



The Australian national team is a match for anybody.

Henry and people like that were unbelievable, but when I play against them, I think, 'I'm not actually that bad myself.'

"I'm going up against Ronaldo, Adriano, Robinho, all those players – but I want to see how good I am. You get to gauge how good you are against the best in the world, and how good you are as a team against the best in the world. That's what you play football for. I don't want to play against the guy from Trinidad who plays in the fourth division in England. I'm professional and I know how to get the job done. I'm reliable." He curls the word around his tongue self-mockingly, as though people have told him that a little too often.

Brett Emerton sees the Socceroos' strength is in its attack, and in its coach. "I can't speak highly enough of Guus Hiddink. He's done an exceptional job. Great manager and a great person off the pitch as well. He came in and changed things slightly, tactically, and gave all us players the belief that we could go on and beat Uruguay. He's quite laid-back, but firm, too. He gets the message across without being too rough."

He clears his throat again, and adds, unprompted, "Confidence is very important in football and I think the Australian national team is pretty much a match for anybody in the world..."

SATURDAY NIGHT at Blackburn's Ewood Park stadium is even colder than Friday afternoon. If it was windy too, they'd call the game off on the grounds of sheer cruelty.

Blackburn are playing the equally solid and hard-tackling Bolton Wanderers, and both Socceroos are in the starting line-up. It is just one of the many matches before they can even begin to think seriously about their must-win game against Japan in the heat of a German summer.

The match goes as scripted under the floodlights. Neill brooks no nonsense and looks for any opportunity to bring the ball forward, linking well with Emerton on the right wing. Emerton is big, smooth and classy, galloping hard like a stag along the flank. His, and Blackburn's, biggest chance of the night is a towering header that raps the bar and disappears into the gloved-and-hatted crowd.

But this is a bits and pieces game; when Bolton's Japanese playmaker Nakata is sent off, it degenerates into an out-and-out battle, some of it between the fans. Both managers shout plumes of smoke into the frigid air.

Emerton is taken off. Neill nearly gives away a goal, but doesn't. The evening ends, goalless. I walk away cold, but strangely warmed, too. Encouraged. Australia is well represented by men such as these: not plucky B-listers or mercurial glamour boys as often in the past, but confident guys at the top of their game, playing unafraid and unawed in the world's toughest league. Brazil had better come ready for a game. **A**

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