



WOLVES CHASING AUSTRALIAN NPL CROWN

Luke Wilkshire, Justin Pasfield and the Wollongong Wolves are eager to be crowned Australia's best in Saturday's National Premier Leagues Final Series Grand Final at Albert Butler Park.



The National Premier Leagues NSW Men's 2019 Premiers earned the right to host the decider after triumphing 5-1 over Canberra Olympic and 2-0 over Perth SC in recent weeks. **They take** on the NPL Queensland Champions Lions FC, who have progressed courtesy of wins over South Australia's Campbelltown City SC and Northern NSW side Maitland FC.

Luke Wilkshire has overseen an astounding turnaround in the historic club's fortunes during his maiden season as head coach, as the Wolves cruised to their first Premiership title in 31 years.

They may have crashed out of the NPL NSW Finals Series with back to back defeats, but the former Soccerero revealed that spirits remain high as his squad chase one last piece of silverware.

"As I've said to the boys these opportunities do not come around every day," Wilkshire said.

"After what the club and these players have done throughout the season there's no surprise that we're in this position.

"For everyone involved it would be a massive tick to be crowned with the (NPL Finals Series) title.

"We have a hungry group of guys, and all their attitudes have been fantastic throughout the season and are now.

"It's been a long year and after the year we had, we have a great chance to finish it off in the best way possible: with a victory."

For a season that has now exceeded 12 months in length, the Wollongong squad can almost finally enjoy a well-deserved break.

But first, they are 90 minutes away from national glory.

Their skipper Justin Pasfield has been impressed by his teammates' commitment and determination to achieve just that.

"It's always hard playing post-season, especially where you have to be fully focused because you don't know what your opposition are like," the shot-stopper said.

But I'm proud of the way the boys have conducted themselves.

I know it's been pretty hard for them because we didn't finish the season the way we wanted to, but the chance to be crowned the best NPL team in Australia is massive."

The title also offers automatic qualification for the 2020 FFA Cup Round of 32.

After Wollongong failed to reach the last 32 in 2019 with defeat at the hands of the Mt Druitt Town Rangers in the ultimate Preliminary Round, Pasfield and Wilkshire admitted the prospect of bypassing that stage will act as a "carrot" this weekend.

In the six previous iterations of the National Premier Leagues Finals Series, two NSW clubs have emerged victorious: Sydney United 58 in 2013 and 2016, and Blacktown City FC in 2015.

Standing between the Wollongong Wolves and a position on this honour roll are Lions FC, who are back seeking redemption after a 2-1 defeat to South Australia's Campbelltown FC in last season's decider.

Facing the Lions will be no easy task for the Wolves.

In his season they won 24 of their 28 league games, conceding only 20 goals in the process.

However, in a similar twist of fate experienced by Wollongong, the Premiers fell at the Semi-finals stage to Olympic FC and will be eager to

extinguish those memories with success on Saturday.

They boast a talented squad coached by former Brisbane Roar foundation player Warren Moon, including some of Queensland's most exciting youngsters.

Notably, Josh Brindell-South and Adam Sawyer have previously tasted A-League action with the Roar and Wellington Phoenix respectively.

The Queensland Premiers saw four players included in the 2019 NPL Queensland Team of the Season squad, including front man Marek Madle who notched an impressive 20 goals in 27 games this campaign.

The Lions will also be fired up by the fact that Saturday signals Moon's final match in charge, as he steps into the Brisbane Roar Academy General Manager position after a successful five-year tenure at the NPL club.

Interestingly, Wollongong are focused on optimising their own game-plan rather than combating the Lions'.

"I haven't seen or heard too much about them," Pasfield revealed.

"I'm sure the coaching staff will do their research, but we didn't take too much notice about Perth either, to be honest.

"We just focus on what we need to do and go out there and produce what we have been doing in the last few weeks, and I believe we'll be okay."

"It is the national final so we're expecting a tough game," Wilkshire anticipates.

"As we've done all year, we're mainly focused on ourselves and producing the performance we know we can do.

"It's a massive opportunity."

Having recently been crowned the National Premier Leagues NSW Men's Coach of the Year, Wilkshire has treasured his first season at the helm.

He looks forward to an off-season of reflection, before the tall order of preparing to match or exceed this campaign's hefty feats sets in.

"You learn every day and are never too old to learn; especially now as a coach in my first year," Wilkshire reflected.

"I will sit back and reflect, but I've still been involved in it so I haven't really had time to take a step back and do that yet.

"It's been pretty full-on, but I've thoroughly enjoyed working with this top group of players." **Pasfield echoed** Wilkshire's praise towards the Wolves squad and is hoping that Saturday will bring worthy conclusion to what has been a historic season for the club.

"It's been a fantastic season for the players and the club," the Wolves skipper said.

"I don't think I will play in a team where we have started the year in first and stayed there until the end.

"That's a huge achievement that most clubs around the world don't even do.

"The boys should be very proud of that, and this weekend could be the icing on the cake.

"But it's not going to just be handed to us, so we have to make sure we're on our toes and do everything right in preparation for what is sure to be a tough game."

The National Premier Leagues Finals Series Grand Final between the Wollongong Wolves FC and Lions FC kicks off at 2:30 pm AEST at Albert Butler Park, on Saturday 5th October.