

Tigers cruise past Blues into decider

Glennelg finds finals belief

WARREN PARTLAND

SO CENTRAL District has a new challenger willing to stand toe to toe and trade blows with the heavyweight champ.

The Glennelg Football Club, frustrated and annoyed since its most recent league flag in 1986, now has the belief it can conquer the Bulldogs in the premiership decider at AAMI Stadium on Sunday.

After failing to stand up in the finals heat against the Bulldogs the previous week, the Tigers responded with an emphatic 66-point preliminary final victory over Sturt at Adelaide Oval yesterday.

This was just the performance Tigers coach Mark Mickan sought from his players. If they were to make a statement they were ready to challenge the Bulldogs for title glory.

"We needed a good response because the players were really disappointed in themselves last week," Mickan said.

"That was the pleasing part - they played the game right out. Their (Tigers) intensity around the ball was very good for the duration.

"It is just good to play well and put a good game together. As a reinforcement for the players, mentally as much as anything these days, that is their standard and what they have got to aspire to again."

Glennelg will take a bucket load of confidence out of the game, but how do you judge its effort?

Make no mistake, the Tigers were impressive. But as emphatic as Glennelg was in cruising into the grand final, the Double Blues were disgraceful.

They lacked heart for the contest - it's as simple as that. Sturt was brushed aside in a manner which again puts the spotlight on its brittleness in finals. The credibility from last week's 71-point thrashing of Norwood in the first semi-final has been erased.

"They (Central District and Glennelg) are the two sides which deserve to play in the grand final," Sturt coach Rick Macgowan said.

"They play finals-type football, they love the contested ball, love the collisions and they give it everything no matter what the contest."

The signs were ominous just a minute into the clash when Glennelg rover Matthew Bode snapped truly for the opening goal.

A push-and-shove between players then developed just 20m from the Tigers' goal. It was all harmless - but disturbing for Sturt fans was the fact three Double Blues were grossly outnumbered by about eight Tigers. Where was their support?

The incident was a summation of the game. Glennelg was never going to take a backward step and it refused to deviate from supporting team-mates.

The Glennelg spark - as has been the case all year - was provided by tireless ruckman Trevor Cranston.

His midfield mates Adam Fisher and Ben Kane dominated with Sturt big guns Luke Crane, Jade Sheedy and Adam Thomson having little impact.

The return of Paul Sherwood to the Tigers' defence enabled Ruory Kirkby to be switched back to the forward line and he posed a double threat with strong-marking Todd Grima.

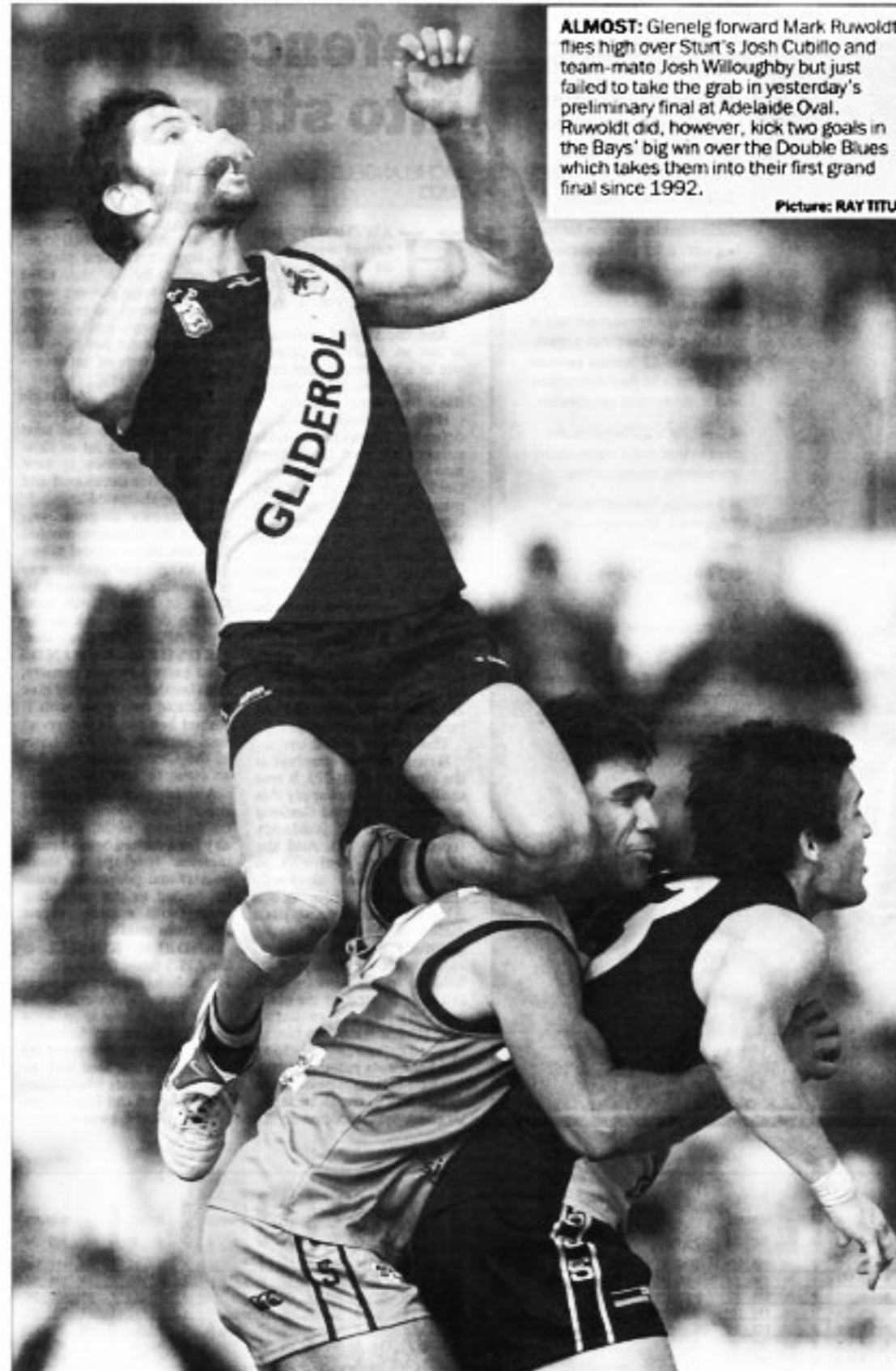
Glennelg, aided by a free kick count of 12-4, blew the game apart in the second term when it nailed six goals and conceded just one.

Twice Sturt's Ken Farmer Medallist Brant Chambers was benched. Tigers defender Sam Rudolph was his typical resolute self but the shocking delivery into attack gave Chambers no chance.

The bottom line is the majority wearing the Double Blues jumper did not put their bodies on the line, a necessity in the major round.

"We were uncompetitive in the 50-50 contests," Macgowan said. "We spoke about their strengths, winning the contested ball, accountability - we hoped we could challenge in that area."

Macgowan was asked whether the loss was a more disappointing exit than last year when beaten by Glennelg in the elimination final. His response: "Definitely."



ALMOST: Glennelg forward Mark Ruwoldt flies high over Sturt's Josh Cubillo and team-mate Josh Willoughby but just failed to take the grab in yesterday's preliminary final at Adelaide Oval. Ruwoldt did, however, kick two goals in the Bays' big win over the Double Blues which takes them into their first grand final since 1992. Picture: RAY TITUS

Paul's focus on the big one

ZAC MILBANK

WHEN Glennelg defender Paul Sherwood arrived at Adelaide Oval yesterday his career flashed before him.

Having missed the Tigers' second semi-final loss a week earlier, Sherwood - at age 32 - knew the preliminary final could have been his last match, had Sturt triumphed.

"It did cross my mind a little bit and it certainly gave me a lift knowing it could be the last time I'm out there," Sherwood said. "But it wasn't to be which is good. I'm just rapt, trying to take it all in at the moment."

Sherwood will make a decision on his playing future at the end of the season but for now the Tigers veteran will focus on playing in Glennelg's first grand final since 1992. "We're going to have to be at our best to beat Central, they've been the benchmark and are a bloody good side," Sherwood said.

"So we'll just get ourselves settled for the week, recover and go in with a lot of confidence."

For good reason. Glennelg was outstanding winning the hard ball in close against the Double Blues, something it will need to replicate against the hardened Dogs.

"That's our strength, get in hard and get our hands on it," Sherwood said.

"Then when they've got it, put on as much pressure as we can - it's not a hard game. We've got some hard guys and it really sets the scene when they burrow in."

With Sherwood recovered from a corked thigh, his presence across half-back also gave the minor premier a much stronger, and settled, structure.

Not only did he keep former Crow Ian Perrie under wraps, "Forest" allowed Ruory Kirkby to start in his customary position in attack, rejoining fellow key forwards Todd Grima and Matthew Duldig to cause the Sturt backmen plenty of headaches. "He presents and gives us that lead-up option," Sherwood said of Kirkby.

One of the few Tigers to play more than three finals, Sherwood said defeating the Double Blues was only the first step in the grand final preparation process.

"We're happy but there's nothing to celebrate yet," he said. "We've got another week to get through."



BLACK-AND-GOLD BUTT: Tiger Matthew Duldig celebrates emphatic preliminary final victory yesterday. Picture: RAY TITUS

TIGERS V DOUBLE BLUES

Crowd 13,846 at Adelaide Oval

GLENNELG	4.4	10.10	13.12	17.17	119
STURT	3.4	4.4	6.5	8.5	53

BEST: Cranston, Fisher, Kane, Grima, Mules, Kirkby, Rudolph, Backwell. **GOALS:** Kirkby 3.1, Grima, Kane 3.0, Duldig 2.2, Ruwoldt 2.1, Holmes 2.0, Bode 1.1, Willoughby 1.0, Panozzo, Block, Cranston, Hinge, Lally, Kirk 0.1, rushed 0.6. **INJURIES:** Lally (knee), Allen (shoulder).

BEST: Coad, Whiteman, Gum. **GOALS:** Gum 2.0, Perrie 1.2, Chambers, McDonald, Coad, Cubillo, Thomson 1.0, Deluca 0.1, rushed 0.2. **INJURIES:** Bentley (hamstring) withdrew from selected side.

UMPIRES: C. Bowen, R. Williams, T. Dey.

Sturt soldiers near the end

CANDICE KELLER

RICK MACGOWAN'S list of problems grew exponentially yesterday.

On the eve of being knocked out of the 2008 finals series by a firing Glennelg, Macgowan could only look to next year for a glimmer of hope.

Yet he will possibly be staring down the barrel of a pre-season minus some of his hardened soldiers who have been instrumental in Sturt's success this year.

No retirements are official but captain Ben Nelson, ruckman Simon Feast and wingman Daniel Wicks would all be seriously considering their future in the SANFL after many tough years on the track and a disappointing close to a promising season.

"I haven't spoken to them but that's the least of my problems," Macgowan said of any possible retirements.

Onballer Nelson, 31, has captained Sturt for five years, sharing the duty with Jade Sheedy for the past two. Winning the best and fairest medal in 2003, Nelson has been a solid contributor for the team over his 175 games.

Feast, 33, is a dual club best and fairest winner, taking home the award in 1995 and '98. He has dominated the ruck competition for the Double Blues throughout the year but was sidelined for weeks with a knee injury.

Power-listed Fabian Deluca had to step up as Feast's replacement but the absence of height around the ground was noticeable.

Wicks has played 123 games with the club. The other possible retiree is vice-captain Andrew Whiteman, who at age 30 (same as Wicks), has struggled all year with ongoing back injuries.

On looking to the future, Macgowan said recruiting would be important but not critical for Sturt to be able to capitalise on its opportunities. He said there was a bevy of talent to pick from in the reserves and junior grade lists, so he would be looking close to home first and foremost.

"We've got plenty of depth in reserves and under age teams. We'll be recruiting like every club but we won't get too carried away. We need to find a real hardness if we're going to win that contested ball, that's the key to it. We need to find more of those. (Today) we were uncompetitive in 50-50 contests."

Whether or not Sturt can take control of that deficiency by the start of next year will determine its chances in 2009. Even without some of the more experienced players such as Nelson, the club has the potential to dominate again in the minor round.

Macgowan has groomed the younger and second-tier players this year such as Craig Evans and Nick Wark in readiness for a tough competition in the next few years.

"I think we will be around the mark for the next five years," he said.

GLENNELG

	Kicks	Mks	Hbl	F/for	F/ag	Gls	Pts	H/O	Tld
HOLMES	8	3	4	1	1	0	0	0	1
GRIMA	9	8	8	1	0	3	0	0	1
BODE	9	2	12	2	1	1	1	0	2
RUWOLDT	7	3	7	2	0	2	1	0	1
DULDIG	9	5	2	0	0	2	2	2	0
KIRKBY	8	7	4	3	1	3	1	3	0
KANE	15	5	9	2	0	3	0	0	2
FISHER	13	6	12	1	2	0	0	1	3
BACKWELL	16	3	14	3	2	0	0	0	2
HINGE	5	6	10	0	0	0	1	0	0
SHERWOOD	3	2	9	0	1	0	0	0	0
MULES	8	4	8	0	0	0	0	0	2
MURPHY	14	8	9	1	2	0	0	0	2
RUDOLPH	7	4	2	2	1	0	0	0	3
PANOZZO	11	8	6	1	1	0	1	0	1
CRANSTON	6	5	4	1	0	0	1	20	1
BLOCK	10	0	5	1	1	0	1	0	0
ALLEN	7	1	7	0	1	0	0	0	0
KIRK	4	2	6	0	0	0	1	2	1
WILLOUGHBY	4	1	5	0	0	2	0	0	2
LALLY	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	174	84	145	21	14	17	17	28	24

STURT

	Kicks	Mks	Hbl	F/for	F/ag	Gls	Pts	H/O	Tld
FARMER	6	2	6	1	2	0	0	0	5
CHAMBERS	2	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
FITTOCK	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	2
EVANS	8	5	8	1	0	0	0	0	4
PERRIE	5	4	2	0	0	1	2	0	2
THOMSON	7	3	8	2	1	1	0	0	3
GUM	16	7	3	2	0	2	0	0	4
SHEEDY	14	6	12	3	2	0	0	0	3
WICKS	14	4	6	1	1	0	0	0	1
CUBILLO	13	4	8	0	0	1	0	1	4
MCLEAY	8	5	1	1	0	0	0	1	2
WHITEMAN	10	5	7	2	3	0	0	0	0
COAD	11	10	7	0	4	1	0	1	1
WARK	1	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	3
MCGLONE	9	3	1	1	2	0	0	0	3
FEAST	2	3	3	0	0	0	0	8	3
NELSON	2	1	6	0	1	0	0	0	3
CRANE	11	3	4	0	1	0	0	0	2
DELUCA	2	3	6	0	2	0	1	19	1
MCDONALD	3	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
PAYNTER	3	2	7	0	0	0	0	0	3
Totals	149	76	101	14	21	8	5	30	51