



By George Stavroulakis

FINALS SERIES WEEK TWO – NPL 2 NSW MEN’S

The last four teams remaining in the National Premier Leagues 2 NSW Men’s finals series are all in action on Saturday, and a place in the Grand Final is at stake. Will having the week off favour North Shore Mariners and Hills United, or will being battle hardened from Sunday’s intense Elimination Finals help Mounties and Bonnyrigg?

Semi Final 1: North Shore Mariners v Mounties Wanderers, 7:00pm Saturday 7 September, Valentine Sports Park No. 2

We have a Saturday night showdown between North Shore Mariners and Mounties, who scored with almost the last kick of the game to defeat Spirit FC on Sunday.

These teams produced two epic encounters earlier in the year. In Round 2, the Mariners grabbed six unanswered goals after Mounties had established a two goal cushion. It was North Shore’s turn to give up the lead in the Round 15 rematch – they were up 1-0 and 2-1 before Mounties came storming back to win 4-2.

The Mariners finished the regular season with the league’s second best defence, and a big part of that was young goalkeeper Ryan Wood, who has shone in his first full year as the number one choice between the sticks. Just in front of him, Rainer Smahel anchors a backline that will need to be wary of the talented Mounties attack, while Brian Jamba is equally capable of excelling in defence or midfield.

In attack, North Shore coach Joe Haywood can call on lightning fast wingers Braden Cheng and Joshua Mbakwe (who scored a hat trick against Mounties back in March). Mounties are one of the few teams that 18 goal marksman Mitchell Smith hasn’t scored against this season, so he’ll be keen to rectify that statistic on Saturday, and his namesake Marquin Smith has chipped in with nine goals.

In between attack and defence, skipper Ricky Woodward will look to control the real estate in the centre of the park alongside long range goal specialist Sean Eve and set piece wizard Chris Lindsay.

Having scored the goal which confirmed his side’s top six spot two weeks ago, Mounties

forward Michael Jeffrey backed it up by getting the vital equaliser in Sunday’s Elimination Final. The young flyer was a constant threat against Spirit FC, and his speed was complemented well by Noah Chianese’s physical presence.

Peter Triantis provided plenty of drive from central midfield, and he also laid on the key pass for Jeffrey’s goal. Tai Smith and Mitchell Davidson will be looking to cause havoc in wide areas – they’ll be supported by fullbacks Joshua Viera and Michael Cklamovski.

As mentioned earlier, Mitchell Smith is yet to find the net against Mounties in 2019, so what can Jacob Poscoliero and Benjamin Spruce do to keep it that way? Whatever happens, Blake Tuxford still needs to command his penalty area with authority, something the former APIA Leichhardt shotstopper has been doing since joining Mounties.

No matter who he selects, Mounties coach Brian Brown will also have attacking quality on the bench. Last week it was Matthew West and Bruno Pivato, but another substitute in Anthony Schmidt ended up grabbing their late winner – what a time to score your first goal of the campaign!

Semi Final 2: Hills United v Bonnyrigg White Eagles, 4:00pm Saturday 7 September, Lily Homes Stadium

The Saturday afternoon game features two sides who certainly know how to find the back of the net – will we see a shootout?

Hills United have been in incredible scoring form, racking up 27 goals in their last seven outings. Fleet footed striker Daniel Fogarty and Jordan Parfait combined for 30 goals during the home-and-away season, Parfait doing exceptionally well to reach double figures as a left winger. On the other flank, the likes of Nathan Rayner and Alexander Vlismas have also played their part.

United holding midfielder Daine Merrin provides the platform for Kento Sakurai and Wade Giovenali to join the attack. However, sitting back isn’t the only thing he provides, and Merrin has also gotten on the scoresheet nine times this year, thanks mainly to his proficiency from the penalty spot.

At the back, expect the multi-talented Greg Giovenali to line up in the centre of defence alongside Jarrod Dodds, while Glen Kelshaw will be making killer overlapping runs from right back. Shaun

Catlin also deserves praise – the shotstopper has been excellent in his first season with the club since joining from Manly United, and he always seems to make big saves.

Bonnyrigg are the last side to keep a clean sheet against Hills. Their 3-0 victory over Hills in Round 15 was the start of an impressive ten week stretch where they collected 28 points out of a possible 30, and the White Eagles have only lost once since then. Amazingly, the Bonnyrigg attack has been even better than the Hills attack in recent times – they’ve scored 28 goals in their previous seven matches.

Asmir Kadric has been leading the way for the White Eagles, and although his eight game scoring streak ended on Sunday, he still looked dangerous whenever he received the ball. Aaron Peterson is also one to look out for after four goals in four rounds, while Jack Armson found the net last time out.

Mark Rodic is an unsung hero, breaking up play in the centre of the park, which allows Ray Miller and David Vrankovic to shine. Miller, in particular, was excellent on the weekend, running the show in midfield and grabbing the crucial late equaliser to take the game to extra time.

That late goal was set up by Bradie Smith, who constantly bombed forward from right back and put in an excellent performance. Bonnyrigg coach Wayne O’Sullivan also received important contributions from his bench: Richard Darko put the contest to bed with two strikes in extra time, and one of those goals was set up by fellow substitute Amar Adilovic.