

Now it's back to busi

RICHARD EARLE

IT'S a long trek from Subiaco to Showdown for Taylor Walker's men — confronting untold emptiness in between.

Flying back across the Nul-larbor yesterday the Crows could look down, one by one and see a vast landscape with no beginning or end. That was the void Adelaide felt at the final siren against West Coast.

Opposing the second-ranked Eagles was a triumph for the Crows just nine days after Phil Walsh's death. It, understandably, took some of South Australia's devastated first-class cricketers weeks to function following the death of former Test batsman Phillip Hughes last November.

Now the pursuit of excellence Walsh demanded must provide the clarity and focus that sustains his ninth-placed proteges against Port Adelaide on Sunday and beyond.

"The sooner we could get back to routine the better it was for the 45 staff, coaches and players," noted Walker. "Everyone had different emotions, it was just good for everyone to get back out there."

A 56-point loss to West Coast on Saturday night felt immaterial in the wider context of a tribute match to late coach Walsh.



However, attention will turn to winning three winnable home games against Gold Coast, Richmond, Brisbane and one away against Essendon to make the finals. The Crows can then grieve in private for five months as Port Adelaide did for John McCarthy in the summer of 2012-13.

This is the time to draw on the progress made under Walsh and blueprint for turning Adelaide into the true club he envisioned. Walsh sought to change fundamentals that set up his famed "elite standards" mantra and was making real inroads by round 13. Adelaide's tackle efficiency had risen from 15th to fourth. And it had made dramatic progress in Walsh's pet ground-ball gets stat. Adelaide last season ranked 13th (-35) but was the competition leader after round 13 with a +119 differential.

Walker noted how Adelaide adhered to the cornerstone of "Crows footy" Walsh engendered with a 14-point first term lead and third-term fightback against the Eagles. "We just need 22 blokes to play their role," said Walker with Adelaide conceding eight unanswered Eagles goals in a decisive second term. "Obviously we didn't play that well in the second quarter but I thought in the second half and the first quarter we played Crows footy."

Adelaide dared to take on West Coast's press and prospered in the first and third quarters before the tyranny of distance and despair caught up. Best-afield Andrew Gaff (36 touches) finished with three goals as the Eagles slammed on seven in a final term frenzy, fired by Nic Naitanui's 39 hit-outs.

WEST COAST V ADELAIDE

	EAGLES	4.0 12.7 15.10 22.15	147
	CROWS	6.2 6.3 11.5 14.7	91

BEST

Eagles: Naitanui, Gass, LeCras, Masten, Rosa, Priddis.

Crows: Dangerfield, Cameron, Crouch, Jenkins, Laird, Walker, Knight, Talia.

GOALS

Eagles: Gaff, Yeo 3; Darling, Hil, Kennedy, Shuey, LeCras 2; Masten, Sheed, Cripps, Priddis, Selwood, Wellington.

Crows: Walker 3; Cameron, Betts, Jenkins, Knight 2; Smith, Wright, Lynch.

INJURIES

Dangerfield (cut lip), Lever (cut head).

UMPIRES

Dalgleish, Margetts, Harris.

CROWD

38,133 at Subiaco Oval.

MERV AGARS MEDAL

5. Dangerfield. 4. Cameron. 3. Crouch. 2. Jenkins. 1. Laird.

No man bled for Adelaide more than Patrick Dangerfield, with 36 touches and 21 contested possessions. He ignited Adelaide in the first term with 13 touches, providing the bursts that allowed the Crows to briefly jump West Coast's press.

Charlie Cameron slipped behind the barricades for two first-term goals in another calling card for the rugby league convert's improvement. Eddie Betts' mark, snap and goal electrified Adelaide in the first quarter and he would harass and assist all game Josh Jenkins was throwing his weight around and Adelaide benefited, creating Walker's second goal before following with his first to secure a 14-point quarter-time lead for Adelaide.

The Crows lost momentum and ultimately the game with Dangerfield off for almost half of the second term having his lip stitched together and treatment for a dislodged tooth.

Still fragile from the chilling loss of Walsh, Adelaide kept West Coast to a 56-point deficit, well below the average 12-goal margin endured by interstate visitors to the House of Pain this season.

Debutant Riley Knight jump-started the Crows with two second-half goals while indomitable Rory Laird's 30 touches, Matt Crouch's poise and Walker's three goals kept Adelaide in the hunt. Add impressive first-year defender Jake Lever's courage battling on from a sickening head knock and the genesis of Walsh's long-term Crows structure was evident.

Conquering Port Adelaide would appear a bridge too far next Sunday but the Crows will do well to heed Daniel Talia's advice to strip back all thoughts and cherish those and the game they "love".

"We will get through it together. What we have been through this week has just made us stronger," said Talia.

EMOTION-CHARGED: Crows star Patrick Dangerfield gets his arms free to handball while being tackled by Mark Hutchings on Saturday night. Brad Sheppard grabs the ball in front of Tom Lynch and Richard Douglas, below. Debutant Riley Knight gets a possession, right, and, far right, David Mackay gets a kick before the tackle from Josh Hill. Pictures: GETTY/COLLEEN PETCH



Midfield makes Eagles contenders

JUSTIN CHADWICK

A TOP-four berth is tantalisingly close, but West Coast knows the job isn't done yet as it prepares for a blockbuster clash with Collingwood on Saturday.

The Eagles maintained their hold on second spot with a crushing 56-point win over Adelaide in Perth on Saturday night.

Coach Adam Simpson was proud of how his players composed themselves in the wake of Phil Walsh's death, with the Eagles unleashing an eight-goal blitz in the second quarter to stroll to the 22.15 (147) to 14.7 (91) win.

But attention has quickly turned to the Magpies, who remain in the top-four hunt despite three losses on the trot.

West Coast hasn't beaten Collingwood in Melbourne since 2003, but it is desperate



STAR MAN: West Coast ruckman Nic Naitanui battles Sam Jacobs on Saturday night.

Picture: GETTY IMAGES

to end that losing run when it faces off at Etihad Stadium on Saturday.

The Eagles were tipped to

struggle this year after losing key defenders Eric Mackenzie and Mitch Brown to knee injuries.

But the club's midfield has gone from a weakness to a strength, helping transform the club into a premiership contender.

West Coast had 13 goalkickers against the Crows, with the vast majority of those players midfielders.

"Confidence is a strange thing isn't it, because it's the same group we had last year," Simpson said.

"Everyone has evolved a little bit. I think Nic Naitanui is having a really good year.

"He really set the tone in the middle. So collectively they're getting it done.

"I think Brady Rawlings is doing a really good job as our midfield coach, and Don Pyke's our stoppage coach, so we're working together.

"We're happy with where they're at but I think there's still a bit of improvement to go."