



By George Stavroulakis

## Socceroos Greats Steve O'Connor

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commanding figure - good in the air and strong at the back - and it was certainly an experience playing next to him.

**"What I** remember mostly about the game in Auckland is that it poured down all match and the field was covered in water. Several times we had chances to get to one on one with the goalkeeper but the ball got stuck in a puddle. We lost 1-0."

**YOU DID NOT PLAY AGAIN FOR AUSTRALIA UNTIL 1983 EVEN THOUGH YOU WERE STARRING IN THE NATIONAL SOCCER LEAGUE. IS IT FAIR TO SAY THE COACH RUDI GUTENDORF WAS NOT YOUR BIGGEST FAN?**

**"I don't** really know what happened there. I went to camps and played in trials. I was playing in a very successful club team at the time so I'm not quite sure why I was not picked for the national side. But it did not really bother me. I kept plodding away for Sydney and eventually I got a look in. With Sydney we were always around the top. I don't remember not playing in a finals series during the 1970s and 1980s. We always expected to win."

**THE APPOINTMENT OF FRANK AROK BOOSTED YOUR INTERNATIONAL CAREER, DIDN'T IT?**

**"I became** a Socceroos regular in Arok's era. We were about 12 or 13 of us who virtually played all the time. We had a strong side. It was a bit different then to what happens now when so many players get called up to play."

**TELL US ABOUT THE WORLD CUP QUALIFIER AGAINST ISRAEL IN 1985 THAT BECAME KNOWN AS THE 'BATTLE OF TEL AVIV'.**

**"Israel were** a decent side with players who were playing in some of the top leagues in the world. We knew it was going to be a fight over there and so it was.

**"Frank liked** to use the line in the media about 'we're mad dogs and we're going to kill you' but sometimes these mind games worked against us. It was a tense match and what happened was one of their players made a poor challenge on one of our players right next to the Socceroos bench. Frank got up and complained to the referee and was sent off. In the end it was pleasing to come away with a 2-1 win. That was a big night in old Tel Aviv, I can tell you that."

**MANY CRITICISED SOCCER AUSTRALIA FOR BENDING OVER BACKWARDS TO MAKE SCOTLAND FEEL AT HOME IN THE SECOND LEG OF THE FINAL PLAYOFF FOR A SPOT IN THE 1986 WORLD CUP. AROK EVEN WANTED TO PLAY IN HOT AND HUMID DARWIN. WHAT'S YOUR TAKE ON THIS?**

**"We were** naive, I guess. Today all countries try to maximise home advantage. Some play in altitude. Having to play Scotland in November, it made sense to play somewhere where it is very hot.

**"We should** have made it as difficult as possible for the Scots but we ended up playing in Melbourne on a very cool night. We draw 0-0 and were out after losing the first leg in Glasgow 2-0."

**YOU MISSED THAT SECOND LEG THOUGH SUSPENSION. WAS THAT THE BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT OF YOUR SOCCEROOS CAREER?**

**"Yes, absolutely.** I was suspended because I got a yellow

card in the first leg at Hampden.

**"I knew** I was one match away from suspension so I was very careful and it really was a soft yellow but unfortunately it was enough to put me out of the next game.

**"I actually** tried my best to get another yellow card in an earlier qualifier versus Chinese Taipei in Adelaide that would have ruled me out of the second leg and allowed me to go into the Scotland tie with a clean sheet. **"I remember** catching the ball and doing all sorts of stuff to get booked but the referee just did not want to know.

**"I kept** saying to myself 'what's this referee doing? It was so ironic ... I was trying to get booked and I couldn't."

**Your career** was spent mainly as a stopper but you also played as a sweeper on several occasions. Has the centre-back role changed much since your days?

**"I don't** think it has changed that much. The principles of the game are still the same. You push up when your team has the ball and plug the spaces when the opposition are on the attack. My job was to dominate as much as possible the strikers I faced. We would drop and play offside at different times. With the Socceroos we sometimes

let them in twice (in a 2-2 draw). In other qualifying games were not quick enough to get back and we copped goals on the break.

**"We had** some great players in the mid-1980s and if we forget fitness we were not inferior in terms of attitude and determination. but again, it's hard to compare."

**WHO ARE THE BEST PLAYERS YOU HAVE PLAYED WITH AND AGAINST?**

**"Sydney City** winger Joe Watson was a fantastic player as was striker John Kosmina who was very competitive and with a great attitude. I played many years alongside defender Alex Robinson. Kenny Murphy was a powerhouse in the national team who had unbelievable engines and covered for 'Jinky' (Watson) and Oscar Crino at times. The two flankers 'Davo' (Alan Davidson) and 'Flash' (Graham Jennings) did a fantastic job in our system. Oscar was great on the ball, it was a well balanced side. We also had Dave Mitchell and Frank Farina who supported up front. It was a strong side.

**"Heidelberg's Gary** Cole was always hard to handle and he once scored a hat-trick against us (Sydney City) in the 1980 grand final in Canberra. I remember we were

over-confident ... we were out playing head tennis the morning of the game for maybe two hours. It was ridiculous. We then got what we deserved and lost 4-0.

**"Striker Trevor** Francis was a handful when we played England three times in 1983, as were Juventus's Zbigniew Boniek in 1984 and Scotland's Kenny Dalglish in 1985."

**AND FINALLY, WHO ARE THE AUSTRALIAN AND FOREIGN PLAYERS YOU ADMIRE MOST AT THE MOMENT?**

**"I like** Germany-based winger Mathew Leckie who has pace and a lot of good qualities. Tom Rogic and Aaron Mooy are obviously skilful players and playing at the top level.

**"I also** admire guys I have worked with at the AIS like Matt McKay, Mark Milligan, Alex Brosque, Carl Valeri, Jade North, Nikolai Topor-Stanley, Luke Wilkshire, Robbie Kruse, Mathew Jurman, Adam Federici, Mitchell Langerak, Matthew Spiranovic, Rhyan Grant, Liam Reddy and Andrew Redmayne, who went on to achieve great things in football. There are a few good stories amongst that lot.

**"Abroad I** love watching Barcelona's Lionel Messi for obvious reasons and Madrid captain Sergio Ramos. I don't think a lot of players like playing against him. I also like Liverpool's new striker Mohamed Salah. What a player he is! He just scores for fun."

### STEVE O'CONNOR FACTFILE

#### Club career:

1977-1987 Sydney City

1987-1988: St George

1989: Apia Leichhardt

#### International career:

1979-1985: Australia (15 matches)

#### Honours:

NSL championship 1977, 1980, 1981, 1982 (Sydney City), NSL Cup 1986 (Sydney City)



played with three at the back, one of which was a sweeper. I see three at the back has come back in now but I doubt if we will go back to a libero set-up.

**"A sweeper** makes the field bigger and gives the opposition better opportunities to push players into open spaces from which to attack, not to mention that sometimes using a sweeper may cost you a man in midfield.

**"I would** never say never, however. Remember Greece won the 2004 Euros with a sweeper and the other teams couldn't adjust."

**MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT FROM A PLAYING STANDARD PERSPECTIVE THE OLD NATIONAL SOCCER LEAGUE MAY HAVE BEEN SUPERIOR TO THAT OF THE A-LEAGUE. IS SENTIMENTALISM AT PLAY HERE?**

**"Look, today's** league is fully professional while we were part-timers. There were good players around in my days and we had some good games, no doubt about that, although the game was far more physical.

**"Today's game** is faster. It's really difficult to compare."

**HOW DO YOU RATE TODAY'S SOCCEROOS AND HOW DO THEY COMPARE WITH THE TEAM YOU PLAYED IN?**

**"They have** done really well to qualify for the World Cup although they probably should have done so earlier not after a double play-off.

**"The problems** arose in that game against Thailand in Bangkok where we lacked concentration at the back and