

Rwanda coach Jimmy Mulisa said his young players must recover from the disappointment of their semi-final defeat by Somalia and focus on securing a place at the 2027 U-17 Africa Cup of Nations.

“I have to see how I can uplift the players’ spirits. As someone who has been there, I know how it feels,” Mulisa said after Rwanda lost 5-4 on penalties following a 1-1 draw at Kigali Pele Stadium on Saturday.

Rwanda will face Ethiopia in Monday’s third-place play-off, with the winner claiming the remaining CECAFA qualification place for next year’s continental tournament.

Mulisa praised his players for their effort against a tactically organised Somalia side but admitted that missed chances had cost Rwanda a place in the final.

“They gave their best and we came short in the semi-finals. We had our opportunities, we couldn’t utilise them,” he said. “It’s a process. We’ll continue to learn and develop.”

The hosts took the lead after the break when substitute Patrick Ujeneza dribbled past two Somali defenders before beating goalkeeper Khalid Nor.

Their advantage lasted only four minutes. Mohamud Osman capitalised after Rwanda failed to clear the ball, bringing Somalia level and forcing the match into a penalty shoot-out.

Somalia converted five penalties to Rwanda’s four, with Mohamed scoring the decisive kick to send his team into the final and secure qualification for the 2027 U-17 AFCON.

For Mulisa, the immediate challenge is to lift his players before the meeting with Ethiopia.

“We came in thinking about going to the final,” he said. “We came short, but we still have a chance for the third spot. We’re going to regroup, stay focused and see how we can secure a place.”

In the other game, Uganda had already booked their place in the final with a 4-0 win over Ethiopia. Yusuf Ssenyonga scored twice, while Ukasha Jemba and Arnold Kayemba added a goal each.

The victory extended Uganda's run to three consecutive U-17 AFCON finals. They will now meet Somalia for the regional title, while Rwanda must overcome Ethiopia to join them at the continental tournament.

Mulisa said the quality displayed by the young players offered encouragement beyond the result.

"It just proves that East Africa also has talent," he said. "We just need to continue helping these talents to shine and maybe compete at a higher level."

Rwanda's route to the tournament is now narrower, but not closed. A win over Ethiopia would give the hosts a chance to put Saturday's penalty heartbreak behind them and keep their continental ambitions alive.