



By George Stavroulakis

# GRAND FINAL PREVIEW – NPL 2 NSW MEN'S MEN'S PREVIEW

After 28 weeks, 186 games and 610 goals, we are finally here: the National Premier Leagues 2 NSW Men's Grand Final. Fittingly, the top two teams from the home-and-away season will battle on Saturday, as North Shore Mariners take on Hills United at Valentine Sports Park.

**North Shore Mariners v Hills United, 4:00pm Saturday 14 September, Valentine Sports Park No. 2**

This Grand Final features two of the newer clubs in the league. North Shore were promoted from the third tier in 2015, and Hills followed suit in 2016. Their relatively recent rise hasn't stopped them from being the benchmark in 2019 – North Shore and Hills occupied the top two spots on the table for the entire second half of the campaign.

These two have previous history in Championship games after locking horns in the 2015 State League 1 Grand Final. A look at the teamsheet from that day would reveal a number of familiar names on both sides: Ricky Woodward, Marquin Smith, Chris Lindsay and head coach Joe Haywood for North Shore; Greg Giovenali, Wade Giovenali, Glen Kelshaw and Bradley Robertson for Hills. North Shore will be hoping for a repeat – they won 3-2, with Marquin Smith setting up the winning goal.

North Shore Mariners are certainly a rags-to-riches-story. They only entered state level competition in 2011 (when they were known as Northbridge FC), earning promotions in 2011 and 2015.

Their first campaign in this division was difficult, but North Shore improved rapidly after collecting the wooden spoon in 2016. Fifth and third place finishes over the next two years laid the groundwork for this season's Premiership and Club Championship victories, and defensive strength has been a common theme. Their 2016 campaign had the rare combination of last place and the league's stingiest defence, and they also had the second best defence in 2017 and 2019.

The Mariners did get off to a shaky start in 2019, losing two of their opening four matches. Joe Haywood's side then went on an exceptional run, losing only once in the next 17 rounds. Failure to register a victory between Rounds 22 and 24 threatened to derail their Premiership ambitions, but North Shore regained their mojo in the nick of time, registering three consecutive victories to reach the Grand Final and scoring eleven goals in the process.

As has been the case since 2017, the Mariners will look to the Smiths (Mitchell and Marquin) to lead the way in the goalscoring department. They've combined for 75 goals over the last three seasons, and Mitchell Smith possesses a good record against Hills, with four goals in his last three games against the north-west Sydney outfit.

However, the Smiths aren't the only players catching the eye in front of goal. Both Spirit FC and Mounties have fallen victim to Sean Eve's penchant for the spectacular in recent weeks, can the central midfielder do it again on Saturday?

Standing in North Shore's way is another team who have reached new heights in 2019. The appointment of Patrick Zwaanswijk as Hills United head coach was a masterstroke: the Olyroos assistant coach has taken a club that finished 11th and 8th in the previous two years to within touching distance of the Premiership.

The core of their squad has developed a great level of familiarity – multiple Hills players have played together in the NSW Futsal Premier League and for the Futsalroos – and the playing group has been augmented by some quality additions. Shaun Catlin is excelling between the sticks, Kento Sakurai is now a key part of the midfield, while Jarrod Dodds has been key in the heart of the

**2019**  
NATIONAL PREMIER LEAGUES 2 NSW MEN'S  
**GRAND FINAL**

**COMMENTARY BY TONY TANNOUS & NIKOLA POZDER**

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4.00PM KICK-OFF**

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defence after joining in the offseason from the Blacktown City U20 side.

Hills have shown a warrior mentality, fighting all the way to the end and scoring 17 goals in the 70th minute or later this year. However, they have more than just fighting spirit. United had the league's best attack, scoring 67 goals in 26 rounds at an average of over two and a half goals per game. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they haven't been kept scoreless since Round 15.

A lot of the magic they've provided in 2019 has come from Daniel Fogarty. The opening goal in the semi-final against Bonnyrigg took his season tally to 20, but Fogarty is far from alone when it comes to troubling opposition defences. Left winger Jordan Parfait has re-emerged following two years of injury struggles and shown his value with 11 goals, while on the other

flank Nathan Rayner has found the net eight times.

The stage is set for a titanic tussle, and late winners in both of this year's regular season encounters mean fans should be prepared for the match to go the distance. Hills skipper Daine Merrin showed his usual coolness from the spot to win the Round 4 game in the 94th minute, and an unfortunate 89th minute Dodds own goal settled the Round 17 clash in favour of North Shore. In fact, the two clubs have a long history of close battles, with only two out of their previous ten meetings being decided by more than one goal.

Will it be a treble for North Shore Mariners, or will Hills United spoil the Northbridge party and claim a slice of history for themselves? Find out on Saturday – you won't want to miss this!

## SPEEDY RECOVERY TO GLADESVILLE RYDE MAGIC MAN JOHN KOLETTI

John Koletti, who currently 'works' for his beloved Gladesville Ryde Magic FC in the NPL 3 NSW Men's competition, has over the years put in countless hours of support towards the game he dearly loves.

There is no doubt that 'JK' sets the highest benchmark in terms of being one of football's best administrators, having always unselfishly volunteered his time and effort over the best part of his life for the betterment of the game.

As an example of some of the work he undertakes, 'Principal K' – as he is sometimes affectionately known, in reference to his 'day time' occupation, where he is the Principal of Putney Public School – is often the first to arrive very early in the morning when Magic are playing at home.

He sets about completing all the necessary chores, from putting up the nets and setting up the field, to lighting up the

barbeque, as he warmly welcomes the first of the opposition junior teams to walk in at the venue. John's work then continues throughout the entire day, and doesn't finish until the completion of the first grade fixture at night, where he has often been the last person to leave the venue.

In addition to his endless energy and support, John Koletti is well known for his sportsmanship, always remaining calm and impartial irrespective of the result, protecting the officials if the need arises, whilst always shaking hands with the opposition...win, lose or draw.

Grassroots football continues to grow and thrive because of people just like John Koletti, so on behalf of the entire football community, we wish JK the quickest of recoveries, and we hope to see him back out doing what he loves most at your local football ground very soon

