



Mark Bridge: A Wanderer, A King, and the NPL

Two-hundred and fifty plus professional matches, 2 Hyundai A-League Championships, 2 Hyundai A-League Premierships, AFC Asian Cup Championship, numerous club player of the year, accolades and awards that go beyond mention.

'King Bridge' has done it all and now embarks on a new chapter which presents a whole different world of challenges. Mark now steps the bridge to the heartbeat of Australian football, the National Premier Leagues.

Since March we have known that the Wanderers great would be hanging up his boots and gracing the National Premier Leagues NSW Men's 2 competition. There has been a buzz of anticipation since the beginning of the season and he prepares to join the fray at an almost perfect moment.

A Wanderer through and through, he will leave the Red and Black behind and don the Black and Yellow of Mounties as he gets set to lace up this weekend.

I caught up with the great man in between his now regular everyday life duties, dad in the car on the school run.

"It still feels a little bit weird, up until this week it felt like a normal off-season, now that I have started training with the team and the boys, it's starting to be real and I am enjoying it."

For a figure in the football community of such high regard, some may think things would fall into place easily. Whilst the squad have all been great at welcoming him, he will certainly be made to work for his place, as he mentioned, "fining me \$100 for being a new player!"

"The training standard has been good and it's exciting. A new challenge. As you want to play, I didn't want to come in and not play. If I need to work my way in because they are doing so well I need to work my way in, simple as that."

Whilst so often there is concern and headlines about what is happening at the top, club football in this country is without a doubt the beating heart and the driver of the sport's growth.

You have to venture back before the A-League existed to find evidence of Bridge plying his trade at club football. Local fans and juniors will finally get a chance to see their Wanderers hero within arm's reach on the local park, so how does the



Parramatta Eagles junior feel about his anticipated return.

"In terms of coming back to club football, I felt like a kid again, last night training in the rain and the mud, it brings back that love of the game."

Bridge has experienced all the highs and lows as a professional, whilst he and so many alike had their doubts about the love of the game during their career, ending his tenure as a pro and returning to club level appears to have given him a fresh outlook.

"Last night hammered home the fact, yep I still love it and I am glad to be playing with and surrounded by guys that still enjoy the game."

Mounties are in the midst of their best form this season with 3 wins on the trot, and the addition of Bridge to the squad adds a new level of goals in their attacking stocks. They have recruited well, already boasting former A-League players and could be pioneers in setting a new standard at club football.

"The standard surprised me, everyone sort of thinks that going down to NPL or NPL2 the standard is not, there but the standard is definitely there".

Recently, more and more former A-League stars have signed

on at an NPL clubs with Corey Gamiero moving to St George City and it could be a sign that a real link is forming. It's a win-win situation really, players can continue to play at a competitive level and clubs get the benefit of quality players to assist the next generation.

"I think there is going to be a push of older A-League players to come and help the younger players in NPL clubs, show what it takes and see what they have got to do to get to the next level."

In what has seemed like an eternity, we could finally be set to see Bridge triumphantly stride back out onto the pitch this weekend.

Mounties face North Shore Mariners away at Northbridge Oval, an often tricky track and although he will be ready mentally, it's a whole different ball game on the body.

"Going from grass to artificial, that's going to be the biggest challenge initially, especially as the body is adjusting to it. As long as I do the right things off the pitch for the body I should be alright."

Here's hoping that that the body holds up over the week of training and club football is graced by Wanderers royalty.

Barbarouses braced for the bitter backlash

New signing Kosta Barbarouses admits the decision to move to bitter Melbourne Victory rivals Sydney FC was a tough one... but he says he wants to win trophies.

The A-League club announced on Friday the 29-year-old forward would be joining the Sky Blues from the 2019/20 season on a «multi-year deal» - believed to be three years on a possible marquee deal, depending on other signings. He's already been branded a snake by some fans for exiting Victory for the Sky Blues after initially saying he intended to move back overseas.

But Barbarouses says he's ready for the inevitable name-calling that will come his way.

"It was a tough decision to leave in general, that's football, that happens. I've had really good success there. The fans treated me really well," he admitted.

"There's going to be some obvious backlash to that but most

people will understand and everyone will move on."

Barbarouses put the decision aside until the season was over and said he saw it as a fresh test for him.

"The challenge of defending the championship is very appealing to me," he said. «As soon as I found out that a great club like Sydney wanted me to play for the club it was a really easy decision and I was really eager to get here.

"I want to win trophies and I want to be a big part of a big team."

And he said he's not fazed about the pressure to score goals.

"I like the pressure, I like the expectation on me. Looking back I've performed better when there is expectation and pressure on me," he said.

He and his wife Tara are expecting a baby in September which was another reason behind the decision.

"I could see myself and my family here for the next three years," he said.

His time with Melbourne Victory includes the historic domestic treble season in 2014-15, in which the forward proved crucial to Victory's A-League Premiership, Championship and FFA Cup title wins.

He also scored the winning goal in the 2017-18 Grand Final against Newcastle Jets to secure a fourth championship for the club.

"He's very fast, he scores goals. I think he's going to be very exciting for our fans to watch as well," head coach Steve Corica said.

Barbarouses had two stints with



Victory, making 161 appearances and scoring 51 goals across 2013-16 and 2017-19.

"After a couple of conversations I've had with Kosta I knew he was the right person to lead the attacking

line this season," Corica said.

"He's a great guy. When we look at players first and foremost we look for people who fit into the culture of the club. He definitely does."