

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Warringah – Elimination Final Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

In the final round against Penrith, Gordon duly secured third spot on the ladder with a 97 - 24 victory, which included a Shute Shield record tally of 57 points from the 2008 Catchpole Medal winner Dave Harvey, including 7 tries. Those points included some magnanimous play from teammate Craig "Buckets" Thomas, who looked set to score two of his own under the black dot. Harvey also caught and passed season-long points scoring front runner Adam D'Arcy in finishing the regular season atop the points scoring table with 308. Two hours earlier in second grade, Greg Wade scored a club record 10 tries to finish as the Club's highest try scorer.

In a magnificent effort by a Club with no Super 14 players, the Highlanders finished second in the Club Championship and third in the Colts' Club Championship, including third grade finishing as minor premiers for the second consecutive season, and all teams qualifying for their respective semi finals in fourth place or better. Congratulations are well deserved by all players, coaches and officials for this marvellous achievement.

Week one of the post season matched the First XV against Warringah, who came from behind to draw against Southern Districts and limp into sixth place, denying the Beasts a place in the post season. Curiously, the Highlanders had to travel to Rat Park for the game. Even more curiously, over the past two seasons between these two teams, the visitors have been victorious. However, with only 3 players remaining in the Rats' team from round 3 and the line up now counting 8 Super 14 players amongst their number, this was a game that Gordon would have to be on their game, particularly at the break down and in back line defence to stand any chance of advancing in 2009.



The game started with plenty of feeling as the two packs smashed into each other at the tackle and the break down. Within two minutes, a scuffle broke out and the characteristically tetchy opposition half back looked suspiciously like he dropped his knees into Matt McDougall on the ground and out of play, after the whistle was blown. Thomas may have perceived that something similar happened, as he collared his former club mate. More players joined and there was an increased amount of pushing and shoving. At that point Ofa Fainga'anuku came racing in to support his teammates and collapsed what had become a very large ruck. The loose head was penalised for his involvement and the protagonist in the incident knocked over a penalty to give an early lead to the home team.



The Highlanders were committed in defence and smashed wave after wave of ball runner, with Paulie Tuala, Marty Plokstys and

Ed Gower making some noteworthy bell ringers.

After weathering the green and white storm, the Highlanders started to work into the game and built some momentum. After a prolonged period in the Rats' half, Sam Harris was penalised for a high shot and Harvey converted the relatively easy

chance to lock the score up at 3 all. Gordon visibly grew in confidence, having repelled Warringah and they looked to take advantage of every opportunity, as opposed to aimlessly kicking away their possession into the strong wind. From the back Harvey and

Dane Haylett-Petty, who was a challenge to handle every time that he touched the ball,

looked to run the ball back and rely on team mates to get back to support and secure the next phase. Harvey was determined to take on the line and the chips and grubbers that refused to stay in at Chatswood in round 14 against the same opponents, started to do as they were told. Getting the ball in behind the home team's defence looked to be worrying the Rats, as they were continually called upon to scramble.



Despite the early momentum and the stiff breeze, on three occasions within 15 minutes of half time, the Highlanders threatened to score. The first

was solely created by Harvey, who took the ball at speed from Terry Preston, who collected a high return kick from Harris 10 meters into Warringah's territory.



Harvey headed down the western touchline, where he hustled aside Haig Sare 30 metres out,

before dropping the ball on the toe, down the skinniest of alley ways. The ball eluded all players as it bounced into the in goal where Gordon's point scoring machine competed with Pat McCabe to

grab the ball; but it was Warringah's custodian who did well to head off the danger. Eight minutes later with the Rats scrambling 10 from their own line it was Harvey again who was in

the thick of the action when he charged down a clearing kick from Jordan Macey, which bounced into the in goal area. As he charged towards the ball, Sam Harris appeared to change his line and check Harvey's run. The ball would probably have reached touch in goal before the Gordon man could have arrived; but as it was under the nose of touch judge Nathan Pearce, who infamously awarded a penalty try against Harvey earlier in the season, the Rats were extremely fortunate that no action was taken. But the best chance to score came from quick thinking from Terry Preston, as Macey inadvertently stepped out upon fielding a clearing kick. Preston threw into Harvey, who turned inside to Kiel. The five eighth appeared to have put Preston away under the posts; but the pass was ruled forward.

With time winding down in the first half, the Highlanders must have been pleased to be on level terms and but for the bounce of the ball and a misdirected pass, could have been two tries in front of their highly-fancied opponent. With any kick getting above the level of the western grandstand demonstrating, the northerly breeze was a valuable insurance policy, the Highlanders were looking forward to the advantage in the second half. With the way that Gordon had stormed home in a number of its games in the second half of the season, the heat was shaping as a factor that may play into the visitors' hands coming down the home straight. The Rats lost the impetus to take advantage of the wind at their backs in the final minutes, as they laboured to the set piece. The bell rang and the sides remained deadlocked.

The first half was highlighted by the magnificent defence of both teams, who refused to give the other team an advantage, by managing to snuff out dangerous movements at the last moment. The scrum, with Gordon's front row competing extremeley well against a very impressive triumvirate including Wallaby Pek Cowan, was a terrific battle, without dominating the contest. But the real stand out was the ability of the Gordon forwards at the breakdown, to turn over at least eight balls was extraordinary and gave the Highlanders a magnificent chance to win the game. Thomas lead the way; but he was ably supported at a fierce breakdown contest by Tuala and the skipper. However, to say that the contest was dour in the first stanza was to be very critical, or Greg Growden. There was plenty of attack and enterprising play, which once again emphatically provided a message to the northern hemisphere to stop ruining the game with the over concentration on the scrum, technicalities and penalty goals. This was only further punctuated later in the evening when Springboks' fly half, Morne Steyne kicked 3 penalties from his own 10 metre line to effectively secure the Tri Nations' trophy. What a joke!

As the teams resumed hostilities after the break, there was again a period of thrust and parry as the combatants searched for the upper hand. However, it was clear that Gordon was starting to gain the upper hand, playing for extended periods in the Rats half. Chris Alcock replaced Tuala after about 10 minutes of the second half and he immediately sought to



impose himself on the game, including getting in the face of Harris, who refused to let go of the ball after a Gordon free kick was awarded and it was clear that the Rats were losing their cool in the hot conditions. After 13 minutes of the half, the Highlanders were rewarded with the first major score of the day, when from seventh phase ball 10 metres from the try line, Justin Turner delivered to Mark Preston, who with beautiful footwork set the defence on its heels before

picking up a straight-running Kiel. The former Rat half broke a tackle and dished a sublime pass onto Havey, who finally got over the try line after his near

misses in the first half. The try was converted and the score was 10 - 3 in favour of the third-placed team.

Soon after the score, Gordon threatened Warringah's line again, as the Rats were being starved of an opportunity to play. Kingsley Seale replaced Nifo Nifo, who had been strong in the contest to that point. Despite their being 25 minutes left in the game and only a converted try in it, Warringah looked under pressure and as the ultimate compliment to the quality of the game that Gordon was playing, they started to take risks. With a quarter of the game remaining and the Rats still stuck deep in their own half, they once again chanced their arm. Sheehan threw a looping pass that Billy Ratu nearly intercepted but which was collected and advanced through replacement winger David Feltscheer. The gangly speedster was tackled in copy-book style by Haylett-Petty and he was forced to turn the ball inside as he was being bundled over the touchline, hoping for support;

but he only succeeded in finding Mark Preston, who skipped down the eastern touchline, out of reach of the chasing Sheehan to score a 60 metre try to take the score to 15 - 3.



If the Highlanders or their fans hoped that the Rats would go away, they would have been upset, as Warringah secured the ball

from the next kick off and made a rare incursion in their opponent's half. After some phases of play around the quarter line a long ball hit Luke Holmes and the talented hooker determinedly smashed his way through five tackles to score and bring the score to within five, with 15 minutes remaining. For a game that Gordon had dominated, this was getting a little too close for comfort. Off the kick off, Warringah kicked the ball back over halfway and Harvey had difficulty collecting the bouncing ball on the touchline 30 metres from his own line in front of the hill, with the defence fast arriving. But Harvey, again showing terrific strength in brushing aside the first attempted tackle and with few options available to him, chipped to space

against the touchline. He raced through to beat Harris to the ball and



toed ahead a matter of metres inside for Matt McDougall to kick to the in goal 35 metres out. Dougs outpaced McCabe to the ball to touch down on the last blade of grass in play in the south-eastern corner.

The try wasn't converted but the lead was increased to 20 - 10 with about 10 minutes

remaining.

Gordon fans who had been at the preliminary final against Randwick at the same venue last year, knew that this was a score that was still achievable by the home side and they collectively held their breath. Warringah certainly had the time and the opportunities to win, as they spent a sustained time in the Highlanders' red zone and it was only the disciplined defence of the visitors and the same intensity at the break down with which they started the game, which was typified by the skipper and Seale, that repelled the attacks. The Rats lost their patience and composure and with it the opportunity to win the fixture.

With Only five minutes of their season remaining, Warringah was forced to take big risks. On just Gordon's side of halfway, John Kennedy, playing at five eighth, took a ball from Sheehan

at the base of a ruck and fired a ball towards the wing of the dangerous Dylan

Smouha; but the ball only managed to find

McDougall who ran the 55 metres to complete his brace for the afternoon

under the black dot and secure a fantastic,

hard-fought victory for the men in tartan.



With the game and Warringah's season over, the most disgraceful incident occurred that many have had the misfortune to witness at a sporting venue. Haig Sare, was tackled over the sideline near the Steve Temple Can Bar by Jared Barry and he was slung towards the fence. Perhaps tired and frustrated by the way the game had unfolded, Sare came up swinging. Harvey approached the scrap and attempted to break up the fight that the Rats' outside centre had started. However, at that point, as the players involved were very near the fence, a member of the crowd reached over the fence and pulled at Harvey's jersey, as he fell backwards into the fence, another member of the crowd leaned over the fence and threw punches aimed at Harvey's head.

Referee Walsh acted superbly in identifying the crowd member and calling for security. In that moment, the coward who threw the punches (it is interesting that he did not seek to take on Barry) arose from his seat and tried to slink out the back gate. Security was ordered to follow the man; but he may have escaped had it not been for second grade centre Josh Whittaker, who apparently caught the offender in the park and restrained him until the authorities arrived, tearing after him. It is fair to say that both sets of supporters were stunned at what they had seen. The incident was an utter disgrace, to rugby generally, as it was broadcast on national television and particularly to Warringah and NSW Rugby. It will be very interesting how they handle this matter in the coming weeks.

Despite the scandal, the gloss should not be taken from this fantastic result. The victory was based on everyone working together and for each other, against a quality opposition.

Anything less would have surely spelled the end of 2009 for the men in tartan. The breakdown was magnificent, with Thomas arguably deserving the plaudits as the game's most valuable player. Coupled with this was the confidence and discipline that the team showed in each other both in attack and defence. Gordon continued to play the expansive game that



has seen them climb back to the top of the ladder in the last two years. Most importantly, however, was the fact that

the central-midfield defence was magnificent.

For so many weeks the Achilles' heel of this side claiming victories, it was almost the greatest strength. It was as if those in the three-quarter line had

made a pact a la Gandolf the Grey that their opposition would not pass. The song virtually lifted the roof off the Rat Park grandstand, as the team celebrated the best performance by a Gordon First XV for ... well, for some time!

The Highlanders now advance to play the mighty myrtle green of Randwick at Woollahra Oval on Sunday. In a twist of fate it is the same opponent that knocked Gordon out at the same stage last season. The Wicks have a very impressive team with a host of Super 14 players and if the Highlanders do not turn up with the same game that they brought to Rat Park, they may as well plan for the traditional end-of-season antics the following day. However, if they can replicate their performance against Warringah, they will be right in the contest.

It is probably true to say that the Wicks will go into the game as favourites; but to say that the pressure is solely on the men from Coogee would be to deny the ambition of this Highlanders' team that has grown together over the last three seasons and will without doubt turn up to the home of Eastern Suburbs with only the thought of winning on their mind. Make sure that you are at Woollahra Oval on Sunday to cheer your lungs out, as the boys strive to make their first Shute Shield grand final since that magnificent day at the Sydney Football Stadium against Northern Suburbs in 1998.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh