



By George Stavroulakis

Ante Milicic has smashed Australia's underage male programs as "not serious" as the Olyroos ready themselves for a qualifying tilt at the 2020 Games in Tokyo. The Matildas coach would know; he led both the under-23 and under-20 national sides last year at tournaments where Australia fell short of reaching qualifying goals.

MATILDAS HEAD COACH ANTE MILICIC BLASTS THE FFA'S YOUTH TEAM SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Our underage programs, they're not serious programs," he told AAP. "They're not designed for qualification. Simple as that.

"When I look at the preparation that we give our teams compared to what the other Asian teams are getting, we have got no right to expect or to assume we will qualify for these major tournaments." Milicic took the Matildas job last month off the back of his experience at international tournaments.

He was Ange Postecoglou's right-hand man at the 2014 World Cup, 2015 Asian Cup triumph and through the Socceroos' successful qualification for Russia 2018. Milicic then took the under-23s, the Olympics age group, to the 2018 Asian Championship only to crash out at the group stage.

In October he steered the under-20s at their Asian Championship, with World Cup qualifying on the line.

In a must-win quarter-final with Saudi Arabia, Australia lost 3-1 to ensure a third-straight absence at the junior showpiece.

Those failures don't sit well with Milicic, who said the entire program needed more support.

"I'll take the blame and I'll take the responsibility," he said. "But we've got to find a different way.

"Take the latest tournament ... the eventual winners were Saudi Arabia. "In the last 12 months they played 17 games. We played one against a national team.

"So why do we expect to qualify? Based on what?" Milicic's comments are similar to those of Graham Arnold, who will lead the Olyroos this weekend against Cambodia, Taiwan and South Korea. Arnold said the rise of Asian football was "scary", arguing Australian football needed to "wake up" to progress made by continental rivals.

Milicic said local progress could come in one of two ways.

"You either got to have a league where players at that age are playing so much football at a high level or you have to invest in the program so that these teams are constantly getting good quality tours, games away from home," he said. "At the moment, for our young ones, we do neither.

"Qatar won the Asian Cup. You know what? I'm happy for them. "Because every time I went to Qatar their young ones are playing games. "OK, they've got the backing but they've given their kids so many games from a young age against different styles, different formations, different cultures, different scenery, different conditions."

While Milicic despaired on the hopes of Australia's junior male teams, the good news is he's delighted with his "unbelievable" preparations as Matildas coach. "I'm quite happy to be open and say this preparation I'm very happy with, I'm comfortable with," he said.



Australian coach Ante Milicic has had his say on Australia's underage male programs



Ante Milicic has waded into the youth system debate



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Robbie Kruse with Milicic.