



Close contest: From left, Andre Lohmann on the ball for Stratford, Leichhardt's Pasco Rogato in action and Aaron Bull leaps to challenge for the ball in Saturday's FNQ Football preliminary final.

Pictures: SEAN DAVEY

Stratford shoot into final

LEICHHARDT rallied from two goals down but were denied entry to the FNQ Football grand final by Stratford in a tense penalty shoot-out on Saturday night.

The away team seemed to have the game in the bag when Connell Breton scored Stratford's second a minute after the half-time break.

But the Lions reacted by playing expansive soccer and finally converted possession into goals after dominating for a majority of the first half.

Well-directed headers from Darcy Fernandez and young-gun Matt Murphy helped them draw level, but neither team could add a third, even after two periods of extra time.

Stratford keeper Phil Sorenson

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was the hero for his team, pulling off three athletic saves in a nail-biting shoot-out.

"He's been the keeper of the season, trained really hard and deserves it," proud coach Glenn Binskin said.

"It's a bad way for either team to lose, but we had the lead and played a good tough game."

The pace of Stratford striker Takuya Kikuchi constantly exposed the Lions' defence, and he had a hand in setting up the first

goal for Robert Booy two minutes before the break.

They had a chance to snuff out the Lions' revival mid-way through the second stanza, but were denied twice by keeper Jack Richards and once by the woodwork in a crazy few seconds in front of the Leichhardt goal.

A third goal would have helped Binskin's nerves.

"I didn't feel like we had the game won at 2-0. Leichhardt are a team that will jag goals and fight the full 90 minutes," he said.

Lions coach Chris Pennington was reasonably upbeat despite his team's cruel exit.

"It's part of football (penalties). (But) a sad way to go out and sad way to end such a good game," he

said. "I feel we dominated the game but we didn't take our chances. When you don't take your chance someone else will."

He praised his defence for standing firm after they opened up the game in the second half, while Murphy also impressed Pennington.

"He's a slow starter, but he's young, fit, dynamic, quick and he's going to be a good player," he said of the goal-scorer.

"They played with Lion hearts and that's all you can do."

Marlin Coast coach Fab Soncin was at the Lions' Den to watch the drama unfold after his team beat Stratford to qualify for Saturday's grand final at Barlow Park.

They may face a different side

though, with Bull brothers Aaron (hamstring) and Jason (possible broken foot) both doubtful.

"Our physio will be kept busy this week and we'll have to see where we stand early in the week. There are a few blokes that have come out of this fairly sore," Binskin said.

Veteran Pasco Rogato battled hard in what may have been his final game in Lions colours. He said he would not rush into a decision, while his coach Pennington spoke highly of the midfielder's contribution to the club.

Stratford 2 Leichhardt 2. Stratford won 3-2 on penalties. Scorers: Stratford - Robert Booy (43), Connell Breton (47). Leichhardt - Darcy Fernandez (63), Matthew Murphy (76).

Midfield mosquito's infectious enthusiasm

CAIRNS-born Zenon Caravella, Gold Coast United's mosquito of the midfield, has emerged as the man with more buzz and bite than any other in his squad over the past four games, according to coach Miron Bleiberg.

Nominating the wiry and tireless Caravella, 27, as his "player of the series" in the clashes against Perth Glory, Central Coast, Newcastle and now Sydney, Bleiberg was glowing over the contribution of the quintessential modern midfielder whose engine never runs on empty.

Unflustered in possession, quick of thought and deed, and clever and concise with his distribution, Caravella linked seamlessly with skipper Jason Culina and a reborn Robson to oil United's wheels against a slick and hungry Sydney in their 1-1 draw at the Sydney Football Stadium yesterday.

"If I had to nominate a player of the series like they do in baseball or cricket it would have to be Zenon," he said.

"He's been the man for us of late and has been doing absolutely everything right.

"He's not gifted like Jason or Robson attacking wise and maybe not defensively like Steve Pantelidis or Michael Thwaite. But he is the complete package in his overall play.



Battler: Gold Coast's Zenon Caravella and Sydney's Stuart Musialik compete for the ball.

"When I was in charge of the Brisbane Roar, we had Matt McKay and Massimo Murdocca, now we have created a new one in the team. I very much like his style of player."

Culina, who benefits from Caravella's selfless toil in his new role as an offensive weapon, agreed, saying: "He makes my job easier.

"There were times last season when we were all called on to help out at the back but now, the way Zenon is playing, it allows people like me to get forward more.

"He takes pressure off you. He does the simple things really well and typifies the sort of player every team needs."

Yesterday's point leaves United in seventh spot, but they could jump as high as joint second on Friday night if they overcome bogey side Wellington Phoenix at Skilled Park.

On Friday, Wellington cemented their top four spot on the ladder with a 2-1 win over North Queensland Fury while Adelaide United's 2-0 win over Perth Glory keeps the unbeaten Reds top.

In other action this weekend, Brisbane Roar smashed A-League newcomers Melbourne Heart 4-0 at Suncorp Stadium on Saturday to take second place, six points behind Adelaide, while Newcastle held Melbourne Victory to a scoreless draw at EnergyAustralia Stadium.

Football Federation Australia has been forced to delay next weekend's scheduled Melbourne derby between the Victory and Heart for a week due to the AFL grand final replay.

It will now take place on October 8.

"This is one of our marquee games and it is important that we give our fans every opportunity to get to the game and be part of history," A-League boss Lyall Gorman said.

"The rescheduling makes sense on a lot of levels and will give us clear space in the lead-up and a clear precinct on the night so we can maximise exposure and attendance."



A-LEAGUE WRAP

ROUND 8

WELLINGTON PHOENIX 2 (Chris Greenacre 4m, Leo Bertos 13m) d NORTH QUEENSLAND FURY 1 (Mark Hughes 67m) at Westpac Stadium. Referee: Peter O'Leary.

ADELAIDE UNITED 2 (Serginho van Dijk 70m, 73m pen) d PERTH GLORY 0 at Hindmarsh Stadium. Crowd: 13,310. Referee: Matthew Breeze.

BRISBANE ROAR 4 (Costa Barbarouses 24m, Erik Paartalu 38m, Reinaldo 48m pen, Mitch Nichols 76m) d MELBOURNE HEART 0 at Suncorp Stadium. Crowd: 6342. Referee: Chris Boyle.

NEWCASTLE JETS 0 drew MELBOURNE VICTORY 0 at EnergyAustralia Stadium. Crowd: 8452. Referee: Chris Beath.

SYDNEY FC 1 (Bruno Cazarine 20m) drew GOLD COAST UNITED 1 (Bruce Djite 45+1m) at Sydney Football Stadium. Crowd: 9977. Referee: Ben Williams.

	P	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Adelaide	8	5	3	0	15	8	7	18
Brisbane	7	3	3	1	7	4	3	12
C Coast	7	3	3	1	6	4	2	12
Wellington	8	3	2	3	11	10	1	11
Melb Victory	9	2	5	2	9	9	0	11
Perth	8	3	2	3	10	11	-1	11
Gold Coast	7	2	4	1	6	5	1	10
Melb Heart	8	2	2	4	8	13	-5	8
Newcastle	8	1	4	3	4	5	-1	7
NQ Fury	7	1	3	3	10	12	-2	6
Sydney FC	7	0	3	4	8	13	-5	3