



By George Stavroulakis

AUSTRALIA U23 – SYRIA U23 1-0

It took 101 minutes, but the Olyroos are on the brink of Tokyo 2020

The Olyroos are now one win away from a first Olympics appearance since Beijing 2008 after sealing a 1-0 victory over Syria in extra-time.

Adelaide United youngster Al Hassan Toure emerged off the bench to break through the Syrian defence and poke home the winning goal in the first period of extra time.

The victory earns Australia's under-23 side a place in the semi-finals of the Asian U-23 Championship for the first time, the competition doubling as qualification for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

The top three teams from the competition will qualify, meaning the Olyroos need only to win their semi-final or the third-place playoff to reach a first Olympic Games in 12 years. **Having qualified** top of Group A after a trio of tough matches, the Olyroos earned an extra day of rest before the knockout stages.

It would prove crucial in stifling conditions at Bangkok's iconic Rajamangala Stadium.

Syria looked the more tired of the teams as the tight contest was sent into the additional half an hour, paving the way for coach Graham Arnold's trio of substitutes to make an impact.

First, Sydney FC's lightning-quick striker Trent Buhagiar should have broken the deadlock when he was played through by the Olyroos' best player of the tournament so far, Wellington's Reno Piscopo.

Buhagiar hit straight at Syrian keeper Mohammed Ourabi,

but it was a sign of things to come as the Olyroos had finally managed to get in behind Syria's well-disciplined defensive line.

It was the other two Australian bench players who finally sealed victory.

Brisbane Roar midfielder Aiden O'Neill slid the ball through for Toure, whose well-timed run burst the Syrian defence and put him one-on-one with Ourabi.

Toure finished calmly, sending the Olyroos into ecstasy and a double-chance at qualification.

The semi-final will take place on 12.15am AEDT Thursday morning against either South Korea or Jordan.

Coach Graham Arnold was pleased with the performance, but reiterated his belief that the team can still improve.

"Our boys showed wonderful fight, wonderful commitment," Arnold said. "We knew that Syria play a very direct game, a very physical game, so the boys had to be up for the fight, and they were."

"Overall I know that we have a lot of improvement in us than what we showed tonight. Getting to the semi-finals for the first time ever is great for Australia but my whole focus is on the next game and I expect the players to go up to another level."



Meanwhile Toure was overjoyed at the win and his first goal of the tournament. It was just his second Olyroos goal since debuting in November, the Guinean-born striker having only committed his international future to Australia late last year.

"It is a great honour to score for my country, especially to get us to the semi-finals where we haven't been, it is a good honour," Toure said. "It was a good team goal, everyone contributed to the goal and I am happy to get the win."

"You live for these moments, to play in semi-finals, not many people get that opportunity to play so I am just grateful."

"He (Graham Arnold) let us know that we still have more to go, we haven't qualified yet. Even though it is good to get in the semi-finals there is still more to go, and we still have two more games."

ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ YOU WILL BE MISSED!

Huge shockwaves were sent through the National Premier Leagues NSW Men's competition as Sydney Olympic's Spanish sensation and one of the league's most prolific strikers Alejandro Sanchez has decided to play football back in his homeland in Spain.

The Blues officially released the news on Wednesday as Sanchez requested a release from his 2020 NPL NSW Men's contract to return home to be closer to his family as well as taking up a new football challenge.

Sydney Olympic CEO John Boulous acknowledged the positive contribution Sanchez made both on and off the field.

"Alex is an exceptional talent on the field who was instrumental in our 2018 season where we won the Premiership and Championship.

"He was a crowd and NPL favourite, that entertained fans with his quality skills and attacking play and will be very much missed.

"While we would have loved Alex, as a key member of our squad to stay for this season, we would never stand in his way as he undertakes the next stage of his life and we wish him the best of luck with this.

"Alex was rightfully considered one of the best foreign players to participate in the NPL NSW competition, as well as being a wonderful person off the field, who was always very happy to assist and inspire our younger players and fans."

An emotional Sanchez was sad to be leaving a Club where he experienced many memorable moments with the biggest being winning the NPL NSW Men's Grand Final in 2018 and scoring a brace in front of over 7,000 fans at Leichhardt Oval.



"It is with mixed emotions that I make this decision, it was very difficult for me as I have Olympic in my heart and have loved my time with the best Club in Australia. I will be an Olympic fan forever and follow them closely from Spain.

"I would like to thank Damon, Bill and John for giving me this opportunity to play for Olympic, they made me feel at home from day 1 and I can't put into words how grateful I am.

"To the Coaching staff, physio's, Chris and Sammy and support staff thank you making me a better footballer and individual and I look forward to staying in contact with you.

"To the fans that supported me at every match, I hope I gave you as much joy as you gave to me by coming to watch each week, Olympic has the best supporters in the league.

"To all the players I have played with while I was here, you are more than teammates, you are family to me and I cannot thank you enough for the support and friendship we have made now and will continue into the future.

"I would like to wish everyone in the Sydney Olympic family the very best for the future and a premiership and championship in 2020".

The club announced that Charles Lokolingoy will be joining the Blues alongside another former A-League player in Seb Ryall and F bio Ferreira as new coach Terry Palapanis

closes in on his new recruits for the 2020 season.

Sanchez will go down in NPL NSW Men's history books as being one of the most successful imports ever to grace the football pitches across the top tier league and will leave behind some amazing memories, having scored a plethora of goals as well as starring as the magic man he was on and off the pitch.