

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Sydney University – Round 19 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

The Highlanders took on the blue and gold hoops of Australia's oldest rugby club at their home patch, and all at the ground wondered whether the war of words between the Fears,



Lachlan and uncle Fizzer would continue from earlier in the season. During the week Lachie and Phoebe welcomed their first born, Harrison and the coach could have been forgiven for having his mind on things other than rugby.

Uni have been extremely strong since the halfway point in the competition with the return of Waratahs, Daniel Halangahu and Dan Carter and, probably more importantly, inspirational skipper Tim Davidson

having come back from a stint in Italy after he suffered this misfortune of his club going broke. Indeed, the side that has won the last four Shute Shields had not suffered defeat in 2009 since their trip to Chatswood Oval in round 8 in the middle of May, when the men in tartan accounted for them 43 - 8.

Following a magnificent finish to their game against Eastern Suburbs the previous weekend, this was probably the best opportunity to beat Uni since that day in May, with Nathan Trist and Davidson attending the wedding of former Uni half back Nick Haydon. The absence of those players was certainly not going to make it easy to beat Uni; but it did make the assignment slightly easier.

Prior to the start of the encounter, Gordon was forced to make late changes as Dane Haylett-Petty and the sides' heartbeat, half back Vinnie Byrne were ruled out with injury. Lachie Mitchell returned to the side along with Sikuti Vunipola making his first start in the top grade for a number of seasons. **After being impressive in his first outing against the Beasts, Tobias Gukibau again filled the space left by injured duo Ben Whittaker and Nath Nicol on crutches.**



The early skirmishes were at full throttle, and the visitors appeared to have been appropriately psyched up before running on to No.1 Oval with instruction possibly ringing in their ears that the only way to beat Uni is to get in their faces. Nifo "Chino" Nifo was cautioned early by referee James Leckie for failing to use his arms and it appeared that the Samoan international was ready to meet fire of a still-impressive Uni pack with fire.

Uni had a number of chances to put points on the board first, with Halangahu being guilty of missing a relatively straightforward penalty goal and then, 5 metres from the line, after Gordon's defence had held the Students up over the line in the previous play, he chose a very un-Uni option and attempted something creative when he kicked across field for his winger, only to see the ball go dead in goal.



Instead it was the Highlanders who got on the scoreboard first following two dominant runs from Billy Ratu, which took Gordon deep into the opposition's territory. It was fantastic to see the big man galloping in open space, whose runs seem to have been less prolific this year than in seasons past. The visitors looked to capitalise on the breaks made by the number 8; but in what was to become a disappointing trend, Uni conceded a blatant penalty, rather than risking 7 points. Dave Harvey,

playing at 10 slotted the penalty and after 13 minutes the score was 3 nil.

The Varsity did not take long to hit back as they came storming back to the northern end of ground and in the 20th minute, Scott Stumbles took a ball from Jono Jenkins in a well worked move off a line out to score the first try of the afternoon. It was a well-worked trick play that caught Gordon utterly unprepared in defence and no a hand was laid on Stumbles. Again Halangahu failed to kick a relatively straightforward goal and the Highlanders were only to points behind their hosts.

Despite the early penalty and caution from the referee the Mag-Nifo-scent One again failed to use his arms and was sent to the sin bin. Uni failed to capitalise and it was the Highlanders who made an incursion deep into attacking territory. Again Gordon had to be satisfied with a minor score as Uni infringed within 10 metres of their own line and took the lead by a point. Minutes later Halangahu made up for his earlier failings with the boot by strolling through some confused defence in the centre of midfield. He may have wished he could throw the ball over the cross bar, given his earlier kicking, but he needn't have been concerned as he added the extra points.

Despite being down 12 - 6 with 10 minutes remaining in the first half, the Highlanders kept throwing themselves at the University defence. Harvey was forced to kick penalty goals on two more occasions when Gordon pressed with 10 meters of the line and Uni predictably infringed. The last of those infringements was so blatantly coming in from the side of a ruck less than 10 metres out, following a tight head scrum win where the Gordon scrum sat their highly fancied opponents on their back sides, that a yellow card should have been produced. However, in what was becoming a joke, the card stayed in the pocket and the Highlanders drew level as the bell went. Peter Marshall, beneath a cap on the far touchline was marking the referee's performance and was receiving some advice from some visiting fans about the Uni tactics and the inaction of the man with the whistle.

The features of the first half for Gordon were the strong scrum, stinging defence and a continued commitment to running rugby. With it all to play for in the second half, the travelling fans dared to believe that they might witness their side achieve the dual honour of being the first team to beat Uni at home and twice in the regular season for 4 years.

Immediately after the break, the Students resorted to their traditional one off the ruck phase play, which has been the cornerstone of their success. There is no denying the skill and discipline that this requires and no doubt it requires a huge amount of work; but, my goodness it can be tedious to watch. Within 20 minutes, the Students scored three tries to take the score to 31 - 12.

The Highlanders never gave up and kept the attack up to the Varsity in search of something from the fixture. **Craig "Buckets" Thomas, who enjoyed another fantastic game bobbing up all over the park, sliced over from 15 meters out** to get the Highlanders back within striking distance at 31 - 19 with slightly less than a quarter of the game remaining.



With Gordon creating late chances, Uni conceded yet another penalty within 10 metres of their own try line, which saw flanker Jono Jenkins sent to the sin bin for a professional foul. It was about time that University was appropriately dealt with for what can only be described as cynical play. The Highlanders had a chance to score a late try that would have secured a bonus point for finishing within 7 points. Unfortunately, a skinny short side was ignored and the ball was flung to Wade's edge, where he fought hard to get to the line but was shut down.

The score finished 31 - 19 with Uni scoring 5 tries to 1. Neither the score, nor the number of tries scored indicated the game that the Highlanders played. The number of try-scoring opportunities that were illegally thwarted by Uni was a blight on their game and a sign of huge respect for a very dangerous Gordon back line. However, that is to take nothing away from Uni's victory as they put on an impressive five tries.

The execution from the men in tartan in all facets may not have been as sharp as it could have been but Uni have done that to many teams at their home ground in the last 5 years.



The front row of Ofa Fainga'anuku, Gukibau and Marty Plokstys were more than a match for their counterparts, both at scrum time and with their damaging running with the ball. **Special mention must go to Ofa, who was observed by many at the ground from both camps to be a stand out.**

In a terrific moment for the Club, on the weekend former Wallaby hooker and Highlanders' life member Bruce Taafe, Wallaby who,

with six others, in 1971 protested against apartheid by making himself unavailable for

selection against the touring all-white Springboks, had the honour of handing the Wallabies their jerseys before their Tri Nations match against the Springboks in Cape Town. Congratulations Bruce.

This round sees Gordon host Manly at Chatswood on Sunday in what is a must-win game to keep the realistic hopes of playing finals football alive. The Marlins were the early leaders of the competition with some consistent rugby, a massive pack and one of the most exciting backs in the competition, Adam D'Arcy. However, of late the Manly has suffered a few losses and must be starting to look over their collective shoulders at some teams who are in rampaging form in Randwick and Eastwood.

The much-anticipated clash between the two teams at the Village Green at Manly in round 9 was a competitive game in atrocious conditions. Manly were good enough on that very wet occasion to keep their noses in front at the full-time whistle. However, the Highlanders had at least two great opportunities to snatch the game in the final 5 minutes, only for the defence of the home team to hold strong.

The Highlanders welcome back inspirational skipper Ed Gower from the statistically unsuccessful Brumbies' tour of France, as the team from the Nation's capital secured only one win from four outings. Gower will be looking forward to pulling on the tartan jumper to do all that he can to claim this crucial win. Haylett-Petty comes back into the side and is joined by **debutant and fellow Western Force squad member Justin Turner at half back**. We all hope to see that Turner has as big an impact as DHP has had since joining Gordon, because the new man certainly has big shoes to fill with Vinnie Byrne still injured and unlikely to return any time soon.



It is "Back to Gordon Day" and the First XV are so confident that they will claim a win for the faithful, the Club has offered that if you come along to Chatswood to get behind your team in this massive game and the boys cannot get over the line, then all of those present at the ground will be granted free entry to the last round against Penrith.

The forecast currently bodes well for a dry track to deliver the contest that everyone craved in the first half of the competition between these two teams. With the weather heating up as we move towards spring, the Rugby is only getting hotter.

Don't be disappointed that you missed a Highlanders' victory in this massive game as the Highlanders get their game together at the right end of the season. As a couple of team s have experienced this season, when the movements stick, the scores posted by the home team at the Chatswood have been a long way out of reach.

This promises to be an absolute belter, prior to the weekend off for the wet weather weekend.

See you from the Cerdic Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh