



By George Stavroulakis

## FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

## Shootout loss 'sucks', says Kerr, but Matildas will only grow stronger

Matildas captain Sam Kerr was philosophical about her missed penalty that set the tone for Australia's loss in a shootout to Norway in the World Cup knockout stage.

But her coach, Ante Milicic, said he had nothing but sympathy for his superstar, who stepped up for the first shot of the shootout but fired high and wide of the goal.

«I'm all right. What can you do. The penalty shootout obviously sucks. It's the second time and disappointing [but] we'll come back,» said Kerr after the game. «I've been trusted to take it and I was confident in taking it and I just skewed it.

«I'll grow from this and become a stronger person mentally. The girls have already gotten around me. I feel like I let the team down but they've been quick to cut that out.»

**Australia's Alanna Kennedy** leaves the pitch after receiving a red card during the Women's World Cup round of 16 soccer match between Norway and Australia at the Stade de Nice in Nice, France

**Milicic said** no blame could be attached to Kerr, who had scored five goals in the tournament, and he had nothing but admiration for her.

«Look, I'm extremely proud of Sam and as an Australian coach, to be able to work with her has been an excellent experience for me,» the coach said. «All I will say is only big players can miss penalties because small ones don't take them.»

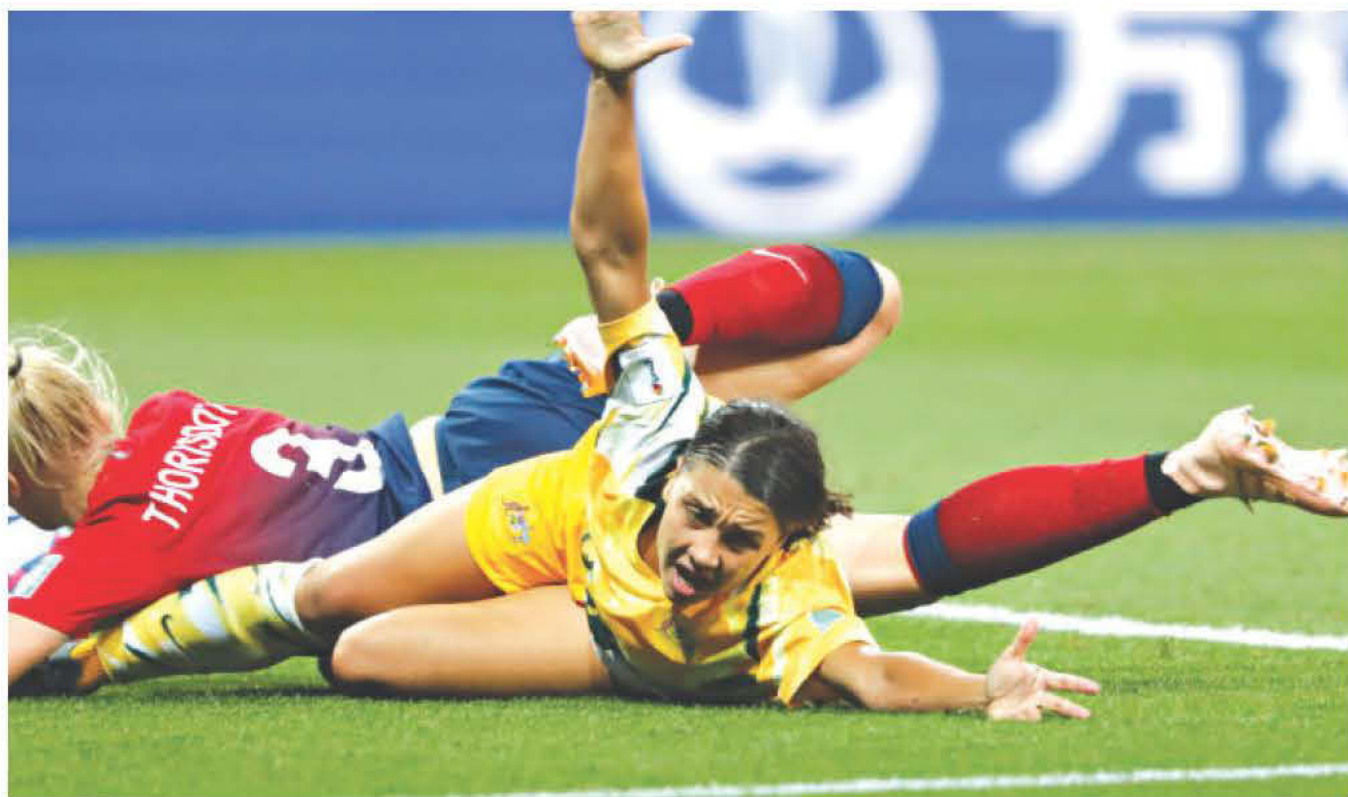
**Kerr praised** the fighting spirit of the team during the tournament.

«It's obviously disappointing but I'm proud of the girls,» Kerr said. «They fought back hard to get into this game. Fought back hard to get into this entire tournament. It's been a roller coaster ride the last few months but I'm proud of these girls. We've stuck together and we've had a lot of support.»

**Despite being** a goal down at the interval, Kerr said Australia had always retained belief.

«At half time we were really confident. We felt like we had enough chances to be level or be up. We kept believing. We kept playing. You could tell the way we were playing, we didn't get flustered, we just stuck with it. We feel lucky that it went to extra time but now just crappy.»

**Australia never** really got into a dominant rhythm in the tournament, beginning with their surprise loss to Italy, but



Matildas skipper Sam Kerr says it «sucks» to lose in a penalty shootout.

Kerr said that hadn't been a major factor even though the Kennedy send-off had made things hard for the last 15 minutes of extra time.

«I think that's the Aussie way, we always do it that way. It was tough. A lot of the girls had played a lot of minutes and we were running on empty and Alanna getting sent off was not ideal.

«We stuck together and Meeks [Tameka Yallop] nearly won it at the end there too. We were still confident and believing in each other but it didn't come off tonight.

«It might look like that but we've had real confidence in our team, always stuck together and it sucks to go out on a penalty shootout.»

**Asked if** the team - ranked sixth in the world - underachieved by crashing out to 12th-ranked Norway in the round of 16, Kerr admitted that the players felt they should have done better.

«Any time you don't win the World Cup you've underachieved. We're obviously really really disappointed and feel like we've let ourselves down. Right now, I can't really think about those things. I'm just thinking about the loss.»

## Stunned Milicic: I take responsibility

Australia coach Ante Milicic says he's distraught at not being able to help the Matildas realise their dream of lifting the World Cup.

After a first-up loss to Italy at the World Cup, Matildas coach Ante Milicic said going the long way about it and the hard way about it, was maybe the Australian way.

**On Sunday** morning (AEST) in Nice, Milicic and the Matildas found 120 minutes too long, and a penalty shootout under the white-hot glare of expectation too hard.

**The Australian** way was therefore to head home, leaving France after their 1-1 (4-1) loss in the round of 16 to Norway.

«I don't know if there are any words to describe how I'm feeling,» Milicic said.

**The Matildas'** performance under Milicic was the first time they have failed to reach the last eight at a World Cup since 2003.

**Visibly shattered** and almost speechless, Milicic said he'd battle to find the right way to address his team.

«It's too emotional and there's too much disappointment in me right now to come up with words,» he said.

«What I will say is I am extremely proud of them and it's been

an honour to work with this group.

«They're a special bunch of girls and have grown so close to me, and I am disappointed I couldn't help them realise a dream they've been waiting for a long time.

«I take responsibly for that and I hope tomorrow they can pick themselves up and carry on.»

**The Matildas** netted a late equaliser to force extra-time against a buoyant Norway, and battled hardily when Alanna Kennedy was sent off in the 104th minute.

**Australia's chances** in the penalty shootout were scorched from the first effort, when Sam Kerr fluffed her effort to send an awful shot both high and wide.

**Milicic spared** his captain of criticism.

«Only big players can miss penalties because small ones don't take them,» he said.

«I'm extremely proud of Sam and, as an Australian coach,



to be able to work with her has been an excellent experience.»

**Not only** did the Matildas fail to live up to the standards set at the past three World Cups, they did so with a much-lauded generation of players that were given a shot at winning it all in 2019.

**That will** set the stage for recriminations and a major review of the team, which will include the pre-tournament axing of coach Alen Stajcic.

**Caitlin Foord** said the Matildas would overlook knee-jerk reactions as they licked their wounds and set sights on the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

«It's going to take some time for it to sink in,» she said.

«This is what we were here to win and that's finished, so it will take some time but we'll re-group when we need to and look forward to Olympics.»