



# ROOS AWAKENING



**Finally enjoying his football again, a refreshed, in-form JOSH KENNEDY could be Australia's secret weapon in South Africa**

WORDS IVAN SMITH

It's the tireddest cliché there is, but to get anywhere at all in this World Cup, Australia will need to score goals – regularly. Qualifying was a solid, successful, but unspectacular process, but the tournament proper is different: the Socceroos can't rely on Tim Cahill or Harry Kewell to pull them out of it every game; Mark Viduka, who would have been useful, is AWOL. Enter Josh Kennedy.

The tall, lanky 27-year-old Victorian, with a famous resemblance to Jesus, could be our saviour. Often making appearances off the bench, the striker has scored an increasing number of important goals for the team and is Pim Verbeek's No.1 option if things are looking tense and tight. And all the signs are that Kennedy will get to game one – Germany – in perhaps the best mental and physical condition of any Socceroo. After 10 tough years in Germany, where he did the tour of some of the best and worst cities in Europe – from Stuttgart to Nuremberg to Dresden – he has settled in the port city of Nagoya, Japan, where his height is more of an advantage. And he's in the goals. The J-League's season suits him, too: when *Alpha* meets Kennedy, he is on a long break, before three months of competitive play tunes him up nicely for The Big One.

First, though, *Alpha* drags him back to the dark days in Germany, and the last days at soon-to-be relegated Karlsruher SC, his seventh German club.

"The first six months were fantastic. Then the first six months of the new season, the team didn't go as well as the season before. I felt I got used as a scapegoat,

being a foreigner, and got used for the reason the team wasn't winning. When things go bad, they go pretty bad. I'd turn up for training and the coach would say, 'Just go for a run in the forest.' So I knew I needed a change, especially with the World Cup coming up: I needed to be playing, not running in a forest by myself.

"I'd been in Germany all my adult life – so it was time for a change. Japan seemed very appealing."

Ten years in Germany saw highs, lows, and a lot of toughening up for Kennedy. "Going over there at such a young age and going through the good times and bad times, means that now not so much fazes me. It's developed me on and off the pitch."

The thing that strikes you immediately about Kennedy is how smart he is – and how opinionated. Great for a reporter; less good if you're manager of a German football team. "It's hard to have an opinion with a German coach. They encourage you to speak up, but when you do and if it's not to their liking, then you pay the consequences. One of the things my wife hates and likes about me is that I tell it how it is, and that sometimes gets me in trouble. But Japan is fantastic. I get on really well with the coach (Serbian legend Dragan Stojkovic) – he's a fantastic guy. He loves football and wants to have fun, and that suits me as an Aussie: work hard but enjoy it."

Although a junior member of the last World Cup, Kennedy has fond memories



Strike gold: With size and skill, Kennedy is a hard man to contain.

of the experience – not least because it was in Germany. "It was weird. I'd get in my car and drive to where the team was staying; if I had the day off, I'd drive to see Mum and Dad; it was easy to order dinner and I was helping the guys – it was quite easy – it was in my backyard."

Life has been fairly easy in Japan so far, too. The Kennedy daughters are too young to worry about language and school, and the hardest part has been understanding his GPS enough to get to and from training. On the pitch, he suddenly finds he's a giant (at 1.94m), and the goals have flowed – including one game in which he scored a perfect hat-trick (right- and left-foot, header).

"Each game I know I'll probably score a goal. In Germany, there would be days I wouldn't even have a shot on goal. The hat-trick was definitely good. But I can play football as well as head goals – friends come to watch a game and can't believe the tricks and flicks I do that I wouldn't have tried in the Bundesliga."

The style of football isn't the only thing that's changed. Japan's heat and humidity mean Kennedy will arrive in South Africa as conditioned as any Socceroo. "Summer in Nagoya is ridiculous; it's like North Queensland humidity. That's what it was like when I first came. I'd easily lose a few kilos a game. It will be

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good to go from hotter conditions to cooler (in South Africa), and it will be to my advantage."

Not that he's even thinking about the Cup too much yet. For an active sports star, a few months are a lifetime, when anything can happen. "There are still games to play before the Cup. After my Achilles injury (a bad one straight after the last Cup) I don't take too much for granted; I'm in the team and I'm going to the World Cup and that's all that matters."

Pressed, he'll concede Australia's group is "exciting" – and of course one team in particular is on his radar. "Germany are a tournament team and everyone loves to beat them – especially me. But they never want to lose any game; even if it's against Liechtenstein, they don't want to lose."

"They are expected to win – because they are Germany. And when they play Australia, the fans won't expect us to do anything. That's to our advantage because they'll have all the pressure. If they don't win there'll be big problems in Germany."

In some ways, Germany and the Socceroos are similar teams: few stars, a team ethic – and a winning attitude.



Extra dimension: "I can play football as well as head goals."

## KENNEDY'S CAREER AT A GLANCE

**BORN:** August 20, 1982  
**CLUB:** Nagoya Grampus  
**POSITION:** Striker  
**PREVIOUS CLUBS:** Carlton SC, VfL Wolfsburg, Stuttgarter Kickers, Koln, Dynamo Dresden, FC Nuremberg, Karlsruher SC  
**SOCCEROOS STATS:** Scored trademark header on debut in a friendly against Liechtenstein, in June 2006; 16 appearances; six goals  
**FAMOUS FOR:** Scoring headers; being tall; looking like the Son of God

"That's just Aussie team sports in general; that's why we're always hard to beat. There's a lot of pressure there, but a lot of the guys were there in 2006, which helps. There's nothing better than being in a sports team that can do well – that's what we've shown in the past two years. Once we're out there, it's the same every game, whether it's Oman or Germany, we're always pumped up and ready to go. Every game – even against bottom teams in Japan – I go out to perform."

That attitude is reassuring – as is the Pim Verbeek philosophy, so evident in qualifying. "First and foremost we're out there to win. His formation is based on how we can win a game, not just to look pretty. When you're playing an overseas game on a shit pitch in 40 degrees, you

can't look pretty. The communication with him is fantastic, too. I'm able to have a chat with Pim about formation or what to do in a game. That gives me confidence."

It's encouraging for us, the fan, considering Kennedy is most likely our super-sub, consigned to the pine until an impact is needed. It's good to know the guy unzipping the tracksuit is a fit, confident goal-scorer.

"Everyone wants to start, but we all need to be ready. I'm in good form, scoring goals and I told Pim I'm there for him – if I'm on the bench I'm still there for him. He understands that – that's how you communicate with him. He tells you his side of the story; you tell him your side – no hard feelings; it's nothing personal, it's football."