



Peter Raath: After two important wins over Black Leopards and Jomo Cosmos, Stellenbosch FC slipped up at home against AmaZulu.

Steve Barker: Look, I don't think that the team was at its best on the day. They were a little bit loose defensively, while allowing AmaZulu too much time and space. I'd say we just weren't on top of our game. That's why we paid the price. It was obviously disappointing, coming off those two good wins. Both AmaZulu's goals came from penalties - however, the first shouldn't have been given. I mean, you're leading 1-0 when they get given a penalty for a handball which was shown on NFD TV highlights not to be the case. But anyway, be as it may, that's something you have to handle and get on with. That was the club's first loss since the beginning of the year, so Stellenbosch are difficult to beat.

PR: But you've only scored 35 goals in 26 games, which is a lot less than Royal Eagles and Thanda Royal Zulu, who boast 47 and 44 respectively.

SB: Unfortunately, they have a couple of individuals like Sedwyn George and Mhlengi Cele who've netted in excess of 15 goals, whereas Stellenbosch hasn't had somebody to step up or even come close. The lack of a regular scorer has affected us, but it's something that everyone's working on daily. We therefore have to make goals around the team and also be difficult to play against by not conceding. Our top scorers are Zaid Patel and Letsie Koapeng with four goals each. Our top scorer is Stanley Muishond, with eight goals. Strikers like Cleopas Dube and Mame Niang are starting to really find their straps. Mame hadn't played for four or five months. Now he's getting regular training and game-time. I'm just hoping that the team will hit the strong form when we really need it.

NATIONAL FIRST DIVISION FOCUS



All teams will play four cup finals

Stellenbosch FC's technical director, Steve Barker, talks to Soccer Laduma's Peter Raath about his first loss. He also discusses the lack of a regular scorer, his strong defence and the play-offs.



PR: On the other hand, Stellenbosch has a solid defence.

SB: It's nice for local lads such as Jarrod Maroole, Matthew Rowell, Junaid Sait, Diego Brown and Tshepo Mabua to be the spine and core of our team. They've been solid in defence and midfield, while hardly missing a match. To have that consistency week in and week out is good. We just need to find solutions in attack as well as a way of netting more goals. That's going to be key but, at the same time, we can't

lose our difficult-to-beat attitude. The team's now really solid. It will be very interesting for outsiders or neutrals, who follow the NFD, to see how it pans out. Even a point here or there at the right moment might just be enough at the end of the season. Hopefully, my experience of promoting University of Pretoria will come through.

PR: What's different for you this campaign compared to the past?

SB: The league table's very tight.

This season's most likely going to go to the final game. Every week, you're facing a tough match. Whether you're playing a side at the bottom or top of the log, there's no difference. Our last two matches against Milano United and Santos will be like cup finals. In fact, it's not only us. I think during May, all teams will play four cup finals. We're taking it one game at a time and just have to stay focused. For me, it's about the consistency of being able to handle match situations and preparations

off the field in the best possible way. Beating Witbank Spurs 2-1 at home was hugely important for us, but then we travelled to Kanyamazane Stadium to face Mbombela United, which is never easy. They took a 1-0 lead on the stroke of half time due to our error. In the second half, we came out really strong and should have equalised in the first 20 minutes but didn't. Mbombela then got a penalty, which was a 50/50 call against us. Being 2-0 down was a tough ask, but the team did manage to pull one goal back.

PR: Should Stellenbosch reach the play-offs, which PSL team would you like to face?

SB: It's a difficult one (laughing). I don't want to mention a name and it comes back to bite you. Whichever PSL team finishes 15th will be really competitive and tough to play against. The play-offs are going to be a dogfight. I don't think it'll be like last season when Highlands Park won it quite comfortably. I still believe there's a couple of twists and turns in the PSL. You never know. You could come up against a real powerhouse, which might be a big team like Bloemfontein Celtic. Let's see what happens... Stellenbosch produced a top performance to beat University of Pretoria 2-0. It was a case of good character and personality shown by all. Leopards' 2-0 loss to Jomo Cosmos happened to be a great result for us. Collecting all three points at home against Mthatha Bucks, guaranteed us a top three spot, with four matches to go. We now just need to get the job done. We have a good chance in the play-offs.

PR: Thanks, Steve, and good luck. But before we let you go, did your move to Athlone Stadium affect the club?

SB: It's not ideal. Stellenbosch would have preferred to continue playing at Coetzenberg Stadium, but Athlone has a nice big pitch, so we have to make it work for us. □

THE LATEST NFD NEWS

- Free State ABC Motsepe League club, Super Eagles, have been crowned provincial champions after an easy 4-1 victory over DLA 2 FC, while former NFD outfit, African Warriors, finished in the lower half following a similar victory against Tshame All Stars FC. "Eagles are still waiting for SAFA to confirm that we're going to the play-offs. But it shouldn't be a problem, as there're no DC cases," said club GM, Sipho Mkhwanazi.
- Former Polokwane City assistant coach, Selaole 'Sly' Mosala, who's working behind the scenes at Black

Leopards, has praised the club's head coach, Jean Loscuito, as well as his Belgian compatriot, Luc Ey-mael of Bloemfontein Celtic. "It's unbelievable what I've learnt from the pair. Next season, I'm looking for a good long contract," he told Soccer Laduma.

- Talented right back, Mthokozisi "Karapawo" Gwamanda, currently on the books of KZN ABC Motsepe League side, GWP Friends - the same team where NFD top marksman, Sedwyn George, was spotted - has apparently attracted the attention of both AmaTuks

and Platinum Stars. "Gwamanda's style of play is similar to that of Orlando Pirates' Thabo Matlaba, while he can also play as a left back. That's why clubs are keen on his services," said a source.

- An interesting aspect of the vital clash at Athlone Stadium between bottom-placed Santos and on-form Real Kings was that referee, Lusapo Mabombo, went almost the entire match without booking a player. It was only in the 90th minute that Nathan Gertse of the People's Team received a yellow card.

