



By George Stavroulakis

GRAHAM ARNOLD ..

«MABIL IS A TERRIFIC STRIKER»



If you think you've been on a rollercoaster watching the Socceroos, imagine being the man in the hot seat himself. It was a much-more humble and slightly relieved looking Graham Arnold that fronted the media after his Socceroos side scraped into the Asian Cup Round of 16 after a 3-2 win over Syria.

Gone were the claims of how his Australia side would "strangle the life" out of opposition teams, replaced instead by an admittance that he, just like his young, injury ravaged squad, are learning from each result.

"It's fantastic, a wonderful learning process," Arnold said.

"The older boys did very well with their leadership, we knew that Syria were going to throw everything at us but we did well tonight.

"We're very grateful and happy to go through to the last

16. I do believe the longer we go, the longer the learning experience for these guys on a four year journey."

Australia now face a nervy wait to see if they face Uzbekistan or Japan, two sides currently separated only by goal difference, in the next round.

But despite drawing significant criticism throughout the group stage, there are positive signs for Arnold to focus on over the next few days.

Not least Awer Mabil and Chris Ikonmidis, who have performed admirably among a fresh-faced forward line, spurred forward by a devastatingly dangerous Tom Rogic who returned to form when needed.

"We'll give them a few days off," Arnold added. "That was a difficult pitch to play on, very quick, Mabil is a terrific striker. That's another learning experience.

"Backyard Tommy, the Wizard of Oz, I love him. When you give him freedom he's exciting, he's a big part of what we're about and he's such a positive influence for those players."

As for Australia's defensive woes, well, Arnie's focusing on the positives for now.

"It's when there are a lot of long balls, it can become a lottery with the second ball," he said.

"The first goal was a mental thing, the second one, you said I don't want to look at it - it was a penalty, there's not a lot we can do.

"This journey is really exciting, I'm learning a lot on how to deal with training sessions. Without four players out there tonight through injury and suspension, it was a mighty performance."

PLAYER RATINGS SOCCEROOS

Australia were once again pushed to the brink by a passionate and determined Syrian outfit, but a wonderful individual display – this time from silky Celtic playmaker Tom Rogic – was enough to secure a 3-2 win and guaranteed passage to the Round of 16.

Syria dominated most of the first half, with Omar Al-Soma and Omar Khribin the major threats.

A piece of individual brilliance from Awer Mabil opened the scoring, cutting in onto his left and curling the ball past Ibrahim Alma. But less than two minutes later, a defensive lapse in concentration let Khribin in for the equaliser, despite the best efforts of Mat Ryan.

A visionary pass from Rogic bisected the Syrian backline in the 54th minute, and a gentle touch from Chris Ikonmidis was enough to carry the ball past Alma and barely over the goal line before it was hacked clear.

The Quasious Eagles were up in arms shortly thereafter when a bobbled first touch from Mark Milligan clearly struck his outstretched arm, but referee Cesar Ramos waved away their furious appeals.

Ramos was at the centre of controversy once more in the 80th minute when Al-Soma went down in the box. The Mexican official hesitated for an agonising few moments before pointing to the spot, seemingly at the behest of his assistant.

Milos Degenek was the closest man, but replays later revealed Al-Soma had tripped over a teammate. It mattered not to the big striker, as he dusted himself off and sent Mat Ryan the wrong way from 12 yards.

Relief for Australia, who go through in second place in Group B, and agony for Syria, who finish bottom of the group with just one point.

Mat Ryan – 7.5

Started very nervously with a shanked clearance straight to the opposition, and must've breathed a sigh of relief when Khribin fired wide.

Rhyan Grant – 7.5

Got forward well in the first half, producing a great delivery for Maclaren.

Mark Milligan – 7

Clearly handballed inside his own box in the second half and was incredibly lucky to escape unpunished.

Milos Degenek – 5

Ball-watching for the first goal, giving Khribin far too much space behind him. Unlucky to give away a ridiculous penalty after one Syrian attacker actually collided with a teammate.

Aziz Behich – 6

Absolutely awful in the first half, giving the ball away repeatedly and getting beaten in 1v1 situations. Much improved in the second.

Massimo Luongo – 6

Recalled to the side in place of Sainsbury, and the QPR midfielder struggled to stamp his influence on the contest.

Jackson Irvine – 5

Couldn't keep possession. Seemed panicked under pressure and committed one shocking first-half turnover – luckily for the Socceroos, the ball ricocheted off the referee and the counter attack was averted.

Awer Mabil – 7

Virtually absent from the contest until his brilliant goal – a curling left-footed effort into the top corner.

Shied away from a crucial 50/50 challenge before Khribin scored. A threat in transition, and fed a great pass to Giannou before being sacrificed for Kruse.

Tom Rogic – 9

Australia's best player by an absolute mile – considered and constructive in possession and cool under pressure.

Chris Ikonmidis – 7.5

Another who struggled in the first half. His set pieces were most often worked short and fizzled out very tamely. Much better in the second half.

Jamie Maclaren – 5.5

Had several great chances in the first half, including a sitter of a header that he really should have put away.

Apostolos Giannou – 6.5

A lively cameo from the Cyprus-based target man, who had several opportunities as the game became stretched. Desperately unlucky to hit the inside of the post with a well-struck shot, and his first touch let him down a few times.

Robbie Kruse – 7

Very calm when most around him were nervy. Helped the side keep possession to take the pressure off in the dying minutes, and defended very well from the front.

Matt Jurman – N/A

Subbed on too late for a rating.