

Round 1 - Stodge City

Contributed by The Jester

I am now once again recumbent in my study chair, sporting a medium case of sunburn on my nose and chin - and having only just rid my match day outfit of the stench of 30,000 Collingwood supporters lighting up within 10 seconds of leaving the MCG. Indeed, walking back to my hotel I was unsure whether the mist in the air was rain, dust from half of Flinders Street being dug up, or the mass exhalation of the Magpie faithful!

Well, that didn't go terribly well. And despite the fact that Freo were in the game for a long time, from my position on the boundary line in the Great Southern Stand, they were never going to win (witness two awful turnovers from Roger Hayden, of all people!). So I suppose I should take comfort from the fact that we did well enough to be competitive for 90 minutes or so.

The first tactical blunder I noticed was the non-playing of Palmer, Ibbotson, Mayne, or indeed anyone young enough to match the Magpie team's pep, vibrancy and enthusiasm. And although Collingwood made many errors, I was dismayed to find only one or two passages of Bella Fremantle play in the entire game. Our "experienced" midfield creaked awfully almost from the very start and was duly smashed - and the more I see the "put Pav in the middle at times of stress" move, the less I like it. To me, he just doesn't seem to have an impact there anymore and is rarely able to turn the game once there.

That said, I thought only Josh Carr had a bad day at the office of our really old blokes. Peter Bell remained as professional as ever, Shaun McManus continued his late-career form surge, M. Carr was useful, and Mark Johnson made a spirited debut. DJ certainly tried too, but the helicopter kicking boot made a unwelcome re-appearance.

As for Chris Tarrant...I am of the school which believes he can make a valuable contribution as a lead-up flanker, but does he really have to play such dud matches against his old team all the time? The team cannot afford for all three main forwards to be quiet as they were yesterday.

If there was a real disappointment to be had, for me it was the efforts of Ryan Crowley, Michael Johnson, Brett Peake and Byron Schammer. All are terrific players at their best - but at a time when they should be our "new generation of stars", each of them have stalled in their development. Crowls and Peakey have lost a lot of their speed, Byron seems to be having the yips again, and Johnno's ridiculous suspension has cruelly robbed him of all the chutzpah and confidence that saw him win the Silver Doig in 2006.

On the positive side, David Mundy and Steven Dodd have shown steady improvement, in their different ways (One is the team's brain, the other its beating purple heart). Daniel Gilmore has gone from being a chicken to a rooster. Antoni Grover struggled mightily against Anthony Rocca and probably lost, but not without that terrific smash into a pack on the members wing. Sandi actually looked more certain with his ball handling for the first time in ages. And Supermac showed that he still has what it takes to mark strongly and kick goals, given the appropriate circumstances.

So what now? Even our best years (2003 and 2006) started with unconvincing losses. A rising Hawthorn will certainly be a tough opponent - and we simply cannot afford to serve up the stodgy, reactive football displayed in Round 1. That said, the wider spaces of Subiaco should provide a boost, and you can bet that someone under 21 WILL be playing this week. Make a few adjustments, win at all costs, and we'll be off. As ever this season, I will be watching.