

Back on the prowl

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GOING FORWARD: Cougars wide midfielder Michael Cay sets off on another run up the park as the home side took control.

A SECOND-half blitz from the Minniecon & Burke Capricorn Cougars compounded the misery for Hyundai QSL defending champion Sunshine Coast Fire with the Central Queensland team winning 3-0 at Jardine Park.

Coast has now lost three of its opening five matches.

Take nothing away from the Cougars as they did everything required of them to get maximum points against a one dimensional Coast team, which spent the whole of Saturday night trying to get the ball to the head of its massive striker Shaun Blackman.

The reason they failed to get reward from this ploy was not only due to a gutsy effort from Dylan Kussrow, who was strong in defence and composed with ball at foot, but a great team showing with every player understanding their role.

Cougars withstood an aerial bombardment for the first 45 minutes with a bit of good fortune, when Blackman did get a free header, but saw his effort strike the inside of an upright and bounce across the face of goal to safety.

Keeper Gerard Kelly also pulled a magnificent save, diving to his right, to deny Bryan Gilfillan, but otherwise the Cougars were reasonably comfortable, except at set-pieces where the visitors brought all their tall timber into play.

At the other end, tall defender Daniel Kirkup was having a nightmare against the Cougars tricky strikers Joe Burke and Tristan Fraser.

As half-time neared, frustration looked to be the home side's enemy, as the referee

repeatedly dished out lesser punishments to Coast for similar offences committed by the home side.

The Coast's second-half display had spectators wondering why its nickname is "Fire", as they rarely displayed a passion for the game despite coach George Cowie ringing the changes.

A criticism of Roy Bob last year was that he didn't move forward enough, but not any more.

A well-worked move down the right saw Tom Evans hit the ball low across the edge of the Sunshine Coast box, where Bob met it first time, and hook it powerfully into the net.

From that point the Fire were barely a smouldering ember as the team switched off for goal number two a few minutes later.

The ball went out for a throw and Fire players followed its path while Johnathon Sauer picked up a replacement ball and sent it down the line to Evan, who whipped it across for Fraser to volley home.

With the Cougars having to bring on substitutes for both Sauer and Brendan James, who had both enjoyed massive games, Coast did apply pressure.

But with time running out, the Fire was totally extinguished when Fraser broke through the heart of the Coast defence, and then unselfishly rolled the ball across to the better positioned Michael Cay, who slotted it home.

As time ran out lively substitute Jesse Thompson was pole-axed from behind, but defender Kirkup received a whisper in the ear from the referee, much to the disappointment of the home crowd.

Cougars coach Brad Smith refused to talk about the performance of the match official, instead concentrating on the display of his own side and what he described as a fantastic team effort.

"I'm not surprised at the way the Sunshine Coast played," Smith said.

"It took us the first half to get used to their long-ball game."

Smith was willing to concede that not everything had gone to plan during the opening 45 minutes, when the team had spells where it would win possession but then feed it straight back to the Coast.

At half-time the instruction was, when under pressure, clip the ball over the Coast

midfield and give the small Cougars front-runners a chance to win it against the physically bigger opposition.

"We've also taken some of the defensive onus off the boys out wide," Smith said.

That move gives the Cougars more attacking options and closer support for the front two.