



An exceptional season coming to its end

By **Joseph Carlucci**

The TeleChoice Championship Series Grand Final match-up is a true reflection of what the regular season has offered in 2008. The CUA Stadium in Penrith will host Wollongong FC and Sutherland Sharks, the two most consistent teams in the competition, a statistic that cannot be argued considering both sides finished the regular season on equal points – the Sharks holding a better goal average.

With very little separating these two sides, Grand-Final day will certainly be an arm-wrestle between two sides that have proven capable of playing open attacking football, yet demonstrated a patience in their approach play that has distanced these two sides from the rest of the field.

TeleChoice Championship Series run

Wollongong FC

Wollongong FC opened their Championship Series campaign with a tricky match-up against Sydney Olympic in the Preliminary Semi-Final. Faced with the possibility of a home loss, and an elimination encounter against Manly United, the Wolves overturned a 1-2 deficit with 6' minutes remaining to seal a 3-2 win courtesy of a late Matthew Bailey goal and an even later Ilija Prenzoski winner.

The win set-up an encounter with Sutherland Sharks for a direct entry into the Grand Final, and once again the Wolves needed to come from behind to clinch the win. In a tense encounter, Matthew Bailey cancelled out Jim Bakis' opener for the Sharks before that man again; Ilija Prenzoski scored the winner with 4' minutes of extra-time remaining.

First blood in the TeleChoice Championship Series was drawn by Wollongong FC.

benefit, of a week-off after finishing the regular season first on the League ladder. Following the week off, the Sharks struggled in their Major Semi-Final encounter against the Wolves. Despite taking the lead via the boot of Jim Bakis, the Sharks failed to 'kill off' their opponents, squandering numerous chances before the Wolves made them pay.

With momentum certainly not on the Sharks' side, following a definite slump in results after an exceptional first 18-Rounds of the season, Sutherland faced a delicate encounter against Sydney Olympic. With all the experience of George Souris in defence, and Brian Brown from the touch-line, Sutherland withstood the immense pressure thrown at them by Sydney Olympic to hold-out for a 2-1 win (David Reid and Nick Stavroulakis the goal-scorers) and seal a spot in the Grand-Final.

2008 Campaign

Wollongong FC

John Turner's Wollongong FC sides of recent seasons have been hampered by slow starts to their campaigns. Season

2007 saw the Wolves finish strongly – claiming the Tiger Turf Cup on the way – yet only just miss-out on Finals football. Much of the reason for the failed finals series campaign was a slow start to the regular season, something that John Turner and his men have successfully improved on this season.

Following an 'exaggerated' 0-4 hiding at the hands of Sydney Olympic, Wollongong FC added two wins on the board before dropping points against Manly United in Round 5. The Wolves went unbeaten for five Rounds, before falling to their third loss of the season, a 2-1 home loss against Sutherland Sharks, before collecting another home loss two Rounds later against Sydney Olympic. Since that Round 13 encounter, the Wolves have not lost a game and hold a 28-goals for, 8-goals against record – Finals Series included.

John Turner has had to make-do without the services of many key players, most notably Osagie Ederaro and Michael West both through injury, meanwhile Dez Giraldi's stay at the club was brief after his move to A-League side Sydney FC.

Sutherland Sharks

Sutherland Sharks enjoyed an incredible unbeaten run through the first 18-Rounds of the competition. Brian Brown's men played with a confidence matched only by the Wolves in the latter half of the season.

Following the impressive showing in the Johnny Warren Cup, where the Sharks were defeated in extra-time of the Final of that pre-season tournament, the Shire side took on an unbeatable mentality, matching all challenges their adversaries presented, including thrilling victories against Manly United, Sydney United and Wollongong FC along the way.

A slump in form started when the Sharks lost their first match of the season in Round 19 against Blacktown City Demons. A 1-3 defeat was then matched by a 0-3 defeat at the hands of Marconi Stallions – coincidentally both sides that were previously coached by Brian Brown.

Despite the nervy conclusion to the regular season, the Sharks did enough

GRAND FINAL

Wollongong FC
vs Sutherland Sharks
Sunday 7th September
15:00, CUA Stadium



on the final day of the season to avoid defeat against the Wolves and seal the Premiership title with a better goal average than the Wolves.

Player Comments

Ben Blake (Wollongong FC):

"It has been a great run for the club, one that has been a long time coming. As many of the boys would say, it was disappointing to miss out on finals football last season, which was probably due to a slower start to our season, though we have learned from that and have had a great campaign to-date.

"We are up against Sutherland, we have played the Sharks already on three occasions this season and we won the most recent match so we will be carrying confidence into the Final – you need to believe in your ability.

"It is a Final though, and as is the case with all Finals, the team that arrives in the best condition with the right frame of mind is the team that will be successful. Our boys are travelling well after the week off we had, and I am confident that we will arrive in good condition on Sunday.

"Winning the Grand Final would carry huge importance as the Wolves have not won a League title since 2001 so it would be great to win this title for all those supporters and club members that have been involved with the team over this time."

Ballamadou Conde (Wollongong FC):

"The biggest difference between the Wollongong team of this season and that of previous seasons is the special rapport

Season Head-to-Head

Round 11	
Wollongong FC-Sutherland Sharks	1-2
(Michael West 45' - Neil Jablonski 3', Brad Boardman 23')	
Round 22	
Sutherland Sharks-Wollongong Wolves	1-1
(Huxley 40' - Long 63')	
Major Semi-Final	
Sutherland Sharks-Wollongong Wolves	1-2
(Jim Bakis 10' - Matt Bailey 66', Ilija Prenzoski 106')	

