



By George Stavroulakis

4 OLYROOS TO SPEARHEAD AUSTRALIAN OLYMPIC GLORY

Australia's Olympic football team have now confirmed their spot in the final stage of AFC's Tokyo 2020 qualifiers. But which Olyroos will be crucial in helping Australia break a 12-year Olympics hoodoo?

Australia joins 15 other nations next January in Thailand at the 2020 AFC U-23 Championship (see all qualified teams below) after qualifying on Tuesday night following a 2-2 draw with the Korea Republic.

The Olyroos last qualified for the Olympics in 2008, where they faced Messi's Argentina, Serbia and Ivory Coast in China. **March has** been critical for Olyroos coach Graham Arnold. It was a rare chance to train with a new group of players and play two friendlies in Kuala Lumpur, before the three successful group qualifiers in Cambodia that helped Australia reach the final stage of qualifiers in Thailand.

So, with Thailand on our minds, here are four players that could spearhead Australia's campaign next January to qualify for the Olympics in Tokyo in 2020.

Full back: Ivan Vujica (Newcastle Jets)

The Newcastle lad was a revelation in Cambodia.

The full-back showed impressive reserves of energy in the heat of Phnom Penh, getting up and down the left side, pressing well and providing good quality crosses on a tricky artificial surface.

In short, he stood out with his constant high work rate.

Starting two games in three days (Cambodia Friday and Chinese Taipei Sunday) showed he has the fitness to take on the humid Thailand challenge next January.

As an A-League player, he'll be in mid-season next January, so fitness will not be an issue for Vujica coming from an Australian summer.

Winger: Reno Piscopo (Renate FC)

Arguably the find of the tournament from Australia's perspective. The Italian-based winger can take on players and knows when to drop deep and receive.

His years at the Inter Milan academy clearly showed, with technique and pace on show against teams that sat back.

More time with the team and the Melbourne-born future star will be even better for the Olyroos.



Midfielder: Aiden O'Neill (Central Coast Mariners, on loan)

You don't play in the English Premier League for nothing.

The on-loan Burnley central midfielder - who debuted against Liverpool in the EPL - showed his versatility and class in Cambodia, scoring goals with his head, playing the left side of a back four all with calmness on the ball, coupled with an excellent passing range.

The Mariners are currently reaping the benefits of this underrated talent who has the look of a future Socceroo.

Winger: Daniel Arzani (Celtic)

It's crucial the Celtic winger (a) gets back to full fitness and (b) can get time off to represent the Olyroos in Thailand.

The Socceroo wasn't with the Olyroos in Cambodia, but his inclusion will be a massive boost for our hopes in Thailand and absolutely crucial to help break down teams that sit back in a block and look to hit on the counter.

Arzani on one side, Piscopo the other and perhaps two-goal hero Nick D'Agostino down the middle.

That's a sweet strike force.

QUALIFIED NATIONS

Thailand (hosts)

Qatar (Group A winners)

Bahrain (Group B winners)

Iraq (Group C winners)

United Arab Emirates (Group D winners)

Jordan (Group E winners)

Uzbekistan (Group F winners)

North Korea (Group G winners)

South Korea (Group H winners)

Japan (Group I winners)

China PR (Group J winners)

Vietnam (Group K winners)

Australia (Best second-placed team)

Iran (2nd best second-placed team)

Syria (3rd best second-placed team)

Saudi Arabia (4th best second-placed team)

****The semifinalists** qualify for Tokyo 2020 (Japan qualify as Olympics hosts so if they finish in the final four, only three other nations qualify).

Olyroos one step closer to Tokyo 2020

The Olyroos made it to the the AFC U23s Championships in Thailand in January after it was confirmed they finished the qualifiers as the top-ranked second place team.

Australia had a nervy few hours after they held out for a draw with South Korea earlier while they awaited the results of the other matches in the Cambodia-based tournament.

Only the top four second-placed teams qualified for the Championships based on goal difference against the teams finishing first and third, with the result against the fourth-placed team ignored.

Australia's +6 goal difference ensured the Olyroos had done enough and are now one step closer to qualifying for Tokyo 2020 if they finish among the top three team at the AFC U23s Championships in January.

This morning coach Graham Arnold hailed the first half

performance in a match which drugged to a halt late in the second half when both sides appeared to settle for the 2-2 draw after Korea equalised.

"Over the whole tournament I couldn't be prouder of the boys," said Arnold. "They have been away together for 16, 17 days and they haven't really had a day off, they've worked really hard and I am very proud to be their coach.

"I thought the first half was clearly one of our best halves of football. When you are a new team and you are in a new environment, you play in bits and pieces and it is difficult to keep everything at a high standard for the full 90 minutes.

"I thought our first 55 minutes was outstanding, and we've

achieved the purpose of the trip which was to advance through to the next phase in Thailand."

Roar attacker Nicholas D'Agostino was named man of the match for his brace of goals. The 21-year-old explained that he felt the team's pre-camp in Malaysia helped Australia secure its ticket to Thailand.

"We wouldn't have played this well if we didn't have the camp in Malaysia before we came," D'Agostino said.

"All the boys needed to come over that week earlier and acclimatise to the heat and humidity, and Malaysia allowed us to do that.

"We put on some great performances."