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By George Stavroulakis

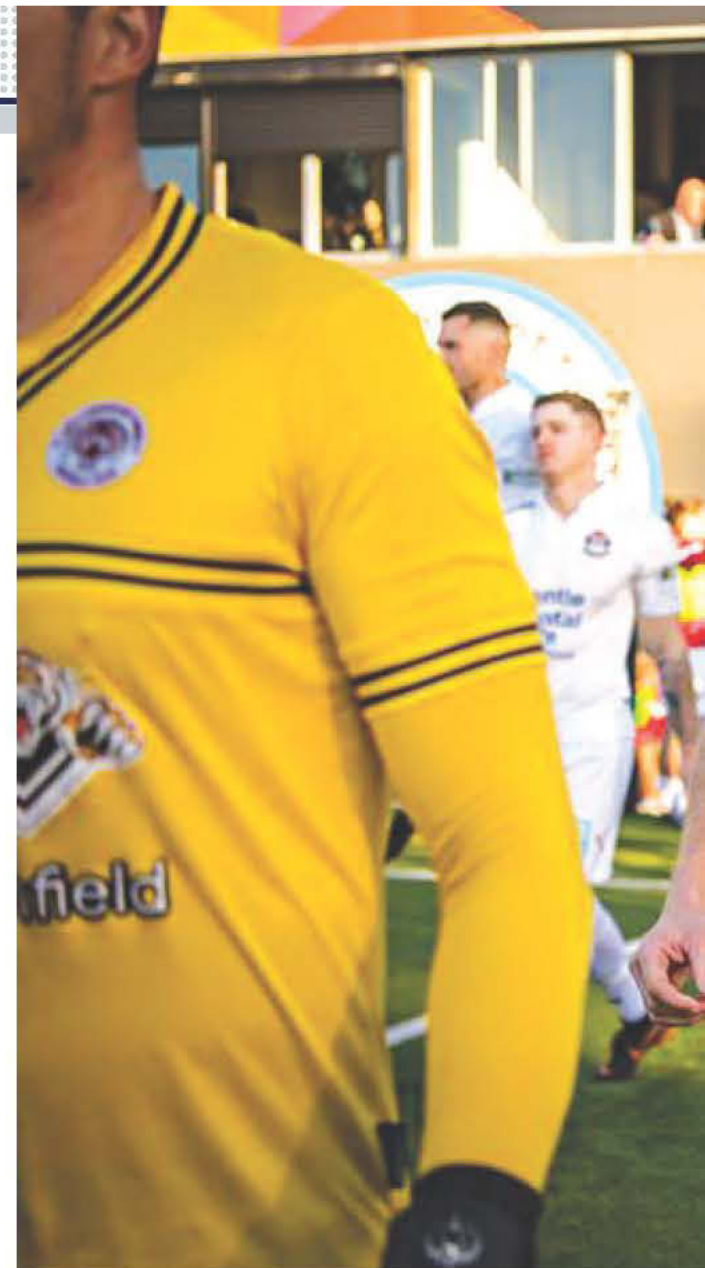
Finals Week One NPL NSW 1 Men's

By Mark Stavroulakis

It's finals time in the National Premier Leagues NSW competition and the league's top five teams are ready to do battle for Championship honours.

Premiers Sydney Olympic FC get free passage through the first week of the playoffs, but for APIA Leichhardt Tigers, Sydney United 58, Rockdale City Suns and Blacktown City FC the race to the grand final starts this weekend. The finals action kicks off on Saturday night with the preliminary semi-final with second placed APIA taking on third placed side United 58 at Lambert Park from 6pm.

Later on Saturday night, the elimination semi-final will feature Blacktown City hosting Rockdale City Suns at Lily Homes Stadium on from 7pm.



PRELIMINARY SEMI-FINAL

APIA Leichhardt Tigers v Sydney United 58, 6pm Saturday at Lambert Park

Only last week APIA Leichhardt Tigers would've been planning to have a week off during the first week of the finals. However, the incredible results on the final day of the season which allowed Sydney Olympic to snatch top spot and the Premiership has meant a shock second placed finish and face-off against Sydney United 58.

The second placed finish is sure to cut deep for APIA's players and nothing short of a Championship win will be enough.

Despite leading the competition coming into the final weeks of the season, an untimely defeat at the hands of Hakoah Sydney City East in round 22 proved fatal to Billy McColl's side.

APIA have been the pace setters this season and at times looked unbeatable with their record breaking attack scoring goals with ease.

Jordan Murray has been the focal point of APIA's attack in 2018 and the young striker's incredible return of 23 goals from 19 games has both secured him the Golden Boot award and broken the league's record for most goals in a season.

However, Murray's success has come at a cost for APIA who will need to find a new attacking focal point after their striker was signed by A-League club Central Coast Mariners.

Tasuku Sekiya, who has quietly had an impressive season himself with a return of 13 goals, will move into the number nine role left vacant by Murray's departure.

The reshuffle at APIA has opened the door for a fairytale finals series for their talismanic midfield maestro Franco Parisi.

TEAM OF THE WEEK

ROUND 22

 GROZDANOVSKI	 SANCHEZ	 MACALLISTER	
 OLSEN	 DE JONG	 MONTGOMERY	 SIMONOSKI
 LITTLER	 WHITESIDE	 TRATT	
 BOUZANIS			

NATIONAL PREMIER LEAGUES #NPLNSW

Limited to predominately a bench role for the club in recent seasons, the gifted veteran will play a crucial role in APIA's push for Championship glory.

Their opponents United 58 have put a tumultuous start to the National Premier Leagues NSW season behind them and will be looking for a return to the Grand Final two years after their defeat in the 2016 decider.

Coach Miro Valstelica has helped the Edensor Park based side back to their best

after the departure of Jason Culina as manager.

In any other season, striker Chris Payne would have been one of the main contenders for the golden boot with his 11 goals playing a big part in the Red's success.

United 58 boasts a high powered midfield with an eye for goal. Wingers Patrick Antelmi and Matt Sim are a constant goal threat, while little needs to be said about star midfielder Panny Nikas.

In Round 9 Sydney United 58 claimed a

hard fought 1-0 win against APIA, however it was a different story during their Round 20 match with the Tigers comprehensively thrashing The Reds 6-2 at Lambert Park.

While a loss doesn't mean elimination from the finals, the prospect of a shorter passage to the grand final would be encouragement enough for both sides.

With the stakes raised, it is sure to be an edge of your seat encounter.

ELIMINATION SEMI-FINAL

Blacktown City FC v Rockdale City Suns, 7pm Saturday at Lily Homes Stadium

The equation is simple for Blacktown City FC and Rockdale City Suns. Win or face an early off-season.

The pressure is on the fourth and fifth placed sides to keep their Championship dreams alive and Saturday's clash is sure to be an absolute blockbuster.

Fourth placed Blacktown City have limped into the finals series after back-to-back defeats to bottom three sides.

Mark Crittenden's side will need a massive bounce back performance if they are to stand a chance of progressing in the finals.

Connor Evans has been a consistent performer in the centre of midfield for City this season and will be the backbone of the Seven Hills based side throughout the playoffs.

Injury has plagued Blacktown this season and they will be without key midfielder Mitch Mallia for the remainder of the campaign.

As a result the pressure will be heaped on Devante Clut and Danny Choi, himself returning from a long injury layoff, to carry the creative burden for Blacktown.

Their opposition this week will be a