



By George Stavroulakis

Olympic hungry for more success

How can you better the perfect season?

-By Nick Houghton

That is the question Abbas Saad and his Sydney Olympic squad will ponder this preseason as they look to defend their incredible 2018 Premiership and Championship double winning campaign.

The boys from Belmore stunned many last year as they shirked preseason uncertainty, after a coaching change weeks out from round one, to record one of the best seasons by an NPL NSW Men's club side in recent years.

Doing it once is hard enough and the success of the previous season is sure to be a hard act to follow.

Saad is confident his team won't be headed towards a sophomore slump in 2019 but accepts this time around the team is set to face some unique challenges.

"The NPL is a tough league where anyone can win so this season for us is going to be one of our toughest challenges yet," Saad said.

"We didn't have the best squad on paper last season but we showed with hard work what could be achieved.

"This time around we will have the target on our back and the pressure will be on the players to take their game further and on me to help facilitate that improvement."

One major hurdle facing Saad and Olympic is how they will go without star midfielder Max Burgess who was rewarded for his stellar campaign by signing an A-League contract with Wellington Phoenix.

Burgess was immense as Sydney Olympic's number 10 in 2018 providing both assists and goals on their way to the double.

Veteran defender Riley Woodcock has also moved back to Perth leaving a major

hole in the backline.

Saad and Olympic have been active in the transfer market bringing in a number of former club favourites including Mitchell Stamatellis, Troy Danaskos as well as the Gaitatzis brothers Harry and Michael Gaitatzis.

The club has also re-signed 16 players from last season, one being Spanish star sensation Alejandro Sanchez, leaving Saad confident the players at his disposal will be able to keep Olympic at the top.

"Max and Riley are both irreplaceable players and we will definitely miss them this season. Players of their quality and with A-League experience are so valuable in the NPL so it will be a challenge to fill the void they leave," Saad said.

"The new boys coming in are all quality players and I'm sure they will do a good job and make just as big a contribution to the team.

"Last year I was able to play one system for most of the year and I knew we would always be a good chance of winning. However, this season I will need to make a few changes to what we do to suit the players we have in the squad and to not be too predictable for our opposition."

One player Olympic fans will be happy to see back in their team's colours this year was star striker Alexis Sanchez who spurned numerous approaches from clubs in Australia and abroad to return for a second year at Belmore Sports Ground.

Although revealing he at one point succumbed to losing the Spanish striker, Saad said he was overjoyed to get the news he would once again have the services of his leading goal scorer



"It took a bit of hard work but thankfully we've kept him for this season," he said.

"There were a lot of clubs, ranging from other NPL sides to A-League clubs as well as professional teams abroad, all circling looking to sign him but he said he wanted to build on what he achieved here and signed on for the season.

"He is more than good enough to play in Asia or in the A-League so to have him leading the line again is a major coup for us."

A busy preseason program has filled Saad with plenty of confidence leading into the regular season and he believes fans should have more reason to smile in 2019.

"This is a very talented group of players and with the players coming in I think we have a much deeper squad than we did last season," he said.

"If we are able to jell as quickly as we did

last year then we shouldn't have any problems but finding that chemistry with the new guys and the returning players will be one of our main challenges early on.

"I have a lot of belief in the boys and I'm confident this can be another successful season for the club."

Sydney Olympic open their NPL NSW Men's championship and premiership title defence with a round one match against Sutherland Sharks at Belmore Sports Ground on March 10.

Key player movements

Arrivals: Harris Gaitatzis (Rockdale City Suns), Troy Danaskos (Marconi Stallions), Mitchell Stamatellis (Hakoah Sydney City East), Michael Gaitatzis (Mounties Wanderers)
Departures: Riley Woodcock (Perth), Brendan Hooper (injury), Max Burgess (Wellington Phoenix)

Joeys set for Turkey tournament after receiving UEFA invite

Australia's preparations for the 2019 FIFA U17 World Cup in Peru have received a significant boost, with confirmation that a Joeys selection will travel to Antalya, Turkey next month to participate in a preparatory tournament to be hosted by UEFA.

The Joeys qualified for the 2019 FIFA U17 World Cup after making the semi-finals of the 2018 AFC U16 Championship held in Malaysia last September, and one of the first components of the squad's preparations for Peru will be fixtures against Turkey, Tanzania, and Guinea in Antalya between March 4 and 8.

Australia is the only nation outside of UEFA and CAF to receive an invitation to the preparatory tournament. The tournament will also feature teams from Morocco, Cameroon, Uganda, Montenegro, Senegal, Angola, Nigeria, and Belarus.

FFA Chief Executive Officer, Mr David

Gallop AM, said securing Australia's participation in the tournament was the culmination of extensive discussions with UEFA.

"Our International Relations team has been working to establish strong relationships with confederations and associations around the world. These relationships in turn enable us to further our strategic objectives. In this case, it's about building up the competitive opportunities for our youth national teams, so this is a major boost for our preparations for this year's FIFA Under 17 World Cup," Gallop said.

"We thank UEFA for the opportunity. Playing international matches against players from Turkey, Tanzania and Guinea is unique for Australian footballers of any age or gender and will provide a brilliant chance for our boys to benchmark themselves against players of similar ages from different confederations."

Australia U17 National Team Coach, Trevor Morgan, who is currently in Europe

scouting potential Joeys players, said he will use this opportunity to provide some new players with international experience.

"We are consistently monitoring our identified elite young players both in Australia and overseas, however we are also eager to unearth new talent for Australia's national teams," Morgan said.

"For the upcoming preparatory tournament in Turkey I will be selecting a squad primarily comprised of players that didn't attend last year's AFC U16 Championship in Malaysia, however this doesn't mean that the players that performed well in Malaysia won't be given further opportunities to impress and stake their claim for Peru.

"We are continually building connections with coaches and technical directors in Australia and abroad, and I'd like to thank all the people that have put forward potential players for the Joeys system," he said.

UEFA's Head of National Associations International Relations, Eva Pasquier, said:

"This initiative is part of the UEFA ASSIST programme, which aims to share knowledge, best practices and offer assistance to UEFA's sister confederations and their member associations."

"In this context, the tournament in Antalya will provide opportunities for talented young players to gain experience playing in a competitive environment, while also learning about different cultures which will broaden their footballing education both on and off the pitch."

Peru (Host Nation), Australia, Japan, Korea Republic, Tajikistan, New Zealand and Solomon Islands have already qualified for the 2019 FIFA U17 World Cup, with additional entrants from CAF, CONCACAF, CONMEBOL, and UEFA to be determined over the coming months.

The 2019 FIFA U17 World Cup will be held between October 5 and 27, and FFA is currently exploring opportunities for the Joeys to participate in additional international tournaments on the path to Peru.