

“A DRAPPIE OR TWO”

Gordon v Sydney University – Round 8 Tooheys NEW Shute Shield

After two losses on the trot to Randwick and Easts in the previous two weeks, Gordon returned home for another television game and to face Sydney University. In seasons past, after two losses, facing Sydney Uni would have been seen as inevitable triumvirate of defeats. The visitors were a very different side to the one that played in the last week of September at Concord Oval. However, with a full strength front row and at least 5 other first choice players, this was not a game that the Highlanders could afford to take lightly.

The Varsity has heaped much pain on the Highlanders' faithful in the past decade. To be fair, they have heaped much pain on nearly every team in the competition. And whilst Jim L'Estrange and others go on ignoring the elephant in the room that is the power imbalance caused in the competition by a team being able to pay players through all grades and colts teams, by way of educational and residential scholarships, which ensures that they continually have the deepest of pools from which to chose, Sydney Uni will continue for some time to continue to metre out the hurt. The dismissal by the head of New South Wales Rugby of the claim that Uni's strength is not based on its unique position - who played at and is part of that Club - and to claim that the strength lies in the fact that it has the best programmes, deliberately misses the point and is disingenuous at best.

However, for all of those issues, which will continue to be debated, Saturday at Chatswood Oval was a day to rejoice in a performance in which the first XV finally gelled and made a statement to the rest of the competition.

With a fairly stiff south-westerly wind favouring the visitors in the first half, the game started in a flurry of activity as both teams, who were coming off a loss the previous week, were determined to stamp their authority on the fixture.



From the outset it was clear that the home team thought that the best way to get the points was to go wide, and as quickly as possible. With Dave Harvey replacing the injured Josh Keil, gone for the week was the short passing at the line and instead expansive double cut balls sent the ball to the sideline in two passes. With Gordon playing to the southern end, **Lachie Mitchell** playing on the western wing was the recipient of this tactic and with the fluency of the ball that he received his pace constantly put the Uni defence on the back foot.

But it was Uni who were the first to really threaten the line. In the fifth minute of the game, the Students broke from the halfway line down the left hand touch line. From a line out 5 from the line, Uni looked dead certainties to put the first points on the board; but as a legitimate try appeared to have been scored, the referee went to the Third Match Official, who detected a knock on. It was a beneficial result for the home team; but it is ridiculous that only one game every week uses this

technology. The scoreboard had virtually already posted the try, such was the inevitability of the result. It seemed an unfair outcome for the visitors and it is thankful that it did not ultimately affect the result. Three minutes later Gordon also nearly got on the board after

Mitchell made a break down the right-hand touch line for 70 metres before centring the ball metres from the line, Matt McDougall, coming from the opposite wing would have scored if he had been able to take the ball. However, just as he got his hands to the ball, the Uni cover arrived to knock the ball from his grasp.

Sydney Uni were eventually the first to score with a penalty kicked on the 14 minute mark. The Highlanders got onto the scoreboard on the stroke of the first quarter of the game. Uni were penalised 10 metres into their territory for a ruck infringement and with the Gordon scrum stacking up against the always impressive blue and gold pack, the men in tartan opted to take the scrum. Having retrieved the ball, fullback Joe Metsuila, playing in the line cut out to McDougall down the Orchard Road sideline, who stepped through two front rowers, before turning inside to Mark Preston who continued for another 10 metres, where he drew the last line of defence and sent fullback Metsuila, starting for the first time this season, over the stripe.

Gordon continued to throw the ball wide and right and Mitchell continued to cut swathes from long distance into Uni's territory. On 32 minutes after two perfectly executed successive double cut out passes Mitchell again charged down field from his own side of half way. At the last line of defence he kicked ahead (who knows how the game at Woollarha would have panned out if Mitchell had resorted to the boot coming up to Pat Delitt just on the halftime break), before toeing the ball to the corner, where the ball was cleaned up into touch within 10 meters of the line. With the line out working well again, it would have been interesting to have seen whether the Highlanders would have been able to get the ball over the line. However, the Students were penalised for unsportsmanlike behaviour as a fracas broke out as the players gathered for the line out. Harvey kicked the penalty and with only a handful minutes remaining before the break, the Highlanders looked to take a 10 - 3 lead into the sheds.

That hope was dashed after the home team spilled the ball from the kick off and the Students went back onto attack. The Highlanders were successful in repelling a number of forays; but with 3 minutes remaining in the first period, Uni scored the type of try upon which they have built their game in the last 10 years, with second rower David McDuling picking the ball up from the base of the ruck a metre from the line and crashing over. Gordon received a reprieve as Nathan Trist missed a relatively easy shot at goal.

However, the spray that the players must have felt was coming for the lapse so close to the break, was spared as from the kick off Gordon wrested control of the ball. After a number of penalties, Nath Nicol broke through some flimsy defence from the back of a ruck on the quarter line, after the bell had been rung for the oranges, and **popped the ball inside to the Mag-nifo-scent One within 10 metres of line to put the ball down next to the sticks** and, with



Harvey's conversion successful the home led 17 - 8 at the interval.

It was a very entertaining first stanza; but the look on coach Fear's face as he headed from the dressing room back to his position aloft the Jack Donnelley Stand, indicated that the job was far from done. With the thought that the wind was worth a few points, the Highlanders must have been confident that if they could keep sticking their passes they would put pressure on the University line. No points were scored by either side in the first

10 minutes, before Chris Alcock was the beneficiary of quick thinking from Craig Thomas, as Uni allowed a ball to escape their ruck 30 metres out. Thomas, known as “Buckets”, pounced on the ball and scooped it up to Alcock, who raced the final 30 meters to the line, at which point he pulled out a swan dive that was even more ridiculous than Anton Lavin's effort the previous week. Obviously he was doing all he could to excite any fans who may have only arrived at the ground after half time.



Within 10 minutes of his first score **Alcock fought his way over the line in the north-eastern corner**, following more vigilance from Thomas, who followed Vinnie Byrne through at the quarter line, when he again released Alcock, who interchanged passed with Mitchell down the eastern touchline before

Alcock completed his brace just before taking the corner post. The TMO found that the ball was grounded before the corner post was disturbed and with Harvey silencing the hecklers in the crowd as he slotted from the sideline the score was 31 - 8. As the players ran back to await the restart one in



the crowd was heard to yell “**Yes Buckets**”. Indeed, Thomas’s clear thinking at the start of the movement set up the try;

but it seemed very high praise for a pass from the base of a ruck. Perhaps it was merely a case of mistaken identity. **Yes Buckets!**



With 15 minutes remaining in the match, the men in tartan were thirsty for more points and skipper Preston collected his own brace. Firstly he scored through a fantastic movement, which started from a scrum on the attacking 40 metre line on the western side of the ground. The ball went through the hands, before Preston hit McDougall, who had moved to the centres after Metisula left the field in the first half, who steamed onto the ball and carried it from 40 metres out to the quarter line. As he was cut down, Doogs flicked the ball up to Preston, who had trailed the talented three-quarter's run, before he finished the movement in what was now universally known around the ground as “Bucket's Corner”. The skipper's second effort was in

stranger circumstances. After he completed a tackle in defence on Gordon's defensive quarter line. **Preston popped straight to his feet before the ruck had formed, picked the ball up, turned and ran the 85 meters to put the ball down next to the posts in front of the Trumper Stand.**



The game finished 43 - 8 in favour of a dominant Highlanders' outfit. The scrum was



terrific against great opposition, with **Ofa Fainga'anuku taking it to the highly fancied Jerry Yanuyanutawa and many good judges awarding him the points decision.** Marty Plokstys played another strong hand in his second game of the season, before being injured. The two Waratahs representative players will surely be considered for more time in a sky blue jersey on this performance. Also the defensive combination of David Alo and first Preston and then McDougall was far more assured than 7

days earlier. However, the biggest difference from the last 3 weeks was that the attack executed their plans, balls stuck and the opposition had little answer.

This week the challenge gets no easier, as the Highlanders travel to Manly to take on the rampant Marlins. After the blue and reds' season looked to have stalled following a loss to Norths at Scum Park, they found themselves down at half time to Randwick. However, to the credit of Phil Blake's chargers, they came back to run out impressive 18 - 16 winners to remain aloft the Tooheys NEW Shute Shield ladder. This weekends' encounter will go a long way to set the victor up for the rest of the season, as a number of teams welcome back their Super 14 players.

It will be a great fixture at Manly Oval, where Willie Ofahengaue and Wycliff Palu are rumoured to be manning the barbeque ... I don't know if that seems strange to anyone else; but isn't that akin to allowing the lunatics to run the asylum? Perhaps it would best for you to eat before you get down to the ground. But just ensure that you get down to one of the best grounds in the competition to cheer on the boys as they take steps towards to top of the pile.

The next home game is on Sunday 31 May against Eastwood. The Woodies have moved quietly up the ladder in the last few weeks and now sit only a game behind Gordon. It is imperative that all Highlanders' supporters get down to the ground to support your team. Make sure that you do your bit to keep the big crowds turning up at Chatswood.

See you from the Cedric Pike Stand.

Georgie McHugh