



By George Stavroulakis

Peter Katholos was one of the best midfielders of his generation

The World Game pays its monthly tribute to the Socceroos stars of yesteryear who left their mark on football down under. Flamboyant midfielder Peter Katholos wooed the crowds with his silky skills but his international career was cut short after getting offside with the national coach.

Midfield star Peter Katholos has accused former Socceroos coach Frank Arok of ruining his international career as 'revenge' for knocking him back at club level.

Katholos, now 58, was one of Australia's finest footballers in the 1980s and made a name for himself as a polished playmaker with an eye for goal.

He was described by none other than Ferenc Puskas as the "best technical player in Australia" when the Magyar master coached South Melbourne in the early 1990s.

Yet his contribution to the Socceroos cause was limited to 14 full international matches due to what he terms as a grudge by Arok.

Arok became St George coach in 1981 and made no secret of his intention to sign the Greek-born midfielder, whose game flourished after he left the Saints for Sydney Olympic.

But after saying 'no' to Arok, Katholos realised his days as a national team player were numbered.

"I'm really dirty on Arok for freezing me out of the national team," Katholos said.

"The truth is I was a St George player and went to Olympic in 1980 but when Arok - as Saints coach - urged me to come back to the Saints a year later, I knocked back the offer.

"I had had an incredible season under coach Tommy Docherty. I was captain of a team that was the talk of Aussie football. I was happy and there was no reason for me to leave.

"Arok held a grudge on me for that and when he took charge of the national team in 1983, the first man to be dumped was me.

"I was picked for the series against England and I was man of the match in the first game in Sydney. When Arok took charge of the national team for the first time that same year, I was replaced at half time in the second game in Brisbane and did not play at all in the third game in Melbourne.

"When I asked him for a reason he told me 'Peter, your mind is on business, beautiful women', blah blah. What rubbish, football was my life!

"So effectively my international career was cut short by Arok. Other players of my era went on to play for Australia for many years but not me. I was never selected again.

"I deserved much more. Unfortunately, I was not his cup of tea. He wanted hard-running tacklers and as a No. 10 player I probably did not fit into that mould. That's

not what football is all about. Which is fine, but I have no doubts that my refusal to go back to the Saints had a lot to do with my axing. I will not bury the hatchet on this episode."

Katholos, who lives in Sydney, was happy to reflect on a colourful career that included a stint with Larissa in the Greek first division.

What are you doing now?

"I am semi-retired. I've been in the sporting retail business for 37 years but now we are just online which gives me plenty of free time. I am also involved in property development but basically I'm just chilling at the moment."

You were born in the village of Myrsini in the Peloponnese in 1961 and came to Sydney at the age of nine. How was life in such a big city those days?

"It was the hardest situation I had been in because I did not speak the language and we had to struggle because my parents came here with two suitcases and nothing else. Growing up, I had to deal with 'wog' remarks everywhere for many years. It was a tough period."

How did you fall in love with football?

"I got hooked on the game back in Athens when I used to play in the back streets on dirt fields. For me when I came to Australia it was a continuation of my love affair with the game and I used up every opportunity to play soccer at school and at playgrounds."

You played two seasons with St George when the National Soccer League kicked off in 1979 but you are best known for the five years you spent with Sydney Olympic from 1981.

"I played for Olympic in my younger years which were very satisfying. I was voted Australia's best player and league player of the year in 1982. It was a special period for me also because I got picked to play for the Socceroos."

Who were the prime contenders for the individual honour?

"St George's Dez Marton scored something like 40 goals that season and to beat someone like him was special. Sydney City's Joe Watson and Wollongong's Phil O'Connor were other great players I had to pip for the title. But in fairness, I did have a fantastic year."

Your move to city rivals APIA in 1987 was seen as a major surprise. How did that come about?

"In 1986 Eddie Thomson took over Olympic and made it clear that he did not want me or Vince Estavilio in midfield. One week



before the competition started I was told that I was not required and I had to find a new club. APIA coach Rale Rasic then gave me a call and that's how I landed at Lambert Park and continued my footballing career. 'Thommo' preferred Peter Raskopoulos, with whom I did not get on very well after a fallout."

Were you bitter about the manner of your dismissal?

"Of course, because I had given good service to the club. It was all about politics and it was a difficult period but I had to power on.

"With a week to go to the start of the 1987 competition I had no club and it could well have been the end of me as a footballer. I needed a bit of luck and thankfully Rale came to my rescue. But it turned out to be a master stroke for him because I had a point to prove and had a fantastic year.

"Rale saved my career and I am eternally grateful to him. He is a person I hold in very high regard."

You won three straight championships with APIA in 1987 and with Marconi in 1988 and 1989. Tell me about that remarkable trifecta.

"At APIA under Rasic we went through a long period of undefeated games. We had

an incredible side including Tony Pezzano, Charlie Yankos, Alex Bundalo and Arno Bertogna. We really were unbeatable that year.

"The two league titles with Marconi under coach Berti Mariani also represented a fantastic period in my career. Again, I played with some great players like Bobby Catlin, Tony Henderson, Zlatko Nastevski and Frank Farina, it was never a case of whether we would win a game but rather by how many goals."

Do you regret the fact that you never won a championship with Greek-based club Olympic that is probably dearest to your heart?

"Not really. I'm okay. I had enough personal and team success with Olympic. My background is Greek so it would have been great to win the league with the Greek-backed club but it was not my decision to leave. They let me go and I went on to win three titles elsewhere so who knows what might have happened had they kept me?"

The NSL was seen by mainstream Australia as a competition for 'ethnic' clubs and supporters. Do you reckon the best players of your generation did not receive the broad recognition they deserved because of this? **"Absolutely. We** played 'wogball' those