

SOCCEROOS

“no one likes us and we don’t care”. In the make-do atmosphere of the old English second division, Neill played everywhere on the park but up-front and in goal. “For a while no one really knew what my best position was,” he says. “Then I had a season at right-midfield and right-back and we won the league.

“I came here (to Blackburn, in 2001) on trial as a midfielder; then two right-backs got injured, one on the Wednesday and one on the Thursday. On the Friday I was signed and I played on Saturday against Sunderland. Weird, weird, weird chance that I got. After that I’ve missed 10 games in five years.”

Neill had no doubts that he was Premiership material. In fact, he rarely seems to have any doubts at all. Slotted in the workaday position of right-back, it’s easy to forget that this is a man who has been playing against some of the world’s best for years without taking a step back. For the clearest insight to his character, think back to that nerve-mangling penalty shootout in Australia’s World Cup qualifier against Uruguay. There were many different expressions on the faces of those present, but the only one featuring a smirk was that of Lucas Neill, as he ran up to stroke his penalty home. Not a smile, mind you, but a *smirk*.

“The day before the match, John Aloisi and I went to that end to take five penalties each. I hit my five in exactly that corner. So when I walk up (during the shootout), I’m kind of smirking because I know I’ve done five of these already. I just walk up, do the exact same routine and hit the exact same spot. That’s how confident I was. The keeper went the other way, but I don’t think he would have saved it.”

The penalty shootout is the footballer’s defining terror: the only thing that turns a democratic team sport into man-to-man combat. The manager has to look into your eyes and know you won’t fall apart, buckle on the run-up, blaze the thing into creation. Dutchman Guus Hiddink, even as a recently installed manager, must have known Neill was his man.

“I love that kind of pressure,” says Neill, and he is smirking again just thinking about it. “The penalty shootout (against Uruguay) – that’s what I live for. Giving yourself a chance to get into that position – to be the one to make the difference in the big games. My worry was not missing, but not being there at all. It was great.”

For a solid player, a stopper, Lucas Neill comes across as a contradiction. He tries to be serious, the hard pillar of the back line, but a broad grin is often bubbling underneath. At the start of the 2003-04 season, Neill performed an inelegant lunge at Liverpool defender Jamie Carragher, breaking his leg. As a result of the media firestorm that followed, he no longer talks to the British press. In fact, he says, he doesn’t read about himself and doesn’t care about his reputation, whatever it may be. “I know I play well every week and I only seem to get noticed for the bad things I do,” he complains.

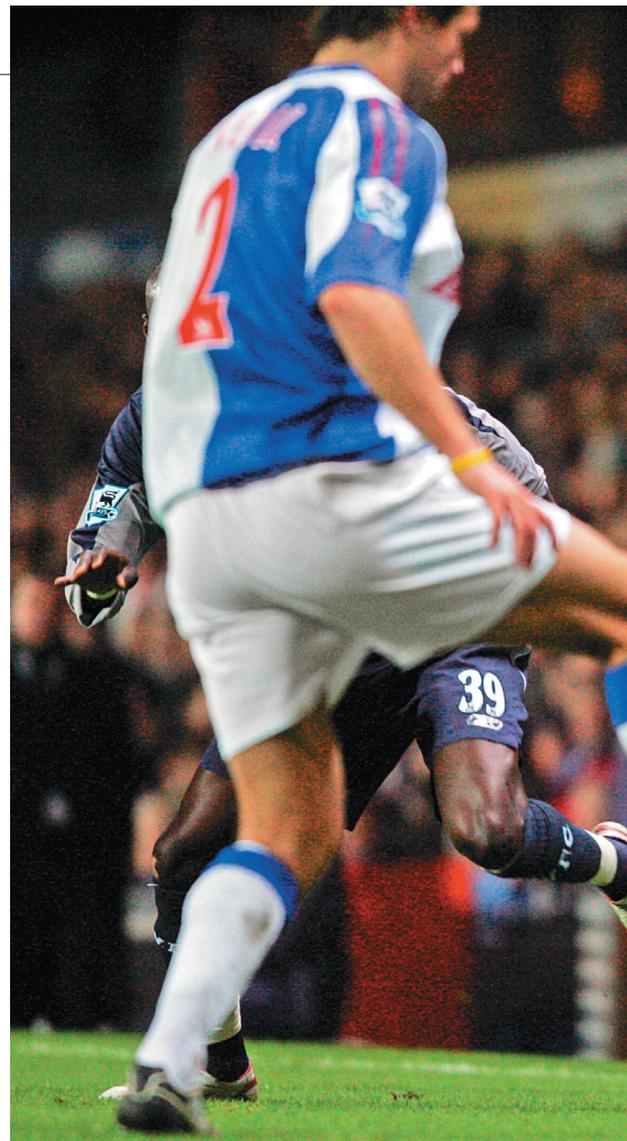
He embarks on a long defender’s speech about how so many players are divers and the referees have got it in for him and the crowds have turned soft, but underneath it all, with his beautiful silver bling and the personalised car-number plate, you sense the old Manly goal-scorer waiting to get out.

“I watch Timmy (Cahill) and Harry (Kewell) and Dukes (Mark Viduka) and they can take all the headlines,” he claims. “It doesn’t bother me. I get the same bonuses as them, the same success, the same feeling of winning. Harry goes on *MTV Cribs* and I don’t. He’s got a more skilful reputation than me and that’s all right. We’re completely different people. I’ll never put my house on telly. I don’t want people to know what they can nick from my house.” The grin is in full evidence. He says he doesn’t seek the attention, but is clearly enjoying himself now.

Grey games: Backed by a local housing estate, the Blackburn squad go through a five-a-side training match.



Training run: Emerton escapes for the day.



BLACKBURN’S OTHER resident Socceroo, Brett Emerton, 27, is a very different kettle of footballer. Taller, bulkier and broader of feature, he sits seriously across the beechwood table like a man about to give evidence at a grand jury. He speaks quietly and politely, clearing his throat before each answer, as though long out of practice. There may be a place where the careless and crazy Brett Emerton dwells, but it’s unlikely to be uncovered in an hour over tea and biscuits.

If Neill represents the Socceroo’s strength and stability, Emerton is, alongside Kewell, one of those expected to give the side its creative surprises. He is an attacking midfielder, a winger with the ability to worry defenders by running fast at them with the ball (which they hate) and the amazingly rare talent to place a cross where he wants it (which they hate even more) – the same skill that gave Mr Beckham his nice house and his Real Madrid contract.

From Campbelltown in Sydney’s west, the young Emerton experienced, if anything, an even smoother ride through the professional ranks than Neill. From the age of five, football was his main love, and he was embraced by NSW, the AIS and Sydney Olympic, before Dutch club Feyenoord snapped him up in 2000. Shrewdly and, one feels typically, his move abroad was only achieved with a great deal of planning and preparation.

“I played for Sydney Olympic for three or four seasons. I just thought it was important that when I did make the step to move overseas I was ready, not only as a footballer but as a person as well.”

PHOTOGRAPHY: JEREMY TOLVONEN (MANLY STAND).