

CHOLAKIAN READY FOR SHOWTIME

It is crunch time for Manly United, and their mercurial midfielder Brendan Cholakian is savouring the challenges that lie ahead.

The Northern Beaches club stand face-to-face with a decisive three weeks of fixtures as they find themselves on the brink of the National Premier League NSW Men's Finals, and within reach of the FFA Cup Round of 16.

Manly fought off a fast-finishing Hakoah Sydney City East 2-1 at Hensley Athletic Field on Sunday night to secure three points that may prove invaluable in the race for the top five. **Their midfield** lynch-pin, who is enjoying his seventh season at the club, was pleased with his side's performance. **"We played** a really good brand of football against a team that can be pretty tough to play against in Hakoah," Cholakian reflected.

"They were fighting to stay up in this league so that made it difficult for us.

"I thought our link-up play and football all across the pitch was really good.

"Over the last few weeks, we have been kicking the ball around with a lot of confidence.

"We created chances, and on another day could have scored four or five.

"We are doing the right things and that's going to lead to more goals in the coming games I'm sure."

It has been a hot and cold campaign for Paul Dee's men who with three rounds to play sit in seventh position, level on 26 points with Marconi Stallions and Sydney Olympic. **Manly also** trail fourth-placed Sydney United 58, who they face on the final day of the season, by a single point.

With everything still to play for, Cholakian assured that his side are capable of picking up the vital results they desire.

"We're confident and we know what we make of this season is completely in our hands," he said.

"It's good that we're going into these big matches with some good performances under our belt.

"If we play the brand of football that we have been in recent weeks and put the ball in the back of the net, then we have a good chance to make something of this season.

"It's not just that we are an extremely strong side on paper; we have complete confidence in each other as individuals

and when we play the style of football we want to play we can beat anyone in this competition.

"We've beaten some top teams throughout the season and played some good football doing it."

The impact of the fortress that is Cromer Park, which plays host to Manly's next two league encounters, may prove key.

"We've been really good at home and I feel that's important when you want to have a good season," Cholakian said.

"We're really confident going into these next two games (against Rockdale City Suns and APIA Leichhardt Tigers) with the crowd behind us at Cromer Park that we can get maximum points and put ourselves in a really good position for not only making the finals but growing momentum moving into the finals series itself.

"This is all in our hands and it's important for us that we keep our heads switched on and are ready to do the job."

Cholakian continues to shine as a standout performer in the National Premier Leagues NSW Men's competition, often capable of sparking something out of nothing with his trickery on the ball.

The 26-year-old has become a household name at the Northern Beaches club since joining back in 2013 and is Manly's leading scorer this campaign with eight strikes to his name.

Whilst he is determined to continue delivering when Manly need him most, Cholakian enforced that at the end of the day results are of number one priority.

"I don't really focus on going out there and scoring goals," he revealed.

"It's all about doing the right things on the pitch and being a number 10, that will create opportunities to score and set players up.

"That's my role for the team and I just want to make sure that I do that.

"That should lead to goals and assists whether it's for me or my teammates; at the end of the day as long as that leads to victories and wins, that's what it's all about.

"The lads have been playing well and have got me into

plenty of good positions throughout the year, and I'm pretty happy with how I've been finishing so that's what I plan to keep doing for the rest of the year."

Before the 2017 National Premier Leagues NSW Men's Champions can continue their finals charge, they face a momentous mid-week encounter with Mt Druitt Town Rangers in the FFA Cup Round of 32.

Having been eliminated at the same stage by NSW opposition in both 2014 and 2016, Manly are within touching distance of their deepest run in the competition to date.

It is sure to be a tense, physical encounter between two sides that have locked horns three times already this season and pose an identical head-to-head record of a win and draw apiece.

Despite the bright lights and tantalising prospect of a glamour fixture at Cromer Park on the line, it will be business as usual once Cholakian and his teammates cross the white line at Popondetta Park on Wednesday night.

"This is why we play football," he enforced.

"It's the big games and big challenges; that's what it's all about.

"We've got a great opportunity to be playing in the FFA Cup, and it's going to be a tough game against a team who are difficult to beat in Mt. Druitt at their place.

"We want to stay in this competition as long as we can, but we don't want to look at it as a pressure game.

"We have to make sure we battle with them because that's what they'll want to do, and if do that, I'm sure our footballing quality will take over and we'll have an opportunity to win the match.

"And like we've proven not just this season that if we play with the style and intensity that we want to play, we can beat anyone.

"We can't get carried away in the moment; we need to make sure everyone is there ready to battle and not change from our game.

"It's just another game for us. We just have to go out there and do the job."

Milligan opens up on Scotland exit and England switch

Mark Milligan admits he was disappointed to leave Scottish club Hibernian unexpectedly, but is thrilled with his move to League One club Southend United to fulfill his career-long ambition of playing in English football.

Milligan spent just one season in Edinburgh with Hibs after arriving from Saudi club Al-Ahli. The Socceroo skipper impressed in Scotland, making 31 appearances in all competitions. **But in May** with the arrival of new manager Paul Heckingbottom, he was surprisingly released and has since inked a deal in England with Southend.

Milligan admitted Hibs' decision to let him go was "very difficult" to process.

"It was disappointing, but obviously with the new gaffer coming in he had the chance to rebuild," he told FTBL.

"While it was very difficult to accept, I did

understand he had a longer-term plan and with my age and the salary I was taking up there, I offered him a chance to, I guess, rebuild by leaving.

"So it was a little tough to take but I can see where he's coming from and I thoroughly enjoyed my time under Paul and at Hibs."

Milligan has always harboured a desire to ply his trade in England and previously has seen potential moves to Crystal Palace in 2013 and to Bolton Wanderers in July 2017 break down.

But now the midfielder finally has his wish of experiencing life in the English system, as well as the lure of a future coaching role with the Shrimpers once he hangs up his boots.

"Yeah definitely - better late than never," he said.

"This is the environment that I always wanted to be in. To be totally honest, the way that I

look at it is one door opens as another closes.

"By me taking this move hopefully a little bit down the line the next door will open for me in the next phase of football [in terms of coaching].

"But first and foremost the discussions were about playing football. That's what I'm still doing at the minute.

"There was a few things I was weighing up, but the lure of being able to play so many games and to be able to play under a manager like Kevin Bond who has been around for quite a while and has a great deal of experience that I think I can still learn from as footballer.

"That was a big plus for me. I didn't want to come to England get lost in the system in this late stage, but I do have one eye towards the future and this offered me the best of both worlds, which doesn't often come about."

