

High Spirits!

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Heartbreak as penalty shoot-out decides Grand Final

Cup dream is over but Spirit do club proud

Match ends goal-less after 120 minutes

Post denies Spirit last ditch winner

Cup goes to Marconi 7-6 on penalties

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Photo: Carlos Furtado





Brave Spirit push Marconi to the limit in grand final

A heart-breaking penalty shoot-out proved to be the only difference between a gutsy Spirit FC team and Marconi Stallions as the NSW Premier League side snatched the McDonald's Cup in dramatic fashion in the Grand Final at Lily Homes Stadium on Sunday.

In a pulsating conclusion to the newly-named knockout competition that featured a record 79 clubs at its start, Spirit went down 7-6 on penalties after 120 minutes of full-time and extra-time football ended in stalemate at 0-0. That Spirit were able to hold their heads up high at the end was not in doubt: in fact if substitute Tim Simpson's shot four minutes from the end of extra time had gone in instead of cannoning off a Marconi post the team would have been celebrating what would have been a well-deserved Cup Final victory.

Whereas Marconi could have claimed a goal or two in the first half of the game when their fluid passing game had Spirit chasing

Spirit FC 0
Marconi Stallions 0
 (After extra time: 0-0 at
 90 minutes)
Marconi won 7-6 on penalties

Report: Danny John
Pictures: Carlos Furtado,
courtesy of Football NSW

the ball to an extent, the Gladesville Hornsby side more than made up for it in the second half. The opposition had their backs up against their own defensive wall for much of the second period of normal time and were saved on at least two occasions by their goalkeeper. First, Adam Peatey and then Leo Papnicolaou found themselves in scoring positions in front of goal with only the Marconi glove-man to beat but ended up shooting straight at him. Marconi certainly had the better of the match at the start and Spirit had keeper

Murray Nelson to thank in the 25th and 31st minutes as the white-and-green attackers pressed home their advantage. The Spirit number one was quick to spot the danger from a threatening Marconi cross and got to the ball first to clear with great punch-out. He then prevented Marconi going ahead six minutes later when a low hard strike from 20 metres that skidded through the defence was kept out by him diving full-stretch to his right.

Nelson's efforts were matched by the central defensive pairing of Daniel Cunningham and captain Paul Nicolaou who time and again closed down Marconi's danger men and came to the rescue as they threatened to break through. But it didn't all go Marconi's way in the first half and Spirit could have snatched a goal just before the break when Papnicolaou's well-timed run into the box resulted in a tight-angled shot that the Marconi keeper did well to block. As the second half began Marconi pressed for an early goal to break the de-



Deadlock after extra time battle

-adlock with efforts that tested the Spirit defence. But as the game wore on it was the yellow and black of Gladesville that began to swarm around the pitch, pushing Marconi back into their own territory for large periods of the half and which culminated in the good opportunities for Peatey and Papnicolaou.

Marconi though continued to present the occasional threat and again were denied by the acrobatic Nelson when he dived mid-air to his right to gather in a well hit free-kick from 30 metres out in the 81st minute. With the scores level at full-time, the two sides lined up for another 30 minutes of extra-time with Spirit bolstered by the fresh legs of substitutes Evan Daglis who came on for Peatey just before the end of normal play and then Simpson for leading goal-scorer Ben Gough. Both sides continued to press for the elusive strike which at that stage of the game would have probably settled it and again the Marconi gloveman did well to keep out a Spirit free-kick that was bent



round the wall halfway through the first half of extra-time. With the dreaded penalty shoot-out now beginning to loom large in everyone's thinking as the game entered the last 15 minutes of normal time, it was Spirit who were to be denied twice in the

space of eight minutes – the first just after the re-start when the ball was side-footed straight at the keeper and then Simpson's shot that hit the post in the 116th minute after his darting run through the Marconi defence.

It was left to Nelson at the other end to have the final say just before the whistle with a save at his feet that he made look easy and then a parry to clear the ball from danger inside the 18 yard box. That left the cup to be decided on penalties with Spirit taking the first one which was comfortably slotted home by Daniel Cunningham.

The advantage continued to lay with Spirit at 3-2 when Nelson pulled off an excellent save to present Nicolaou's side a chance to wrap up the contest within the designated five penalties-per-side. But an equally fine effort by his opposite number then allowed Marconi to draw level before a second fateful save saw the NSW Premier League side deliver the cruellest of blows at 7-6 to take the cup by the narrowest of margins.

I'm so proud says coach Walmsley

Spirit FC may have ended up on the losing side but there was no hiding the pride of head coach **Tony Walmsley** in what his team managed to achieve in the closest of Grand Finals seen by Football NSW in recent years. Walmsley, who recently took over the helm of the team alongside assistant coach Steve Appleby, was delighted with the application shown by the squad against the higher-ranked Marconi Stallions side. Speaking after the match Walmsley, GHFA's Director of Football, said: "[I'm really] proud of the efforts of the players, though no doubt we did rise to the occasion. I thought we could have really taken something more from the match, we created a couple of really good chances too – hitting the post in extra-time as well – though if you are not clinical enough in-front of goal, then you won't score goals. We were a little too careful in the first-half, though I was happy with the way we went out from the second-half onwards. Credit to Marconi [who] without really hurting us,

they had a lot of possession, and we just didn't make the most of the chances we managed to carve out. This group of players has been tremendous as I said, I take my hat off to all the boys. This side is a Premier League side, playing in the Super League ... and we are now working behind the scenes to get the side ready to make the jump to the top flight as soon as the opportunity should come and present itself." Spirit's efforts also earned praise from Marconi's cup-winning coach **Lee Sterrey**. "I must pay credit to Spirit FC, as they were first class," said Sterrey. "I said at the break that seeing we hadn't taken any of our chances that they would continue coming at us, and full credit to them for not letting up. "They are well organised with a really positive attitude, and I can only congratulate them on a fantastic run in the competition as they have been a great performing side."

Tony Walmsley and **Lee Sterrey** spoke to Joe Carlucci of Football NSW

Photos: Carlos Furtado



A team of champions: Spirit's final line-up

1. Murray Nelson; 16. Tom Lovell; 2. Daniel Cunningham; 4. Paul Nicolaou (C); 20. Scott Wright; 6. Matt Peatey; 8. Josh De Kelly (15.Akwasi Agyei 61'); 11. Brendan Griffin; 10. Leo Papanicolaou; 18. Adam Peatey (17. Evan Daglis 85'); 7. Ben Gough (9. Tim Simpson 97');
Subs Not Used: 3.Lachlan Harte; 41.James Irwin (GK).

Spirit's top five players: as rated by Joe Carlucci FNSW

- 1. Paul Nicolaou** – Captain led by example and was best on field for his side
- 2. Matt Peatey** – Picked up his game immensely in the second half to thread several ball through to his strikers
- 3. Daniel Cunningham:** Had a great game in the centre of defence blocking several shots and breaking down Marconi play
- 4. Ben Gough** – Had a good presence up front but just could not get a shot on goal
- 5. Tim Simpson** – Hit the post in the dying minutes of extra time and provided a spark for the attack after coming on as a substitute



How the two sides fared in the game: match stats

Compiled by Joe Carlucci of Football NSW

Shots (on target)	Offsides	Yellow cards
Spirit FC – 9 (6)	Spirit FC 2	Spirit FC 0
Marconi – 9 (4)	Marconi 0	Marconi 3
Fouls against	Corners	Red cards
Spirit FC 14	Spirit FC 1	Spirit FC 0
Marconi 18	Marconi 5	Marconi 0

Cup weaves its magic for Spirit



Photos: Carlos Furtado

The end result may have not gone Spirit's way but it was a great run nonetheless, writes **Danny John**

In the end, it took just one kick to decide a Grand Final that defied earlier predictions that this would be a relatively comfortable affair for the bigger and better-placed club, Marconi Stallions. Few doubted that Spirit FC came into the Grand Final as underdogs. That much was evident from many of the comments in the match day programme and not just from the NSW Premier League outfit, which has been experiencing a resurgence under new coach Lee Sterrey. Even our own coaching staff, players and officials knew it would be a huge ask to lift the cup despite the fact that Spirit had put out two other Premier League teams to make the semi- and grand finals respectively.

But as such tournaments around the world have shown – in particular the FA Cup in England on which the newly-re-named McDonald's Cup is modelled - there is something "magic about the cup". That magic is more often than not provided by lower league teams – sides that are so often anonymous to the "big boys" and who only dare to dream of matching their efforts on such occasions, let alone manage to beat them. These are the clubs who toil away week in, week out more often for the enjoyment and fun of playing rather than in the knowledge that they may actually win something one day. As for Spirit FC,

while the club has been no stranger to claiming silverware in the past, this has been "one of those seasons" where victories have been hard to come by. Coming into the cup on the back of what for them was a disappointing run in the Super League, Spirit knew not to under-estimate the likes of Hurstville ZFC, Camden Tigers and Gwawley Bay.

For them, claiming the scalp of the defending Super League champions in one of the earlier rounds would have been a big achievement in itself, rightly earning them the epithet of "giant-killers". That was exactly the position in which the State One Division side Blacktown Spartans found themselves when they met Marconi in the semi-finals before the Premier League team finally ran-out 2-1 winners after extra time.

Nonetheless, that showed just how far lower-ranked teams could travel – not least given the fact that most people thought that by the conclusion of the semi-finals, the Grand Final would be an all-Premier League affair. But as is so often the case, Spirit upset that forecast thanks to the unpredictable nature of cup-ties. The 3-2 win over Blacktown City of the Premier League was a greater achievement than the 2-0 knockout of South Coast Wolves in the quarter-finals and showed that Spirit could mix it with the best. In doing so, Spirit went into the Grand Final as clear outsiders – a view underlined by a poll on Football NSW's website in the run-up to the match that made Marconi favourites to win by a 60-40 per cent margin.



Those opinions were justified to a degree by Marconi's better pedigree whilst there were elements of their game – as shown by their passing, structure and shape – which underlined the Premier League outfit's higher class. However, if Spirit were intimidated or overwhelmed by those factors it didn't show on the day and for large parts of the final the two sides went head-to-head as equals. As it was, the likes of Murray Nelson, Daniel Cunningham, captain Paul Nicolaou, Ben Gough, Tim Simpson, Leo Papnicolaou and Akwasi Agyei to name but a few were more than a match for their Marconi counterparts. And for while it may have been an upset if Spirit had won, it would have arguably been justice on the day given the opportunities that the boys in yellow and black created.

That the end result came down to a penalty shoot-out which itself could have gone either way showed just how little there was to choose between the two sides after 120 minutes of normal play. But that, as they say, is the "magic of the cup" and we wouldn't want it any other way.