and put Gordon on the attack. The Highlanders moved deep into the visitor's territory and were only stopped with

a professional foul at the break down by Joe Azar, who was correctly shown a yellow card by Stuart Dickinson. The home team opted to maximise their growing advantage as they elected to pack a scrum 10 metres out. **Ratu picked up at the back, holding the ball in one hand as if it had been left on the field from the under 7's game at half time,** and strolled through some tired defence to collect his brace for the afternoon. Harvey failed to add the points from a relatively easy spot, considering his two previous conversions, which would have tied up the game once more. With 15 minutes remaining in the game, Gordon was down by two points.



Club Captain Kingsley Seale was having a terrific game and looked to have gone some distance to securing a bonus-point win for the Highlanders five minutes after Ratu's try, when he indulged in a ridiculous swan dive under the black dot, after the home team completed a sweeping back-line movement from a turnover on the western side of their own quarter line. Easts' five eighth, Ben Ward was put under pressure from a high kick from Harvey, with the latter putting on a hard tackle as he released the ball. The Highlanders regathered under Dickinson's nose and spun it to a numerical advantage on the right. Play was allowed to continue and the ball went through the hands to Seale, as the crowd erupted. However, for a reason that has not yet been satisfactorily explained to me, the play was brought back to where Ward was tackled for a scrum.

If it was for a late hit on Ward or offside, that is fine; but it should have been a penalty and not a scrum. If it was for a knock on, which I'm told that it was, it should have been a scrum five metres up field were the ball was regathered by Gordon and not where Ward was tackled. In any event, as the referee and the touch judges are wired up, play should have been pulled up immediately and certainly not allowed to continue for the crowd to see a match-winning try in what was a great contest, only for it to be brought back. To say that "it was not handled well" is to be trite.

The Beasts then embarked on an exercise of ball control and they ran down seven or eight minutes of the remaining 11 with great skill and discipline. The Highlanders craved one final chance to wrest the result from their guests.

With a measly few minutes remaining on the clock, Easts lost their grip on the ball in Gordon's half and a scrum was packed. The ball was immediately taken back into Easts' "red zone". With 75 seconds left, the Highlanders' line was set and ready to rip with the

forwards in control of the ball 30 out. **Harvey had other plans, as he took a pass, propped as if a modern-day Hugo Porter and swung his left hoof at the ball 40 meters out and 10 to the left of the sticks.**

In flight the ball wobbled onto its side, to resemble the goal kicking of the Rats' iconic fly half of the 90s Robbie Walton. All gathered at the ground held their breath as all went silent; but the hum grew as the crowd rode the ball ever closer and when Dickinson raised his arm and blew his whistle, the home crowd had the euphoric relief that was denied them 10 minutes earlier. With a minute remaining, the men in tartan were ahead (by a point) for the first time in the game.



A moment of concern came from the kick off as an Easts player collided with Paulie Tuala and as he lay prostrate, Dickinson blew his whistle again. However, to the relief of the Highlander faithful, it was only to note an Easts' knock on. The ball was secured by the scrum and eventually delivered into touch for the best finish to a game at Chatswood since Dom Byrne's 95 metre intercept try against Randwick in 2005, which snatched the game in the last minute. By this stage the southern terrace was going ballistic and the First XV duly went to that part of the ground to share the victory with their club mates and the ladies, who had polished off a healthy volume of champagne, in a great day for the Club in which all grades were triumphant. One can only imagine the feeling in the sheds as the players filed off the ground to sing the song.

The encounter was a terrific advertisement for the game and reinforces that the authorities have got it right with their current support of club rugby. Whilst a game between the Western Rams and the Central Coast Rays may have produced the same result on the scoreboard and some may argue that the quality of rugby would have been better, it simply would not have come close to the atmosphere that this game produced. Because, apart from the players, no one would have really cared! With the quality of the players playing in the competition week in - week out, no one could seriously argue that this competition is not producing or preparing players for the next level.

Easts were desperately unlucky to leave the ground with a solitary point for finishing within seven points as they were slick in attack and solid in defence. The difference in the game probably came down to the work of Gordon's tight five, discipline and patience that has been lacking at crucial times this season, fitness at the back end of the game and desire (or call it desperation).

But the job is not nearly done. In the month that will determine whether or not the Highlanders will play semi finals football for the second consecutive year, the coming weekend represents arguably the most difficult challenge in club rugby, as Sydney Uni await the men in tartan. The self-proclaimed "birth place" of rugby in Australia, which I am bored with but bound to point out there is no evidence to support the claim, has seen the Varsity win on the last 41 occasions back to the middle of 2007. However, in daring to believe, I note that in each of the past four seasons Uni have lost, whilst at full strength, on average about once. After the bounce of the ball favoured the Students against Randwick last weekend, as they triumphed 55 - 22, one can only hope that this is the game that they drop.

If Gordon play with the conviction, patience, discipline and execution with which they played against Easts, they will be right in the mix to take advantage of any opportunity that is afforded to them. Be there to witness the Highlanders go head-to-head with the bench mark of the competition. If they pull off a win at this graveyard, you will want to have been there to witness what no other travelling fan has witnessed in the last 3 seasons ... silence from the Bruce Williams Pavilion.

**Terry Preston Celebrates
brother Mark's try as Gordon
beat Uni in Rd 8 earlier this
year**



The next home game is the massive encounter against Manly on Sunday 16 August.

Bubba Perry may be back on the field by then; but I'm sure that he can be pressed to repeat his shirtless celebrations on the southern terrace.

See you from the Cerdic Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh