



In the spotlight: Lucas Neill and Brett Emerton, Blackburn, UK, January 2006.

SOMEWHERE IN THE WILDS OF LANCASHIRE IN THE NORTH OF England, off a motorway, off a main road, down a country lane, past a bloke with a sheep and a village pub so old Pitt the Elder had a pint in it, is a place that doesn't belong there at all.

The first clue is the bronze sculpture of a footballer by the road, busy dribbling a bronze football along a hedgerow. The next is the huge blue-plastic and steel construction opposite, with a sign saying "Senior Training Centre". This is the training complex for Blackburn Rovers FC, the Premiership club biffing its way like a tug from the terrible whirlpool of relegation into the heavy seas of mid-table, and the home of Brett Emerton and Lucas Neill, Socceroos.

The glamour of the Premiership is not here. Despite the big shiny vehicles stocking the car park, this is a shivery windswept place, especially in English January, when the sun is something a displaced Australian can only struggle to remember, and the day begins to fade at something like three o'clock. It is a place where a footballer gets reminded of the basics of his trade, and one the average fan would do well to find and encouraged not to linger. The walls inside are lined with posters featuring ecstatic Blackburn goal-celebrations and inspiring slogans ("It's not about the breaths you take; it's the breaths you take away"; "The heart is not just a muscle"); doors open onto weights rooms and treatment rooms and offices for physios and trainers and managers: all the pieces of a machine geared to delivering 11 men with a plan onto a football pitch on match-day.

In a vast full-sized indoor football arena like a carpeted aircraft hangar, the photographer pokes miserably at his equipment under the dim lights far above. Brett Emerton is thrown Nike's new World Cup-edition Socceroos top, the golden garment the first and only one anywhere in the world. He looks at it. "Don't Brazil wear exactly this colour?" There is a brief silence as we all look at each

other, alone in this huge atmosphere-free room on the edge of nowhere. It's a sudden reminder that in just a few months from now, two of us will be standing on the same pitch as some of the finest players in one of the best teams in any sport, ever. And that is something.

OUTSIDE THE front of the training centre, near the sculpture and the hedgerow, is a cafe where we reconvene. It's a place players would only consider entering if forced to talk to journos or agents, with its swathe of beech and chrome, pastel walls, Novotel-style prints and a barman who supports Celtic. The closed-circuit TVs are playing some hideous video-show called *50 Greatest Love Songs*. Bizarrely, the two Socceroos arrive to be serenaded by Kylie and Jason's *Especially for You*.

Lucas Neill, 28, is one of those defenders who started as a striker and moved backwards. After the progression from his local boys' club in Manly, Sydney, through the NSW Academy and the AIS, he signed for London side Millwall as a teenager in 1995, staying for six years (he was there with fellow Socceroo Tim Cahill). Slim and compact, he seems in the image of that small club: combative, a scrapper, a hint of

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