

Mark Rudan... "Early Days"

Wellington Phoenix coach Mark Rudan is holding his head up high despite his team's 1-0 loss to 10-men Bentleigh Greens on Tuesday night.

Phoenix bowed out of the FFA Cup Round of 32 in Melbourne with Marco Jankovic scoring the only goal of the game.

Bentleigh undermanned for the majority of the game after James Kelly was given his marching orders in the 33rd minute but Wellington were still unable to test goalkeeper Ryan Scott.

It was the Nix boss's first competitive game in charge and he dismissed any suggestions that their loss was an embarrassment.

"It's not the first time an NPL club has beaten an A-League side and we're going through a whole raft of changes at this club as well," Rudan said post-match.

"If you think that we should be at a stage in our development under a new coach with new players that we should be winning 5 or 6-0 against a very quality side like Bentleigh, then maybe I'm looking at it differently.

"The focus wasn't so much on tonight, we've got a long way to go. We still have a lot of players left to fill our roster as well.

"To call it an embarrassment, you're actually being very disrespectful to Bentleigh because they're a good outfit."

Wellington have signed six new players since last season and recently returned from their pre-season training camp on the Gold Coast.

Rudan said it was early days and he was testing their endurance for now.

"We certainly didn't underestimate the opposition, we gave them enough respect," he said.

"We're at a certain stage in our development. The boys are extremely tired, it was really hard and I wanted to test them under fatigue.

"Bentleigh have been a successful side for a long time under JA (coach John Anastasiadis), he's a very good coach. It'd be great for him to get an opportunity at the top level as well one day."



ROUND 23 – NATIONAL PREMIER LEAGUES 3 NSW MEN'S PREVIEW

Only four rounds of football remaining, and yet there is all to play for in the 2018 National Premier Leagues 3 NSW Men's competition.

Just six points separate the top five sides in the league, with the top three – St George City FA, Gladesville Ryde Magic and Hawkesbury City – also in a ding dong battle for the Club Championship.

On the fringes of the Top Six however, neither Camden Tigers nor Sydney University – in 7th and 8th spots respectively – can ill afford to drop any more points, starting this week, or risk losing ground as well as any hopes they had for finals football in 2018. Round Twenty Three is spread across three days – with one match being pushed back to Tuesday – as we take a look at this week's enticing encounters.

Two teams coming off losses last week will lock horns at Marjorie Jackson Field on Saturday afternoon, with the Western NSW Mariners and Bankstown City Lions

kicking off at 3pm. The Mariners recent uplift in performances was nowhere to be seen last Sunday when they succumbed easily to the power of Gladesville Ryde Magic, losing 0-7 in a disappointing performance. Bankstown City themselves have dropped off the pace in recent weeks, with 3 losses in their past 4 outings, including last week's 0-1 reverse at Granville.

The Lions have dropped to 4th position and have the Raiders and Dunbar breathing down their necks, so will want to return from Lithgow with nothing less than the full quota of points on offer. Despite needing to travel the first time these two sides met, Bankstown City trounced the Mariners 8-0 in Mudgee back in Round Ten, with Tommy Markovski and Ante Tomic netting

hatricks, so they will hit the highway full of confidence of a repeat outcome.

#St George City FA will be out for all three points on offer on Saturday night when they travel to Arlington Oval to meet Stanmore Hawks at 7pm.

Two successive draws have resulted in an advance of teams below St George on the ladder, with both Magic and Hawkesbury now within three points. **Despite the** draw last week against Sydney Uni, the league leaders will take some heart from the fact they fought back from 0-2 down to level the match, even though keeper, Chris Marques, was dismissed from the park just before half time. Sitting in 11th position could be deceiving for anyone coming up against Stanmore, because they have proven on their day they can easily play the part of the proverbial spanner for any team in the league. T

he Hawks have managed two wins in their past four games, against Dully and Bankstown, and nothing will give them greater pleasure than toppling the leaders. St George City FA won the first round fixture 6-1, with James Spanoudakis netting a brace.

Spanoudakis has been plagued by injury throughout this campaign, but he was back to his best last week in instigating St George City's comeback against Sydney Uni, and will no doubt be out to steer his

side to another three points in this match.

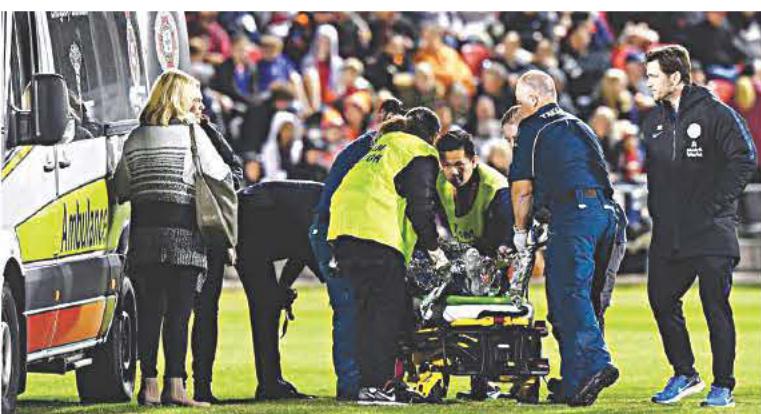
#Firmly ensconced in the Top Six and in great form of late, both SD Raiders and Gladesville Ryde Magic will do battle for the spoils at Ernie Smith Reserve at 7pm on Saturday night.

The Raiders have flicked a switch of late, and managed 11 points out of 15 in their past 5 matches, helping them to 5th spot on the ladder on 41 points. Their two draws in that run have been against teams above them on the ladder – St George City and Hawkesbury – and both have been scoreless.

Their wins have been by huge margins, and the Raiders now boast the equal best attack in the competition, with 66 goals in 22 games played. Gladesville Ryde Magic have themselves been in great form, with 6 wins and a draw in their past 8 matches, including 17 goals in their most recent three games.

Michael Gaitatzis has been the beneficiary of a very well structured side, scoring 28 goals this season so far as Magic have climbed in to 2nd place on the ladder on 45 points, just 2 behind St George.

The first round encounter finished 2-2, with Daniel Bittar and Matias Toro Suazo scoring for the Raiders, whilst the Gaitatzis brothers – who else – netted for Magic. With plenty of shuffling going on at the top of the ladder, expect a similarly tight contest this Saturday night.



LUKE BRATTAN SERIOUS INJURY CONCERN

Melbourne City star Luke Brattan looks to have suffered a serious injury during the FFA Cup clash against Brisbane Roar.

Brattan was prone and unmoving on the pitch for 45 minutes after what looked like an innocuous challenge.

Paramedics worked on the 28-year-old midfielder as they waited for the "right equipment to arrive" at Dolphin Stadium, according to Fox Sports.

A specialist ambulance was needed to transport the player to hospital.

There were fears of a serious spinal injury, but reports suggest the player has some feeling in his arms.