

# CAN THE NPL AND A-LEAGUE EVER BE FRIENDS?

The fascinating chasm between two of Australian football's strongest sources of life was well and truly on display on Sunday afternoon when the New South Wales Premier League competition began with its opening round of fixtures.

**Young men** with dreams of a top-level professional football career and a host of cagey veterans still playing the game they love took to pitches across the state. The NPLs of Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland are already well underway, with Canberra the final cab off the rank when the capital region begins play on 5 April.

**The commencement** of NPL action in New South Wales came on the back of week laced with A-League death-knelling. I read with interest the fears around the City Football Group's potential domination of the A-League should the salary cap ever be jettisoned.

**Rather curiously** and contrastingly a second headline ran on Sunday after the Central Coast Mariners' capitulation against the Phoenix and the subsequent sacking of Mike Mulvey. The two stories set up an interesting narrative.

**On one** hand the salary cap story conveyed the fear that a loosening of the club's purse strings would hand immense power, influence and success to the wealthiest club in the land. The mere thought conjures images of silverware, prestige and glory. But at the same time the



story emanating from the Central Coast of New South Wales evoked sombre notions of disaster, doom and decay.

**I found** it a fascinating contrast. One club with the potential to bring an unprecedented quality of player to the league and an ensuing boom in interest and exposure, the other a well and truly flogged horse with an unfortunate gathering of recycled players and a community sick to the gills of watching their non-competitive team.

**There was** no such death-knelling at Lily Homes Stadium on Sunday afternoon when fellow Roar contributor Paul Nicholls and I made the trek to Seven Hills to watch Blacktown City FC take on the newly promoted Mount Druitt Town Rangers FC.



**To say** it was warm would be an understatement, yet the packed grandstand defied the conditions and said a lot about the passion and soul of Australian football burning brightly at NPL level.

**With more** extensive coverage via live streaming and recent interest from A-League clubs in identifying and utilising the immense talent gracing NPL pitches, the competition is enjoying a newfound level of enthusiasm and interest.

**The wonderful** crowd on Sunday merely cemented that thought. With a community feel and an old-world charm that have been the cornerstones of many fans' emotional attachments to the FFA Cup competition, Blacktown City FC hosted an afternoon of not only high-quality football but also a slick match day and social event.

**The homes** side's under-20s, 18s and junior players were all professionally kitted out in official club merchandise and in full voice when the NPL 1 boys took to the pitch. The rusted-on supporters of a club that has its roots as far back as 1953 took up their usual positions at the back of the grandstand, craftily avoiding the heat of the intense afternoon sun as it lowered towards the horizon and the canteen did a roaring trade as patrons sought a cooling afternoon refreshment.

**The game** was gripping, hard-fought and at times controversial, with the referee's assistants under intense pressure throughout – so pleasing it is to witness a close offside ruling without copious replays to further confuse and infuriate fans.

**In the** end it was a lone first-half goal to Blacktown City that separated the two teams. Mani Gonzalez was put into space on the right and his shot across the goalkeeper thundered off the bar before collecting the knee of Mount Druitt defender Nick Trimble and dribbling into the back of Carlos Saliadarre's goal.

**Blacktown looked** more likely in the first

half but the new kids on the block were dangerous on the quick break and Satoh Hiten, Fabricio Fernandez and Lord Darkoh kept the home side's defence on watch for the entire contest.

**Former A-League** Jet Devante Clut was influential for the home side, James Demetriou threatened when he took to the pitch in the second half and stalwarts Matt Lewis and Grant Lynch were as stoic and professional as expected.

**Former A-League** striker Joey Gibbs struggled to get into the game and coach Mark Crittenden will reflect on the match with some satisfaction but also a knowledge that clean-cut chances were few and far between.

**After a** fourth-place finish in 2018 Crittenden will be looking for more fluency when Blacktown face Sydney United 58 next Sunday at the same venue.

**With the** perennial challenge of an A-League competition entering the late-season funk where eliminated teams and their supporters lose much motivation, the NPL is now in full swing across the nation.

**It appears** that more and more people are realising this fact and heading out to local grounds to watch an ever-improving standard of football. The second tier looks very strong and, as I have written previously, the non-existent link between it and the fully professional game in Australia still hampers football's development.

**Some call** it old soccer and new football, others see professionalism as the clear distinction. Whatever the best phrase is to describe the chasm in Australia football is immaterial. What matters more is the melding of the NPL and A-League competitions for the benefit of the game.

**There are** more than enough people attending, it just feels that sometimes we are watching two entirely different games.

## NPL NSW 2019 Men's 1

### Round 2 Results

- APIA Tigers - Wollongong Wolves 0-3
- Manly United - Sydney FC Youth 1-1
- Blacktown City - Sydney United 0-1
- Marconi Stallions - Rockdale City Suns 1-2
- Mt Druitt Rangers - Sydney Olympic P-P
- Sutherland Sharks - Hakoah Sydney 0-1

### Next Games Round 3

- 24.03.2019
- Mt Druitt Rangers - Manly United
- Sutherland Sharks - APIA Tigers
- Sydney FC Youth - Marconi Stallions
- 25.03.2019
- Rockdale City Suns - Hakoah Sydney
- Sydney Olympic - Blacktown City
- Sydney United - Wollongong Wolves

### Round 2 Table

	Team	GP	Pts	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-
1	Wollongong Wolves	2	6	2	0	0	5	1	4
2	Sydney FC Youth	2	4	1	1	0	3	2	1
3	Rockdale City Suns	2	4	1	1	0	2	1	1
4	Sydney United	2	4	1	1	0	1	0	1
5	Hakoah Sydney	2	3	1	0	1	2	2	0
6	Blacktown City	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	0
7	Sutherland Sharks	2	3	1	0	1	1	1	0
8	APIA Tigers	2	3	1	0	1	1	3	-2
9	Manly United	2	1	0	1	1	2	3	-1
10	Mt Druitt Rangers	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	-1
11	Sydney Olympic	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	-1
12	Marconi Stallions	2	0	0	0	2	1	3	-2