

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Eastwood – Round 21 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

After a week to savour their magnificent win against Manly and following three of their most convincing performances of the season, the Highlanders arrived on Sunday in the outskirts of Sydney's catchment area to take on Eastwood at T G Millner Field, with their season still very much in the balance. The day before, Warringah destroyed Eastern Suburbs in a clinical and ruthless display at Rat Park, which guaranteed that the race for the post season would be between seven. This season, particularly since the end of the Super 14, has seen a standard that has certainly not been witnessed since the middle of the 1990s; but arguably it has reached a standard that has never previously been reached in this grand old competition. It has been compelling viewing and consequently the crowds have flocked to suburban grounds to see their local teams battle for regional honour.

With only the remaining game of round 21 and the last round of the regular season to be played, the only places sorted out appear to be Sydney University wrapping up another E S Marks Shield, awarded for the minor premiership, Randwick in second and Northern Suburbs in third to last place. Every other spot is up for grabs.

Prior to kick off in first grade, the visiting Highlanders won each of the lower grades to firmly ensconce each of those teams in the top end of their respective competitions. With the front row injury crisis staring to have an effect, Michael Schmidt and Steve Taylor dutifully took up their places in second grade and first grade respectively. Not to be outdone by their senior brethren, each of the Colts teams are guaranteed a place in the finals. In the face of such performance from all of the Highlanders' teams, Gordon's premier team were desperate to join the rest of their club mates in the second half of September. At least one bonus point would go some distance to achieving that goal.

Like the first Manly clash of the season, the initial meeting between these two teams at Chatswood was presented with a day that demanded Gortex. It robbed the fans of a fitting platform for these two great local rivals to entertain. The Highlanders had to come out firing to take on a side that has steadily increased in strength in the season and the results have followed. However, Gordon made what has become a characteristically slow start. Within five minutes the home team crossed the line, as a missed tackle in midfield allowed an offload to recent arrival at Eastwood, fullback Ray Isara, to power to score in the corner. Woodies' fly half, James Foote continued his fantastic kicking form from Chatswood in round 10 by slotting the conversion into a strong westerly. Following the first try, Gordon strung some positive play together as they looked to hold onto the ball and pressure was built through phase play. Justin Turner, growing more into his role in the number 9 jumper, directed his team around the park with ever-growing assurity and command. On the 10 minute mark the Highlanders were awarded a penalty 10 metres into the hosts' half. Dave Harvey kicked truly, battling with the strong cross-field wind to take the score to 10 - 3.

But, five minutes later Eastwood were next to strike. With Gordon attempting a box kick to get out of their own quarter, the ball drifted to the middle of the field to provide the Woods with a perfect opportunity to attack. The home team's backline linked to put centre Sione Piukala away through a gap in the defence. The attack was snuffed out by the ever-reliable Craig "Bucket" Thomas, who got a hand to the ball to halt the movement. Buckets looked like he may regather the fruits of his labour; but such are the vagaries of the oval ball, the footy bounced into the arms of the Woods' captain, Hugh Perrett who ran untouched to put the ball under the black dot. Whilst the contest was keen and the clashes fierce with skipper Ed Gower leading the way in that department, the home team was fast moving out of sight. Ten

minutes later Eastwood increased their lead to 20 -3 with a penalty awarded by referee Leckie for a pretty close offside call, and the game was fast moving away from the men in tartan.

With the Highlanders now in a position to which they have become accustomed, having their season on the line, they refused to go away and hit back with a try to Dane Haylett-Petty with 13 minutes remaining in the half. Gordon were able to build up pressure on their opponent as they moved into the Woods' half. Turner and DHP employed a box kick over the ruck, 10 metres from the line, which saw DHP fly through to collect the bouncing ball, under significant Eastwood pressure to score in the south-eastern corner with three defenders around him. The Highlanders kept taking it to the Woods in the last 15 minutes; but it was not enough as within sight of the break Eastwood scored through the talent and pace of Chris O'Young and a penalty on the break, following a pretty tough call on Paulie Tuala for a late hit.

At the half time break Gordon was down 27 - 10 and those with money on the Woods were starting to feel comfortable, with the strong westerly starting to swing around to favour the home team. Some of the decisions did not go the Highlanders way; but the reality was that they found themselves well behind to an impressive team, with their season on the line. It would call on all of the fighting team qualities of the men in tartan to get back into the game and to earn the right to control their own destiny in 2009. Within a minute, with a significant proportion of the crowd at the bar, or in the toilet, the Highlanders scored off an error from the Woods, which led to a dash up the blind, before two sweeping passes the other way put Terry Preston away from 30 metres out to score. In bizarre scenes, Harvey's conversion attempt was charged down by O'Young, racing from his own line.

The game then again entered into a period where the combatants exchanged blows without respite. With a score that looked to be virtually fatal to Gordon's aspirations for the afternoon, rangy winger John Grant plunged over with 20 minutes remaining in the encounter. The Woods appeared to be comfortably in control of the fixture, when Eastwood Coach, Billy Melrose substituted his best player of the game, the skipper Perrett. For those with a sense of football history, it was reminiscent of Warren Ryan substituting Steve "Blocker" Roach and Paul Sironen in the 1989 mungoes grand final. The change was massive as the home team lost an edge at the contest at the breakdown.

The Highlanders kept pressing away and soon found themselves with a scrum five metres Eastwood's line. The ball secured, Turner played to the blindside, which led to Dane Haylett-Petty getting over the line. However, for the umpteenth time in the last few rounds, DHP was denied a try as Gordon were penalised for obstruction.

With a mountain to climb with a quarter of the game remaining, the visitors could have given up, as the home team kicked out to their 22m line. However, the men in tartan proved that they were made of far sterner stuff than that, as Kingsley Seale stole the lineout and from the ensuing throw. From phase ball, the Gordon pack demonstrated purposeful pick and go to establish a platform for the backs. The ball was shifted two wide to Mark Preston who delivered an inside ball to a flying Chris Alcock, who had come on as a reserve and made the kind of impact for which he has become synonymous. Alcock galloped 20 meters and seemed destined to score, but was pulled down a metres short of the line with a fantastic desperate tackle by Rowan Kellam. No one could believe that the man with the perm didn't score; but quick ball from the breakdown and a nice ball from Turner saw Harvey go in untouched to score in the north western corner. With 18 minutes remaining on the clock the Highlanders had reduced the deficit to 12 points and they knew that if they were good enough, they were still in the hunt.

Gordon had the momentum and they continued to take it to their opponent. With the ball carried deep into the home team's territory it appeared that something had to give after pressuring the Woods' line for 8 phases. The visiting fans hoped that the pressure would bear

points; but with excellent organised defence, Eastwood forced a turn over to Damien Fitzpatrick, within a sniff of the line. The Highlanders' supporters sighed, with time quickly running out; but were ecstatic to see the thief pushed back into his own in goal, which resulted in a scrum under the posts and a tartan feed. With something obviously building wide from the scrum, Billy Ratu gather from the back and drifted across the defensive line; but with great vision and quick-thinking Ratu saw a gap and whilst he dragged the defence with him, he found the straight-running Sikuti Vunipola, on for Turner, cutting back in to receive a deft flick pass from big man, to dive over the line adjacent to the posts untouched. The try was converted and with only 7 minutes left Gordon were only an unconverted try behind.

The Highlanders appeared to have no other thought than to run the ball and attack, just like the game should be played. Off the restart, Ratu secured the ball and passed to Alcock who in a bustling fashion not unlike the Warner Brothers' Tasmanian Devil, made some important yards up the centre of the park. As he was tackled and set up phase play, the biggest halfback in the competition, nay the World, Seale delivered beautiful ball to see perfectly executed catch and pass play from Dane Haylett-Petty and Mark Preston, from 10 meters their own side of halfway, to put Matt McDougall away down the sideline. Doogs looped a pass back inside to DHP who found Tobias Gukibau inside, doing his usual massive amount of work for the team. Finally, Gukibau hooked a pass inside to the cult figure Greg Wade, who was on for Terry Preston.

Wade dived over under the posts with an effort not unsimilar to his effort in the only Trevor Allen Cup grand final at Concord in 2007. We have said it before here; but, it bears saying again: we love you Wadey! Harvey knocked over the simple conversion and with less than five minutes remaining, Gordon once again this season hit the lead late in a game for the first time in match 32 - 34. To write off the Woods in that situation would have been fool hardy and would have ignored half a century of the spirit and attitude of this fine club. And true to their history they threw everything that they had at their opponents in the last few minutes. Save for a final pass that failed to hit the mark, the Woods may have snatched the game; but their was to be no last minute save by the Eastwood on their home patch as the Highlanders prevailed by two points, scoring five tries to four and were unlucky to not finish with an exclamation point as Gukibau was denied a try with yet another obstruction call.

The fifteen players on the field were exhausted but exuberant as they realised that they were a mere step from semi final football and the opportunity to finish in third place. The travelling fans, including the injured Wallaby captain, also appeared spent after what was a magnificent advertisement for the game at the grass-roots level. Instead of going through their usual warm down on the field, the players moved through their jubilant fans, en route to the dressing rooms and the biggest song of the year. This team, with a year's more experience is looking to mount a serious challenge in the post season. There is no doubt that the team spirit, belief and trust are all present in this unit. There is no way that a team without those attributes would have triumphed against Easts, Manly and Eastwood in the last six weeks.

The team takes on Penrith at Chatswood this weekend, to finish the regular season. The players will no doubt have an eye on the following week; but they will underestimate the Emus at their peril. In the past the men from the mountains have not enjoyed the greatest success; but they have always had a crack and they have always had the capacity to score plenty of points.

The equation is simply, win the game and secure a spot in the post season, possibly third, depending upon results. However, lose and face the prospect of missing the big dance. There can be no greater motivation. Get down to Chatswood for the final time this season, to see what promises to be an exciting fixture and to send the all teams to the finals the following week.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh