



By George Stavroulakis

→ GOLDEN BOOT RACE AS PAYNE TO PUSH JAMES TILL THE END

APIA Leichhardt Tigers marksman Chris Payne is in red-hot form and ready to push Thomas James to the end in the race for the National Premier Leagues NSW Men's Golden Boot.

The former A-League striker registered a brace to make it six goals in as many games during APIA's 3-1 triumph over Sydney Olympic on Sunday afternoon. **He also** chipped in with an assist for Paul Galimi's opener, with his performance earning him a spot in the Ultra Football Round 19 Team of the Week.

"It was a very tough game," Payne reflected.

"Olympic are always a very good side and it was good to get the win.

"Scoring is always a bonus, but I was just happy with the three points."

Payne is loving life at Leichhardt, having made the switch from Sydney United 58 in the off-season after the Edensor Park club deemed him to be surplus to their requirements.

He was charged with the tall order of filling the sizeable void vacated by last season's Golden Boot winner Jordan Murray.

However, Payne has made significant steps towards matching the remarkable 23 goals notched by the now-Central Coast Mariners frontman.

"It's going really well at the moment," Payne said.

"I'm really enjoying my year at APIA and looking forward to semi-finals football coming up.

"Hopefully we can win our last three games.

"Coming here, I knew how many goals Jordan Murray scored and that I'd always get chances to score there especially with Franco (Parisi) behind me.

"I've been lucky enough to be able to finish them so far."



John Calleja's men have quietly gone about their business to make second spot their own, despite Luke Wilkshire's Wollongong Wolves continuing to capture the limelight.

But come finals time, Payne is confident APIA have what it takes go one step further than they did last year out and snatch the headlines when they matter most.

"All year we've been in second spot and Wollongong have been the front runners," he said.

"To be honest, I think they deserve it at the moment; they've been the best team and have beaten us twice.

"They're a tough team to play against and are well structured.

"Hopefully we can have some results go our way and put some pressure on them, but the end of the day we can only focus on ourselves and do the job that is in front of us.

"Moving forward you need to go into semi-finals football with confidence and belief.

"That's what we have in our squad: we believe that we can go all the way."

While APIA would require a small miracle to rein in the Wolves, who can all but secure the Premiership if Leichhardt slip up this upcoming weekend, there is a personal title that remains up for grabs for Payne.

Wollongong's Englishman Thomas James has long appeared a shoo-in for the top scorer accolade, however with three rounds left to play his lead has been narrowed to just two goals.

James broke the 20-goal mark on

the weekend with the fourth goal in Wolves' 4-0 rout of the Sutherland Sharks, whilst Payne's double at Lambert Park propelled him to a total of 18.

And as the APIA juggernaut rolls on towards the business end of the campaign, Payne revealed his intentions to ensure the Golden Boot race goes right down to the wire.

"Of course, as a striker that (the Golden Boot) is what you aim for at the start of the year.

"I set myself a target at the start of the year and hopefully I can reach that by the end."



Ultra Football Round 19 Team of the Week and league leaders Wollongong Wolves Football Club dominate proceedings yet again - keeper Justin Pasfield and star players Thomas James and Takeru Okada continue to dominate the headlines. Marconi Stallions FC promising young gun Martin Fernandez gets himself a spot for a Man of the Match display bagging a brace over the weekend. Manly United FC's Dejan Pandurevic had a solid game as did fellow teammates Kieren Paull. Blacktown City FC's Grant Lynch had a great showing in his side's backline while Mason Versi was the difference in their victory over Rockdale City Suns Football Club - Ilinden. Sydney FC defender Harry Van der Saag played outstanding in the Sky Blues victory at Edensor Park while on the losing side, Mount Druitt Town Rangers FC's quality import Fabricio Fernandes had a sound match. APIA Leichhardt Tigers FC ace marksman Chris Payne's two goal brace kept him within two goals of leading competition scorer Thomas James and was a standout out in his side's victory on Sunday.