

## **“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”**

### **Gordon v Parramatta – Round 1 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield**

It is the earliest in the rugby season that this correspondent has ever been to Death Valley. Curiously, all appeared to be very similar, the pies were outstanding, the best place to watch the action was on the eastern hill, that woman who gets stuck into ... well, just about everyone was getting stuck into just about everyone; but something was missing. It took some time to realise that the omnipresent sub-continental cricketers were not going at it at on the adjacent sports field. Without fail they are there every season, middle of winter, no gloves and loving. On this day however their absence created an eerily silent back drop to the rugby.

Of course, one needn't have worried, as on the stroke of 5pm they came out from where they had been and engaged in their very unique style of Australia's summer past time.

It was at this time that the first grade combatants ran out on to a field. The change in regular time, which caught several fans off guard, was to accommodate Gordon's own cricketers, whose 3<sup>rd</sup> grade side, under the direction of wily veteran Ed Howitt, were busily booking a place in this week's decider. Over this weekend the Gordon Rugby Club sponsored “Stags” will compete for two premierships. 3<sup>rd</sup> grade take on Sydney Uni, yes they dominate cricket as well, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade face Fairfield.



#### **Veteran Ed Howitt burgles another wicket at Chatswood Oval**

The cricket meant that on this rare occasion, all colts and grade played at the one ground.

Granville Oval appeared as if it was surprised that rugby had again started. It looked like it had been told that the competition would start the following week. Perhaps it was just that the spark plug had gone missing from the mower. Frankly, it was surprising that the woman who gets stuck into just about everyone, was not getting stuck into whosever job it was to mow the grass.

The start of the new season and the Gordon brains had informed the press during the week that they were quietly confident that the first XV had a genuine chance to bring the Toohey NEW Shute Shield back to Chatswood. The game against the always physical Two Blues, with 10 positional changes from the side that played in the semi final last year, would give an early glimpse as to whether that optimism was well placed.

The scoring started early, as after 5 minutes big Kingsley Seale got on the score board. Reminiscent of the Highlanders' own play 5 years ago, Parramatta were attacking at the Gordon quarter line; but a dropped ball was pounced upon and punished as Mark Preston made initial yards through the centre and made space for Lachie Mitchell, who pinned his ears back and made 35 metres down the right flank before he was put into touch. The ensuing line out saw poor ball back to Parramatta pivot who fumbled the ball in his own in goal area. A five metre scrum followed and Josh Kiel in his first game in a Gordon jumper threw a cut out ball that led to more metres, phase play and the big lock ploughed over.



A similar story unfolded 8 minutes later as the home team again dropped the ball, this time 30 metres from their own line. **Billy Ratu gathered the loose ball, turned it inside to Craig Thomas, who ran 25 metres to score the first of his two tries for the afternoon under the sticks.** Thomas picked up where he left off at the end of the 2008 season and was simply everywhere. His battle with Rodney Ma'a for the number 7 shirt will be intriguing; but Thomas appeared determined to put in a stellar first performance. Ma'a gets his chance to show his wares as he returns from a pre-season injury in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

Parramatta were certainly willing and continued to throw their best at the men in tartan. However, they were constantly thwarted by dropped ball and a lack of a clear game plan in attack that they may have had if a more experienced player in Josh Weekes had been on the field. Without that decisive direction, some relatively aimless kicking followed that served only to hand the ball back to Gordon. On top of that the scrum held firm against a strong pack. **The front row of Lamarn Ma'a, Nath Nicgol and Tobius Gukibau,** who was returning to Granville, after having played with Parramatta, duelled brilliantly with a huge triumvirate of McAlley, Podmore and Killman. In what appeared to be a moment of great satisfaction, Gukibau popped up with a try in the second half.



Another player returning to a club at which he had previously played was **Vili Napa'a.** Vili looked to be in peak fitness and in the form that saw him dubbed a few years ago as the hardest



ball runner in the competition. On the 33 minute mark he finished off a marvellous flowing back-line movement, in which the ball passed through the hands of each of David Harvey, Keil and the elusive Josh Whittaker, who was back in the top grade after playing in the premiership-winning 3<sup>rd</sup> grade side last season, before Ratu again threw the last pass to see Napa'a crash over in front of the home fans. At the break the Highlanders led 17 - 0, although they could have been further in front as Napa'a

briefly turned villan when he decided to go himself and ignore a 5-man overlap down the right side of the field in the second to last minute of the opening stanza.

Running towards the southern end in the second half, which is also known as the cricket net end, where another group of sub-continental cricketers had arrived, Gordon were keen to grab the bonus-point try early and put the game out of reach of the Two Blues. It was not long before the Highlanders had achieved that aim, which again came through another Parramatta error. Harvey kicked the ball deep into the home team's end of the field, the Two Blues' backs having had precious little possession were keen to run the ball and create a spark, when big Wise Gavididze threw



a long ball, which was plucked out of the air by Thomas, who strolled the 25 metres to score his second try of the afternoon. Only five minutes later the men in tartan scored again after a strong run from run-on debutant with a name that sounds as if it belongs to the alter ego of a Super Hero (or possibly a villain), **Lex Fairley**. Fairley continued his very strong performance in busting through the teeth of the defence and just when you thought that Preston was having a quiet day by his standards, he took a flick pass from Fairley and ran the 35 metres to the line in

second gear and the score was suddenly 31 - 0.

Fairley impressed with his work in the line out, although it was fair to say that he was not greatly challenged as not a player from 1 to 8 in blue measured over 6'1". In any event, it was a great first game from the man who deservedly won the players' player of the match. Nifo Nifo and Ed "Undies" Gower are champing at the bit to return to the field and Australian Schoolboy Mark Johnson impressed in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, all of which will undoubtedly put pressure on Fairley. However, if he continues to perform like he did on Saturday, he will give coach Fear some (pleasant) headaches in a few weeks.

Following Gukibau's brilliant 2 metre run to score at the 20 minute mark of the second half, the Highlanders increased their lead to 45 - nil, when Harvey made up for some of the embarrassment he suffered by being outpaced by Sydney Uni's Jerry Yanuyanutawa last season at Chatswood, by sprinting away from Parramatta's tight head. However, not to be unfair to Harvey, who kicked 8 from 10 for the day, the home team's prop would place highly in a 100 metre dash held between the Shute Shield's "pigs".

Another debutant scored in his debut for the Highlanders two minutes later, when replacement centre Chris Tuatara was on the end of a Gordon overlap and flashed over the line in his black and gold socks from his days at rugby league's Balmain Ryde Eastwood Tigers. They may be his lucky socks, but hopefully the Club has not been hit so hard by the global financial crisis that Tuatara will not be sporting green, yellow and black socks this Sunday. With 5 minutes remaining on the clock there was still enough time for two more tries, as first Ratu grabbed one for himself and then, on the bell the best movement of the game saw Gordon attacking from within their own quarter. David Alo set sail down the eastern touchline, before releasing replacement Matt McDougall to score to take the final score to 66 - 0.

It was certainly a dominant display on the score board and in most facets of play. However, coach Fear is adamant that the side has significant improvements to make if they are to have a chance at fulfilling his lofty ambitions. The back line was a little incohesive at times; but that is hardly surprising, given that there were 6 positional changes from the team that took the field in the last

game of last season. On that basis, it may take a little time to be as comfortable as the terrific unit of 2008. The signs are certainly there and the instinctive understanding amongst the side can only improve with time.

### Josh Keil directs play

A more difficult challenge awaits this week as the Highlanders return home to Chatswood to host West Harbour on Sunday. Last season the two sides split the games, with two brilliant



games of running rugby. It was only the bounce of the ball from a speculative kick ahead from Wests' half back Steve Massey that sealed the game for the Pirates at Concord in round 20 last season. The game also sees the best two young coaches in the competition go head-to-head. Last year's coach of the year was a very close run thing between Stu Woodhouse and Fear, with many good judges thinking that Gordon's mentor was a little unlucky not to be recognised with the award. However, under Woodhouse's tutelage, Wests have been transformed into a tough but very exciting side. With Wests having finished within 7 points of Randwick in round 1, it should make for a cracker of a game.

These games at Chatswood are what it is all about. Make sure that you are there on **Sunday** to see the Highlanders at the first home game in 2009. Come and cheer on your team.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh