



By George Stavroulakis

# THE MOST PROMISING AUS

## WELCOME TO 2019: THE LAST YEAR OF THE 21ST CE

Ask anyone over 30 and they'll tell you this century has been an age of lazy narcissism (read: Instagram, Facebook, mobile phones, the internet and Uber Eats) But while our epoch is shaking off the last of the acne and applying for Newstart, some Australian teens are training seven hours a day and shipping overseas for a chance at footballing immortality.

The New Year means it's been another 12 months since the golden generation illuminated our hearts and living rooms, but with more promising young Aussies then you can poke a selfie stick at, is another golden age on the horizon?

Every Soccerroo fan is hoping that in a decade's time, we look back at 2018 as the year that unearthed Daniel Arzani. What will 2019 be?

### Ramy Najjarine

**The most** fruitful prospect in the footballing cornucopia that is Melbourne City football club, 18-year-old Najjarine has just begun to break through under Warren Joyce and so far we like what we see.

**Rumoured to** be internally regarded as an even brighter prospect than his former teammate Arzani, Najjarine possesses the same silky skills and excellent mobility as the Soccerroo, but at 176 centimetres tall and weighing over 70kg, there's a little more 'rainy Tuesday night at Stoke' to him as well.

### Rahmat Akbari

**When Akbari** was first called up to the Joeys, his father laid out just how much it meant to the entire family, who emigrated to Australia from Afghanistan when the now-18-year-old was five.

"If we were still in Afghanistan or Pakistan this would never have happened," he said. "Back there we couldn't even go to a proper school or get educated."

**At 185** centimetres and still growing, Akbari is now another solid-built, naturally-gifted A-League wunderkind, product of Brisbane Roar's youth system but right at home at Melbourne Victory.

**Despite the** Big V boasting one of the finest attacking lineups the competition has ever seen, Akbari already has five appearances this season. What he can learn from the likes of Keisuke Honda is mouth-watering...

### S. Pasquali

**When Melbourne** Victory fans sing 'Stand By Me' before A-League matches, they're not just rousing emotion, they're giving career advice. When Pasquali first burst onto the scene (remember that phenomenal performance against Juventus?) he was a 16-year-old attacking midfielder.

**After three** years with Jong Ajax – admittedly one of the greatest youth academies in the world – the 19-year-old is now playing largely as a centreback. Whether this is the shift he needs to break into Ajax, or any other first team, remains to be seen.

**Pasquall clearly** has quality to be playing for Ajax's superstar conveyor belt, which is why 2019 bodes promisingly as the year he breaks through somewhere. But as a

centreback? Really?

**Perhaps post-match** Victory fans should be a little more obvious and just start chanting 'Should I Stay or Should I Go...'

### C. Theoharous

**From one** Big V prodigy to another, Theoharous' departure to Borussia Monchengladbach is the latest in a long series of Aussie youngsters heading to the Bundesliga (Kwame Yeboah recently returned home after four years attempting to break into the same side).

**Possessing excellent** balance, a decent final pass and an uncanny ability to beat a fullback when the ball seems lost, Theoharous' performances during Victory's successful finals tilt last year suggested he's a Soccerroo in the making.

**In the** meantime, it's likely the 18-year-old will be an extended work in progress in Germany...

### Ajdin Hrustic

**At 22**, Hrustic is the oldest player on this list, but he's also a one-cap Soccerroo and a regular performer in the Eredivisie for Groningen. You get the feeling 2019 will be the year that makes or breaks Hrustic's sterling potential.

**The attacking** midfielder – who came through the increasingly prolific Schalke 04 academy – needs to add direct contributions to his game. One assist all season and two goals in 39 Eredivisie appearances don't exactly signal star potential.

**But when** you see Hrustic face up three Dutch defenders on the wing, pause, then charge directly through all of them, you realise if anyone's really going to break through this year, it's probably him.

### Con Ouzounidis

**A little** left-field, but 19-year-old Ouzounidis is fighting through arguably the best academy in England at the moment with Everton, under England's best youth coach in David Unsworth.

**A ball-playing** centreback with a knack for scoring goals, Ouzounidis has also been drawing high praise. Short-lived Toffees defender Ramiro Funes Mori played one match with the teen last year and walked away raving about the youthful Aussie: "I think he's got a really good



future."

"I feel like I've come on a lot over the past year," Ouzounidis said after signing a professional contract.

"I got injured, which was a blow, but I was in the gym a lot with the physio so that helped me develop physically. Coaches like [Under-18s boss] Paul Tait and Unsy [David Unsworth] in the Under-23s have helped me out a lot, too.

"Unsy used to be a centre-half and he's been there and done it for the first team, so he knows what it takes to get there. I just have to take what he says on board and put it into my game."

### Ben Folami

**A striker**, a striker, our kingdom for a striker.

**If losing** Daniel Arzani, Aaron Mooy, Martin Boyle and possibly Matt Leckie and Tom Rogic from the Soccerroos Asian Cup campaign has been good for anything – and obviously it has – then Chris Ikonmidis's sudden importance could finally signal a new Soccerroos striker.

**But Ikonmidis** isn't naturally a striker; even at Perth Glory he's been playing as part of a front two. One day, his partner in crime may just be Gbenga Tai Folami

– but just call him Ben.

**Like Ikonmidis**, Folami is a Sutherland Sharks alumni and the 19-year-old has already racked up four Championship appearances for cellar-dwellers Ipswich Town. He's highly rated by the Tractor Boys and, by the sounds of things, that's saying something.

"It's a lot more cutthroat there," he told AAP. "If they don't think you're up to it, or good enough, you're gone."

### Denis Genreau

**If you** thought Paris was a romantic honeymoon destination, turns out Parisians think the same thing about ol' Sydney. Who could have guessed traffic jams were so damned attractive?

**Parisian-born Genreau** emigrated to Australia as a child when his parents fell in love with the Harbour City and after picking up the round-ball sport, may have assumed finding opportunities Down Under would be a little easier than in Europe.

**Turns out**, he was better off heading back. After making five appearances over two years at Melbourne City, Genreau secured a loan move to PEC Zwolle in the Eredivisie. **Suddenly the** 19-year-old is a regular for