

TOMMY DENG FIT AND READY TO LEAD THE OLYROOS AS THEY EYE THE TOKYO 2020 OLYMPICS



Thomas Deng is fit and ready to lead the Olyroos.

THE OLYROOS HAVE THEIR SIGHTS SET ON BREAKING A 12-YEAR QUALIFICATION HOODOO BY BOOKING THEIR TICKETS TO TOKYO FOR THE 2020 OLYMPICS. AND THEIR HOPES HAVE BEEN GIVEN A BOOST WITH TOMMY DENG READY TO GO.

Melbourne Victory defender Tommy Deng has been declared fit to lead the Olyroos into battle as they aim to be among Asia's three qualifiers for Tokyo 2020.

Led by Socceroos boss Graham Arnold, the under-23s - the men's Olympic tournament is age limited, so as not to compete with the World Cup - are aiming to break a 12-year qualification hoodoo.

The Olyroos face a tough task in the Thailand qualifying tournament, missing Daniel Arzani (Celtic), Harry Souttar (Fleetwood Town) and their suspended quartet Adelaide United star Riley McGree, Melbourne City duo Nathaniel Atkinson and Lachlan Wales plus Brandon Wilson, who on Monday joined Wellington Phoenix from Perth Glory.

One of just two Socceroos-capped players in the squad along with Denmark-based Alex Gersbach, Deng will play a leading role.

So, too, will Melbourne City midfielder Connor Metcalfe, Germany-based Jacob Italiano and Adelaide United striker Al Hassan Toure, who has pledged his international future to Australia

over Liberia.

On Friday, Deng made his first appearance, a 45-minute outing in a drawn friendly with South Korea, since missing a month with a groin tear. **"The last** team that qualified was in 2008. For us to have that honour to go to Olympics would be amazing," Deng said.

"It will change a lot of our careers and would be a dream come true.

"This is the last chance that I have, and a lot of boys have, to qualify for Olympics. We have the opportunity, we have to take it with both hands.

"Everyone in camp is in good condition and with the help of (conditioning chief) Andrew Clarke, we're looking sharp and strong for the first game against Iraq.

"I'm feeling good coming back from injury. **"I missed** four weeks; you don't realise how much fitness you lose. Last week helped me get into the groove to get that sharpness and confidence back."

Melbourne City midfielder Denis Genreau (shoulder) is the only player set to be unavailable

for the Iraq game. The other teams in the group are Thailand and Bahrain.

MORE FOOTBALL

Toure, who only debuted for the Olyroos in November, months after making his senior debut, scored in the South Korea draw.

Deng revealed that the players had pledged to donate \$525 per goal to the Australian bushfire appeal, admitting that it had dominated mealtime discussion in their Asian camp, with players taken aback at the graphic videos on social media.

OPERATION TOKYO 2020

Olyroos' Olympic qualifiers - Thailand, January 8-26

GROUP GAMES

Jan 8 - Iraq, 9.15pm

Jan 12 - Thailand, 12.15am

Jan 15 - Bahrain, 12.15am

- **Top 2** teams from each group advance to knockout phase

- **Top 3** of 16 teams qualify for Tokyo 2020

THE NEWCASTLE JETS ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE A-LEAGUE AND NOW THEY'LL HAVE TO FIGHT THEIR WAY OUT WITH A NEW COACH AFTER THEY ANNOUNCED THE SACKING OF VETERAN ERNIE MERRICK.

NEWCASTLE JETS SACK COACH ERNIE MERRICK IN RESPONSE TO HORROR START TO A-LEAGUE SEASON



Ernie Merrick has been axed by the Newcastle Jets after a nightmare start to the year

Newcastle Jets have sacked struggling coach Ernie Merrick following a 4-0 loss to Melbourne Victory on Sunday.

The Jets find themselves bottom of the Hyundai A-League having won two games, conceding 25 goals and scoring just 11 in 11 matches.

Newcastle Jets CEO, Lawrie McKinna, thanked Merrick for his efforts during his time in Newcastle.

"During Ernie's tenure, the club reached its first Grand Final in more than ten years and we're grateful for his contribution during his two and a half years in Newcastle," McKinna said on Monday.

"However, results and performances haven't been good enough this season and a change was needed

"On behalf of everyone at the Club, I wish Ernie all the best in his future endeavours."

The Jets have begun the process to hire a new first team coach.

In the meantime W-League head coach Craig Deans and A-League assistant coach Qiang Li will steer the team in the interim.

Newcastle were dealt a major blow in pre-season with an injury to Irishman Wes Hoolahan, a creative midfielder that was set to be an integral part of Merrick's game plan.

Other injuries to key players in his squad

have also hurt the Jets.

Players like Ronny Vargas, Daniel Georgievski and Roy O'Donovan weren't adequately filled by Merrick, who had little to play with.

Chairman Martin Lee has been hit hard by the ongoing US-China trade war.

The acquisition of Panamanian striker Abdiel Arroyo, Matt Millar, Nick Fitzgerald and Bobby Burns haven't plugged the holes that have departed the Hunter side last season.

Th sacking brings to an end Ernie's 13 year in charge of an A-League club, having won two A-League Premierships and Championships with Melbourne Victory as well as spending two and a half seasons at Wellington Phoenix.

