

FOOTY

COUNTRY VICTORIA'S NO. 1 COVERAGE

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PAKENHAM-BERWICK



Warragul players Brendan Sheehan, Tim Brady, Leigh Baldry, Ryan Flack and Tim Keily kick back and enjoy the moment after the Gulls' first senior flag in 19 years.

Back from the brink

By Ken Moore

WARRAGUL won its first senior flag since 1984 after defeating a valiant Garfield in the 2003 Western Division grand final by 19 points. Played in difficult conditions, the game was worthy of a grand final and pitted the two best sides in the competition. It was a fairytale victory for Warragul, as only four seasons ago the club faced closure.

The Gulls, who were well over \$120,000 in debt and short of players and support, were on the brink of folding before the 2000 season but managed a remarkable turnaround since joining the West Gippsland competition. The upturn in fortunes began later that year when the Gulls made the preliminary final. Last year the Gulls were runners-up and this season went one better.

Credit for the club's resurgence must go to the likes of former president Tony Flack, president Bob Baldry, former secretary Arlene Bible and Jack Nott to name a few. Warragul strengthened its line up off-season with powerhouse forward Paul Whelan and classy on-ballers Nick Edney and Glen Marshall but still a fair bit of praise must still go to home-grown captain-coach Ash Green. After being runner-up last season and sustaining two heavy losses to Garfield, one as recent as the second semi-final, Green was able to foster a strong sense of togetherness and belief among his players and they duly responded on the day it counted. Warragul's

on-ball division of Ryan Flack, Nick Edney and Dan Murphy performed superbly to eclipse the much-heralded Garfield midfield. Rob Murphy was awarded best on ground and Green, Cant and Grant Aitken solidified the defence.

Garfield fell one hurdle short in a fine season. In Lincoln Withers and Danny O'Brien, Garfield had two of the most accomplished ball-winners in the league this season. But two players do not make a team and a good deal of credit for Garfield's good season must still be accorded to first-year coach Ben Soumilas. Soumilas attracted the likes of Withers, Jason Nibbs, Joe Allen, Gavan Upton and Matt Cunningham back to the club and displayed a disciplined coaching style that emphasised fitness, loyalty and teamwork. These are the qualities that have come to represent Garfield and, despite the loss to Warragul, the Stars again earned respect. It was the fourth time the Stars had been runners-up in recent seasons, having also been bridesmaids in 1996, 1998 and 2001.

The other big winner at the weekend was Drouin. The Hawks, who this season exceeded everyone's expectations in the seniors, won flags in the seconds and under 18s. The Hawk seconds upset the previously undefeated and well-fancied Warragul, while their star-studded under 18s won their fifth consecutive thirds flag, beating a defiant ROC.

Left: Gun Garfield goal kicker Mal McKenna contemplates what could have been after the Stars went down by 19 points on Sunday.

Right: Warragul coach Ash Green and president Bob Baldry raise the 2003 Western Division grand final cup after the Gulls' great win.

Pictures: Stewart Chambers.

