

# Stellenbosch's Barker buzzing ahead of big Cup clash

RODNEY REINERS

STELLENBOSCH FC have been motivated by the performances of neighbouring Western Cape clubs in the Nedbank Cup, which is why they are determined to make the most of their opportunity. The Cape Winelands side hosts NFD table-toppers Highlands Park in a last 32 tie of the competition at the Athlone Stadium tomorrow night (kick-off 7.30pm), and the objective is to join the three other Mother City qualifiers – Cape Town City, Ubuntu Cape Town and Steenberg United – in the last 16 draw on Thursday.

"I see that the Cape is well-represented in the last 16, with a team from each division – PSL, NFD and ABC Motsepe (Second Division) – through to the next round," said Stellenbosch coach Steve Barker. "We will certainly do our best to join them and add another Cape team to the mix."

Stellenbosch are an ambitious club and have made no secret of their desire to make it to the PSL. Last season, they missed out on a glorious opportunity to realise their dream when they failed in the promotion play-offs.

This is season, under Barker, Stellenbosch have had a frustratingly inconsistent campaign. They started off well and looked to be the team to beat in the National First Division (NFD). Then, for a while, the wheels came off, and they slumped down the standings. But it's come good again in recent weeks – and Stellenbosch are now in a respectable fifth position, again challenging for a play-off spot.

But their league aspirations will take a backseat this week when Barker focuses his men on the Nedbank – and he is expecting a tough challenge against Highlands.

"Yeah, we know a bit about them (Highlands Park) because we are in the same division," said Barker. "We know what to expect. They are obviously having a good season, they are top of the log, and they are a solid, all-round team. But we are happy to have got a home draw, which gives us a bit of an advantage. We are confident, we are looking forward to the game, and we just want to take the momentum of our last three games into the Cup clash."

"We started the season well, but then hit a rough patch," added Barker. "It was a difficult time, but our recent results (two wins and a draw) have seen us turn things around a bit. We are on an upward trajectory, we are still in with a shot at a promotion play-off spot, and in the last 32 of the



PREPARING WELL: Steve Barker, coach of Stellenbosch FC, is aiming for a promotion playoff spot as well as a good Cup run.

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Nedbank Cup, so it's not all that bad.

"The preparations have gone well this week and, when Wednesday comes, we will be ready."

Barker was robust, hard-tackling midfielder with Wits University and SuperSport United before moving into coaching. After a six-year spell in the coaching structures of the University of Pretoria, he joined AmaZulu in 2014, and was then lured to Cape Town last season to act as an assistant to Stellenbosch head coach Sammy Troughton. But, with the team missing out on promotion, Troughton took the fall and moved on, and Barker was asked to take charge of the team this season.

"There has been a large turnover of players since last season," said Barker. "I was with Sammy (Troughton) for the last six months of the previous campaign, and we just want to build on what was left after he departed. We've brought in a number of new players, and the aim is to improve on all aspects of play. We have the promotion play-off spot as our aim, and we just have to make sure that we remain focused for the last few months of the season."

Barker has quite a bit of experience in the squad: there's experienced 32-year-old Zimbabwean goalkeeper Washington Arubi, former Santos players such as Gert Barends, Iqraam Rayners and Carl Lark, there's also Devon Saal, who has played for

## FIXTURES

### NEDBANK CUP LAST 32

**Wednesday:** Richards Bay v Bloemfontein Young Tigers; Platinum Stars v Baroka FC; Stellenbosch FC v Highlands Park (Athlone Stadium, 7.30pm), Super Eagles v Free State Stars

### PSL

**Friday:** Maritzburg United v AmaZulu

**Saturday:** Baroka FC v Chippa United; Golden Arrows v Bidvest Wits; Kaizer Chiefs v Cape Town City (FNB Stadium, 8.15pm)

**Sunday:** Bloemfontein Celtic v Polokwane City

Milano United in the NFD and Maritzburg United in the PSL, while Jarrod Moroole has long been touted as a footballer with potential.

