

Tough road back to top

By Andrew Voerman

CHRISTCHURCH United are back in the big leagues.

They needed at least a draw last Saturday to win Mainland Football's first division and secure promotion back to the top flight.

In spite of going behind after being up 1-0, they got there in the end, drawing 2-2, and booking their place in the Mainland Premier League for the first time since 2012.

Club captain Gary Bint (inset), said being relegated had showed them they had to do things different within the club in terms of player development, and winning promotion was sign they'd achieved plenty in the last two years.

"This year was really a big push to get into the premiership," he said.

"We wanted to really look at what players we've got inside the club already and just nurture them and bring the best out of what we've already got."

In addition to winning division one, the club's premier development league side won their competition.

The two sides train together, and have been challenging each other throughout the season.

Bint plays left back for the division one team, and said having the two squads together had helped to get the best out of both of them.

They may be all smiles now, but they so nearly didn't make it.

Heading into the last two rounds of the competition, United needed just one point from a potential six still up for grabs.

Their first game was against FC Twenty 11, then the bottom-placed side, and United lost 1-2.

Bint said they let the pressure get to them.

"We thought we had it wrapped up after we beat Selwyn the week before. It was a mentality thing – we just didn't show up on the day."

The United lads were gutted after the loss, but knew they had another chance to achieve their goal,



SECURED: Christchurch United celebrate after drawing 2-2 with Parklands United and clinching promotion back to the Mainland Premier League.

with their final game of the season, away against Parklands United.

"We had a good chat, we had some good training sessions, and we knew what we had to do," said Bint.

The key was just to relax and make sure they enjoyed their football, he said.

"We knew Parklands would give us a good game, and we knew the pressure would be on."

As their season entered its last 10 minutes, they were a goal down, and on the verge of being pipped for promotion on goal difference.

Then they won a free kick, and striker Gerry Christie slotted it home.

Bint said the result showed how they were a team that would never surrender.

"We kept on battling and we got that goal at the end."

"Once we'd got that goal, we really tried to just maintain and keep possession of the ball and just play smartly."

They did, and when the final whistle blew, there were jubilant celebrations.

It was a goal that brought a three-way battle for promotion to an end.

"We always knew from pre-season friendlies that the teams that were going to be up there (were) Waimak and Selwyn," said Bint.

'We kept on battling and we got that goal at the end.'

Waimak fell away down the home stretch and it was Selwyn that ran them the closest, while never actually being able to beat them.

"We played them pre-season,

beat them then. We played them twice in the league and we beat them on both occasions," said Bint.

"The game down in Selwyn when we beat them 4-1, that was a real confidence boost for the team," he said.

While United went unbeaten against their closest competitors, slip-ups against the weaker sides helped to keep the overall contest close.

The loss to FC Twenty 11 and the draw with Parklands were joined by a draw against Hornby United, and a loss to the Cashmere Technical Turtles, who aren't eligible for promotion.

The whole club was excited to be back in the MPL, he said.

Bint is in his ninth season with United, and is one of several in their squad who have played at that level before.

"The players who've played premiership football before are really looking forward to getting back into it."