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By George Stavroulakis



APIA LEICHHARDT TIGERS – BONNYRIGG WHITE EAGLES 6-3

APIA Leichhardt Tigers head into the final week of the 2018 National Premier Leagues season in pole position to retain their Premiership title after a phenomenal 6-3 win over Bonnyrigg White Eagles at Lambert Park on Sunday afternoon.



Down 3-0 with half an hour played, the Tigers looked a shadow of their former selves until Sean Symons sparked the comeback with a goal just before the break.

Bonnyrigg imploded with three red cards in the second half allowing APIA free rein in the closing stages the game, with a sixth goal late on giving the hosts a cushion that seemed impossible an hour earlier.

It was a spectacular and somewhat bizarre contest but most importantly puts Billy McColl's Tigers side in control of their own fate ahead of what is set to be a dramatic final week of action in Round 22.

The first half hour gave little hint of the match to come – indeed, Bonnyrigg dominated the opening exchanges and might've gone in front almost immediately.

A pass across the top of the box split the APIA defence to leave Jewook Woo with a free shot on goal but the forward somehow contrived to hit the side netting instead of the target.

Aaron Peterson was next to go close for the visitors, breaking past his man on a bouncing ball before looping a volley outside of the far post.

Threatening as they were in the first few minutes, it was little surprise when Bonnyrigg went in front. A corner swung in from the right deflected off an APIA leg and in past Ivan Necevski, leaving the visitors to celebrate an own goal and an unlikely 1-0 lead.

It might've been two a few minutes later when Aaron Peterson muscled through at the top of the box, but Necevski came out and stood up well to deny the striker his goal.

There was little the APIA keeper could do about the next effort however, as Raymond Miller sent his shot through Howard Fondyke to double Bonnyrigg's advantage.

With the finals series eluding them and relegation a certainty, Bonnyrigg looked determined to have an impact on the race for the Premiership one way or another.

Franco Parisi should've brought APIA back within a goal after skipping through at the top of the box but James Chronopoulos made a fantastic save from the one-on-one to preserve Bonnyrigg's lead.

Moments later the hosts were left reeling again when Bonnyrigg scored a third; Tynan Diaz hanging a boot out at a ball dropping in the box to poke a shot past Necevski.

With defeat here handing all momentum in the Premiership race to Sydney Olympic, APIA Leichhardt pushed hard for a goal before halftime and scored a stunner through Sean

Symons.

The winger lunged at a beautiful cross from Brandon Lundy to flick a diving header past Chronopoulos.

Faint hope gave way to faint expectation in the stands when Sekiya Tasuku made it 3-2 just a few minutes later. The Japanese midfielder latching onto the ball and hitting a first-time finish past the keeper after a majestic run from Franco Parisi.

Sekiya and Parisi could have, and arguably should have, completed the comeback before halftime but each was wasteful with his chance.

Sekiya attempting a weak header where a shot was needed, and Parisi trying to sneak the ball in at the near post rather than aiming for the far corner.

Those two late goals transformed the mood around Lambert Park during the break, and despite an early second half resistance from Bonnyrigg the next APIA goal was inevitable.

Sekiya was sent through on the left side of the box and pushed the ball towards goal with a shot that rolled through a sea of legs before settling in the net behind Chronopoulos.

All of APIA's good work was very nearly undone in spite of the run of play when Aaron Peterson burst through on goal ten minutes after the equaliser, but Ivan Necevski held his ground to make a remarkable save when a goal seemed a certainty.

Reminded of their opponents' threat – they had scored three goals to this point after all – APIA steadied themselves before turning the game on its head. Sean Symons picked up the ball on the left and rifled a shot past Chronopoulos to give the Tigers the lead for the first time in the match, four goals and nearly an hour after going behind.

Understandably frustrated, Bonnyrigg both dropped and lost their heads. Samuel Gallaway saw red a few moments after APIA took the lead and David Vrankovic followed him down the tunnel for an early shower a little over ten minutes later.

Sekiya was played clear through on the left flank as the final whistle approached and gave Brandon Lundy the chance to make it five after being brought down by the keeper, with Bradie Smith awarded a red card in the aftermatch to leave Bonnyrigg with eight men.

Chronopoulos made a solid save to his right to deny Lundy from the spot, though the save would've been little consolation to the keeper.

Paul Galimi added a sixth in extra time, before the full whistle sounded while Lambert Park delighted in the sight of Franco

Parisi running the full length of the pitch as he looked for the goal his performance deserved.

The 35-year-old's legs aren't what they used to be, but then this was a night when anything seemed possible for APIA.

Relieved, delighted and perhaps a little dazed after seeing his side to victory in one of the matches of the season, APIA's Billy McColl said he never doubted his team's ability to come back after a dismal start.

"At 3-0 down, I was thinking about how we'd score five," he said. "We don't throw the towel in and we're on a mission.

"Even at 3-0, I had total confidence in the squad. I said that to them at halftime. We made a couple of changes that reinforced what we're about, and the boys delivered."

Bonnyrigg's Milan Susak had little to say after the match: "I don't think I should say anything," he said. "I might get in trouble."

Match Stats

APIA Leichhardt Tigers FC 4 (S. Symons 37', 69', Tasuku 40', 89', Vranovic OG 56', Galimi 90')

Bonnyrigg White Eagles FC 3 (J. Symons OG 12', Miller 22', Diaz 30')

Referee: K. Ams

Assistant Referees: J. Park, R. Osborne

Fourth official: B. Wright

APIA Leichhardt Tigers FC: 8. BICZO Corey, 32. FONDYKE Howard, 19. LUNDY Brandon, 2. MILLGATE Nathan, 15. MUATA-MARLOW Themba, 1. NECEVSKI Ivan, 10. PARISI Franco, 20. SEKIYA Tasuku, 4. SYMONS Joshua, 16. SYMONS Sean, 18. UCCHINO Adrian

Substitutes: 13. D'APUZZO David 3. GALIMI Paul, 38. GULISANO Samuel, 12. MCCARRON Benjamin, 22. TUXFORD Blake

Bonnyrigg White Eagles FC: 10. ADELI Shervin, 1. CHRONOPOULOS James, 7. DIAZ Tynan (11. KADRIC Asmir), 16. GALLAWAY Samuel, 18. GIL Mun-Soo (2. AVERY Aaron), 13. MCKENZIE James, 15. MILLER Raymond, 9. PETERSON Aaron, 14. SMITH Bradie, 14. VRANKOVIC David, 22. WOO Jewook

Substitutes: 21. BRADASEVIC James, 20. TOSI Benjamin, 4. KRLJAR Nikol

Yellow cards: Gil 12', Gallaway 51', 72', Vrankovic 61', 85', Miller 80', Chronopoulos 86'

Red cards: Gallaway 72', Vrankovic 85', Smith 90'