



By George Stavroulakis

→ NPL NSW MEN'S 2019 GRAND FINAL PREVIEW



The biggest game of the National Premier Leagues NSW season has arrived with months of blood, sweat and tears culminating in a blockbuster clash of the titans to decide the season's biggest prize.

APIA Leichhardt Tigers are back for their third straight grand final and will be hoping this year is the year they finally breakthrough for Championship glory when they take on Sydney United 58 at Bankwest Stadium.

The Tigers and United finished the season in second and fourth place respectively with their finals form setting up a thrilling competition decider.

Huge wins against Premiers Wollongong Wolves secured a grand final berth for both sides ensuring they are full of confidence as they battle for silverware.

While APIA have been a regular feature of recent NPL NSW grand finals, the match is United 58's first since they were defeated by Blacktown City in the 2016 decider.

Both teams have been two of the most successful team's in the league over the past decade but neither have been able to taste Championship triumph.

Sydney United's last grand final win came 13 years ago when they defeated Blacktown City in the 2006 decider, while APIA's came 16 years ago in 2003 with win against Blacktown.

The path to Bankwest Stadium has been quite different for APIA and United.

APIA kicked off from where they left off last season with another brilliant campaign boasting one of the competition's best attack and defence records.

United 58 on the other hand have found form when it has mattered most after what has been a rollercoaster of a season featuring numerous highs and lows.

The Red's finals form has been a sight to be seen with eleven goals in just three games, but more impressive has been their fighting spirit having fought their way back into their last two matches. **on the park** both team's have squads bristling with talent.

APIA Leichhardt are packed with a brilliant balance of youth and experience while they also boast a number of big time match winners who could prove to be the difference on Saturday.

Striker Chris Payne finished the season with 21 goals, exactly half of APIA's total goal tally, while also scoring key goals in both of their finals wins.

Payne and fellow APIA midfielder Nick Stavroulakis will have plenty of extra motivation as they come up against their former side in United 58. Both will be driven to prove a point to their old team.

You can't mention APIA without their midfield maestro Franco Parisi. The 36 year-old is playing as good as he ever has and his ability to move the ball to create chances will play a major factor in his



side's chances.

The injury of club stalwart David D'Apuzzo in the early rounds carved out a brilliant opportunity for youngster Sam McIlhatton and he has delivered in spades with his lung busting running and fearless efforts becoming a big part of APIA's identity.

A thin roster has not stopped United 58's drive for Championship glory.

The mid-season departure of Stavroulakis to APIA, as well as Sebastian Gallegos' exit has left their midfield stocks very short.

An injury to star midfielder Glen Trifiro on the cusp of the finals looked like it could further scupper United's chances. Instead Tarik Maia has made the most of his opportunity and has become one of the league's form players with three amazing performances in his side's last three games.

Defensively the combination of Tomislav Uskok and Adrian Vlastelica has been a solid duo at the heart of the backline, while Yianni Fragogiannis and Cristian Gonzales have been tough to beat on the flanks.

One player APIA will need to keep a close eye on is Patrick Antelmi who has proven to be a supersub of sorts for Miro Vlastelica's side. He has been a spark plug in attack and has scored more than his fair share of match winning goals.

This game presents a number of key matchups with some of the competition's best facing off and creating big questions which are sure to be answered during this mammoth clash.

Can APIA's big game experience help them stifle a carefree Sydney United attack.

Will it be Chris Payne or United's Patrick Antelmi who dictates the attack at Bankwest Stadium.

Will the scars of two straight grand final defeats prove too heavy a weight to shake.

And can Sydney United find the energy to defeat APIA after playing five games in 14 days.

APIA and Sydney United 58 have played twice this season with the Tigers winning 3-1 and 1-0 in each encounter.

United 58 have proven they fear nobody and have the ability to beat anyone on the day.

However, will they have enough left in the tank to beat APIA in the biggest match of the season.

Whatever the outcome, one thing for sure is that there will be plenty of foals excitement and entertainment on the menu.

Because when it's all said and done, only one team can be crowned champion.