

THE TIGERS RE-WRITE MPNFL HISTORY

2019 DIVISION: 1 GRAND FINAL

Ref: 2020/2



History rewritten in 2019

THE BACKGROUND TO THE 2019 GRAND FINAL



Unity is strength

Football never fails to produce inspirational stories; and Dromana's victory in the 2019 Grand Final against Sorrento was 'one for the books' and a pinnacle in the club's long and rich history. Dromana rewrote the history books when, against all odds, it defeated Sorrento by seven points to claim the 2019 MPNFL Division: 1 premiership.

The records show that, since the introduction of the promotional/ relegation system, no MPNFL club had won Second and First Division premierships in consecutive seasons.

Comparable with the situation that faced Collingwood in 1958, few, if any, pundits thought a Dromana victory was possible. Most commentators predicted that the pennant would be ‘lay down misere’ for Sorrento following its 57 point demolition of the Tigers in the Semi-Final at Rye.

‘Backs to the wall’ was an understatement regarding the situation that faced Rikki Johnston and his team; and the commentators believed that Sorrento could not be stopped on its way to another flag.

However, experience, planning and leadership really count in finals; and Rikki Johnson’s background in coaching gave him a genuine advantage and his faith in his group and ‘the process’ was unshakeable. Together with Craig Milward, Mitch Pepper, Matt Price & Terry Wheeler, the pre-match preparation left ‘no stone unturned.’



Two champions prepare for battle- Rikki Johnston and Billy Quigley

As was the case in 2013 and 2018, the ‘blueprint for the game plan’ was developed to suit the smaller dimensions of Frankston Park; and every player was well versed in their respective roles within the team.

As game day approached, the players were buoyant and ready to join the fray; and the supporters ‘rallied around the flag’ at the various activists and Grand Final Breakfast provided a kick-start for the loyal band on that Sunday.

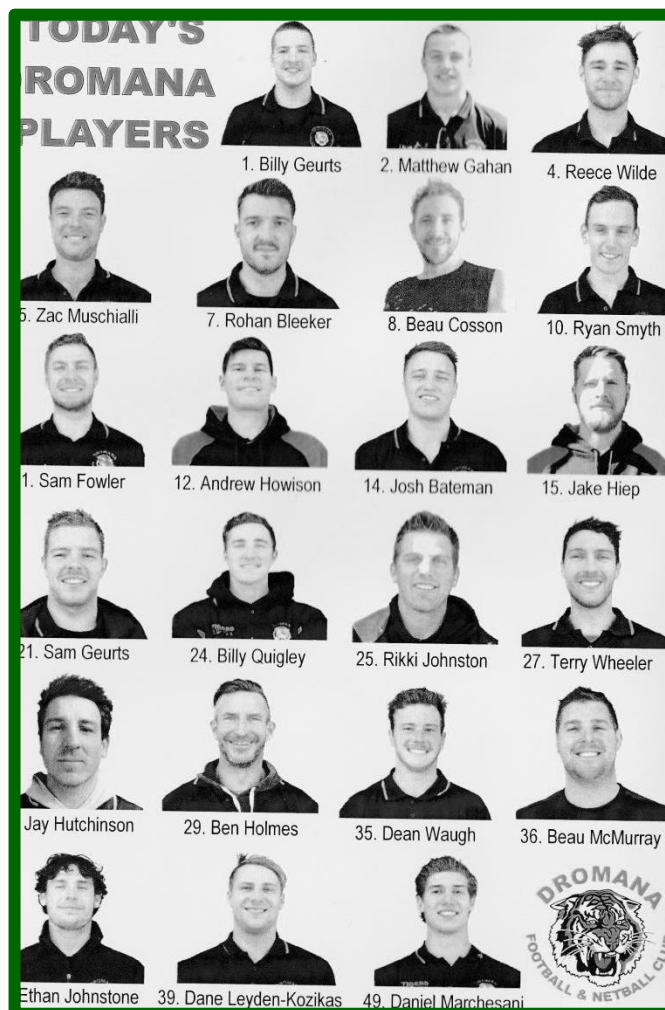
THE SELECTED TEAM

There were no changes to the team that overcame Bonbeach in the Preliminary Final. Will Gregson and young Jake Milward, who had been serviceable and loyal players in 2019, were named as emergencies.

Will, and Jake were amongst a group who were unlucky to miss selection but had contributed to the club’s success throughout the season. The line-up was:

Backs	Daniel Marchesani	Zac Muschialli	Rikki Johnston
	Rohan Bleeker	Matt Gahan	Dean Waugh

Midfield	Beau Cosson Billy Geurts	Andrew Howison Sam Geurts	Reece Wilde Jay Hutchinson
Forwards	Dane Leyden-Kozikas Ethan Johnstone	Terry Wheeler Ben Holmes	Billy Quigley Sam Fowler
I/C	Jake Heip Josh Bateman Ryan Smythe Beau Mc murray		
Emergencies	Will Gregson Jake Milward		



THE FIRST QUARTER



The banner said it all.

It is no secret that the toss of the coin is crucial in finals football; and Dromana kicked into a stiff breeze towards the bay end of the ground. The first term was traditional 'tough and tense' finals football; and, from the initial bounce, both defences were desperate 'hold ground.' The 'fight for territory' made space a premium and the Tiger players hit hard early and several of their tackles were unqualified 'boneshakers.'

Dromana's pressure stifled the Sharks' opportunities for repeat entries into the arc; and the close physical contact of the Tigers troubled the Shark's freewheeling style.

It was obvious that Dromana's aggressive attack on the ball, close-in bodywork and tackling impacted on the Sorrento midfielders and the Sharks laboured to gain a clean possession and go forward.

Billy Quigley's run down and fierce tackle in the midfield was 'text book stuff' and, in that one action, Billy sent an unmitigated warning to the Sorrento bench.



Matt Gahan- An emerging young star in local football

Matt Gahan showed why he was regarded as one the best young defenders in local football in 2019. Zac Muschialli, who had played his first senior MPNFL game in 2009 was a 'tower of strength' and repulsed several promising attacks...

“ Zac broke into MPNFL senior ranks in 2009 and he has never forgotten his first senior game against YCW. On that day, Zac played at full back which gives some indication of his strength and ability as a teenager.” Source: Tiger Talk 2019.

Josh Bateman, who won the AFLSE Medal in 2018, was full of run; and Dromana's champion midfielder, Terry Wheeler, despite being hampered by a nagging shoulder injury, was busy and found an avenue to register a behind.

It took Sorrento some fourteen minutes to hit the scoreboard; and observers gave the 'battle for territorial rights' to the Tigers at that stage of the game.

Young Billy Geurts combined brilliantly with his brother Sam and Terry Wheeler to set up a forward thrust ; and there was no doubt that Bill's size, aggression and mobility had 'thrown a spanner' into the opposition work.



The face of experience- Ben Holmes

Veteran Ben Holmes was proving more than a handful for the Sharks; and Jay Hutchinson , who had been given the Herculean task of tagging the league's star, Mitch Hallahan, was prominent.



A mercurial talent- Ethan Johnstone

With quarter time siren close at hand, the mercurial Ethan Johnston received a handpass from Dan Leyden-Kozikas and weaved into space and, with a clever kick, threaded the first major the Tigers.



Ethan Johnston and the champion from Christchurch-Andrew Howison

It was a emblematic conversion by the 'small forward' and the crowd erupted as the ball sailed homeward and the Tigers took the lead.

Sorrento responded immediately with a major but one goal at the Kars Street end of the ground, in a quarter, was a poor return ; and it was clear that the Sharks were on the back foot and Dromana had won the 'first round' on points.

Quarter Times scores

Dromana 1.2 (8)

Sorrento 1.1 (7)

SECOND QUARTER

Dromana supporters could not have asked for a better opening to the second term as, within second of the bounce, Jay Hutchinson gathered a handball from Daniel Marchesani and drilled a 40metre goal from the boundary. It was a brilliant angle conversion by Jay; and that rapid-fire goal stung the Sharks and lifted the Tigers to new heights.



Jay Hutchinson-Another stirring performance MPNFL finals football

Note: Dromana supporters have never forgotten Jay Hutchinson for his 'long bomb' goal in the 2018 Grand Final...perhaps a case of ...history repeating itself?

While Jay Hutchinson's goal was memorable, recognition should be given to Daniel Marchesani for his determination to succeed in Senior Grade football. In 2018 , Daniel played only five senior games; however in 2019 Daniel, consolidated his place in the team, as a key running defender, with a 'closing speed' that often catches opposition forwards unaware.

Daniel is one of the uplifting success stories at Pier Street; and his loyalty to club has been reimbursed in the best possible way.



Dan Marchesani- One of the great stories of season 2019.

Note: Younger readers may be unaware that Daniel Marchesani's father, Frank , played 52 games with Carlton and Fitzroy 1980-85 and was once described as a:

“ A smooth-striding wingman who loved kicking goals...”

Source: Bluseum website.

Matt Gahan and Rohan Bleeker came under notice as they repelled attacks; and the game was punctuated with heavy blocks and ferocious tackling. The match was played with 'willing intensity'; and at the seventeen-minute mark of the term, Reece Wilde was 'necked' on the 50 metre line. His kick 'hung and swung' and was 'dragged in' by none other than the formidable Ben Holmes.

It was a strong contested mark and emphasised the importance of Ben as the Tigers' spearhead. Ben converted truly and the Tigers took the ascendancy.

Dromana's Josh Bateman was busy and the young brigade of Geurts, Leyden-Kozikas, Quigley, Wilde and Waugh worked hard. One of the reasons for Dromana's dominance was the performance of the big-hearted Jay Hutchinson in negating the influence of Mitch Hallahan.

It was a classic battle of backlines; and the Dromana defence was equal to the task in limiting the Division:1 leading goal kicker Leigh Pohlke (who had booted some 80 goals in 2109). Dromana 's structure 'behind the ball' was impenetrable and Sorrento struggled to find exits to go forward.

The encounter had reached a impasse until Jake Heip took charged and 'fired off' a long, high 'mongrel punt' which wobbled and dipped and was marked by Ben Holmes who proceeded to nail his second major for the quarter.



Ben Holmes in full flight

Jack Heip , (who was recruited from Cerberus Naval Depot-SNFL via Canberra via NTFL) at the start of 2019 , had never had a more important possession in his sixteen senior games with Dromana; and his 'hack up-country punt ' to Ben Holmes gave the Tigers the lead on the siren.



Jake Heip's mongrel punt brought results.

On the siren, Dromana had inched ahead of the fancied favourites by the slimmest of margins. The first half of football , had revealed that Sorrento was vulnerable to the pressure and that the Tigers' detailed planning had given them the edge across the midfield.

Half Time scores...

Dromana 4.3 (27)

Sorrento 4. 2 (26)

THE THIRD QUARTER

The ominous dark clouds opened up and the deluge that greeted the teams as they entered the arena for the second half sent fans scurrying for cover. Despite the discomfort of a drenching, the Dromana fans welcomed the cloudburst as they realised that the wet conditions would aid the Tigers' quest. They were accurate in their collective notion as, within minutes, the rain had transformed the game into a 'war of attrition.' Once again, the comparison with Collingwood's miraculous triumph, in the wet in 1958, was not lost on some 'elderly observers.'

Both defences were magnificent and space was hard to find. In all truth, it was 'ugly pack football' but, despite the congestion around the ball, it was an exciting contest. Wet weather football can measure the mettle of all players and the slippery conditions tested the nerve of all.

The ancient quotation 'Fortune favours the bold' was apt as the Tigers' young brigade of Billy Quigley, Ryan Smythe, Dean Waugh, Bill Geurts, Sam Fowler, Sam Geurts sensed the shift in momentum and doubled their efforts.



Billy Quigley- A blue ribbon star in local football.

Following a stoppage and a ragged skirmish, the ball was driven forward by Jay Hutchinson and, somehow amid the ruckus, Ben Holmes took possession and with his left boot snapped his third goal to give the Tigers a five point buffer.

Ben Holmes loomed large as a major hurdle to Sorrento's likelihood of victory; and he was playing his role as spearhead to perfection. Ben's experience in the forward line was telling and his strong, vice-like hands, in such difficult conditions, were blessings.

Jay Hutchinson had negated the effectiveness Sorrento's star, Mitch Hallahan, and the Tigers' tactics were paying 'good dividends.' Beau McMurray was brave in the clinches and in his 64 senior games with DFNC he has always given his of best

“ The secret to Beau's eye-catching style of play is his powerful running, strong kicking and fearless attack on the ball. Most

would agree that Beau has been an inspirational player in major games has proven to be a superb performer in finals football.” Source: ‘Tiger Talk’ 2019

Beau has played in four Nepean FL Grand Finals for Dromana; and was a key member of the victorious teams in 2013 and 2018.



Beau McMurray-Three premierships with the Tigers

Added to Sorrento’s increasing woes was the fact that Rikki Johnston, as pre-arranged, went forward with immediate impact. He received a free for an infringement and was then further advantaged with a 50 metre penalty which guaranteed ‘full conversion.’ It was a tipping point in a thrilling duel and his timely goal was celebrated with gusto.

Note: Rikki’s goal at the ‘bay end of the ground, instantly summoned memories of his vital goal in the 2018 Division : 2 Grand Final against Red Hill.

At the 23rd minute of that crucial term, Sam Fowler intercepted a Sharks’ wayward pass and, with the aid of a ‘heavy-duty’ block by Rikki Johnston, he streamed forward into the 50 metre arc and kicked truly . Sam’s second goal brought the crowd to its feet and the Tigers had gained some breathing space. It was a costly turnover by the Sorra’s; and a perfect example of ‘zoning off’ by young Sam. The maxim: ‘As you train , you play’ was personified in Sam’s brilliant interception.

The Tigers had rallied and were playing with controlled vigour; and in a decisive quarter of football, Dromana had kicked three majors and kept the Sharks goal-less. Dromana’s ‘brave deeds’ had put it in a strong position to claim the flag. At three quarter time, the Tigers were ahead by 15 points. It was a reasonable margin in such conditions but time would tell the tale.

Note: In 1982, AFL authority David Parkin defined the third quarter in a football match as the ‘premiership term’. Statistics give his theory some credence as research shows that in the past five seasons, 72% of the teams that won the third quarter of a match go on to ultimate victory.

Three quarter time scores ...

Dromana 7.3 (45)

Sorrento 4.6. 30

THE FINAL QUARTER

The three quarter time huddle is always an interesting study in sports psychology as one coach is usually urging his troops to 'bridge the gap' while the other coach is instructing his players to 'stay the course' and 'bring home the bacon.'

Fifteen points was a sizeable lead in tough conditions but realists know that margins can be reduced in a trice when team rebounds and get a 'run on.'

However, within 20 seconds of the bounce Dromana increased its lead to 21 points when Beau Cosson handballed 'over the top' to Sam Fowler who nailed a check side running goal. It was Sam's 49th goal for the season; and probably the most important major in his short but impressive senior career.



Beau Cosson- Gave his all in the 2019 finals series.

Some fifty years ago, Norm Smith, the doyen of modern coaches, wrote ...

" A backman is judged on the way his opponent plays –not on his own number of marks or kicks ..."

Norm's words were again rang true as Sorrento hit back hard and threatened to turn the game on its head in that last quarter. Dromana's 'back six' players were the epitome of Norm's maxim and again underlined the old adage that great backlines win finals.



Zac Muschialli- A keystone in Dromana's defensive wall

Dromana's defence held tight; and the pressure applied to the Sharks forwards by Zac Muschialli's and the ever-reliable Rohan Bleeker's were major factors in the Tigers withstanding the Sharks' surge.



Mr Reliable- Rohan Bleeker- Blanketed Sorrento's key forward.

Stoppages and lock-ins became 'stacks on the mill' as each team fought 'tooth and nail' for yardage. Andrew Howison (ex-Christchurch Eagles FC) had eyes only for the football while Sam Geurts, Beau Cosson and Reece Wilde did 'everything and anything' to maintain possession and propel the ball forward. It was desperate football and the Tigers' met every Shark challenge head-on.



Courageous and Committed- Reece Wilde

Meanwhile, Billy Geurts sustained his work rate; and his powerhouse exhibition, self-discipline and stamina, across four quarters of rugged football, was extraordinary for such a young footballer.



Billy and Sam Geurts

At the 17-minute mark of that quarter, Sorrento had grappled its way back to within six points of the Tigers and the struggle that arose was exhilarating to witness. Both teams threw caution to the wind and the courage of all players could only be admired; and the Dromana defence stood tall and absorbed the Sorrento onrush.

All eyes were on the 'electronic timer' and excitement reached fever pitch, when Sam Fowler 'found the ball' and then ran like the wind and 'let fly'. While his mighty kick missed the 'big opening' it registered a behind; and that minor score was vital in the context of the game as it gave the Tigers a seven point 'cushion'.

Despite the frenzied last minutes, Dromana had done enough to hold on and defy the odds. It was the greatest victory in the club's long history...

“ Dromana coach Rikki Johnston predicted his side would “surprise a few” stepping up to the top division this season. In the rain at Frankston Park on Sunday, Dromana celebrated its greatest moment, securing its first MPNFL Division 1 premiership with a gripping seven-point win over Sorrento in the grand final.” Source: Herald Sun 16th September 2019.



MPNFL History rewritten- Terry Wheeler and Sam Fowler

2019 IN COMPARISON TO 1958

In 1958, Collingwood toppled the reigning champions with a win that was described as the ultimate underdog victory ...

“ Collingwood's 1958 premiership is arguably the greatest in the club's history. For a magical, against-the-odds, fairytale triumph, nothing compares with it.” Michael Roberts. Historian.

On the September 22nd 1958, Percy Beames of 'The Age' wrote that Collingwood won by...

“ Playing football almost perfectly suited to the conditions “.

In 2019 at Frankston Park, Dromana's finest victory seemed to echo Percy's comments; and like the Black and White Army in 1958, the Tiger faithful celebrated as never before . The Tigers' dream had become a reality; and it was a triumph for the ages and a story to tell one's grand children.

THE BUNDLE OF STICKS

There are numerous lessons to be taken from Dromana's triumph and the following quote will make sense to everyone who saw the Tigers in action during the 2019 finals series...

“A fighter is someone who rises up, even when the odds are stacked against them.”

Rikki Johnston was confident that if each of his players embraced their role with complete conviction, no opposition team could overcome their collective strength. Prior to the game, Rikki threw a tied bundle of sticks into the centre of the team huddle to illustrate that alone each players was vulnerable but if they were 'combined, disciplined and tied with trust' they were unbreakable.



Unity is strength

A lesson that the Dromana players will never forget.

The 'bundle of sticks theory' can be traced back to a fable of Aesop but for Collingwood in 1958 and Dromana in 2019 it emphasized, more than ever to Rikki's team, that unity is strength.

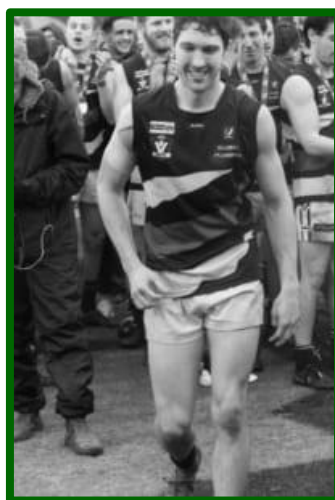
There is no doubt that one of the lasting memories of the DNFC 2019 team will be a 'bundle of sticks and an inspired coach named Rikki Johnston.

MATCH DETAILS

Quarter by Quarter scores:

- **Dromana:** 1.2 4.3. 7.3 8.4 (52)
- **Sorrento:** 1.1 4.2 4.6 6.9. (45)
- **Goal Kickers for Dromana:** Ben Holmes 3 Sam Fowler 2 Rick Johnston Jay Hutchinson Ethan Johnstone
- **Best Players for Dromana:** Billy Geurts Jay Hutchinson Daniel Marchesani Terry Wheeler Sam Fowler Rohan Bleeker
- **Winner of the AFLSE Medal:** Billy Geurts

BELIEF & HARD WORK- TERRY WHEELER



Supporters would agree that Terry Wheeler was an inspiring leader on that day; and despite injury set the standard for others to follow. Terry arrived at Dromana FNC in 2011 and has been a major factor in the success of the club. He has been a popular player, a dedicated leader and following the premiership victory, Terry said....

*“For some teams the task would have looked impossible. You could forgive a team for not believing they could overcome the massive challenge that lay ahead in defeating a powerful Sorrento in the final game of the year. But this Dromana team was not like most teams. The belief in the group, despite losing to the same team by 57 points only two weeks earlier, never altered. The belief we could win was created by a huge amount of physical work and relationship development within the team. As a group, we knew exactly what to do, and if we executed our plan, we would be able to over run Sorrento. I feel incredibly proud and grateful to be a part of this amazing group, as Rikki Johnston said before we ran out, “we are a bundle of sticks, when joined together, we are unbreakable.” Terry Wheeler
September 2019*

PREPARATION IS EVERYTHING -CRAIGE MILWARD



The preparation, hard work and contribution that Craig Milward made to the club's success should not be understated or overlooked . Rikki Johnston is unwavering in his praise for Craig's involvement in Dromana's back to back premierships ...

“ Craig's efforts and commitment to the club and the playing group has been super and a real driving factor in the heights that we've been able to achieve. Craig's been a workhorse in so many valuable areas and a real lynchpin in the coaching staff taking on significant responsibility in many areas. As a playing coach, this assistance and the confidence that I had in Craig GameDay allowed me to confidently focus on other important areas while he ran the bench.”

GOODBYE TO A TRUE CHAMPION



That Grand Final was the last game Rikki Johnston played for Dromana. At the age of 38 years and after 246 club games and a career that saw him achieve virtually everything in MPNFL, football Rikki stepped down as a coach and player.

Rikki's retirement was a significant moment in club history and a tribute to Rikki's enduring contribution to DFNC will be posted later in the year but he has provide the following thoughts regarding the 2019 season and flag....

“ For me that 2019 Grand Final win stacks up as the best team performance I can recall in my 17 year involvement with the club. After exceeding all external expectations all year coming up to Div1, the season came to a screaming halt after a bruising 57 point loss to a rampaging Sorrento in the qualifying final at Rye. Once again ‘the experts’ had claimed that we were out of our depth and merely filling a spot in the finals.

After a workman-like 18 point win in the rain and mud at Rosebud against a classy Bonbeach our ticket was booked for the big dance. It was a proud achievement for a group that was built on exceeding expectations.

Although we were the popular pick of the neutral supporters around the league, no one in their ‘heart of hearts’ believed we could beat Sorrento on Grand Final day, that was everyone accept the most important people being the players and the coaches within our four walls.

After the poor, uncharacteristic loss in the first final, the coaches had pulled apart and studied hours of footage and identified

some weaknesses in the Sorrento arsenal. Whilst going through this process, we had learned that Sorrento had lost their last two games at Frankston Park, notably in Round 3 against Pine earlier in the year by excess of 10 goals.

On the Tuesday of Grand Final week the players and coaches had a class room session to review the footage; and, as a coach, this was the moment I knew the boys believed we could topple Sorrento, you could literally see it in their faces as we watched the video and pointed out every weakness that we could find in the Sorrento game plan and playing personnel. We would play a different style and slow some of Sorrento's best players and see if there was a plan B.

I left training that night extremely confident that we had the players believing.

The next thing that perfectly fell into place for us was a radio interview that I listened to on the Wednesday evening. During the interview Sorrento coach Luke Tapscott was asked how he thought Sorrento could beat us, to which he replied: "We don't need to worry about how Dromana play, we are only worried about playing our game as we know if we play our game we will win".

Straight away I alerted our coaches that Sorrento had significantly underestimated us; and more than likely hadn't done any further home work on us, they didn't believe they needed to. This was a mistake. There would be no Plan B because in their eyes it would not be required.

Any good coach will tell you that you will never learn as much as you do after a bad loss. We certainly did.

Sorrento didn't think they had anything to learn and this lack of preparation played straight into our hands.

History will tell you the result of the game but for me there were some amazing jobs done that day that I'll remember forever. As a coach to see so many selfless players commit to their role and play the perfect team game and our game plan executed to perfection makes you extremely proud.

It was a life lesson for all of us that hard work and preparation trumps talent.

This final memory will stay with me forever, during half time the rain started pouring down. I've never felt such a euphoric feeling running out with the boys after half time with the rain tumbling

down with such a strong feeling of confidence that the conditions would suit us down to the ground. We loved it tough, the tougher the better.

The buzz that went through the group was electric and you can't fake that feeling, it rolls through like thunder and makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up.

All the stars had aligned and there was no way we could be, or would be beaten. We had something Sorrento didn't, a deep connection built on hard work, mateship, belief and love for each other and the jumper. 22 sticks tightly bound together and together no one, no matter how good could break us.

Such a proud day for our great club; and an absolute privilege to be a part of it." Rikki Johnston September 219



Exhausted but elated.



Billy Geurts- Winner of the AFLSE medal



Rikki Johnston and Terry Wheeler –the ‘Dynamic Duo’ of Dromana.



A remarkable team.



The smile says it all- Beau Cosson.

THE IMPORTANCE OF JUNIOR DEVELOPMENT AT DFNC

If there are any remaining doubters about the importance of junior development in building a football club it is worth considering the following statistics.

Of the twenty –two (22) players who represented Dromana in the 2019 Grand Final – **eight (36%)** members of that team had played in the 2015 Under19 premiership team: - Sam Fowler, Sam Geurts, Dane Leyden- Kozikas, Ethan Johnstone, Billy Quigley , Daniel Marchesani , Reece Wilde and Dean Waugh.

As Magic Johnson once said...

“Allplayers and kids need is a little help, a little hope, and somebody who believes in them.”

Who knows what in store when a group of children start kicking a football? 2019 has again underlined the importance of ‘home grown’ footballers in building clubs.

REFERENCE & RESEARCH INFORMATION:

Sources: DFNC Records –MPNFL records -Personal files- local and metropolitan newspapers- various football websites as indicated.

Article reference: 2020/2: The Tigers rewrite MPNFL history.

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