

FOOTBALL
NSW

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APIA Leichhardt - Sydney United 58 2-1 ET (1-1)

Championship finally comes home to APIA Leichhardt Tigers

APIA Leichhardt Tigers have ended nearly three years of championship heartache with an incredible 2-1 extra-time grand final win against Sydney United 58 in front of over 6,500 spectators at Bankwest Stadium on Saturday.

A sensational lob in the first period of extra time from Tigers captain and Man of the Match Sean Symons sealed victory after a gruelling and at times physical opening 90 minutes.

After suffering heartbreaking back to back grand final defeats in 2017 and 2018, the Lambert Park based club earned the title they so desperately wanted to win with a tireless 120 minute performance.

Defender Paul Galimi helped APIA to a perfect start with a towering header from an Adrian Uchino assist midway through the first half.

United 58 refused to give up and Matthew Bilic helped his side back to level pegging with a desperation finish in the 57th minute.

With the game deadlocked after 90 minutes extra-time was needed and it was Symons who proved to be the difference with his goal enough to secure a historic title for

APIA.

It was a cagey start to the contest with neither side looking to take any early risks.

United 58 keeper Tom Manos was forced to make a desperation save 15 minutes in when Payne pinched the ball inside the area but it was smothered by the quick thinking custodian.

The wet pitch conditions made both sides unable to play their usual slick passing style of football with the game becoming a physical grind through the middle of the park

APIA finally found the breakthrough in the 28th minute.

Set-piece master Adrian Uchino delivered a looping cross into the box from the western sideline with Galimi flying high above his make to nod the ball into the top left corner over the outstretched arms of United keeper Manos.

The tough tackling defender was full of

adrenaline as he celebrated his goal with the legion of Galimi fans that turned up at Bankwest Stadium.

Sydney United 58 were denied what they felt was a clear penalty 10 minutes from the interval when Peter Simonoski went down in the box after tangling with a defender.

Referee Ben Abraham had other ideas and waved the penalty shout away as APIA clung onto their 1-0 lead at the break.

A rare run into his own penalty area from Payne kept his former side from making a perfect start to the second stanza.

The striker was able to block a driving shot from Tariq Maia on the goal line before clearing it to safety.

However, The Reds were not to be denied and only a few moments later they levelled the score thanks to a determined finish from Bilic.

A low cross from Simonoski skidded across the penalty area avoiding the APIA defence and onto the outstretched leg of the United winger to direct it into the back of the net.

That sparked massive celebrations with the United 58 faithful who turned out in great numbers to support their beloved side.

Chants of 'Croatia, Croatia' started to get more momentum as the former NSL giants pushed for a winner.

The physical nature of the match began to take its toll with both United 58 and APIA forced to make changes after players went down hurt.

Towering defender Themba Muata-Marlow was proving to be a hard man to beat for United winning everything sent his way.

Despite the efforts of both sides the game finished locked at 1-1 with another 30 minutes needed to find a winner.

It was a tense start to extra-time but it took APIA only four minutes to turn the game in their favour.

A hopeful flick on from Payne found his captain Symons running in space who then chipped Manos from 25 yards out with a brilliantly placed lob.

The Tigers found a second wind after the goal limiting a desperate United sides chances in the closing stages of the opening period of extra time.

United finally found their way to goal just after the restart with a Patrick Antelmi header remarkably cleared off the line by Uchino