



By George Stavroulakis



APIA LEICHHARDT TIGERS - BLACKTOWN CITY FC

APIA Leichhardt Tigers have snatched an incredible 5-3 penalty shootout win against Blacktown City FC in a preliminary semi-final at Lambert Park on Saturday.

Ivan Necevski was the hero for APIA making a clutch save to deny Joey Gibbs in the shootout after the match finished deadlocked at 1-1 at the end of extra-time.

It was a rollercoaster ride for fans with Chris Payne giving the home side a 1-0 lead from the penalty spot in the first period of extra-time before Gibbs snatched an incredible equaliser in the dying seconds of the match to send the contest to a shootout.

The result means APIA will now take on Wollongong Wolves at WIN Stadium on Wednesday night for a spot in the Grand Final, while Blacktown have a second chance at life with a minor semi-final match at Lily's Homes Stadium against Sydney United 58 also on Wednesday night.

It took only 90 seconds for the first chance of the game with Chris Payne firing narrowly wide of the post.

Only moments later Tynan Diaz had a contender for goal of the year denied by Tristan Prendergast in the Blacktown goal when he tipped over a stinging volley 30 yards out.

Josh Symons threw his body on the line to make an incredible block to deny Blacktown City in the 12th minute.

Chances were coming thick and fast with the match being played at breakneck speed.

APIA's defence was forced to make another desperation clearance in the 20th minute with Symons heading the ball clear after a looping effort from Joey Gibbs.

Corey Biczo was only millimetres away from scoring in the 34th minute when he slid in on a loose ball only to have it cleared into him and rebound narrowly wide of the post.

Despite their efforts, neither Blacktown or APIA could find a breakthrough in the opening 45 minutes heading to half-time deadlocked at 0-0.

APIA made a rapid start to the second half with Biczo cannoning a shot into the crossbar.

The home side were desperate to break the deadlock and with Franco Parisi was pulling the strings had Blacktown's defence on their heels.

The visitors found their way back into the contest midway through the half and forced two big saves out



of Tigers keeper Ivan Necevski.

Fatigue was taking its toll as the minutes ticked on with extra time looming.

A late flurry from both sides couldn't find a winner inside 90 minutes.

With the scores deadlocked extra was needed and it was Blacktown who had the best of the early chances forcing another big save out of Necevski.

However, in the 100th minute the match had the flashpoint it had been waiting for.

APIA winger Sean Symons went down in the penalty area and referee Katie Patterson immediately pointed to the penalty spot.

Payne stepped up and duly fired into the back of then to give APIA a 1-0 lead.

Blacktown knew they had to throw everything forward if they were going to snatch an equaliser.

And that is exactly what they did.

Attacker James Demetriou was brought in at the of the first half to help spark City and they threw everything at a tiring APIA defence.

Tigers midfielder Sam McIlhatton made a number of key tackles to stifle Blacktown and it appeared the home side had done enough to secure a hard-fought win.

But Gibbs had other ideas and caused a major twist in the tale scoring a brilliant goal to keep his side alive when everything was going against them.

It would come down to penalties to decide this contest.

APIA and Blacktown both scored their first three kicks but up stepped Necevski to deny Gibbs from the spot and set up Tynan Diaz to blast home the winning penalty for the home side.

It was pure jubilation for APIA who celebrated with gusto after a nerve-racking finals clash.

Coach John Calleja was a relieved man after the final whistle but was already plotting ahead of APIA's grudge match with Wollongong on Wednesday.



"That was a huge win for the boys. We were pushed all the way yet they kept their cool even with all the injuries and niggles this team is carrying," Calleja said. "I'm really proud of this team and, even though I'm a bit biased, I wouldn't want to go into battle with any other group of lads from this competition."

"With such a short turn around it is very important we hold off on the celebrations a bit and go straight into recovery mode to give us the best shot of booking our spot in the Grand Final."

"Wollongong is a tough place to play so while we will enjoy success tonight we need to remain focused on the goal of winning the championship."

Blacktown City captain Matt Lewis rued an opportunity lost for his team.

"I felt we dominated that match and had the better opportunities," he said.