

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Manly – Round 20 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

Unquestionably the best game at Chatswood Oval this season. The Highlanders needed to win against high fliers Manly to ensure that they remained in control of their own destiny in 2009. In the first half of the season, the two teams played in conditions at Manly Oval that robbed the crowd of a great spectacle, as the Marlins maintained their position aloft the table with a hard-fought, low-scoring win. For the return encounter, spring came early to the North Shore as Chatswood Oval was bathed in sunshine.

With Gordon suffering injuries to its first three choices at hooker and first two choices at halfback, the home team would be forced to dig deep to overcome a team that need to keep winning if they are to enjoy the advantage that they have built up so far in the season. To help the cause, with Vinnie Byrne and Dan Robinson apparently sidelined for the season, Western



Force squad member Justin Turner took the number 9 jersey. Turner was talked about as featuring heavily for the Force in 2009; but injury curtailed that opportunity. To regain match fitness, Turner lobbed up at that park on Miller Street in North Sydney to have a run. He featured in the only triumphant red and black outfit to triumph against their northern neighbour, before realising that a tartan jumper would be far better fit. The faithful who turned up to "Back to Gordon Day" were keen to see the debutant's performance.

The Highlanders welcomed back their inspirational skipper Ed "Horse" Gower to the team after the Brumbies' questionable mid-season tour. Whilst the trio of Kingsley Seale, Nifo Nifo and Big Jared Barry have filled the beach with aplomb, there is no doubt that Gordon lifts a level when the man with the biggest calves in the competition leads the team onto the ground. The Marlins had the much vaunted front row of Lakepa (affectionately known as the "Persuader"), Taione and New Zealander Tim Fairbrother; and in the first exchanges at the scrum the

Highlanders were demolished, despite the best efforts of Ofa, Tobias Gukibau again filling in at hooker and Lamarn Ma'a replacing one of the Highlanders' stand out performers for the season Marty Plokstys, who took his place on the bench as a fresh reserve.

The Marlins came out showing that they meant business with a very solid scrum and a number of breaks through the middle of the ground including a damaging movement that saw Luke Johnson streak into the Highlanders' danger zone. The first points in the fixture came

through the boot of Manly full back Adam D'Arcy after 5 minutes, when Gordon were pinged for being offside after the home team lost a scrum against the feed in what was to become a worrying trend in the first half an hour. Gordon returned the favour minutes later when **Dave Harvey, playing at 12, knocked one over for 35 metres out.**



The first major score of the game resulted from a little bit of luck, a howling breeze and lack of grip, when, at the 10 minute mark D'Arcy fielded a raking clearing kick from Dane Haylett-Petty, 40 out from Manly's line. The Marlins' fullback hoisted the ball into the wind coming

straight down the ground and chased hard. Harvey moved toward the ball and probably played for too much strength in the breeze. The ball swirled and Harvey tried to prop and move back with the flight of the ball. Unfortunately, his cleats didn't grab the turf and he sprawled as the ball bounced behind him 30 meters out and D'Arcy ran onto it and galloped untouched to the line and under the black dot.

The Highlanders hit back 5 minutes later after moving deep into Manly's territory. The visitors cleared from a ruck five metres out from their own line to the halfway line were Terry Preston, who is growing in stature by the week after starting the season in 3rd grade behind some impressive wingers at the Club, took the line on and beat three tackles on his way back to five metres shy of the attacking quarter line. From the next phase, Turner unleashed a clinical ball



to Kiel who quickly shifted a cut-out pass to Billy Ratu. Ratu continued his top ball running form from the previous week's performance against the Students in fighting his way to within 15 metres of the line, before he gave a trademark one-handed ball inside to Mark Preston. Preston drew D'Arcy five metres from the line and **put Matt McDougall away into the south-western corner for his 14th try of the campaign.** Harvey kicked truly in the blustery conditions to restore parity at 10 all.

Despite some solid defence the pace of the visitors' outside backs and the obvious advantage that they had in the scrum started to dominate the home team. Within 10 minutes of McDougall's try Manly had increased the score to 20 - 10, when first D'Arcy's scored his second try for the afternoon, following another sloppy scrum from the Highlanders. Then Gordon were again pinged for being offside, following which the visiting fullback added another penalty.

Gordon were caught short in their defensive line again minutes later, as the Marlins swept to the right, where Dane Haylett-Petty was called upon to cover three men. Understandably, DHP was not up to that mammoth task and the last pass was delivered to winger, Lupini Siale, who swept over under the Trumper Pavilion. Siale rounded towards the posts to improve the conversion attempt. However, in what was arguably the most important incident in the game, under minimal pressure from Harvey, he lost the ball on the way to touch down and Gordon were granted a massive reprieve. He later claimed that there was some moisture on the ball that caused him to lose grip; but it is doubtful that the talented winger will ever again attempt to touch down without two hands on the ball. The significance of the moment cannot be underestimated, as the Marlins were playing dominant football with a pack that had all the answers, and a try could have seen the visiting team move well and truly out of sight.

With five minutes left in the half, Gordon were awarded a free kick near the halfway line as Ma'a went down injured. Plokstys took his place on the field as Gower signalled that he would take a scrum. To the faithful at the ground, the decision seemed incredulous. However, they, along with the Manly pack were stunned when the Highlanders' scrum was rock solid. It seemed at that point that the visitors suffered the uncomfortable realisation that they would be in for a torrid second half if they were to leave with the victory. With three minutes of the first stanza remaining, Harvey saw an opportunity and chipped at the line, before he was unnecessarily checked by Johnson and awarded a penalty, which he duly converted. At the half time bell, Manly were up 20 - 13; but they could easily have racked up 30 to 40 points, with the opportunities that they created. It was only the inexplicable mistake by Siale and the disciplined defence that was able to hold out a marauding opposition.

The second half stepped up in intensity, as both teams traded blows and were met with excellent defence. It was not until the twelfth minute of the half that points were scored, through the boot of D'Arcy, who had scored all of the Marlins' 23 points. However, within a few minutes Gordon crossed the line for another try, after Haylett-Petty was felled as he chipped through and he was awarded a penalty. With their season on the line, the Highlanders opted for the side line and found it within 10 metres of their objective. From the ensuing lineout, **the forwards mauled their way over the line for the ever present Craig "Buckets" Thomas to score the try.** At 23 - 20, the Marlins must have been wondering whether they would be forced to rue their missed opportunities in the first half, especially considering the ever-improving Gordon scrum.

Craig "Buckets" Thomas was again sensational at number 7

Following that score, the Highlanders had the momentum; but as they looked to capitalise, for the second time in as many home games, they were denied a try, which would have taken the men in tartan to the lead for the first time in the encounter.



The forwards smashed their way up field and from phase play, with a movement flashing towards the north eastern touchline, Thomas appeared to get over the line, albeit under some heavy attention. The home fans cheered and the Manly players appeared resigned to the fact that the hard-working number 7 had scored a brace. Referee Hardy seemed to have little doubt and he went through his usual routine before reaching for the sky. However, it seems that the only person at the oval to see a bobble was the touch judge.

Thomas may have indeed juggled the ball, only he will know; but I have seen the replay several times and I cannot see where he lost control. Former Gordon greats Matt Dixon and the mercurial Tim Wallace were stationed in that corner and may have politely questioned whether or not the referee's assistant had really seen a bobble. The end result was no try; but an increasing belief that the Highlanders had more points in them. And the crowd only had to wait a further two minutes as Manly invited their hosts to take



the lead, when a pass from the base of a ruck 40 meters out from Gordon's line, thrown by Manly halfback Chris Cottee, failed to find its mark and it bounced on its point to **Sikuti Vunipola, who had replaced the injured Turner, whereupon he raced the remaining 60 metres to score in front of the home dressing room.** Harvey missed with his conversion; but the Highlanders were ahead 25 - 23 with 15 minutes remaining.

The game was still firmly in the balance; but then, arguable the best single piece of play in the game, as Manly fed the scrum 30 metres from their own line. After being completely dominated in the first half, the Highlanders scrum put on a shove against the head that buckled the Marlins' imposing scrum which resulted in the tartan pack winning the feed. Those at the ground realised the gravity of the moment as the Jack Donnelly Stand, where visiting fans chose to sit, was deathly quiet, whilst the rest the round cheered wildly. It was at that moment that Manly's challenge was probably killed off.

To finish the game in emphatic fashion, Gordon mounted one last challenge. With Vunipola injured shortly after his try, although some may have thought that he was out of gas after his 60 metre run, Terry Preston filled the role that he occupied as a colt. He showed that he retains the skills of wearing the number 9 as he delivered quick phase ball to his right to Kiel 40 metres out. The fly half took the ball another 10 meters before bulleting a pass to McDougall on the eastern touchline in open space. As the cover defence came, Doogs turned the ball inside to Haylett-Petty and the Australian under 20 player gathered before throwing a one-arm miracle ball high over his head, which Terry Preston collected under huge pressure from Manly number 8 Wil Brame; but was able to put the ball down in the corner for the bonus point.

Is that Georgie McHugh celebrating another brilliant win for the Highlanders?



The encounter finished 32 - 23, with the Highlanders clinching the all-important bonus point. To keep Manly to a mere 3 points in the second half, when they were running with the wind was a magnificent effort. The attack finally saw some of the fruits of the opportunities that have been created during the season. A massive wrap must again go the front row who withstood the blue and red onslaught early to come away with the points. The superior fitness of the pack proved a major turning point in the game.

This weekend it does not get any easier for the Highlanders as they travel to TG Milner on Sunday to take on the impressive Eastwood. A loss would see Gordon potentially relying on results in the last round to secure a place in the post season. However, a win would give the men in tartan an opportunity to finish as high as third at the end of the regular season. The Woods are always fierce opponents with a massive pack with which to contend and after their loss last weekend to Randwick at Coogee and Sydney Uni awaiting them in the last round, there is no doubt that the blue and whites will have marked this as a must-win game.

Make sure you drive down Epping Road this Sunday to see the Highlanders return to the ground at which they were magnificent last-start winners. If the boys can pull off a win, you will have witnessed a fantastic game, between two fierce local rivals in which the men in tartan must win to guarantee a second consecutive post season. Don't miss this one, as it promises to be a humdinger.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh