

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Randwick – Round 6 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

After a loss against Randwick in the previous round, the Highlanders were desperate to get back into the winner's circle at a venue at which they have only tasted victory twice in the last decade. In a fantastic sign of club spirit, two men who were part of the earlier of those victories, former Wallabies Andrew Blades and Tim Wallace braved the eastern side of the ground and the errant golf balls and stand in front of the worst-designed scoreboard in the competition to support their Club.

Gordon's Wallabies - Andrew Blades gets tagged by Tim Wallace in the Celebrity Classics v Celebrity Legends. Tsunami Fundraiser 2005



Gordon have not won at this ground since 2002 and to tackle the challenge they named another new three quarter line after a number of breaches in that area in previous weeks. Had Chris Tuatrara not joined intercept guru Sisa Waqa and signed with the Sydney City Roosters, he may have been given the job. Instead Dave Alo came in from the wing and Matt McDougall, who had impressed in his only start for the season, moved into Alo's number 11 jumper. The Highlanders encountered 2008 referee of the year, Nathan Pearce for the second week in succession, following his controversial penalty try ruling, where many thought that he played up to the television cameras on hand at Chatswood.

The signs were not good after 5 minutes as Tom Azar plunged over. Trepidation most aptly described the mood of the travelling fans; but they needn't have been so concerned, as 5 minutes later the Highlanders executed their best try of the season, as a scrum from



midfield saw the ball to Keil, who delivered a double cut out ball, which eventually led to McDougall scoring adjacent to the sticks. Dave Harvey converted and the score was 7 - 5 in favour of the visitors. The Highlanders' scrum was terrific early and Marty Plokstys was punishing in defence in his first outing of the season.

Matt McDougall impressed in his 2nd start

The men in tartan pushed for the next try as they camped in Easts' camp for the next 10 minutes. Unfortunately a foray at the line by the Highlanders saw a loose ball 30 metres from the Beasts' line, which saw the home team turn defence into attack in the blink of an eye. The tricolours targeted the

new three quarter combination before sweeping in for a try after 20 minutes. Much to the chagrin on those with sympathies north of the harbour tunnel, the dose was repeated twice more in 10 minutes as Delitt completed a hatrick through the same gap.

Nearing the end of the first stanza, the home team had a commanding lead of 24 - 7. However, in the shadows of half time Paulie Tuala, who replaced the injured Vili Napa'a, charged through the central defence, before releasing winger Lachie Mitchell, who came streaming through. With only Delitt in front, Mitchell decided to take on the custodian, with support looming behind. Mitchell was tackled in a crunching hit and the opportunity was lost, when a chip over the top may have left the full back with little chance to recover. If the score had been 24 - 14 at halftime the game would have been far more within the grasp of the travelling side.

Just prior to the half-time break, Easts' impressive number 13, Anton Lavin pulled out two very obvious shoulder charges in defence, that were right in front of the referee and his touch judges. After last week's heavy handedness, some wag in the crowd called for a penalty try for the infringement. However, Pearce was having nothing of the suggestion and cautioned Lavin on the way to the half-time break. Strangely, Pearce, who had been so keen to demonstrate to everyone at the ground and watching on television the previous week that he knew the intricacies and nuances of the rules of rugby, chose only to have a cautionary chat with Lavin as the teams left the field. Without wishing to go to the rule book twice in a fortnight, rule 10.4(g) stipulates: "***Dangerous charging. A player must not charge or knock down an opponent carrying the ball without trying to grasp that player***". Put simply, a player cannot shoulder charge, and the outcome must be a straight arm penalty. It is strange that in the space of 7 days, the same referee who was so willing to get involved in the game declined to give two pretty clear cut penalties within kicking distance. However, in saying that, most would likely agree that they prefer the latter approach to the Ayoubesque display the following week. I promise that I will get over this issue soon.

After the half time oranges, Gordon re-emerged with greater purpose; but with a massive mountain to climb. Neither side scored within the first 15 minutes of the second half. The Highlanders threw the ball around and ran the ball back in broken play. However, luck was against them, as Mark Preston kicked through and just failed to regather 40 metres from the home team's line. Instead the ball was gathered and run down the right-hand touch line from 60 metres out to score. Finally, fifteen minutes into the second half Alo, playing in close proximity to the centre of the ground, got on the end of a number of phase plays 5 metres from the Beats' line and he and scored the try to close what was becoming a wide margin to 31 -12. Again it was strange that after Easts had conceded three long-arm penalties within 5 meters of their line in the space of two minutes that Pearce was not diving for a yellow card.

With 25 minutes remaining in the game there was still time for the men in tartan to get something going, as every time they now touched the ball they breached their opponents' defence and were making significant incursions into hostile territory. **Tuala continued his devastating form from the first half and seemed to need several of Easts' massive pack to bring him down. He was**



more than ably assisted by Chris Alcock, who gained another opportunity in the first XV wearing the number 8 jumper to replace the injured Billy Ratu. Despite missing the big man, Gordon competed remarkably well at the line out against the tallest pack in the competition.

Again, as Gordon pushed for more points, a loose ball was well cleaned up by the home team and run from distance for Lavin to score a great counter-attacking opportunists' try.



With 20 minutes on the clock and down by 26 points it looked like a very tough ask. However, to the Highlanders' credit and with the knowledge that they had left a multitude of tries on the park in the previous two weeks, they kept playing (and playing the more dangerous football) until the final whistle. In that time **Craig Thomas, who had another terrific game**, finished off a movement that saw McDougall leave his wing and flash down the opposite side of the ground, in front of the

grandstand and only 26 metres away from a schooner. Dave Harvey missed a very kickable conversion attempt by his high standards and the score was 38 - 17.

In the final minutes of a frustrating game, the Highlanders continued to have chances to score, including when McDougall was cut down by a tackle around the boot laces from

only metres from an otherwise undefended goal line. However, in the second to last minute of the game, McDougall completed his brace in a very dominant performance from the winger. With Harvey successfully converting McDougall's try, **he (Harvey) reached 100 points for the season.**



It is a magnificent achievement in such a short space of time. However, the Highlanders will need him to keep racking up the points if they wish to continue to threaten the competition.

The final score was 38 - 24 and gave rise to thoughts of what might have been. The difference came down to the fact that Easts converted 6 of 6 opportunities to score, including two tries that could not have been scored but for favourable bounces. On the other hand, the Highlanders had no less than 10 genuine opportunities to get the ball over the line and were only able to manage the feat on 40% of those opportunities. To be fair to the home side, some of those chances were snuffed out by some marvellous last line

defence. It is difficult to again write that it was a game that although lost, augurs well for the remainder of the season. Despite playing the better football from the half hour mark in the game, Gordon simply left themselves far too much to do after their right side defence went missing for 10 minutes. Once this team gets it together, their hapless victims on that day will wonder what hit them.



Aside from Vinnie Byrne, who put in another stellar performance, the players coming into the starting XV were the standouts. Plokstys showed the form that saw the Waratahs selectors pick him in the preseason and **Chris Alcock had another barnstorming game.**

However, it was Tuala and McDougall who demanded that they be included on the team sheet next week. Every time that either of them touched the ball something

happened and it took no less than three players to take down the man with the orange fro.

This week is a massive fixture against Sydney University. The loser could see themselves drop out of the 6. The Highlanders will do all that they can to avoid dropping three games in a row. After a decade of seeing teams in blue and yellow hoops triumph over the men in tartan, there is no better time for this year's Highlanders to finally come together as a team and put the points on the board that they have promised. If that eventuates, this team will go a long way to avenging those who have gone before them, who have been wiped off the park by what has seemed to be Australia's fifth first class franchise. Most galling has been that the Varsity teams have included in their number up to a third of Gordon juniors in some of those seasons.

This will be a massive encounter, as both sides are coming off a loss in the previous round. The Highlanders after playing two very good games but coming away with a solitary point, will be hell bent on putting on a show for their loyal supporters. Your club needs you more than ever to be at Chatswood as the boys attempt to get back on track. Make sure that you are there to part of a crowd that promises to be even bigger than the Randwick game a fortnight ago.

It is "Get Back to Chatswood" round this weekend, and anyone with tartan blood coursing through their veins should really have no excuse not to be there. Get there early to secure the best vantage point as seats will be at premium to see this encounter.

Finally, just a quick plug for the team at Rugga Matrix, who have dedicated a new website to discuss the grass roots of the game. Make sure that you go to www.clubrugby.com.au, where Djuro Sen, Mark Cashman and former Marlin Sean Maloney are giving a voice to the grass roots of rugby. They do a 45 minute podcast every Tuesday night about the action from the previous round and highlight the one coming up. Get on and get involved.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh