

The UAE's second 'Golden Generation' dream of Qatar qualification miracle



- Rodolfo Arruabarrena's team, who meet Iraq on Thursday, must qualify through the playoff route
- The Emiratis must finish third in Group A, defeat Group B's counterpart and then overcome CONMEBOL's fifth-place nation

The sun is setting on the UAE's second "Golden Generation" of footballers.

Ismail Matar, Ali Khaseif, Omar Abdulrahman and Ali Mabkhout thrilled the world at the London 2012 Olympics, won the Gulf Cup in 2013 and then, as arguably one of the continent's best teams, captured hearts as they reached the last four of the 2015 AFC Asian Cup in Australia.

But the coveted place at the 2018 World Cup in Russia never materialized and the team's performances plateaued.

Now there is one more chance.

Can the UAE pull off a miracle, just as the nation's first Golden Generation did in 1990, and qualify to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar?

They'll have to do it the hard way, indeed the hardest possible way.

As we reach the last two rounds of matches of the Asian qualifiers for Qatar 2022, no Arab team has yet secured a seat to Doha, though Saudi Arabia are within touching distance — or three points — of confirming their place. A win against China in Sharjah on Thursday, or simply matching Australia's performance against Japan, will do the trick.

For the other Arab teams, the long and risky play-off route awaits.

In the Group A, three Arab teams — the UAE, Lebanon and Iraq — are still in with a mathematical chance of finishing third, while Syria has lost all hope.

The UAE, in third place with nine points, are best-placed to qualify, followed by Lebanon with six points and Iraq comes in fifth place with five points.

The third-placed teams in Groups A and B will meet in a play-off, with the winner earning the thankless task of trying to get past the fifth-placed team in the CONMEBOL qualification group — currently Peru — in a one-off match to reach Qatar.

New UAE coach Rodolfo Arruabarrena will not be looking that far ahead at this stage.

The Emirati team has a golden opportunity to secure third place after FIFA and the AFC decided to move Thursday's clash with Iraq from Baghdad to Riyadh, giving the away team the huge boost of playing on a neutral ground.

The two nations do have World Cup history. The UAE's first Golden Generation agonizingly lost out to Iraq in the playoffs for the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

But four years later, the likes of Adnan Al-Talyani, Mohsin Musabah and the brothers Nasser and Fahd Khamis did it the hard way, drawing four matches and winning only one in the final six-team group stage, to join South Korea at Italia 90. It remains the UAE's only World Cup appearance to date.

This represents the last chance for this group of players to emulate the stars of the 1980s and 1990s.

Long-time captain and talisman Matar has returned to the squad after some brilliant performances for his club Al-Wahda this season, and, at 38, this is surely his swansong.

Goalkeeper Majed Nasser, who is 37, has also made a comeback, while Walid Abbas is 36. Naturalized Argentine Sebastián Lucas Tagliabúe is 37 and ruled out due to injury.

Fabio De Lima and Caio Canedo have come into the fold in recent years and could be seen as quick fixes.

Perhaps no three players epitomize the Emirati Golden Generation of the last 15 years more than Omar Abdulrahman, Ahmed Khalil and Ali Mabkhout, who all starred in Australia seven years ago.

The 31-year-old Mabkhout remains the qualification campaign's highest scorer across all continents with 14 goals, though he has been woefully out of form for the UAE in his most recent appearances.

Injuries and lack of form, meanwhile, have seen golden boy Abdulrahman, "Amoori," and 2016 Asian Player of the Year Ahmed Khalil — both 30 — slowly slip out of contention.

The current UAE squad is a mix of heroes from the Mahdi Ali-inspired group, established stars like Khalfan Mubarak and a batch of promising youngsters that include Alio Saleh and Yahya Al-Ghassani.

After Iraq on Thursday, Arruabarrena's team will meet South Korea at home in their final Group A fixture next Tuesday. Finish third and thoughts of a miracle qualification can cautiously be entertained.

Awaiting them, potentially, would be the likes of Australia and Peru.

But miracles are rare in football. Sadly, we could be seen seeing the last of the UAE's second Golden Generation once and for all.

