

## “A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

### Gordon v Manly – Round 9 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

This could be a short report. The overall feeling was disappointment.

The Highlanders faced the top of the table Marlins at Manly Oval on Saturday. Fans of both teams and neutrals alike were looking forward to seeing the best two teams without Super 14 players take each other on. All that the game needed to ensure the spectacle that the fans wanted was a fine day and a dry track. That was all that it needed to see two potent backlines strut their stuff. What the game got was a week soaked with rain and a down pour as the game started. The Highlanders had triumphed in the last five games against their rivals from the lower Peninsula and they looked to finish their tough four weeks with a win.

For those superstitious amongst the Gordon players and fans - for the purpose of this report let's just call them "cricketers" - the fact that the referee overseeing the game, Nathan Pearce, had officiated in the only losses that the Highlanders had suffered for the season had the whistle for the afternoon. The cricketers were visibly nervous every time that they heard the “peep” of the whistle.

Compared with the performances that both of these sides have produced this season, this game could best be described as dour. It was a compelling arm-wrestle; but dour nonetheless. One off the ruck running was the order of the day as the teams were forced to keep it close. The scrum was going to be a key part in determining the winner of the fixture. This battle did not disappoint as **Nath Nicol and his props Tobais and Ofa** locked horns with the Marlin's islander trio including local favourite James "the Persuader" Lakepa, who has been in brutal form all season. Manly have dominated up front this year; but the tartan pack stood up under their challenge.



The men in tartan were the first team to get on the board, as, just shy of the 20 minute mark, the Marlins were penalised 30 metres from their own line. Dave Harvey duly steered the penalty between the sticks. Within five minutes the home team drove into Gordon's half. As they regained the ball 35 meters from Gordon's line they commenced a movement that rolled towards the line in the slippery conditions, which was finished strongly by number 8 Mark Fisher. As the big man careered at the line, he simply had too much momentum to be halted, before he crashed over under the parochial "hill" in the north-western corner. Manly point scoring machine Adam Darcy converted the try and the score was 7 - 0 to the red and blues.

Whilst the wet conditions conspired against Gordon's attack, the Highlanders showed that they were up for the contest with some brutal defence. This was epitomised with several massive hits that Ofa pulled off, which saw his opponent on each occasion take some time

to pick themselves off the mud pile that the field at the bottom of Sydney Road had become.

The Highlanders turned in the second half with the wind at their back and the travelling fans waited hopefully for their team to set their attack alight despite the conditions. Making the task all the more difficult was the loss shortly after the break of Harvey, who started to struggle with a leg injury with 10 minutes of the first stanza remaining. His raking kick was



missed as that ability would have heaped the pressure on the home team. His departure saw Terry Preston come onto the field for the second time in two weeks as he replaced **Matt McDougall on the right wing** as McDougall, who had another strong game, moved into outside centre and Mark Preston moved to full back.

Gordon attempted to break the shackles by throwing the ball wide. However, in the slippery conditions they spilled the ball

too often. Adding to the pressure upon them, the man in tartan started to fall off tackles, as former Highlander Josh "the Mouth" Gamage continued to step of his massive right foot, refusing to shift the ball and sensibly take it on up the middle. With the forward pack hunting together and sniping off the edges and on the few occasions that the ball went wide, Neon Leon Bott making yards, Manly looked a chance to dominate the game on the scoreboard. However, to Gordon's credit they managed to stay in the contest, despite inviting the Marlins to take control when they dropped the wet pill in attack.

With a quarter of an hour to go, the home team looked to put the game out of reach, as they stormed towards to line from 40 metres out, following a collection of curious decisions from the bloke with the whistle. The catalyst for that Manly attacking foray came from a ruling following a Marlins' knock on, Gordon collected the ball and kicked out on the full. Strangely, the line out was formed with a Manly feed as the referee determined that advantage had already accrued to the visiting team. The home team charged towards the line and as they closed in to 5 metres of putting the game out of reach of their guests, they looked destined to score. However, in a fantastic sign for the Highlanders, Lachie Mitchell with the help of desperate cover defence on the line managed to knock the ball loose and keep the man in tartan within a try of winning the game.

Again, it would be unfair to suggest that Pearce was the reason that the Highlanders lost the game; but some of his rulings were curious to say the least. One such incident saw Manly half back Chris Cottee collect **Kingsley Seale** with a right cross to the chin and the referee, having already awarded a short arm penalty did not take any further action. Curious! Three weeks ago, the same bloke may have run under the posts and award a penalty try. However, this week the television cameras were not at the Village Green. Former referee Peter Marshall was pacing the sideline, obviously



running his eye over the young whistle blower, and he was seen to write notes furiously on his pad. The rumour that Marshall was a little embarrassed about the referring is unfounded. Suffice it to say that Pearce was lucky that he was not refereeing a Wests Tigers' game at Campbelltown

Even with ten minutes remaining, Gordon had a couple of chances to take the points. With a three man overlap to the left on the half way line, the Highlanders dropped the ball cold. Further, with two minutes remaining the Highlanders broke from the halfway line down the eastern touchline. Mitchell and McDougall exchanged passes and made 40 metres; but to their credit, the Marlins defended marvellously to snuff out the attack. In weeks past, the visitors may have outsmarted their opposition to score and win the game. However, to their great credit, Manly concentrated to the end to secure the points.

The score ended with neither side scoring in the second half. However, up until the last minute of the fixture, it was still anyone's game. It was a shame that the encounter was



marred by the conditions; but any team that hopes to win the competition must perform in all conditions. The Marlins played at full tilt and with unquestioned commitment and they deserved their win. The Highlanders fell off too many first up tackles during the course of the afternoon and they didn't take the chances with which they were presented. Despite the tireless efforts of Craig Thomas around the park and the Energizer Bunny, Chris Alcock, who scored a

marvellous and unlikely winning try in second grade, the visitors just couldn't get enough going to get the points. Paulie Tuala was again devastating in his attack and punishing in defence. It is great for the Highlanders and the Waratahs that he has committed his future to stay in the country to attempt to secure a spot in the sky blue's squad in 2010.

This week Gordon hosts the blue and white of Eastwood. After the Highlanders' former Wallaby Laurie Monaghan did the competition a favour in 1981 to slot a field goal to relegate the Rosso Neri to subbies, Eastwood were the fierce local rivals for the men from Chatswood. At one time, when NSW Rugby was talking about a national competition, these two great rivals were touted to join forces.

The game is the second of three marquee games to be played at Chatswood on a Sunday in 2009. The management of the Club have ordered an unseasonably warm last day of May to guarantee an open, free-flowing game. The Woods were not on the radar as a danger game a month ago when Gordon faced it month of truth. After three relatively close losses out of four, the men from Milner having put wins on the board, including a last start thumping of Randwick, and welcoming back several Super 14 players, this game is crucial to the fortunes on the Highlanders as the first part of the competition in one round from the halfway point.

Many in the tartan camp would be disappointed with where the team sits. Although in second place, Gordon has lost some games in which they might have triumphed. In truth, the Highlanders have lost only one more game to this stage of the season than last year. However, whilst this season the losses column reveals one more loss, each of those has been very close.

Gordon lose the services of Samoan duo Nifo "Magnificent" Nifo and Josh Keil as they travel to the island nation for selection trials. They may be out of a tartan jumper for up to



five weeks; but the Club wishes them the best in their endeavours to be selected to represent in the royal blue jumper. However, in a great bonus, **the Highlanders welcome back Ed "Horse" Gower** as he takes his position in the first XV, partnering Seale in second row. Gower will also takes the captain's armband from Mark Preston. The faithful supporters at Chatswood have been looking for last year's leader to return to the field.

There is no better time to get to the ground to support your team as they attempt to get back on track. We all need to get down to the Old Girl to get behind the boys and they need your support more than ever to get back into the winning habit. In years gone by the performance of Gordon against Eastwood on Sunday at

Chatswood has been such to inspire the conception of a first born. Don't miss it.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh