15 DAYS IN JUNE (abridged)

To Pino Paonessa

AUTHOR'S NOTE

'When Australia qualifies for the next World Cup, this country is going to go berserk.'
Johnny Warren, 2003

At quarter to midnight on 16 November 2005, I was standing in the media box at Telstra Stadium in Sydney, wedged between a stunned Japanese FIFA official and an Italian bloke who'd sneaked his way into the enclosure by borrowing a pass from a friend. The Italian had tears streaming down his face. Both men couldn't believe what they'd just seen. I had to take their word for it. Like many of the 83,000 at the stadium, and the eight million watching around the country, I hadn't been able to bring myself to look. In truth, I'd buried my face in the armpit of the Italian bloke's leather jacket. He didn't seem to mind. 'I understand, mate, it's alright,' he laughed, when I apologised afterwards.

The noise inside the ground was so loud and unearthly it was as if I'd pressed my ear up against the jet engine of an airplane. The stands rippled with movement and colour, like fields of blooming canola. I could vaguely make out what looked like Australia's Spain-based striker John Aloisi running down the far sideline with ten maniacs in full playing kit chasing him, bench players and team officials in their wake. I turned around to the radio booth behind me to see ABC commentators Peter Wilkins and Andy Harper thumping the perspex window with their fists and almost expiring from excitement. High fives were flying everywhere. Grown men were hugging and kissing. The flute solo in Men at Work's 'Down Under' filled the late spring air, along with fireworks, yellow streamers and all manner of rubbish. 'We've done it!' said the Italian bloke, clasping my wrist. 'I don't fucking believe it. We've done it!' He wiped the tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket.

We'd done it. We'd finally made it to the FIFA World Cup, the biggest sporting event on earth, after 32 excruciating years. Nineteen seventy-four was a long time ago. It was another time. Patty Hearst. Richard Nixon. Cyclone Tracy. Now it had all come full circle, but what the hell had happened? What sort of perverse logic was at work here? This had been one of the worst prepared qualifying campaigns in living memory. The new coach, a Dutch gun-for-hire called Guus Hiddink, who'd almost torn his hair out watching his 'boys' scrape to a 2–1 qualifying win over the Solomon Islands in a Honiara cow paddock, had said we'd need a 'miracle' to make it through. He'd only been five weeks in the job and had engineered victory over a team that hadn't lost a game in South America in the second half of its qualifying campaign, even against world-beaters Brazil and Argentina. Now we were going to Deutschland 2006. The jinx was over. The hoodoo shattered.

As first a fan, then a sports journalist obsessed with this team of no-hopers, I had spent some of the best years of my life dreaming of this very day. I'd lived through the agony of Argentina in 1993, Iran in 1997, Uruguay in 2001. I could remember where I was for each of them, when that first hit to the guts came, why I persisted in believing in the Socceroos when it would have been easier to just give up and walk away. But now that it had come, I didn't know what to think, having been so habitually conditioned to watching them lose. I sat back down in my seat and gathered my thoughts. So Australia had qualified – what were we supposed to do now?

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Set aside June 2006, for starters. The next morning I went to my local bookstore to get

some literary inspiration for the trip I planned to make to Germany. I walked over to the travel section, gave the racks a quick once-over and came up with ... nothing. *Nichts*. While I had the choice of more than 500 books about growing olives in Italy or buying condemned buildings from canny geriatrics in France, if I wanted anything about Germany, the kindly shop assistant told me, I'd be better off looking in History or Military Studies. That wasn't what I wanted. So I tried the local library. The same. No *A Year in Morgenröthe-Rautenkratz* or *Under the Thuringian Sun* on any shelves, anywhere. Publishers clearly didn't see much of a market for books about vacationing in a land that had given rise to Martin Luther, Adolf Hitler and Boney M. Aside from guidebooks, there were no German travel books at all.

For most of us, Germany happily functions as the setting for a midday war movie or as a subject we took in high school. We can all reference it by important points in its history or popular culture: Versailles; the Weimar Republic; the Holocaust; Dresden; JFK speaking at the opening of the Berlin Wall; David Hasselhoff torturing modern song at its fall; Alan Rickman's mincing performance as a sinister West German terrorist in the first *Die Hard*; that Kraftwerk album we bought on a whim and quickly tried to return. Yet beyond the parameters of murder, conflict, espionage and bad 1980s rock, Germany has scant meaningful presence in our daily lives.

We all own German products. We drink German beer. Some of us drive German cars. But to want to travel to a country, and to fully immerse oneself in its very essence, it must have more going for it than its GDP. Germany, unfortunately, possesses very little such appeal. Its most significant problem is not its Nazi heritage or the legacy of the Cold War, but simply that there are better places in Europe to visit. Like architecture and culture? Try Italy or France. Like good food and hot bodies? Go to Spain. Like sunshine and beaches? Book a ticket to Portugal or Croatia.

Although Germany remains the dominant economy in Europe, five million unemployed, the lowest birth rate in the EU and nearly zero per cent growth are proving problematic for a nation that has lived on the fruits of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the so-called 'economic miracle'. This *Wirtschaftswunder*, the period between the end of the war and the fall of the wall, is fundamental to the identity of the German people. Germany's other 'miracle', the 'Miracle of Bern', when West Germany defeated Hungary in the final of the 1954 World Cup, is similarly crucial. When they had little to be proud of, sport offered them pride. In fact, Germany's relationship with sport is not unlike Australia's. We both feel validated by winning and like to vaunt our superiority. Little wonder, then, that from as early as 1992, Germany began planning a bid to host its third football World Cup.

Winning the right to a host a World Cup is one thing. Winning the world over is another. So the German government decided to spend €3 million on a promotional campaign with the catchy slogan, 'Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden' or 'A Time to Make Friends'. It made no secret of the fact it was a tough assignment.

'We are known for our organisational talents and punctuality,' said Dr Christoph Bergner, German Interior Ministry state secretary. 'Unfortunately we are not viewed as especially friendly and therefore have a special challenge with the World Cup.'

German football giant Franz Beckenbauer, head of the German World Cup Organising Committee and a vice-president of FIFA, football's world governing body, announced at the press conference for the launch of the campaign in December 2005 that his country 'wouldn't get this opportunity again for another 50 years so it's worth at least smiling for a few weeks'. Straight from The Kaiser's mouth. Come to Germany, take note of all these happy smiley Germans, and spend your money, *bitte*.

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I was one sceptic who didn't need convincing to return to Germany. I'd been there earlier in the year for *Inside Sport* magazine on a German government–sponsored junket, the highlight of which was seeing the Socceroos play in the FIFA Confederations Cup in Frankfurt, the traditional dry run for the World Cup. When the offer came, I didn't hesitate to accept. It was a chance to see our underplayed national team take on a powerhouse of the game, Germany, in a brand new arena that would host World Cup games. A once- in-a-lifetime opportunity to see Australia skipper Craig Moore lead his men onto the tartan pitch of the Waltstadion, amid the jeers of the boisterous and well-lubricated German fans, to line up opposite names like Ballack, Schweinsteiger, Podolski, Kahn – proper football names. My boss at *Inside Sport* was the fearsome Brad Boxall, a legendary figure in men's magazines who'd built his career on soft porn and rugby league. He didn't know Schweinsteiger from a bottle of Steinlager, but he graciously and unexpectedly took my word that the trip was worth it and agreed to let me go with a group of excited sports hacks for ten days.

It was a long way to go for one game, but the German government was keen to show our magazine's Australian readers that there was more to a World Cup than just football. Herded from hotel to hotel, city to city, we got to see with our own eyes what made Germany tick, who its people were, and how it was preparing to stage this massive event that, because the Socceroos always failed to qualify, still flew under the radar of most Australians. Over those ten days, my opinion of all things Teutonic began to change. The people were surprisingly friendly, the cities weren't that awful, the nightlife was as good as anywhere, if not better, and the country's horrendous past didn't seem as much of a burden on everyday German life as we journalists had come to expect. We got to see a mob of fans descend upon the white-haired Beckenbauer in his limousine outside the Waltstadion as if he were a rock star. We witnessed the ridiculous pampering of FIFA officials at their hotel, carrying on like they were important heads of state. We had privileged access to explore the bowels of a World Cup stadium, AOL Arena, in the port city of Hamburg, and see the super-sized players' spas and the hangar-like garages that were purpose-built to whisk in team buses so that players could avoid the melee of over-zealous fans outside. The scale of it all – the preparation that the World Cup demanded of its organisers – left us in suitable awe. That's why, when Aloisi slotted home his penalty, I knew I had to go back. To start planning for a holiday I had never expected to take, like the tens of thousands of Australian football fans, both old diehards and new converts, making the very same plans. A lucky few would get match tickets. The majority would not, but would still come to Germany in their droves – good-humoured, passionate in their support and open to whatever fate rolled our way.

People like Christopher Stevenson from Albion Park, who was 20 metres underground when Australia defeated Uruguay. A miner at the Delta Colliery at Elouera, he didn't see any of the game live but when finally told about it by friends at the end of his shift he was just as excited as if he'd been there. Now, on a jumbo bound for Frankfurt, he was on his way to the World Cup, with his adult son Daniel and brother-in-law Werner, an émigré from Germany. All three were resigned to not getting tickets, but they didn't seem to care. They were going for the hell of it and their better halves had given their blessings. 'We've got the best wives in the world,' said the mustachioed Werner.

One of Christopher's workmates, irony of ironies, was 1974 Socceroos captain Peter Wilson, who had famously turned his back on the game, shunned player reunions, and become a virtual recluse at his home in Kembla Heights, outside Wollongong. He'd

refused to comment publicly on anything to do with the Socceroos, the 1974 version or any other. But when Christopher told Peter he was going to Germany, the old warrior's face lit up.
'Oh mate, you'll have a good time over there.'

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I had a hunch that Australia's presence at the tournament would be a significant few weeks, not only because Australian football had finally found itself a global stage, but also because the rest of the world was given an opportunity to reassess its mostly hackneyed view of Australia. Some had already made the grandiose claim that our nation changed on the night of 16 November 2005, but that was premature.
We won a football game to take one of the 32 spots at the World Cup. (If we had lost the tie – and we came very close to doing just that, save for a split-second's misjudgment from Uruguay's Alvaro Recoba in the 18th minute – football could easily have reverted to the dark ages.) The important moment for our country was still to come. That was in June, when we had at least three games to show the world we weren't a fluke, and that we deserved to be considered in the same company as Brazil, Argentina, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Holland.
Sport has always been vital to any reading of our national identity, but not before this World Cup had we the opportunity to compete, quite literally, against the rest of the planet in a sport that really counted for something. The whole world would be watching these three games – Chinese, Indians, Africans, Europeans, Americans, Japanese, Brazilians, Russians, Arabs, Melanesians, Israelis, Vietnamese, everybody. This was an opportunity our country had not had in over three decades. For 270 minutes, possibly more, we'd be able to show the world who we were, what we stood for, and how far we had come. Being in Germany was also an opportunity for self-evaluation. When we saw ourselves up close, would we like what we saw?
It was my fervent hope that with a great Australian side in Germany we would witness scenes much like those at Korea–Japan 2002 when Hiddink took the host nation to the semi-finals and triggered a wave of national pride no one had seen coming. The bedlam on the streets of the Korean capital, gridlocked with seven million screaming football converts in their 'Be the Reds!' T-shirts, was unprecedented.
Australia was obviously a different case to Korea in many ways. We weren't hosting a World Cup on home soil, nor, at that stage of our football development, had we the pedigree of the Koreans. But there were enough similarities between the two countries for any comparison not to be trite. Both nations had long been encumbered with an inferiority complex: Australia for its convict past, Korea for its forced occupation by Japan in the early 20th century. Yet both were – and are – two of the most dynamic countries in their regions. Hiddink, the inscrutable, private Dutchman, had tapped into what made both countries tick, and made them believe that anything was possible.
He would inherit a very different team in Australia. Where the Koreans were defensively strong but bereft of attack, Australia was the opposite. Where Korean team culture was based on traditional hierarchical values, Australia's was intrinsically egalitarian. In the Socceroos, Hiddink found a team inculcated in a culture he could work with instantly. What he had to change was their skill level, organisational acumen and approach. Once those things had been sorted out, the rest would take care of itself. Theoretically.
As individuals, Hiddink's new 'project' might not have represented the best football talent in Europe, but as a unit they weren't about to collapse into a self-recriminating

rabble when the going got tough, à la Portugal at Korea–Japan 2002. They would give their all whatever odds were stacked against them. This was as much an opportunity for Hiddink to test his own adaptability as it was for Australia to win some football matches. These were all the things I expected – or at least hoped – to see fulfilled in Germany. What I hadn't bargained on was returning home with a renewed appreciation of what already makes Australia great, World Cup success or not. Qualities all of us probably take for granted at one time or another but fiercely uphold by almost natural reflex. Though they would ultimately succumb in harsh circumstances to Italy in the second round, Hiddink's Socceroos showed even the biggest football powers that they could learn one or two things about how to play the game. For those 15 days in June, the world, briefly, turned on its axis.

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Yet, amid the hype surrounding the Socceroos' achievement in Germany, it was the period that came after the national team's elimination that was arguably more important for the development of the Australian game. When Hiddink touched down in Moscow in late July 2006, replacing Dynamo Moscow's Yury Syomin as coach of Russia, a new chapter in Australia's football story began.

That story wasn't as easy to follow, and certainly wasn't as heroic, but would demonstrate just how much Australia had changed for its World Cup experience. Not all of what transpired was good. Some of it, in fact, saw Australian football get knocked down a few pegs – the announcement of John O'Neill's decision not to stay on as Football Federation Australia chief executive, the resignation of his prize recruit, Matt Carroll, as head of operations and the Kuwait City and Denmark meltdowns were all massive body blows to FFA, an organisation that hadn't put a foot wrong in years. Two steps forward, one step back.

It's sobering to think that the Socceroos only won one game in Germany. Yet that one game changed our football and our country, both in the way we felt about ourselves and in the image Australia projected abroad. The Socceroos, about to go into their first Asian Cup the following year, also became a vehicle for a lot of the aspirations Australia had lost sight of during the John Howard era – true 'engagement' with Asia, being open to new ideas, having a world vision.

Football, as much as politics or economics, can change societies, something that has been proven at recent World Cups. The world game changed France, it changed Korea and Japan, it changed Germany, it changed South Africa, it may well change Brazil too. The Socceroos' 15 days at the FIFA World Cup in June 2006 represented a pivotal moment in Australia's nationhood and this e-book is intended to be a celebration of the impact World Cups have on pretty much every one of us each time they roll around and a commemoration of what remains our best performance at a World Cup. It's impossible not to be swept up by this tournament. Just as it's impossible to deny the charms of the exhilarating affliction we call football.

Jesse Fink
Sydney, 2014

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT WORLD CUP?

'I can't say it did anything for me because I'm not into the sport... all they have done is qualify for a tournament.'
Leigh Matthews, 2005

Even now, half a decade on from the time he made this comment, it beggars belief that such a pillar of Australian sport as Matthews, the great Hawthorn VFL rover and AFL coach, could be so pig-headedly ignorant – or cynically dismissive – of what it means to qualify for a FIFA World Cup, the world's biggest sporting event. But in fairness to Matthews, the significance of the Socceroos' achievement on the morning of 17 November 2005 was lost not just on him but on a lot of people, though you wouldn't have guessed it from the public reaction.

Businesses near my home in Sydney's inner west had the front pages of the day's dailies sticky-taped to their windows. Green-and-gold streamers fluttered from the aerials of hotted-up cars. Commuters sipping their takeaway coffees were wearing green-and-gold 'Australia' caps. In The Domain, a stretch of open parkland in the centre of the city, a stage was set up for the thousands of supporters – who had not had the opportunity or the inclination to sleep – to cheer their new heroes. *The Australian* published a photo of one fan, Steve Saunders, who had crawled out of his hospital bed and taken his drip with him. He was still recovering from a machete attack, of all things, but couldn't bear to stay away from the celebrations. 'It's a special day,' he told the paper. 'If anything, that's going to cure me.' His nurse had other ideas and escorted him back to the ward before the players emerged.

It was as if Australia's football tribes had suddenly found themselves in a parallel universe. How else to explain the tabloid *Daily Telegraph*'s front page the next day: 'THE HEROES 12-PAGE SOUVENIR LIFTOUT. THE NIGHT OUR ROOS LIVED THEIR DREAM'? *Our* Roos? This coming from a paper that would have reserved its dying breath to stick the knife into football? What was going on? 'Ethnic' broadcaster SBS earned its highest ratings in a quarter of a century. National broadcaster ABC ran with the news of the Socceroos' win for the first six minutes of its 7pm bulletin. No other single sporting event in memory had received such exposure. Even Legends Genuine Memorabilia, the heartbeat of sporting middle Australia, rushed a thousand copies of 'DESTINY FULFILLED', a 'superb panograph' comprising 'a montage of memorable imagery from that special night' into stores. All for $348, or $166 in three 'easy monthly payments'. Counterfeits, made from crude colour photocopies, flooded the market. My local café was selling them by the Friday.

The Socceroos' win was even held up by some federal politicians as a defining moment for multicultural Australia, a vindication of the immigration policies pursued by Liberal and Labor governments since the meat-and-two-veg days of Arthur Calwell and the White Australia Policy. This lofty claim, however, was undermined a few weeks later in Cronulla when mobs of Lebanese hoodlums and Anglo-Saxon 'skip' thugs laid into each other with fists, boots and beer bottles in Australia's biggest race riots since the 1850s. It was a reality check for anyone who felt the Socceroos had helped our country turn an important corner. Sometimes, winning a game of football can only do so much. As those shameful events would attest, Australia had not changed per se, but the Socceroos had tapped into something. Post 16 November, our country felt like a different place, the victory over Uruguay evoking passions that had hitherto lain

dormant. But when the draw for the finals was held and the Aussies were bundled into a group with world champions Brazil, 1998 semi-finalists Croatia and reigning Asian champions Japan, the good cheer turned to cheerful resignation. Whatever it meant for our country going to a World Cup, Australia wasn't going to last very long at all.
The Socceroos' tournament was as good as over. Just turning up, the critics argued, was ample reward for a code that still had years of hard work to put in before it could capture Australians' hearts and souls. Aussie Rules, rugby league and cricket were unassailable. Whatever residual public interest remained after those sports went into following rugby union's Wallabies. Soccer, and at this time it was known by no other name by the majority of Australians, was a sport for dilettantes – it wasn't fair dinkum. Channel Nine had given the sport a crack in 2002 and couldn't make it work. How could it when the local game's most marketable commodity, Harry Kewell, didn't even bother to come home and play for his country? The message from the naysayers was pretty clear: Fellas, have fun in Germany while it lasts but don't expect anything and don't get ahead of yourselves. Remember, we're Aussies – we're not like the rest of the world. Come June next year the only thing we'll be thinking about is Ricky Ponting getting back the Ashes. Once the World Cup's over, you won't have any pull. It'll be back to same old, same old.
Boy, did they get it wrong.

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It's accepted by almost anyone who follows the game that football is an expression of national identity at its most stark; that the great teams and the way they play can be held up as a mirror of the societies they come from. It's a theory that holds with the Brazilians. They're flamboyant, athletic, always look like they're about to break out dancing. The same with the Italians. Touchy, self-absorbed, theatrical. The English are capable but dull, while the Croatians are hot-headed and brutal. The stereotypes – and they *are* stereotypes – are easy to identify and, though generalisations, have some basis in truth. So what, then, can be inferred about Australia from the Socceroos?
Prior to Christmas 2005, I thought I had it figured out: we unapologetically dish out the hard stuff, want to keep our structure at all times, can hold up the ball but fail up front when it matters most. In summary: we're battlers, capable of the big upset, can take direction, but often wilt under pressure or can't finish off an opponent. I'd also seen enough of rough-and-tumble Socceroos sides over two decades to accept that we weren't the most elegant of football nations. Graham Arnold's description of his own time playing for Australia under Frank Arok was of it being 'pretty much, "Let's get out there and scare the hell out of them" – our brand was to get by on the physical side of things'.
But that was precisely what I loved about the Australian team – they were always up against it. Football was one sport in which our supremacy wasn't a given. We frequently see athletes whose poor off-field behaviour is a symptom of a wider problem of excess and unaccountability in Australian sport. But the Socceroos, as far I was concerned, were a notable exception. They had carved out careers abroad in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environments, proving they could thrive outside the bubble of Australian sporting celebrity with no special treatment, little media interest and, up until recent times, next to no support from administrators back home. They seemed genuinely touched when the mainstream media took the slightest bit of interest in what they were doing.
The prevailing attitude of the press even as recently as 2005 was that football was

someone else's game. That attitude mystified me, and it certainly mystified people inside the sport. Among them was Socceroos captain Mark Viduka, who'd experienced the establishment's ingrained hostility not just as a kid in suburban Melbourne but as a world-class striker in the English Premier League. What did he have to do to make Australia sit up and take notice? He was exasperated by the indifference of his countrymen.

'No other sport can generate this much interest and passion and patriotism,' he told me. 'This is the whole world. People who have loved soccer all their lives in Australia, we've all known that. Yet a lot of the time we've felt a little bit out of place because everybody around us was saying, "What's this game? It's a nil-all draw. What's the big deal?" What, people want a hundred goals a game or something to take it seriously?'

I particularly remember one day, midway through 2005, when the late Greg Hunter, who had been at the helm of *Inside Sport* during its glory years in the 1990s, returned to the magazine, called me aside and asked me into his office. He closed the door. 'Things are going to be changing around here,' he said, putting his feet up on the table. He then proceeded to give me his prescription for the perfect sports magazine: milking every available drop out of our stable of 'local' sports stars, which meant a steady diet of rugby league, Aussie Rules and cricket, and no more Socceroos. His view was that a personality such as Adam Gilchrist, for instance, was worth at least three feature stories a year: one comparing him to the greats, one doing a 'dark side of' profile, and the other assessing his achievements over that calendar year. (More than three if his sponsors bought a couple of ads.) No room in the magazine for Lucas Neill, Vince Grella, Viduka or anyone else in the Australian national football team achieving such great things abroad. They were only to be written about if there was a match being played in Australia, or, when hell froze over, we made it to the World Cup.

Six months later, that prescription had been torn up. As FFA liked to put it, 'old soccer' had become 'new football'. Middle Australia had embraced the Socceroos. John O'Neill counted the national team's securing of a sponsorship deal with cereal company Sanitarium as a big step towards mainstream acceptance. Such a statement might have irked the millions of parents who didn't need a blow-in from rugby to tell them the sport their kids played was now socially acceptable because Tim Cahill was on a Weet-Bix packet, but the message was not for them. It was for the ignorant pissants in the media, the TV programmers, the ad buyers, the corporate lunchers, the politicians who went where the wind blew. They were the ones who were out of step with the Australian public, not football.

Not everyone was a winner with Australian football kicking on, though. With the new guard being given the keys to the kingdom, many within the 'football family' now complained of being ignored; they railed privately that FFA had been hijacked by greedy merchant bankers and tie-wearing lickspittles who had no respect for the history of the game and those who had built it. The house of football might have been a rundown old wreck before FFA put it back on its foundations, but it was still theirs. Old Socceroos like the 1974 team's Ray Richards then went public, voicing their disdain for Frank Lowy's and O'Neill's cronies. Anything, so their sentiment ran, was better than what we had before Lowy and O'Neill hitched their wagons to the sport, but did the local game have to veer so far away from its traditional base just for the sake of fast dollars and AB demographic palatability?

Well, in short, yes. Thanks to a decisive kick in Sydney, Australia was now a player in the big bad world of international football. There was no looking back.

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What convinced me the FIFA World Cup occupies another plane to all other sporting events was a report that came out of Thailand a few weeks before the tournament's opening game. The director- general of the country's Livestock Development Department, Yukol Limlaemthong, proudly announced that Germany 2006 had delivered a major fillip for Thai chicken exports. A World Cup, he said, was worth 20 per cent more sales to Japan and Europe. Impressive. If Thai chicken farmers could benefit that much from a four-week football tournament played far away in Germany, one in which Thailand wasn't even competing, what about the rest of the business world?

Well, they'd do well out of it. Ticket sales for Germany 2006 were over three million, and oversubscribed almost 30 times. The same number of foreign visitors turned up without a ticket. World Cup TV rights for the 2002 and 2006 tournaments sold for $3 billion, making the AFL's much ballyhooed $780 million TV rights deal for five years look like small change. Thirty billion people watched it on TV. Fifteen sponsors paid $50 million each to be an 'official partner'. The numbers go on and on and on.

Money, however, can only explain so much. You know a tournament is really something unique when it enters the sociological realm. Branko Milanovic, an economist at the Washington DC-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, argued in his essay 'Globalisation and Goals: Does soccer show the way?' in the *Review of International Political Economy* that football was responsible for the world's sole true 'globalised profession' – the transnational movement of football players from Africa, Asia and the Americas to Europe. With a global workforce at their disposal, the rich club sides of Europe – Barcelona, Bayern Munich, Manchester United, et al – were becoming superior and so success was shared by a privileged few. At the same time, national teams, especially those from Africa and South America, could now compete on a more level playing field at the World Cup because their players were being honed in better competitions. So while capitalism was making the gulf between champions and also-rans wider at club level, the World Cup itself was becoming more evenly balanced. The socialist ideal wasn't dead after all. It had found an unlikely home in the most capitalist sporting event on earth.

In Germany the results wouldn't quite support Milanovic's hypothesis. But his theory was basically sound. The World Cup, much more than the Olympics, has the power to touch almost every conceivable sector of humanity. In Europe, Russia, South America, Central America, West and East Asia, Africa and the Middle East, the only game is football, and the only competition that matters is the World Cup. Nothing else comes close. Even in cricket-besotted India, a country that has never been to a World Cup and probably never will (they qualified in 1950 but didn't turn up because they weren't allowed to play barefoot), more than 50,000 people regularly turn out for games by East Bengal, one of the oldest and proudest football teams on the planet. In neighbouring Bangladesh, a cricketing country that can hardly play cricket, each World Cup divides the nation between Brazilian and Argentinean supporters' groups. Within 20 years, football will surely be as dominant in South Asia, North America and the Caribbean as it is everywhere else.

What about Australia? Why should we sacrifice our precious time and our more precious nerves to a team of exiles we know will likely never be world champion?

A distinctive feature of Australian sport is its provincialism – we love sports where we can say, without hesitation, that we are the 'best in the world'. Hence our matchless passion for 10,000m swimming, rugby league, Aussie Rules – sports no one else really gives two hoots about. These sports provide a pedestal for national chest beating, and

serve to cement an illusion that we're more important on the global stage than we really are. USA coach Bruce Arena's comment before the 2006 World Cup that he thought Trinidad & Tobago and Australia were the two weakest teams in the tournament was offensive to a lot of Australian football supporters, but it was a view that was not uncommon overseas. After all, what had Australia done to deserve Arena's benefit of the doubt? Had we a record to match USA's World Cup appearances (eight), best ever result (semi-finalist in 1930), or goals scored (27)? There are a lot of historical reasons why American football had a better chance of proving itself on the world stage than our own, but the bald fact remained: We'd been to one World Cup and hadn't won a game. We were nobodies.

Of course, local football fans knew better than Arena and that large segment of the Australian population who still sneered at 'soccer'. They were used to getting bashed. Unlike their rugby league and Aussie Rules counterparts, they followed their sport not being able to see the 'best in the world' down at their local oval every weekend. Until recently, before the arrival of the A-League, they'd had little choice but to support the football team of an ethnic social club or survive on whatever meagre rations of English or European league football were transmitted on SBS. Most, sensibly, opted for the latter. Late at night on those television sets in suburban lounge rooms, Australia's expatriate footballers were making quiet but significant steps for our country.

As globalisation became the new buzzword of the 1990s, it was no coincidence that rugby league and Aussie Rules began getting serious about national expansion and redefining their 'brand'. Not because football was about to breach the ramparts, but because their very provincialism, what had formerly been the source of their strength, had suddenly become a liability. In the global marketplace, they would find themselves isolated. But where the indigenous sports of the United States were sustainable because of the country's vast economy of scale, Australia's indigenous sports were sitting ducks. League and Aussie Rules, through natural selection, were doomed.

We are living in an age of unprecedented privilege but also uncertainty. We crave security in our lives – low interest rates, job protection, affordable petrol – yet, stripped of industry protection while our government champions free trade, all these things have become less guaranteed. This feeling of insecurity, of being unsure of what's going to happen next, runs counter to Australia's embedded culture of surety, of being a winner in everything we do – especially in sport. So, in effect, the Socceroos are the team for this time in our nationhood. They might not be 'sure things', but they're the only team we can say are truly competing against the rest of the world. For this reason they represent for many people what has been an uncomfortable period of readjustment for Australia, a period in which we are being judged against global standards, not our own.

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A year before he died, I had the privilege of interviewing Johnny Warren on the phone from his house in Jamberoo, south of Sydney. It was late 2003, and Warren wasn't well. He'd just returned from a cancer clinic in the United States, where he'd been trying to stave off another bout of the lung cancer that would eventually kill him.

Sometimes hectoring and overly emotional, Warren wasn't to everyone's taste, but I'd always been impressed with his outlook on life, enumerated in his appearances on the program *On the Ball*, an hour-long Sunday panel show that ran for a few years on SBS. Warren was a regular guest and liked to be upfront with his views, which didn't often accord with the game's administrators. This, of course, made *On the Ball* compulsive viewing. What I liked most about Warren, though, apart from his unruly hair, was that

he loved to bang on about South America, especially Brazil, a place he'd visited dozens of times and said he'd happily retire to, save for the family he had in Australia. It was obvious he wished he'd been born in Rio or São Paulo. If for some reason viewers failed to pick up on his wanderlust, they couldn't miss the red and white Flamengo tracksuit he'd sometimes wear. (He would be cremated in it.)

Warren was an ordinary kid from the southern suburbs of Sydney who took a broad view of life: the world was bigger than Australia, England and America. Going on what we copped each day in newspapers or on the telly – saturation coverage of the AFL or NRL – most of the Australian sports media believed that nothing much existed beyond Sydney or Melbourne. It frustrated him that the world was out there waiting for Australia to join it, but that continually failing to qualify for the World Cup always scuppered his dream of making it happen. He was first diagnosed with cancer during Korea–Japan 2002, the last World Cup he would see. Back then, against all good sense, Australia was in the grip of a kind of World Cup fever.

'For the first time we were a real football country. That was such a buzz for us – for people like me – to see the whole of Australia football mad,' he said. 'I was a bit on about that [with God]. I just thought, well, "Why do you put me in that position then take it away from me?"'

Not everyone was caught up in the occasion. Like many in the football community, Warren kept tabs on what was being said about the sport in the mainstream press because it was the mainstream press that had to be won over if the game were ever to gain 'acceptance'. One commentator he particularly despised was *Sydney Morning Herald* personality Peter FitzSimons, a former Wallabies forward who liked to make cracks at football's expense in 'The Fitz Files', his regular weekend sports column.

'Peter FitzSimons epitomises it. He epitomises the whole lot, the boofhead mentality that has a go at soccer,' Warren said. 'His commentary on soccer is a joke. Highlight the shit, but never mention it, you know. The media doesn't want to admit what our game is. I can't forget FitzSimons's comment before the World Cup: "What World Cup?" or something, he said...'

Over a couple of hours, Warren riffed on all sorts of subjects, occasionally going off to answer a call from a friend or another journalist, and wasn't afraid to give an opinion when I asked for one. Because he was a man facing death, he was perhaps even more candid than usual, admitting to having contemplated suicide. But it was when I asked him what he thought was his greatest achievement that I was the most taken aback. It wasn't representing Australia at the 1974 World Cup in West Germany, or captaining the Socceroos, but 'travelling the world. Being part of a family, a global family, where if you're involved with the game you're welcomed, embraced as being part of it.' He pointed out that a club like Brazil's Flamengo, his team, a name largely unknown to Australian sports fans, had 30 million supporters.

'*Manyana* people' was how he described Australians. Brazilians, he said, lived for the day, the moment. Australians were too often thinking about tomorrow. If it doesn't happen now, there's always next time. *Manyana*. It was a philosophy that seemed to underpin generations of Socceroos teams, bar the trailblazing journey of Rale Rasic and his 1974 part-timers and a short burst of impressive results under Frank Arok in the 1980s. A draw was usually good enough. Failure was too often tolerated. Coaches and backroom staff who were well past their use-by dates were retained. If only Australia could get to the World Cup, all the problems would go away and soccer – football – would take its rightful place in Australia's sporting firmament. This was Warren's dream, but he knew he'd never see it in the short time he had left.

'Why are Australians so ignorant of South America?' he asked, not waiting for an

answer. 'They would love it, they would *love* it. Whether you're Pelé or whether you play for the over-60 Jamberoo pub team, you're part of a family, a group, you have something in common. You sit down with a Pelé, who treats you with respect as a fellow player. I'm proud to be a part of that massive club worldwide. Our game is the world. Australia has to tap into what's happening in the world. That's our problem.' Come June 2006, however, it would be our problem no more. Australia was about to hitch a ride with the Socceroos through a fortnight of football that would make us confront who we were and determine where we stood. Warren might have been long dead, but his wishes were finally being fulfilled.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HIDDINK SUPREMACY

'When I first started my coaching career... I was like a nutcase... I have to try to be cool. I'm rather passionate. I follow it... I have to control myself to think that one or two steps ahead.'
– *Guus Hiddink in an interview with Derek Rae for ESPN's* Headliners: Guus Hiddink and the Socceroos

Frank Lowy, fortunately, did not grow up with a *manyana* mentality. Spending his formative years fleeing Nazis and fighting a war in Palestine probably accounted for that. If he had grown up in the Australia of Ben Chifley or Robert Menzies, his life might have taken a very different turn. The Socceroos might not have made it to Germany 2006.

After all, what sort of man spikes the national coach three months out from a World Cup qualifying two-leg playoff, with no one to step into the breach? Someone, obviously, who wants to get things done and isn't about to wait around for someone else to do it. Perhaps, too, like Johnny Warren, Lowy was keenly aware of his own mortality. For a man nearing 80, a workaholic who slept just a few hours a night, he wasn't known for his patience.

I'd crossed paths with Lowy on a number of occasions, the last time at the Confederations Cup in Frankfurt in mid 2005.

By pure coincidence he was staying at the same hotel as me, the grand Steigenberger Frankfurter Hof (I could afford to because Gerhard Schröder was picking up the tab). Lowy had been FFA chairman for some time, but here in Frankfurt was the first occasion he'd been in the company of FIFA's leaders and illuminati. The first time I'd met the Westfield titan, on his boat in 2001 (I was there because I'd edited his biography), we'd chatted briefly about football. He told me he liked going to English Premier League matches when in London.

'So any plans to return to Australian football, Frank?' I'd ventured, half-jokingly. He'd pulled his own club, Sydney City, out of the National Soccer League (NSL) in 1987 and abandoned the game altogether to concentrate on his shopping-centre interests.

'No,' he said, smiling. 'I don't have the time. I am too busy. I love the game but there are too many problems. There is too much politics. I have no reason to go back. You never say never, but I don't want to get involved again.'

In Frankfurt, I didn't remind him of that conversation. It felt like a million years had elapsed. Lowy had indeed come back – in a spectacular way. After concerted pushing and prodding from various factions, he'd had a change of heart and was here in this chintzy hotel in southern Germany, with FFA's John O'Neill, John Boultbee and Matt Carroll and half a dozen Fijians I'd never seen before in my life, to try to get Australia's campaign for the World Cup back on track and his federation into Asia.

The reasons for his backflip were complex but also remarkably prosaic. Lowy had spent his life reading from the same script as Warren: Tap into what's happening in the world. Embrace it. Don't shun it. Australia's wealthiest self-made man was international to the core, a mélange of European, Israeli, Australian and American life experience. His own story had been full of twists and diversions, adventures and follies, but no matter how rich and powerful he became, no matter where he was in the world, he was always grounded by football, the sport he'd begun following as a small boy under the influence of his father, Hugo, in the Slovakian–Hungarian border town of Filakovo.

Then, he'd been penniless. Now, in 2005, he was one of the 200 richest men in the world, but he retained the same boyish enthusiasm for the minutiae of the game.
We talked about why Tim Cahill had been taken off by Frank Farina in the match against Germany, when it was clear he'd been one of the few players who looked capable of scoring an equaliser. The others in his group seemed to think Farina had made the right call. Lowy just shook his head. He'd long ago made up his mind about the national coach – having met 'many coaches, probably about ten' before Hiddink was chosen. However the performance in Frankfurt suddenly became a convenient rationale for the decision that would come at the end of the tournament. Farina was purged.
'I wanted to do it beforehand, but [the performance at the Confederations Cup] doubled the effort to find somebody else,' he said.
Three losses in three games was an embarrassing return for FFA, especially when Lowy had been in Germany talking up the benefits Australia would bring to Asia. Unlike his predecessors as chairman, Lowy didn't see why it was necessary to put up with an Aussie coach who failed when there were better candidates out there who could do the job the first time. Nor did it deter him that there were only a few months before the all-important playoffs between Australia and the then-unknown fifth-placed South American team.
Lowy could be that confident because he had a very special person in mind for the task – PSV Eindhoven's Guus Hiddink, at the time the only man to lead two separate nations to the semi-final stage of the World Cup. His name had been mentioned in passing years before by family friend and FFA board director Phil Wolanski. Lowy had paid careful attention.
'When I [became chairman] I made enquiries around the world. I have some contacts in Holland and they found his agent [Cees van Nieuwenhuizen] and he introduced me to Hiddink,' said Lowy. 'I had a dinner with him in Amsterdam about a month after I had taken the job. I looked around where I could find a coach, because I felt it was essential for us to succeed. It took about a year or two to negotiate with him to join us.'
Hiddink's recruitment, however, was never a fait accompli. Other candidates were still in the mix right up until the moment pen signed paper. Graham Arnold, who Farina begged to stay on as assistant coach for the sake of the country's World Cup mission, met ex-Dutch national coach Dick Advocaat for an hour in London and was then flown to Holland, where he was kept in the dark about who he was about to meet until Van Nieuwenhuizen picked him up at Eindhoven airport. Van Nieuwenhuizen turned to Arnold and cut straight to the chase: 'There's only one person who can stuff this deal up and it's you. If you don't sell it to him he'll walk away.'
'Hiddink had in his contract that he wouldn't sign anything until he had spoken to me about the football side of things – players, programs and going forward – so I basically had to sell him the job,' said Arnold. 'I sat with him alone for a half hour in a side room at the airport Novotel, just me and him, and he said, "Tell me why I should take this." I convinced him we had the players with the desire and showed him the program we had ahead. He'd seen the Confederations Cup, and he saw what he believed were our problems. Guus asked me what I thought our problems were and I told him and we agreed. He said, "Right, I've heard enough."'
Arnold signed and witnessed the contract and the two men toasted the deal over champagne.
When Hiddink's appointment was made official that July, it was a clear sign, if any were needed, that the old rules of engagement and small-minded provincialism in Australian football no longer applied. Lowy's net had been cast wide. Here was one of the world's

best coaches, a man adaptable to any culture, east or west, standing outside the Sydney Opera House to pose for pictures that would be seen within seconds on the other side of the world. It was a serious statement of intent. It also demonstrated the significance of the adventure on which Australia was about to embark. A World Cup, even a World Cup qualifying campaign, is no place for chumps. If we were going to get to Germany, we were going to do it not by half measures but by embracing the best the world had to offer – even if we could only get Hiddink on a part-time basis. He had agreed to the terms only on the condition he retained his club contract and led Australia to the World Cup when his schedule allowed.

The importance Hiddink placed on managing his time was immediately apparent to Arnold. For three days after the contract signing, he was forced to hang around PSV's training ground, taking walks with Australia's new coach during breaks. Though impressed by Hiddink's breadth of knowledge about Australia's players and their respective strengths, he wasn't kidding himself that his new boss was about to reinvent the wheel for Australian football.

'Guus was very fortunate that he was able to take over a stable team,' he told me. 'Frank Farina had been in charge, with myself, for five years, and the core of the team was the same for that time, so the group was very stable, focused and hungry. Hiddink only worked 24 days for us [between signing his contract and the Uruguay game], so a lot of the groundwork had already been done by Farina. The difference was Hiddink had a lot of experience. He came in with no baggage. He could probably make decisions blindly that other people wouldn't have made. Like leaving Harry Kewell on the bench against Uruguay. If Frank had done that, and it didn't work, he would have got killed.'

The rationale behind that decision, Arnold explained, was not to unleash Kewell on an unsuspecting Uruguay or piss off Australia's greatest football prodigy, but to protect the team's most valuable asset from being physically assaulted and put out of the game by the hard-playing South Americans. Hiddink's thinking was that once the Uruguayans had fatigued from the helter-skelter opening stoushes of a sudden-death World Cup qualifier, Kewell would be given the freedom he needed to perform.

'I'll never forget what Hiddink said: "With my experience, you never win these games in the first 20 minutes, half hour. You only lose them." So we started with an extra defender, Tony Popovic. Everything that you saw was pre-planned; that Harry was on the bench. He was going to come on after 35, 40 minutes... it got sped up a little bit by Popovic throwing the elbow. Straight away, Hiddink said, "Just get him off. Don't even worry about Harry not being warm, just get him off. Because they'll search [Popovic], look for another yellow, and he's gone." So we just dragged Tony off before Harry was ready.'

Minutes later, Kewell had set up the goal that would tie the two-leg playoff series and send the match into extra-time and penalties. And so history was made.

The real test of the Dutchman's necromantic powers, however, would come after Uruguay were beaten. What kind of team would Australia take to the park against Zico's Japan on 12 June in Kaiserslautern and what sort of football would they be playing?

* * *

After the Sydney game, Hiddink flew back to Europe and returned to his day job, taking Socceroos Jason Culina and Archie Thompson with him, the latter's signing causing a mini-crisis for the fledgling domestic competition, the A-League. Not much would happen in the national coaching position for a few months.

But by late February 2006, it was time for the nucleus of his squad to come together again. Hiddink audaciously scrapped a planned friendly against Colombia in England and arranged for 14 players to convene in Mierlo, outside Eindhoven, for a three-day camp. For many in the squad, it was the first real opportunity they'd had to savour the team's qualification in the cold light of day – as well as bond over a game or two of tennis.

'Everyone was looking forward to going into camp to catch up,' said Mark Bresciano. 'They're a good bunch of boys and we're all good friends. Other than training we just hung around, having coffee, drinking. We were very close before but obviously our achievements brought the group closer.'

The only other World Cup country not to play a friendly that week was Togo. Australians wouldn't see their national football team on home soil until the Greece game in Melbourne on 25 May. They were lucky to get that.

Hiddink had his work cut out. Not just in the formidable challenge that lay ahead in Germany but in getting his players to comprehend what he had in store for them. Unlike many of our celebrated national teams – the Australian cricketers and the Wallabies, for example – the Socceroos had for decades existed in a state of flux. There was minimal continuity in personnel, strategy, training programs or, at the most basic level, in time spent together. A Ricky Stuart in league or a John Connolly in rugby inherits a group of players who know one another's playing styles intimately, who socialise together and live in one or two cities on the eastern seaboard of Australia. Pecking orders are established and implicitly understood. The Socceroos were different. Their team culture had always depended on who was in charge or what players were available that week. Hiddink, though, as he had done while coach of Holland and Korea, made it clear that reputations counted for nothing. What he saw with his own eyes was the only thing that mattered. The side would be picked according to what happened on the training ground. His man-management would be crucial. Players would have to accept they might be yanked from the park at any minute or not used at all, a strategy that would alienate some members of the team. Above all, his most important requirement was solidarity. Hiddink's squad would go to Germany united and committed, representing not only the best players he could assemble, but also, if we were to swallow the hype, the idea of Australia itself.

'Guus is a great guy,' Lucas Neill told me just prior to the World Cup. Australia's central defender was on a beach in Dubai, catching some sun before going into camp again in Holland. 'He came in and obviously was trying to feel out the personalities of each and every one of us. He's a good judge of character, so he was quick to learn about certain people, and just from his résumé in the world of football he commanded respect. Guus has a charisma about him. Immediately he opens his mouth and it makes sense, and as a result everybody listens. You listen because you know he's going to give you something you've never heard before. He's got that World Cup kind of magic about him.

'When we get into the [team camp] dining room we're all leaders. There's no captain, no one's funnier than anyone else, no one thinks they're better than anyone else. There are no stars, even though we've got Harry, Dukes and Bresh, Schwarzer and Cahill. Everybody's on the same level. Everybody gets the piss taken out of them, everybody laughs at jokes and everybody has jokes made about them. The most important thing is Guus won't take sides and he won't treat anyone differently. Look at Harry [in the Sydney World Cup qualifier]. He just dropped him, because the team was more important than Harry. That pissed Harry off – I know because we roomed together – and it got exactly what we needed out of him. That's why Guus is what he is.'

Not everybody was in thrall of the self-described 'Dutch farmer boy'. That much became apparent in the only player diary that appeared following the World Cup. In Mark Schwarzer's *World Cup Destiny: From Sydney to Stuttgart*, Australia's number one carefully couched his language but painted a picture of a head coach who played cruel 'psychological games' with his players. Schwarzer, especially, was left feeling tormented on the eve of important games, not knowing if he would play even when he felt he had done everything on the training pitch he needed to do and had the match fitness to get the edge on his rival, Zeljko Kalac. Indeed, the fact that the Socceroos' goalkeeping position was kept open before and during the World Cup marked Hiddink as a very different beast to his contemporaries. In the German team, for instance, Jürgen Klinsmann named Jens Lehmann as his number one well before the tournament, leaving veteran custodian Oliver Kahn enough time to deal with his disappointment and cool down. France coach Raymond Domenech had done the same when he named Fabien Barthez over Gregory Coupet. But not Hiddink.

I tried to contact Hiddink after the World Cup to ask him about the rationale behind his goalkeeper selection, but his Dutch representatives refused an interview: 'Guus Hiddink is going to publish his own book. In this book there will be several chapters about Australia and the World Cup and I am sorry to inform you that Guus Hiddink will not be able to talk to you.' When the ghostwritten tome, *Dit Is Mijn Wereld* (*This Is My World*) was released in Europe in November 2006, Hiddink played it characteristically straight: 'I really wasn't convinced that either of them could do a great job.'

Arnold, who saw the saga unfold up close, felt the matter was poorly handled by Schwarzer.

'By the time we got to the World Cup, Guus wanted to get extra out of everyone,' he said. 'He was very hard on people and players. Whether I could have done that, I don't know. I don't think so. But he wanted to challenge them all. I know what Mark has said, but that's maybe because Mark comes from a different environment where everything is explained to him. But Guus was like, "We're at the World Cup. Jesus Christ, we're playing for our country. There's 23 of us, it's not about 11. It's about 23 plus the staff. We have to make decisions and [you players] are playing for your country at the World Cup."'

South Korea's assistant coach Afshin Ghotbi, who worked as a technical analyst for Hiddink at Korea–Japan 2002, assured me Hiddink's handling of the goalkeeping issue was no accident. The same thing had happened in Seoul four years before.

'In all the friendlies we had before the 2002 World Cup what Guus would do was alternate the two 'keepers – the younger one who wasn't a star versus the one that was,' he said. 'He literally waited until the last few days before the tournament to decide what 'keeper he was going with. I think he made the right choice. The goalkeeper turned out to be Lee Woon-jae, now over 100 caps, probably the best 'keeper in Asia. He put in a great performance in 2002. I think if he had gone with just the one 'keeper, and let everyone know in advance which one it was, he wouldn't have got the same performance out of Woon-jae. Guus did what he thought he had to do to get that out of him.'

Craig Foster is an astute football analyst. Get him talking about the game on a slow news day and it's like trying to stop a burst water main with a tampon. When we caught up after Germany 2006, I asked for his view of how the goalkeeper situation had played out and what challenges beyond man-management Hiddink had faced in fashioning a competitive team.

'Hiddink wasn't convinced about Schwarzer and neither was I. Schwarzer's always got

the ability to make a stupid mistake, he's made them on a number of occasions for Australia,' he told me. 'I don't put him in the world-class category at all. The reason Hiddink didn't back him as number one was because he wasn't his number one. He was never sure about him.

'In the past, we've just been a team who had to get it forward as early as possible. Highly predictable stuff. It was no good Hiddink trying to keep Australia as a counter-attacking nation, because we're not. We're – as [Fédération Française de Football technical director] Aimé Jacquet said – dynamic athletes. We've got good mental competitive characteristics, which means we want to take the game to people; that's why the team resonated so much under Terry Venables and now under Hiddink. They're the two managers that came in and said: "We're going to attack teams."

'One of the first things Hiddink said to the boys was: "We're gonna defend from the front, get away from our goal." The Dutch are the absolute antithesis of the way we played [under Farina]. They value possession, which we could never achieve. They play high up the park when we would play defensively – we'd sit on our box. They'd use fast ball circulation and passing to move defences around. We'd just get it forward. Everything we weren't under Farina, basically.'

With almost every team in Germany able to play technically proficient football, what advantage had Australia taken into the tournament, if any? Had being Australian itself factored in our chances?

'Hiddink identified our national character better than Eddie Thomson ever did,' Foster said. 'Thomson's character was the Scottish national character. Hiddink's character from a football sense is a lot closer to where Australia wants to be. We recognise what quality football is. There's many nations in the world who just want to win and they don't care how they do it. Australians aren't like that.'

* * *

Could we really differentiate ourselves when it came to kicking a ball around a park? Hiddink thought we could. He spoke of Australia's 'huge mental force' but qualified that praise by saying there was 'no balance between the effort and the cleverness of play'. The key to getting the best out of the Aussies was to strike a balance between their natural instincts – to fight, to scrap, to never give up – with a bit of Dutch intelligence. In Mierlo in March 2006, in among the ribaldry and team-bonding, some serious work was being done: two two-hour structural sessions a day for ten days straight, many of those without a ball.

The Socceroos would have to learn quickly. This pre–World Cup window would be the players' only chance to learn from the master, because by mid-April Hiddink's wily agent Van Nieuwenhuizen had confirmed what FFA had feared: that the Football Union of Russia had come in with a massive salary and bonuses package, bankrolled by Chelsea's billionaire owner Roman Abramovich, to lure Australia's new coach to Moscow once the World Cup was over. His last day in the job would be whenever Australia was knocked out.

It was a soft blow, as it hadn't been unexpected, but it did create an awkward vacuum within the national team before they arrived in Germany. Arnold and fellow assistant Johan Neeskens, both former internationals with limited club coaching experience, began lobbying for the top job as a duo even before a ball had been kicked. This sideshow became more disruptive when Hiddink intervened to lend them his support, telling reporters when the squad flew back to Mierlo in late May that FFA was stupid to 'waste money' on snaring another first-tier coaching appointment, such as Lowy's

favoured candidate, Olympique Lyon's Gérard Houllier. The FFA chairman didn't bite. It was left to Van Nieuwenhuizen to announce publicly that Lowy's flat rejection of the Neeskens–Arnold pairing had compelled his client to rule out a return to Australian football after his Russia contract expired in 2008. Australia's second-richest man was probably not used to having his hand bitten by someone he was feeding with hundred-dollar bills, but until Australia went out of the World Cup, only one man was calling the shots and that was Hiddink.

The media pack following the Socceroos had had that spelled out loud and clear. If they'd thought they'd get to share a few steins with Harry Kewell and Tim Cahill at the bar of the ritzy Wald und Schlosshotel in the woods of Friedrichsruhe, they were sadly deluded. Fraternising with players or team staff was forbidden. Following the Socceroos would not be like a Kangaroos tour of Great Britain. Anything but.

Hiddink had learned some valuable lessons from his mentor, Rinus Michels, FIFA's 'Coach of the Century', whose 1974 Oranje had been expected to blitz the tournament – and did – but self-destructed in the final. Their uncharacteristically insipid performance that day was blamed on German magazine *Bild Zeitung* publishing a story about an alleged sex romp at the team hotel pool on the eve of the match. The Dutch had never quite got over their failure and Hiddink would not repeat the mistake. He'd clamped down hard on out-of-control egos coaching Holland at France '98 and never let his South Korean team in 2002 feel totally settled.

'Hiddink's objective was always to win,' explained Ghotbi. 'Psychology is one of the most important things in football – how you deal with players, the atmosphere in the locker-room, the atmosphere in training, the atmosphere prior to matches. That is the key to success; Guus really understood that. There were times he shared information, times when he didn't. Sometimes he was confrontational, others he was very passive in his approach. He used whatever methods he needed to get results for the team.'

Those methods had some sort of payoff – both sides had reached the penultimate stage of the tournament. So for the Socceroos in Germany, aiming to make it three in a row for their new gaffer, their time under the 'old-fashioned' Hiddink would require total discipline. No sex. No drugs. No parties. No yacking on mobile phones. And certainly no media distractions. Whether the Aussies could hack it was another matter entirely.

'Korean players are very different to Australian or European players,' said Ghotbi. 'You can have them train three or four times a day, you can take them to the top of the mountain and have them run forever and they don't really complain. They just do what they're asked to do. With Korea, Guus rarely was confrontational with the big-name players. Very clever. Almost like a poker player in that he never showed his hand. No decisions were made. He'd wait till the last moment to select players. He would literally sit at meals and look at players' body language, their physical demeanour, which of them had the positive mental energy, who was sharp on that particular day. Ask anyone who's been in football long enough: the players that play rarely complain about the manager. The players who don't play or who aren't selected complain. Players have to adapt to Guus's management style because at the end of the day he's the boss.'

* * *

So without scoops on who might be in the team or what tactics were on the whiteboard, the media pack was reduced to simple observation for gathering intelligence. But divining any secrets from the Greece friendly at home or the Socceroos' warm-up games against Holland and Liechtenstein would prove a quixotic assignment. What sort of team Hiddink was preparing to unveil in Kaiserslautern was anyone's guess.

The Greece match was more a valedictory celebration than a rigorous contest, the European champions a far cry from the squad that had crushed Portugal in their own backyard, but the Australians, directed expertly by Jason Culina, Vince Grella and Mark Bresciano, played to a plan and stuck to it all game. Their dominance never looked like being challenged, but worryingly the only goal came through a moment of opportunism from Josip Skoko.

On 4 June, under blue skies in the port city of Rotterdam, Marco van Basten's Oranje provided a more telling gauge of Hiddink's progress with his new team. Holland was in the middle of a golden period, Van Basten having taken them through qualifying unbeaten. There was talk the Oranje could go one further than Hiddink's in '98, but the Dutch, the World Cup's most resigned bridesmaids, had learned not to tempt fate. Cruel endings were an accepted part of the country's football narrative, as David Winner wrote in *Brilliant Orange: The Neurotic Genius of Dutch Football*, a state of affairs brought about by 'a quintessentially Dutch combination of ill-discipline, complacency, and lack of will or nerve. The Dutch seem to have an allergy to authority, leadership and collective discipline.'

Against the Socceroos, though, they were raging favourites and they knew it. Holland took to the field looking like clones of Robert Patrick's T-1000 robot in *Terminator II: Judgment Day* – all height, jaw and sinew – and pulverised the Socceroos, controlling possession, dictating the tempo and defending in packs. They gave the hapless Aussies no time to find their bearings, no time to look up from their feet. Australian passes were being sprayed everywhere. First touches were abysmal, especially from Grella and bench player Luke Wilkshire, a bolter in the squad who'd been granted a rare start. The team's lack of pace was also exposed, Brett Emerton, the Socceroos' most agile player, being run ragged down the flanks by Chelsea's Arjen Robben. If a wake-up call were needed, this first 45 minutes at the De Kuip, 'The Tub', had provided it.

When the Socceroos came out after the break they were a different team, unafraid to play to their strengths but maintaining their concentration and skill level. Even after the nervous Wilkshire got sent off and the Aussies went down to ten men, they kept a throat-hold grip on the Dutch from which the home team never recovered. The end result, a 1–1 draw, was ultimately flattering, but it was also a declaration to the world that Australia wasn't going to Germany to pussyfoot around. Van Basten described the carnage in his dressing room as 'like an episode of *M*A*S*H*'. The match reports didn't pull punches, either. The Aussies were physical brutes playing a style of football that would win them no friends. This, however, was progress. Whatever the Germans would have us believe, World Cups weren't the time to make friends.

Yet three days later against Liechtenstein, a team ranked 123 in the world and Europe's equivalent of Hutt River Province, the Socceroos tanked. The only real positive to emerge in an unconvincing 3–1 win was Harry Kewell, crocked since his FA Cup cameo, returning to the field with a new hairdo and lasting an hour. The hordes of Aussie fans following the team, camped in their motorhomes or taking in the sights before the serious business of Japan got underway, could have been forgiven for feeling some trepidation.

Lucas Neill, Australia's rock at the back who'd let in an uncharacteristic own goal in Ulm, understood better than most what confronted his team in a few days' time in Kaiserslautern. Some members of the Australia squad were calling the game their 'World Cup final'. With Craig Moore, Neill was the player whose split-second decisions against Hidetoshi Nakata and Shunsuke Nakamura would mean the difference between tournament survival and extinction. Yet he wasn't shirking from the challenge. If anything, he couldn't wait.

‘If we win, it opens up so many options for us,’ he told me. ‘But if we draw it makes it tough, and if we lose then we’re really, really fighting against it. We need to hit the ground running. Every game is going to be an upset if we win, as far as the football world is concerned. If we get four or five upsets, we’ll find ourselves well and truly up there. We’re confident we’re going to have a fantastic three weeks, not just two.’
No one, however, was rebooking their flights just yet.

CHAPTER THREE

KOKODA

'We are in a very tough group. Croatia and Brazil are very good.'
Japan coach Zico, 2006

Everywhere I looked, there were girls on bicycles. Beautiful girls in the full bloom of youth, hair trailing in the wind, carefree, whistling Edith Piaf songs en route to romantic assignations with fine-boned poets with immaculate hair and unblemished skin. That's at least how I saw it. It was hard not to get swept up in the romance of Strasbourg, France's most eastern city and capital of the new, freewheeling Europe.

I had an excellent view of the action: a fourth-floor apartment in the centre of town overlooking the main square, Place Kléber. I had chosen to come here with my family and a few close friends because it seemed the best place to spend our time during the World Cup – close enough to Germany to be able to commute to Australia's games, but far enough away to stand a fair chance of ingesting anything other than *currywurst mit pommes frites* for two weeks. Germany was just a five-minute drive from the city centre, yet once in Kehl, the industrial town on the other side of the turpid Rhine, there was no mistaking what you had left behind.

Being based on the border seemed the smart option, but when I first told colleagues back home where I was staying they were confused. Wasn't the World Cup in Germany? Yes, but Strasbourg was unique. Not only could you see the German influence in the half-timbered houses and the street signs in two languages, but unlike every other French city, where dog shit is considered a major social problem, Strasbourg's streets were so clean you could almost see your reflection in them. Being so close to Germany but not in Germany had its advantages.

It had plenty of disadvantages too, not least the fact that because of its geographical position in the armpit of France and Germany, Strasbourg had been a plaything for armies for centuries. In 1949, British foreign secretary Ernest Bevin had been moved to call it the city that 'more than any other, has been the victim of the stupidity of the nations of Europe which thought they could solve their problems by waging war'.

He'd spoken with some intimate knowledge of the subject. Just a few years before, the city and its surrounding areas had been overrun with Nazis. Strasbourg had been one of the first cities to fall to the Wehrmacht in the early days of the war and became an important symbol in Hitler's conquest of France. It was in Place Kléber, renamed Karl Roos Platz after a German-sympathising Alsatian who had been murdered by the French, that the Nazis staged mass rallies and tore down a statue of Napoleonic general Jean-Baptiste Kléber, the hero of Egypt. For good measure, they also disinterred his corpse. Over 60 years later, General Kléber was standing on his plinth again but trust between the two countries had been harder to restore. In Strasbourg, a glib slogan like Germany 2006's 'A Time to Make Friends' had sinister connotations.

The tragic story of the city could be told through its football team. Racing Club de Strasbourg had originally started out as a German team, FC Neudorf, but took a French name after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. When Hitler invaded France in 1940, the team became a crucible for the French resistance. The local league was disbanded and replaced with a new German competition. Forced to re-become German, Racing now called itself Rasensport Club Strasbourg (RCS) and its players were obliged to give the Hitler salute at matches. Racing's crosstown rival, Red Star Strasbourg, fared even worse. It was taken over by the German secret police and renamed Sportgeimeinschaft

SS Strasbourg.
SS tried to blackmail RCS's best players with threats of imprisonment in a concentration camp, drafting into the Wehrmacht, or worse. Some submitted; others, like Oskar Rohr, a German who had played with Bayern Munich and was Racing's top striker, refused. He fled to southwest France, joined the French Foreign Legion against the Nazis, was captured, and saw out the war in a concentration camp. Rohr's teammates, though, were not about to surrender without a fight, contriving more subtle ways of bucking the Germans. They sang French songs in their locker-room and, during one game in 1942, defeated SS wearing a red, blue and white strip. Infuriated, the Nazis subsequently decreed only two colours could ever be worn.
SS did not survive the war, but Racing did, and in 2006 there was no mistaking its paternity. Its playing roster was as multicultural as France itself – Cameroonians, Moroccans, Ivorians, Egyptians, Tunisians, Senegalese. In the spirit of the *république*, France coach Raymond Domenech had picked 17 black or 'coloured' players in his squad of 23 for the World Cup. In contrast, Germany's Jürgen Klinsmann had picked two.

* * *

The map suggested it was pretty straightforward. Get on the A4 north of Strasbourg, cross the border at Wissembourg and take the back roads through the vineyards and the Pfälzerwald Naturpark to Kaiserslautern. The scenic route.
Two of the blokes sharing our flat, Neil 'Jamo' Jameson, a Novocastrian sportswriter and football nut, and his mate Keith 'Harro' Harris, a white-haired bear of a man who'd once laced up as a striker for Newcastle KB United in the National Soccer League, hadn't been convinced. This was their first World Cup, and they'd wanted to get to the Socceroos' opening match as quickly as possible, even if it meant missing out on the countryside.
Certainly sightseeing wasn't their top priority. They'd turned up in matching 'AUSTRALIA' shirts the previous morning after getting a train from Paris, made their introductions, then found a table at the local bar, ordered the first round of many beers, and didn't move away from the plasma TV until after the last game that day, Angola vs Portugal. They then came back to the apartment, somewhat pie-eyed, and watched the highlights before crashing at about 2am. I'm not sure if they were still hungover, but the next morning they acceded to my plan without a word of dissent.
In the rearview mirror of our rented Renault, though, it was clear from Jamo's inflamed cheeks and Harro's stony stare that they'd wished they'd spoken up. Somehow we'd all left Strasbourg without first learning how to get the car in reverse and, one wrong turn later, were now stuck in a cul-de-sac in the French village of Hagenau, 30 kilometres north of the city and miles from any autobahn. Every time I moved the gearstick to where 'R' was, it inched forward instead. There were just two centimetres between the front number plate and a stone wall.
This was not how I'd planned our first trip to the World Cup. Worse, there didn't seem to be anyone around who could help. Where was everybody in Hagenau? Working in the fields? Crushing grapes? In the 20 minutes it took to figure out the problem (a small latch had to be raised under the head of the gearstick), the only local to come to our aid was a hunchbacked octogenarian peasant in a grey felt hat. After our sign-language French failed to elicit any sympathy, he just shrugged his shoulders and walked away.
Back on the road to the border, we'd lost valuable time. The silence in the back was

excruciating. Perhaps music would help improve the mood? In preparation for the trip, I'd burned a mix tape featuring classic Australian songs such as Men at Work's 'Overkill' and the Sunnyboys' 'Alone With You', with selected highlights of Peter Wilkins's call of the playoffs in Montevideo and Sydney. ('He took a DIVE, appealed for the PENALTY. The referee stayed COOL. He said NO. Is that going to impact on the whole scenario at the CENTENARIO?' Classic stuff from Wilko.) I put it on and it had no effect; in fact, it seemed to aggravate Jamo and Harro. Even when we reached the vineyards of Wissembourg and I pointed out a sign for 'Winegut Cuntz', it barely raised a chuckle.
'Let's just get to Kaiserslautern,' growled Jamo.
I slammed my foot on the accelerator and prayed we'd make it before kickoff.

* * *

The 'Samurai Blue' hardly needed extra motivation to beat the Socceroos. Japan, after all, was taking on a team coached by Guus Hiddink. Four years before, the Japanese had been eclipsed by their neighbours and co-hosts across the strait. Japan had done all right, reaching the second round, but Korea had done better, reaching the last four – Asia's best ever result at a World Cup. It hurt Japan that the 2002 tournament would be remembered as Korea's, so this was a chance to get one back against Hiddink and restore face.
Japan certainly looked up to it by reputation. Their coach in 2002, eccentric Frenchman Philippe Troussier, who'd been described by one Japanese journalist as 'stable as uranium', had left his post and was now living as a Muslim under the *nom de guerre* of 'Omar' in Morocco. His stabler replacement was Arthur Antunes Coimbra, better known to the world as Zico.
The grey but still handsome Brazilian – the great striker of the 1982 and 1986 World Cups – had inherited much more than a tight professional unit from Troussier. Football had gone on to become bigger than baseball and sumo in Japan and the national team had won the past two Asian Cups. The Japanese Football Association (JFA) had successfully adopted a French-style youth development system, technical levels were advanced, and many top-shelf Brazilian players were earning big money in the domestic competition, the J.League. Zico himself had been one of the first former Seleção, 'Selection', to finish his playing career in the Far East. There he had been admired for his tireless work rate and passion for winning.
In *Japanese Rules*, his account of the creation of the J.League, Sebastian Moffett described how during the competition's inaugural season Zico's team Kashima Antlers met Kawasaki Verdy (later renamed Tokyo Verdy 1969) in a two-leg playoff. Verdy won the first game 2–0 and then in the final few minutes of the second, with Kashima ahead 1–0 and searching for an all-important two-goal advantage, Verdy's Brazilian midfielder Paulo dived in the penalty area and was awarded a direct free kick.
'It was all too much for Zico,' wrote Moffett. 'He had come out of retirement, played in the second division of Japan's corporate amateur league, then built up the Antlers to be one of Japan's best teams... but now, just before the moment that would justify all this effort, a referee was about to take it away. Zico walked up to the ball. He bent over it, as if to check it was properly on the spot – and spat.'
Referee Shizuo Takada, who had already handed out one yellow to the fiery Brazilian striker, had no choice but to show him a second and send him off. It was only the fifth time in a 25-year playing career that Zico had been given his marching orders.
J.League chairman Saburo Kawabuchi was aghast: 'It was as if he had spat at the

J.League itself.' But Zico wasn't about to apologise: 'Since I came to Japan, I have always put my heart and soul into it. I didn't want to be another foreign player who didn't do enough, and I did not let up once.'

Yet for all their coach's inexhaustible reserves of grit, there was no escaping three incontrovertible facts for Japan's national football team: they were devoid of quality strikers; only six squad members were playing in Europe (and then only sparingly, being mostly used off the bench); and almost to a man they were a good head shorter than the Australians. All this, combined with fear of Australia's rough play – Kawabuchi, now JFA chief, had labelled the Australians a bunch of reprobates who committed a 'lot of dirty fouls' and liked to 'target ankles' – meant that despite outward signs of cockiness in the country's media, the Japanese were understandably apprehensive going into their opening game against the Socceroos.

More worryingly for Japan, their lead-up form had been poor. In qualifying, they'd hardly had to break a sweat in beating Oman, Singapore, India, North Korea, Iran and Bahrain, losing just once, in the unforgiving Azadi Stadium in Tehran. But when they played the vastly overrated USA in San Francisco, employing a 3-6-1 formation to make the most of their disproportionate talent in midfield – Shinji Ono, Hidetoshi Nakata and Shunsuke Nakamura were the team's undisputed star players – they lost easily. Rather than admit his team selection (and his tactics) were faulty, Zico blamed 'inappropriate shoes' (he is famously obsessive about footwear, having played in other people's boots when he was young and poor in Brazil). A 2–1 loss to Bulgaria at home followed, a game in which the Samurai Blue had 20 shots at goal, and a scoreless draw with an inept Scotland saw them surrender the three-team Kirin Cup.

The Japanese public's World Cup expectations and their team's World Cup prospects weren't on the same page. Hiddink, though, was not risking complacency, pointing out to Australian journalists in March that the Japanese weren't the only nation with a mortgage on fighting spirit, *yamato damashi*.

* * *

Not all the seats had been filled at kickoff, but the well-marshalled Japanese fans made the 46,000 capacity feel more like 96,000, booming the solitary word 'NI-PPON!' followed by three claps for most of the game. It was easy to admire the Zen perfunctoriness of it. These *oendan*, or support groups, are an ingrained part of Japanese culture, where for many students supporting a team is regarded as an honourable alternative to playing sport at high school and university. The motley Australian fans, perhaps stunned by the 38°C heat or the fog of body odour (tournament volunteers had confiscated all deodorant at the gate), didn't seem to know how to respond to the wall of noise. 'Waltzing Matilda' didn't quite work as a gee-up, 'C'mon Aussie, C'mon!' was inappropriate for a football match, and 'You Only Sing When You're Whaling' was funny but not exactly original: it had been pinched from the Scots, who had taunted Norway fans with it at their match in Bordeaux at France '98.

Like most people lucky enough to get a ticket, though, I was happy just being there to see the Socceroos, rollicking chants or otherwise. It had been 32 years almost to the day since an Australian team had last been at a World Cup. That game was in Hamburg, on 14 June 1974, when the Socceroos had held out for an hour against East Germany before defender Col Curran conceded an unlucky own goal and ten minutes later the aptly named Joachim Streich made it two. Of that Australia squad only Manfred Schaefer and Jack Reilly had made it back for the reprise three decades on, although

I'd seen Jim Scane, the original Socceroos superfan and impromptu mascot of the '74 campaign, being wheeled onto a plane before I'd left Sydney. The *Sydney Morning Herald*'s John Huxley had written a piece about the 90-year-old missing out on the World Cup, and Emirates, apropos of nothing, had come in with free flights, accommodation and tickets for him and his grandson. It was a generous and selfless gesture, especially as the airline had the grace not to blow their own trumpet about it.
The drama of the win in Sydney and Australia's long hiatus from World Cup action meant expectations were high that the Socceroos would be firing the moment they took to the park, but whether it was big-stage jitters or a knock-on effect from Rotterdam, Australia had all the zip of a group of retirees in gumboots. Even before the still-disputed opening goal, when an out-of-position Mark Schwarzer collided with Atsuchi Yanagisawa and was then knocked over by another Japanese player, the Socceroos appeared dazed, their sporadic incursions upfield failing to deliver genuine chances and losing shape immediately when the counterattack came. Were their brains being fried in the heat?
It seemed Hiddink's was. Or perhaps he was starting to believe his own hype. How else to explain Luke Wilkshire's reappearance in the side? The underplayed Bristol City midfielder had been awful in the time he'd managed to stay on the pitch at the De Kuip, yet here he was at right back, a position to which he was unaccustomed, with Brett Emerton pushed up into midfield. It was admirable of Hiddink to show faith in Wilkshire; he deserved another chance, but why give it to him now, in our most important game in 32 years?
In reality it had less to do with stubbornness and more to do with the fact that because of his youth and fitness Wilkshire was a player that Hiddink could utilise in all sorts of positions on the field while his older teammates were still trying to catch their breath. In David Winner's *Brilliant Orange*, Ruud Krol, a former Ajax Amsterdam and Holland player, explained that the so-called 'total football' system was as much a way of conserving energy as it was about players switching places.
'Our system was also a solution to a physical problem,' he said. 'Fitness has to be 100 per cent, but how can you play for 90 minutes and remain strong? If I, as left-back, run 70 metres up the wing, it's not good if I immediately have to run back 70 metres to my starting position. So, if the left-midfield player takes my place, and the left-winger takes the midfield position, then it shortens the distances. If you have to run ten times 70 metres and the same distance back ten times, that's a total of 1400 metres. If you change it so you must only run 1000 metres, you will be 400 metres fresher. That was the philosophy.'
Graham Arnold later confided there was simply no way Hiddink could countenance having Harry Kewell, Mark Bresciano and Tim Cahill on the field at the same time. Along with Mark Viduka, as a collective they were deemed too pregnable for opposition attacks and so put too much pressure on holding midfielder Vince Grella and the defenders behind him. The chief beneficiaries of this new dictum were the whippets of the team: Jason Culina, Brett Emerton and Luke Wilkshire. The chief victims, plainly, were the veterans: Stan Lazaridis, Josip Skoko and Archie Thompson. None would see any game time during the tournament.
'Guus felt from what he'd seen at the Confederations Cup that defensively we weren't good enough,' Arnold said. 'We needed to have players on the field who would chase and chase and have a high work rate. Guus looks at athletes first and foremost. If a player basically can't get around the field as quick, well, he's pretty much pushed away out of his mind. Guus likes players who are very mobile, very adaptable, can play in more than one position, very athletic.' Vim and vigour, though, can't always

compensate for lack of skill. Within just three minutes of the start, Wilkshire was lucky to escape a yellow card after a late challenge on the Japanese defender Alessandro Santos, and would go on to be outwitted and outrun by the same player. Emerton would prove similarly ineffective, once falling over the ball with no one around him on the halfway line, and preferring to lob long passes crossfield when taking the ball to the line might have been more damaging. The Blackburn Rovers player was quick, but didn't have the nous to convert forward motion into scoring opportunities. Each time he came within cooee of the goal he'd clumsily hand back the momentum to Zico's men.

'Emerton's a player exactly like Robbie Slater used to be,' Craig Foster told me. 'Emerton is better on the ball than Slater, but Slater was powerful, he'd donk it, use his speed and get in great crosses. But when he got anywhere near the goal, he'd put the ball out of the stadium.'

Good teams can carry one average performer, but on this day Australia as a unit weren't on their game. Slack passing, average marking and an overreliance on long balls from the back were putting unnecessary pressure on everyone and testing the nerves of the fans. Only rare moments of brilliance and industry from Viduka, Bresciano, Scott Chipperfield and a three-quarters-fit Kewell were keeping the tie alive.

The tension continued to ratchet up after half-time. Schwarzer came out of the box to head the ball straight into the path of Naohiro Takahara, and was saved only by the leg of Lucas Neill. On 75 minutes, Chipperfield was dispossessed on the halfway line by Takahara, who had the goalmouth tantalisingly open but crossed square to Yanagisawa, who popped it up to Schwarzer. Yuichi Komano, too, wasted a chance three minutes later.

With just ten minutes left on the clock, it seemed Australia's great adventure was already over. Hiddink had run out of options. The Socceroos had promised so much, fought for so much territory, but there was no getting away from the gnawing feeling that they'd been shown up as pretenders by a team they'd expected to beat. The Australians weren't letting the Japanese rest for a second. Even if they nabbed a late goal, a draw wasn't going to be enough now. They'd left it too late. Or so they thought.

In *Japanese Rules*, former Japan coach Dettmar Cramer explained what the samurai called *zanshin*: 'It looks good if you take a sweeping cut [with a sword] at someone, and then just turn your back. But the fallen victim might summon up his last morsel of strength, and come back at you. So after you've taken a sweeping cut, you must remain alert until he has taken his last breath. That is *zanshin*. Japanese soccer does not have that.'

Typing furiously and barely raising their eyes to look at what was happening on the field, the correspondents for Australia's dailies began finessing the doomsday dispatches they'd started writing even before half-time. Where was Hiddink's famous luck? He had a nickname in Holland – 'Guus Geluk' or Lucky Guus. But the Aussies couldn't take a trick. Were we instead seeing 'He Stinks!', the inglorious nickname Korean fans had given him before his miracle run in 2002?

Then, almost on cue, it happened. Eight minutes of mayhem. The sort of eight minutes a football fan would be happy to have once in a lifetime. In the centre of it all was one man, Tim Cahill, a player who just years before couldn't even get a game for Australia. The son of an English father and a Samoan mother, he'd been persuaded to turn out for a Western Samoa under-20 side as a substitute when he was 14, playing just a handful of minutes. That was enough for FIFA to declare he'd never represent Australia, the country of his birth, the country he'd grown up in, scampering around the suburban fields of Sydney. For close to a decade he'd fought for the right to wear the

green and gold, even threatening to go to court. He'd been on the scrapheap. One of those what-if players, like Craig Johnston, Tony Dorigo and Josip Simunic, who could have played for Australia but didn't. Then it all changed. A policy backflip. An FA Cup goal. A contract with Everton. A call-up against South Africa. When Cahill ran onto the field in the 53rd minute to replace Bresciano, he was still surfing a wave that he didn't want to get off.

Now, there were just six minutes of normal time left on the clock. A long throw-in. A scuffed shot. A scramble in the area. *Goal.* Cahill ran to the left corner flag, sucked the screams of 20 million Aussies into his cheeks and shadow-boxed like a champion whipping up the crowd before a title fight. He didn't overdo the celebration. He knew the battle had only just begun.

A kid who'd come up through Millwall, the toughest club in England, with five reds and 70-odd yellows in his club career, Cahill had never been afraid to ride his luck. He returned down the ground and almost instantaneously chopped down Komano on the edge of the box after the winger had jinked in off the goal line. It was a foul. But Essam Abdel Fatah, the harried Egyptian ref, was probably still trying to figure out if he'd been right awarding the first goal to make a decision. Minutes later, Takashi Fukunishi was played into space by Shinji Ono. He steamed into the box, sidestepped Neill and let rip. The ball missed the inside netting by inches. Now there were just 60 seconds left.

The play returned to the Australian half. John Aloisi, on for Wilkshire, collected the ball on the edge of the box, and laid it up square. Cahill was there. He tapped the ball forward with the bottom of his heel and swung his leg back like a golfer chipping onto the lip of a green. *Goal.* Australia had the lead for the first time in the match. Now it was Japan that had run out of time.

The third from Aloisi, a left-footed, defender-boondoggling slalom, was just too much for Japan to process. What had they done to deserve such misery? What had we done to deserve such fortune?

Goal. Goal. Goal. 3–1 to Australia. Zico dipped his head. Three points, *his* three points, had been stolen from him by a team he hadn't rated at all. When the whistle blew, the sound of delete keys being tapped frenetically on journalists' laptops was only drowned out by the cheering.

'Kokoda,' Jamo said to me ten minutes later, still shaking his head in wonder as we walked down to the press conference. 'We're over the Owen Stanley Ranges and Port Moresby's in view.'

* * *

Fortune favours the brave. The man who'd dropped Harry Kewell in Sydney strode imperiously into the poorly airconditioned press conference room, taking swigs from his bottle of water and smoothing down his hair. His face was red. His soiled shirt clung to his gut. Guus Geluk had saved the day.

'I don't think it's an escape,' he said, his charming Dutch–English lilt filling the room. 'Escape is something when you get crucified by you [the media], in general. You can force your luck. If you sit back and you don't have a plan to see how the game can develop beforehand and you get your ball in, then it's luck. But when there's a plan then I can be very proud of the guys that they executed and practised on this and then it's nice to see that you pushed the luck.' Hiddink wasn't very convincing – he had been lucky, and his substitutions had been reasonably straightforward given the desperate circumstances, not, as many were saying, the work of 'genius'. Ruud Gullit, the former Holland player and coach, said Hiddink had a 'horseshoe as big as my house'. But one

Korean fan, Heejoon Park, blogging on the *Herald Sun* website after the game, put it down to something else altogether. He was convinced he'd seen the Dutchman perform 'a magic'.

'We Koreans are huge fans for Mr Hiddink,' Park wrote. 'When you were having been dominated by Japan until the half of the second half, I saw Hiddink on the TV, and I said to him in my mind, "Mr Hiddink, it's time to show us a magic." And wow! He really did it.'

You can't argue with the supernatural.

Arnold, though, insisted his boss had prepared the team to deal with any eventuality. 'The cue was that when Craig Moore came off and Josh Kennedy went on, that's when everyone knew what their jobs would be,' he said. 'Harry went from the middle out to the left-hand side, Emerton came back as a right-stopper, so then we had three quick guys at the back to counteract the counterattack, then we'd get the ball out to Emmo just over halfway, Johnny, Viduka and Josh would be in the middle, and Timmy would be around them. We felt, as well, that we could have started that way in the game – looking enough at Japan and seeing how they were defensively against high balls into the box. But if that backfires on us, what do we then revert to? So this was an option we tried to keep right up our sleeve until the end. It was something we fell back on to in case of need.'

'Guus knows how to tackle every situation,' confirmed Viduka, 'whether we're winning, losing or whatever. If you're clear in your mind on what you have to do in every situation, it makes the job a whole lot easier. As a bunch of guys, we know what to do in every situation.'

What Australia would have to do in their next game, against Brazil's Titulares, the anointed XI, had been equally thought out and analysed. But all the planning in the world would count for nothing if they didn't have the inner belief they could win it and the ability to make it happen. That, however, was not going to be a problem. After what had happened in Kaiserslautern, the Socceroos had it in spades.

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Down on the Bremerstrasse, a drab thoroughfare by the rail line, Australian and Japanese fans were streaming into town an hour after the game. It was overwhelming to see how dedicated the fans were. Even at the Uruguay game, there'd been thousands of supporters dressed in Wallabies or Kangaroos jerseys, which suggested that football hadn't fully arrived in our country just yet. In Kaiserslautern, though, almost every fan wore an official replica top, either generic or one with their favourite player's name emblazoned on the back. In years past, the only name you would have expected to see, if you'd been so lucky to even find a Socceroos jersey in a store, was KEWELL. Now there was BRESCIANO, POPOVIC, GRELLA, SKOKO. All good Aussie names.

At one point, a bloke in a kangaroo costume, tired of seeing the crowd held up every couple of minutes by a black FIFA limousine, ran into the middle of the road and tried to direct traffic himself. The *polizei*, in their khaki shirts and green berets, had a laugh and with a minimum of fuss moved him on. When he'd been shifted the required few metres, the kangaroo took a call on his mobile. It was the surreal highlight of a surreal day in Germany.

That night, back in Strasbourg, former France international Christian Karembeu, a World Cup winner born in New Caledonia, wore a Socceroos shirt while being interviewed on television. I had no idea what he was saying, but when he pinched the front of his shirt to show the TV audience, his body language said he was wearing it with

pride. In the Socceroos he'd obviously seen something he liked.
France was yet to play their first game – that was the next day, against Switzerland – so the bars were going about their normal business. It was almost ten o'clock, but the sun had only just gone down. Place Kléber was teeming with young lovers and groups of teenagers who were oblivious to what had just taken place barely 150 kilometres away. I left the apartment and found Jamo and Harro, unwashed and still in their Socceroos T-shirts, in a bistro that was showing the end of the Italy vs Ghana game.
'ALLEMAGNE 2006 – LA COUPE DU MONDE DE FOOTBALL! – COMME SI VOUS Y ÉTIEZ!' said the flyer in the window. It wasn't quite just like being there, but the atmosphere was convivial. The owner, a small fat man in his forties, was too busy taking orders and wiping down tables to take any notice of what was happening on the flat-screen TV bolted to the wall. I ordered a plate of tortellini and a beer and settled in for the rest of the game.
With 15 minutes left on the clock, the Ghanaians were desperate for an equaliser to Italy's first-half goal and had the most irrepressible midfield I'd seen all tournament. But as with Australia's build-up play for 80 minutes in Kaiserslautern, the Africans couldn't convert. Italy were doing the bare minimum to hold on to their lead. I was rooting for Ghana – I wanted an African team to do well – but there was an air of inevitability about the result. There always is when the Italians play.
This night would be no exception. Sammy Kuffour mistimed a back pass after collecting an Andrea Pirlo lob from midfield, substitute Vincenzo Iaquinta intercepted, stepped around the goalkeeper and poked a low shot into an open goal to make it 2–0. He ran to the left post, arms outstretched, mouth agape, and collapsed on his back to be buried under his teammates. We drained our drinks. The World Cup had seen enough fairytales for one day.

* * *

On my first trip to Germany, I'd stood in a street just off the medieval Romerberg Square in Frankfurt and asked my guide, a bird-faced young woman with a Leo Sayer perm, why there weren't any monuments to the German war dead. Everywhere I had been during my ten-day journey through southern Germany and the Rhineland I'd been inundated with information about the civic authorities' great shame about the country's Nazi past. This shame was physically and appropriately embodied in all manner of monuments, sculptures and plaques to the genocide victims. But there was nothing to commemorate the estimated two million Germans who had been killed, and the 12 million displaced, mostly in the east, after the end of the war.
'It is not something we do,' she replied, looking faintly embarrassed. It was something she didn't want to talk about either. She turned on her heel and walked a few hundred metres down the street to the next 'attraction'.
However, my guide wasn't telling the whole truth. Germany's new chancellor, Angela Merkel, had come into the job supporting the concept of a Centre for Expulsions in Berlin, a facility that would document this secret history of the forced removal of ethnic Germans and other nationalities from Eastern Europe after the Third Reich's collapse. The Berlin project, and the 2006 World Cup, were important to Germany because they were loud statements to the world that it had finally decided to move on from half a century of guilt.
The Germans have a typically unpronounceable word for coming to terms with their history, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or 'wrestling down the past'. For most of the postwar period, they achieved it by living in denial. From the 1970s onwards, they

achieved it by introducing draconian laws outlawing such acts as displaying swastikas or giving Nazi salutes. Even in 2006, with the world riven by terrorism and regional violence, there was still a reluctance to deploy the German national army because of its Nazi history, even though Italy and Japan – two equally guilty parties in the wartime fascist trident – were not held up to the same scrutiny.

Germany 2006, though, was to change all the rules about how Germans should behave. Freed by football from their prison of shame, the flag was flying everywhere. Kids were comfortable painting their faces in black, red and gold. The national anthem was sung with gusto. As Beckenbauer had wanted, his people were allowing themselves to crack a smile. They were even feeling good.

In the national football team especially, the change was plain to see. The dour, stolid, defensive but effective style that had so characterised Nationalmannschaft sides of the past had been replaced by a new emphasis on attack, fitness and flair. Klinsmann's boys had opened the Cup in Munich on 9 June with a 4–2 win over Costa Rica. No one had seriously expected the hosts to lose to the Central Americans, but it was the aggressive manner of the victory, and the sheer number of goals collected, that suggested a very different Germany. As 'Klinzi' had said before the World Cup, his team's brief was not just to win the tournament but to exploit 'the opportunity to show the world who we are'. His country had the 'possibility to redefine Germany: to create a brand'.

If youth and optimism were driving Germany into a new era, France was running on an altogether different motor, one that threatened to clap out long before the final on 9 July. It had been eight years since Les Bleus had humiliated Brazil 3–0 in the Stade de France – by no means an eternity. But it had also been eight years since they had scored a goal in a World Cup match, that same night in Paris, which was an eternity. And where Klinsmann was young and hip – as hip as one can be with a bleached mullet in your recent past – new French coach Raymond Domenech was old and cerebral, affecting a professorial look that might have won him adorers on a lectern at the Sorbonne but looked decidedly out of place in the team dugout.

A former defensive midfielder with Olympique Lyonnais and long-time coach of the French youth team, Domenech had unusual methods which, according to legend, included making Zinedine Zidane and three teammates attend a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* before an important match. Whether this had anything to do with the retirement of Zidane, Lilian Thuram and Claude Makelele a month after Domenech took the job is unclear. (Perhaps they might have stayed had he bought a few bags of popcorn and hired a DVD of *Gladiator* instead, like football coaches everywhere.)

Football was no longer the social glue it had been eight years before, when Jacquet's licorice all-sorts team silenced far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen. After the September 11 attacks in New York, the sense of shared identity between black, white and *beur* (French-born but of North African origin) had evaporated. Even Le Pen was blustering again, telling the French sports daily *L'Equipe* later in the tournament: 'France doesn't totally recognise itself in this team. Maybe the coach exaggerated the proportion of players of colour, maybe in this area he should have been a bit more careful, maybe he got carried away in his ideology.'

Politicians and sociologists didn't have any answers for France's woes. But if their football team could win the World Cup, everything about *La République* would be right again. Yet their results in qualifying were mediocre. A depleted Les Bleus had drawn with Israel in September 2004, drew with the Republic of Ireland a month later, and then drew again with Switzerland in March 2005. They hadn't put a goal away in 270 minutes. But when Zidane, Thuram and Makelele reversed their retirements en

masse, this triggered an immediate turnaround in form that would see France ultimately top its group. Amazingly, it was France's first successful World Cup qualifying campaign since 1986, having automatically qualified as hosts in '98. A shock loss to Slovakia at home in March – their first in 18 games – rightly sounded alarm bells again, but subsequent victories over Mexico, Denmark and China showed the old stagers, whom *Le Parisien* newspaper had cleverly likened to 'the Rolling Stones on their farewell tour', still had the requisite swagger. Like the Stones, unfortunately, their best days were also well behind them.

That was immediately apparent in France's opening game against Switzerland on 13 June. I watched it with Jamo and Harro in a bar off Place Kléber, in a room full of young Algerian and Tunisian students. Thierry Henry, the most feared striker in world football, barely got a chance the whole 90 minutes, the best attack taking place when Zidane gave his teammates William Gallas and Sylvain Wiltord a spray on the sideline. Down the other end, it was little better. The geriatric Fabien Barthez was fortunate to escape with a clean sheet, faffing about in goal and regularly getting himself out of position.

It was easily the worst game of the tournament so far, enlivened only by the presence of a young French footballer called Franck Ribéry, who was quick, tenacious and had the most unusual face, courtesy of it going through a windshield when he was two. He was a Muslim who had been anointed as Zidane's successor but, because this was only his debut, was a long way from establishing a Zidane-like authority among his teammates. A bitchy Henry put him in his place in the press conference afterwards.

'Franck placed the ball behind me instead of placing it in front of me,' he said. 'If he had placed it in front of me I could have pushed it inside an empty goal without controlling it and that would have been a goal. He is young and it was not easy for him. He brought us what he could and *some* of it was good.'

When we left the bar, it was almost 9 pm yet the sun was still high in the sky, making it feel like late afternoon. Preparations were being made for *le grand départ*, the start of the Tour de France. Landscapers had moved in, constructing garden beds and positioning huge outsized terracotta pots. Sprinklers had been installed to help the turf and flowers survive the heat, and young girls and boys were spraying their faces in the billows of mist. We strolled over to the tomb of General Kléber, killing time before Brazil's opener against Croatia in Munich, a game that would answer a lot of questions about Australia's likely fate in Germany.

Already this World Cup was subverting all the scripts. Australia had run over the top of Japan. Ecuador had thumped Poland, Trinidad & Tobago had kept Sweden to a scoreless draw, Portugal had just held off its old colony Angola. The mighty France, it appeared, was gone already. Germany was flying high. General Kléber, however, standing before us in bronze, his skeleton under our feet, proved that sometimes things don't always turn out the way you think.

CHAPTER FOUR

CIRCUS MAXIMUS

'*Futebol é uma caixinha de surpresas.*' ('Football is a little box of surprises.')
Brazilian saying

In 2006 John Aloisi's day job was in Vittoria, northern Spain, for a club called Deportivo Alavés in the Spanish second division. As the only Australian to have played in the world's top football league (he'd been transferred from Primera Liga outfit Osasuna the previous season), he understood better than most how it felt to be regarded as an oddity from the Antipodes. The Spanish knew very little, if anything, about Australians, he told me, and their general knowledge of Australian culture and lifestyle was so poor 'some people think we have kangaroos as pets'.

'People over here don't really know much about Australian soccer,' he said. 'They don't know any players that play in our national team. They only really know me as the "Australian player" and they think the national team is me and players who've never left Australia.'

The Socceroos might have stunned the critics with their win in Kaiserslautern, but searching for Australia merchandise – a jersey, a stuffed kangaroo, even a measly flag – in the shops along Strasbourg's Rue des Grandes Arcades was, like Aloisi's experience in Navarra, somewhat of a comedown. The few World Cup displays consisted of copious Zidane merchandise and a smattering of French jerseys, or the distinctive shirts of Brazil, Portugal and Spain. Australian football wasn't on Europe's sporting radar at all; in fact, it was hard to find anything Australian anywhere.

The phenomenon of Australian footballers in Europe is a misnomer, if you count England as distinct from the continent. Most players who've left home since Joe Marston stumped up at Preston North End in 1950 have, for reasons of opportunity and cultural affinity, chosen the British Isles as their proving ground. In 2006, Australian footballers in the continent's big leagues were a rare breed. Rarer still were those who became stars, names that European kids looked up to and tried to emulate. Before Mark Bresciano became Australia's first ever $20 million-plus footballer at Parma in Italy, Robbie Slater – at Racing Club de Lens in northern France – was probably our closest thing to a bona fide celebrity in professional club football outside England. Others had made big impressions in lesser leagues – Paul Okon, Frank Farina and Eddie Krncevic in Belgium; Mark Viduka in Croatia – but very few Aussies had graduated to the big time of the continent's top competitions and made a commensurate impression (though Okon, significantly, would play at Italian giants Lazio). In England, the situation was different. Harry Kewell and Viduka became stars at Leeds United and for a short time Mark Bosnich was first-choice goalkeeper at Manchester United. Hence our national team had remained a curiosity, a bunch of unknowns. An understandable state of affairs if you appreciate that before Australia's game against Germany at the 2005 Confederations Cup, a full-strength Australia side had not played on mainland European soil for five years, its last outing a 3–0 drubbing of Hungary in Budapest in 2000. That famous 3-1 friendly win over England had taken place in London.

Yet just an hour and a half's drive north-east of Strasbourg, one town was getting to know quite a lot about our national team. The Socceroos and its caravan of supporters and media had been holed up there for over a week. The only pet kangaroos spotted had been inflatable ones, carried around the necks of fans as they took in team training

or paraded through the streets.

* * *

Outside the newly relaid Otto-Meister Stadion, the home of TSG Öhringen and the temporary training ground for the Socceroos, hundreds of fans had gathered on a grassy knoll behind a tall wire fence. Some had their faces pressed up against the mesh. A few were standing back a bit, trying to get long-distance snaps of their heroes. Others, bored with seeing nothing, had started a scratch game.

The players could have been excused for not paying much attention to them. Quite apart from trying to impress Guus Hiddink, Johan Neeskens, Graham Arnold and the team's retinue of trainers with their limited opportunities, they were a good 200 metres from the fence, separated by an athletics circuit and a platoon of security goons.

Europe's heatwave had not spared Öhringen. The only shade on offer was under the main stand, and that was for the media and some fortunate local schoolkids. No wonder the fans were screaming at the top of their lungs to get noticed. The players had to squint into the glare of the midday sun to even guess they were there.

I joined the throng at the fence for a minute or two, but found the squad was so far away it wasn't worth the effort. So I got inside the media entrance where at least I could walk onto the pitch and see the faces of the players. Behind the running track, the usual suspects were struggling to keep out of the sun: Fairfax's Michael Cockerill was chatting to John Kosmina; the Australian football writer Matthew Hall, cranky at the best of times, was complaining about bandwagons; his wife, Anita, was talking to a group of student filmmakers from Hamburg who were making a documentary about the Socceroos' time in Öhringen. Peter Wilkins, sweltering inside a grey suit, was pacing up and down the sideline. Ray Martin, an odd sight at a football tournament, was scribbling on a notepad. The gossip on the ground was that FFA had relaxed its strict media rules so that Martin could interview the players for puff pieces for *60 Minutes*.

I didn't see what point was being served keeping the fans penned in. They'd come from the other end of the world to cheer on their team and were being treated like sheep in a holding yard. They deserved better. But football was a whole different ball game now. Hiddink was keeping the team on a tight leash. When the Australians had first arrived in town, they'd snubbed an official civic reception at the town hall – brass bands, little kids, Öhringen's hoi polloi – sending Luke Wilkshire and three wide-eyed development players instead of the full squad.

On this day, though, Tim Cahill walked over and did his best to acknowledge the fans. He picked up an adidas +Teamgeist ball and punted it over the fence into the crowd. Scrapping wildly, grown men fought over it like seagulls tearing apart a packet of fish and chips.

At the 'G'day Mate' festival in the town's main square, the atmosphere was more inclusive. Green and gold vinyl tablecloths had been set on foldaway tables and Aussie beer was flowing. Local teenage boys and girls performed bizarre choreography to techno music while dressed in the kits of some of the competing nations. Older townsfolk paraded in the traditional dress of the area and happily posed for photographs. John O'Neill, on behalf of the again conspicuously absent Socceroos, gamely sang 'Waltzing Matilda' to a generous cheer.

To escape the sun, I wandered down a side alley and found an outside table at a pub. The ponytailed André Krüger walked up and stopped briefly for a chat. Krüger has the odd celebrity of being regarded in some quarters as the Socceroos' greatest fan, even though he's spent his entire life in Germany. He became interested in Australia as a

child in Hanover, and by the time the Socceroos rocked up to the 1974 World Cup he was obsessed. Krüger was now a folk hero to a lot of supporters and, with the Socceroos making their heroic return to a World Cup on his own turf, he was revelling in the attention. (He was hardly incognito – he had KRUEGER on the back of his Aussie jersey.) As we got talking, I noticed he had an old bloke with him who was wearing a Socceroos shirt and baseball cap, had dyed brown hair and looked about 70. It was Ted Smith, who'd played two games for Australia at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. When Krüger got waylaid by some autograph seekers, I introduced myself. Smith gently touched my shoulder and leaned in. I asked him how he was feeling. 'I'm walking on cloud nine,' he said, his eyes glistening. 'I never thought I'd see the day. I missed out on a World Cup as a player, and I always thought I would as a fan, but I'm here now. There's Australians here from everywhere. Germany's beautiful. *Beautiful*.' And with those words, my cynicism about the antics at the training ground and the no-show Socceroos and everything else I'd seen and heard so far in Öhringen disappeared.

* * *

Three weeks out from the start of Germany 2006, while the world was devouring profiles of the two Ronaldos and betting agencies were installing Brazil as unbackable favourites to win a sixth World Cup, a civil war was raging in Brazil's biggest city, São Paulo. The few images coming out of the country were cinematic in their rawness and violence. Gangsters from the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of the Capital), a ruthless crime syndicate, had mounted coordinated terrorist attacks inside 80 prisons and on the streets in protest over the relocation of hundreds of its members to a remote penal facility. Police and fire stations were bombed, vehicles torched, hundreds of civilians slaughtered. The four days of carnage only ended when the gang's kingpin, Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, aka 'Marcola', called for his foot soldiers to release their hostages. In return for their compliance, Marcola had a simple request: new plasma TVs for his men to watch the World Cup.

So in a country where even civil wars come to a halt for football, to earn the yellow shirt of the national football team marks a player as exceptional. It's when 11 of those players come together that the real trouble begins. The boys from Brazil have forever grappled with the curse of overconfidence, what they call *oba oba*. The better the Seleção, the more crippling *oba oba* becomes. The curse struck instantly at the 1966 World Cup in England after Brazil had won the previous two tournaments in a canter. The 1982 team, regarded by some experts as the best Brazilian side ever assembled, didn't get past the quarters in Spain, eliminated by eventual winners Italy 3–2 in Barcelona.

In Germany, the spectre of *oba oba* was bigger than ever. With a line-up containing Ronaldinho, Kaká, Adriano, Ronaldo, Robinho and Roberto Carlos, among others, and a World Cup-winning coach in Carlos Alberto Parreira, there could be no excuses. How could there be? Failure was not an option – it never has been in Brazilian football. Dida, the team's number one, had spent the previous months begging his country to forgive the 'crucified' figure of the late and unlamented Moacir Barbosa, the goalkeeper who'd had the grave misfortune of letting in Uruguay's winning goal in the World Cup final... *in 1950*.

Brazilian players and management, though, appeared oblivious to the dark presence stalking them. Before the tournament, they'd arranged little more than training runs against a Fluminense under-20 side, a Lucerne invitational XI and New Zealand, banging in 25 unanswered goals; their only serious friendly, against Russia in Moscow,

had been played in the middle of the Russian winter, in temperatures approaching –30°C. Hardly ideal preparation for a balmy German summer.
They'd been paid millions just to train. The small city of Weggis in Switzerland had stumped up US$2 million and thrown in free accommodation in a five-star hotel. Their training sessions were promoted like rock concerts, tickets being sold for €17 and snapped up in seconds. No one within the squad seemed to have their heads screwed on right – the players had asked to do away with shared accommodation and demanded individual rooms. Strikers Ronaldo and Adriano, the two players who looked most out of shape and needed to knuckle down, partied hard on their days off. Arrogantly, Parreira was already talking about meeting Germany in the final.
Ronaldo, Golden Boot winner at Korea–Japan 2002, was under considerable pressure going into the Australia game, after an opening performance against Croatia in which he appeared to do nothing at all. One Brazilian journalist even refused to give him a rating out of ten, so lackadaisacal and inconsequential had his contribution been. His substitute and Réal Madrid team-mate Robinho had, in sharp contrast, been energetic and impressive. But first performances historically don't count for much; Brazil had been slow starters in all their World Cups and took some time to get their groove. Indeed, most of the first XI had been off their game in Berlin, only Kaká's skills matching the wattage produced by the flashes of the fans' cameras. Certainly Parreira's unstinting faith in Ronaldo was stretching credulity, just as the player's official weight for the Australia game: 82kg. He'd arrived in Switzerland at 95kg, and had lost three or four kilograms at the most. Brazil's tight-fitting dri-fit tops couldn't lie. *O Fenômeno* had become *O Fatômeno*. The suspicion that Parreira was keeping him in the team just so Ronaldo could break Just Fontaine's goalscoring record was hard to shake.
The Socceroos, however, wouldn't be fooled. They knew it would take an extraordinary effort to come away with a result in Munich, with or without Ronaldo. The key to an improbable victory wasn't technical ability but mindset. Lucas Neill, the most headstrong of the Australian players, wasn't buying into the David-versus-Goliath talk about the match.
'If you worry too much about your opponent, then you take away the strength of your own game,' he told me. 'We're an unpredictable team and we're a very good team. If we play to all our strengths, hopefully that will cancel out what everybody else is trying to do. Maybe Brazil will find themselves defending more than attacking.'

* * *

The *New Yorker*'s architecture critic Paul Goldberger had called Allianz Arena a 'quilted doughnut'. Locals called it the *Schlauchboot*, the 'Inflatable Boat'. To me it looked like a girl's elastic hairband. Whatever it was supposed to be, it was hard to miss coming down the A99 from Stuttgart. Made from ETFE or ethylene tetra fluoro ethylene, a high-tech plastic, it was renowned for glowing blue or red to denote whatever local Bundesliga team was playing there on any given day: red for Bayern Munich, blue for 1860 Munich, and sometimes red and blue just for the hell of it.
On 18 June 2006, at noon, on a killer summer's day, it was white. I had hoped the World Cup organisers might have switched on some yellow or green lights – which would have been neutral, after all – but it hadn't happened. Instead, the concrete ramps and car parks outside the stadium were flowing with two shades of yellow: the lime of Brazil and the banana of Australia. It was hard to tell them apart. It was also something the world would probably never see again. Getting a full-strength Brazil to come to Australia was a pipedream. The last time they had travelled west over the Pacific, in

1999, when Soccer Australia was arranging matches with club sides, the Confederação Brasileira de Futebol had sent an under-23 team. Ronaldo and Harry Kewell, the star attractions for the fans, hadn't bothered to turn up. Today, they were both playing, Ronaldo – on the basis of his poor form – possibly for the last time. Neither team could meet later in this World Cup.

Chatting with the fans outside the stadium, though, I soon discovered all the talk was not of history being made but of Sam Newman's assault of a Fanatic at the 'Samba Party' at the Lowenbrau Keller Beer Hall the night before. The fan, later identified as airline steward Anthony Demovic, had called the Melbourne TV identity a 'poofter in a pink shirt' and spat on him. It was hard to know what was more galling: the punch-up, the spitting or the fact that Newman was in Munich. I'd had no idea *The Footy Show* was even in Germany to film a special or that Peter FitzSimons had been flown out by Channel Nine for the program. Shane Warne, Eddie McGuire, Paul Vautin and Garry Lyon were questionable enough comperes for a show about football, but FitzSimons? It was like Monica Lewinsky doing an ad for breath mints. If it was an attempt by Nine to steal some ratings, it didn't work. If it was an attempt to connect with football fans, it failed abysmally. The only thing it accomplished was to highlight again how out of touch the station was with a sport it had never come to grips with. But some good would come out of the whole sorry episode. Johnny Warren could at least rest in peace knowing FitzSimons had finally answered his own question, 'What World Cup?'.

* * *

Australian sport has had its great moments of theatre – Jack Johnson circling Tommy Burns like a panther in Sydney Stadium in 1908, Gary Ablett fighting a one-man war against Hawthorn at the MCG in 1989, Wally Lewis going nose to nose with Mark Geyer at Lang Park in 1991, Cathy Freeman in the Olympic Stadium in 2000. The frisson of excitement around the stands of Allianz Arena heightened the feeling that Australians were about to witness a similar moment for the ages. The reserves doing their drills. The high mesh fences behind the goals. The Bob Sinclar music. The roar of a whole stand of fans as a Mexican wave passed through. Goleo the lion dancing for the cameras. The VIPs. The drums. The hundreds of millions of people watching. Germany's Circus Maximus demanded something special. Yet the Socceroos weren't overawed by the occasion. In fact, they took to the pitch with nothing to lose. Just before 6 pm, news had filtered in of Japan's goalless draw with Croatia in Nuremburg, eliminating the spectre of goal ratio from Australia's pre-game planning. A win or draw would now see the Socceroos qualify for the second round. A loss would mean that the game everyone expected to be the crunch clash of Group F, against Croatia, would be just that. Australia could run onto the field and just play.

By quirk of fate, I took my seat almost directly behind Hiddink and the Australian bench. A gum-chewing Arnold was nervously pacing the sideline, enjoying some banter with fans. Hiddink seemed deep in thought, holding his chin in the crook of his thumb. A few metres away stood Parreira, the legendary Mario Zagallo, and the Brazilian bench.

The opening minutes followed a fairly predictable pattern: the Seleção building up their attack with short, carefully measured passes. Australia, a step off the pace, conceded a free kick to Kaká within the first two minutes but Ronaldinho's lame effort was cleared away by Mark Viduka downfield. Then Brazil showed what it could do in the blink of an eye. Roberto Carlos punted the ball back down the left flank, it bounced once and found Lúcio, who was dispossessed by Craig Moore. Only Moore's miskick ended up

in the path of Kaká, who headed on to Ronaldo. The heavyweight striker received it cleanly on his chest, then volleyed over his head to where Kaká, now steaming in directly behind him, smacked it hard into the advertising hoarding behind the left goalpost. Mark Schwarzer, who'd barely had time to spit on his gloves, was sent rolling on the grass.

'The spirit of Australia is the flying kangaroo, mate,' Viduka had laughed when we spoke before the tournament. 'We've gotta fly at 'em. We've gotta take 'em on. It would be a shame if we tried to play "bunker system" or something like that. It wouldn't utilise what kind of players we have. Going forward we've got so many good players. My philosophy is attack is the best defence.'

It was a wonderful sentiment, and that's all it might have stayed. But, true to the captain's word, the Australians immediately hit back, Viduka himself unleashing an in-swinging strike that came off his boot at half pace. Neill then made a terrific run through midfield, beating Ze Roberto, but was foiled by Lúcio. On seven minutes, Moore, falling to his feet after a back pass from Jason Culina, kicked a 30-metre cutout pass to Scott Chipperfield who sent Mile Sterjovski scuttling through to the byline.

There were signs of life in this team. Brett Emerton was containing Ronaldinho. Chipperfield was outfoxing Cafu. A pumped-up Vince Grella was tormenting anyone who came his way and was lucky not to be sent off for a studs-up tackle on Ronaldo. Only their finishing, Australia's bête noire, was letting them down: Culina botching two corners, one long-range strike and a free kick. Still, the performance had been encouraging. Brazil had reverted to playing long balls for their strikers to get through the six-man midfield. Australia, in contrast, were pushing the ball around on the deck, keeping possession. 'GO AUSSIE! GO AUSSIE! GO AUSSIE!' reverberated around the stadium.

When Viduka drew Lúcio, Ze Roberto and Emerson and still managed to thread the ball to Culina, the PSV Eindhoven midfielder again wasted good lead-up work. Another chance was squandered when Chipperfield trundled down the left wing and played in Sterjovski near the corner flag, but Sterjovski let the ball run out of play on the referee's whistle. Except the ref, the German Markus Merk, hadn't blown; it had come from the crowd.

There were other moments of intrepid play. Emerton and Culina combined for a dazzling one-two down the left, fooling Ze Roberto, Ronaldinho and Roberto Carlos. Culina, atoning for his earlier profligacy, combined with Viduka to set up a rampaging Mark Bresciano, whose strike whistled over Dida's crossbar.

Brazil didn't know where to look. Ronaldinho, the most gifted player in the world, made his first real burst only on the 20-minute mark but was denied by Neill at the edge of the box. He was so rattled by the Aussies' marking, he later stepped on the ball when in a position to score. Ronaldo was also badly off the pace. He flailed theatrically in mid-air to ruin a scoring opportunity and his one good strike from an Adriano backheel was blocked by Neill.

It had been a bravura show by the Socceroos, a performance that in just 45 minutes had exploded the myths about the Australian game – the resorting to thuggery, reliance on the long ball, lack of invention, poor tactical discipline. Whatever historical baggage Australia had taken into the World Cup had been unceremoniously dumped. Emerton had banished all memories of his ordinary effort in Kaiserslautern to be arguably best on ground, Neill's presence in defence was omnipotent, and Viduka was in breathtaking form. Hiddink, by turns pensive or manic on the sideline, could no longer be suspected of quackery: he'd backed up after a shaky outing against Japan to demonstrate there really was some substance to the hype. Unleashing Bresciano just

before half time, just like his switch of Kewell for Popovic in Sydney, had given the team a new edge.

'Guus is able to get the best out of every individual,' Bresciano told me. 'Just the way he approaches the game, the way he talks, his motivational skills, his ability to read a game. He's not quiet and not over the top. He's got the right medicine. When he came in, everyone started from zero and that's why our intensity and our performance increased. Aussies don't muck around, mate. If we've got a job to do, we'll do it.'

* * *

So how to account for what happened just after the break? If anything, it proved that Ronaldo was still a force to be reckoned with, a player who might have been overweight and slow but had the brains to think two or three movements ahead. The goal seemed too easy. It was made from a Ronaldinho straight pass from near the centre of the pitch to a fractionally offside Ronaldo on the left edge of the box. He drew Emerton, Neill and Moore and crossed square to Adriano, who had no trouble threading it through Chipperfield's legs. It was a bitterly disappointing goal to concede. More disappointing, though, was the failure to snatch a goal back when Australia had the world champions back-pedalling on the counterattack. The tension was immense. Arnold was gesticulating frantically on the sideline, trying to get Hiddink's tactical changes communicated to the players. 'BRESH! BRESH! COME HERE!' he screamed. Hiddink, also unusually agitated, was having hassles with the fourth official.

Viduka got the ball in the centre of the park, held off Ze Roberto, and nipped it past Emerson to Cahill, who put in Bresciano down the left flank. He had no one but Dida to beat, but paused to cut back in and was filched by Ze Roberto. Then a Dida blunder gifted Kewell, who was on for Cahill, but the Liverpool striker blew his shot in front of an open goal. Minutes later, he sweetly hit a long-range shot but it grazed the top of the crossbar. Stunned, the Brazilian fans began booing their own team. Who the hell were these colonial upstarts? Brazil's fans weren't used to seeing their national team scrambling back in defence, sortie upon sortie. The wrong team had the upper hand.

This was the Hiddink effect in action. More than any other coach in the world, he knew when and how to deploy his substitutes. Now he was bringing on John Aloisi, one of the more competent finishers in his squad, to buttress an attack that was already running hot laps around the Brazilians.

Parreira, like an old man on the other side of a chessboard, had his own plan. On came Robinho for Ronaldo, Gilberto Silva for Emerson. With almost his first touch, Robinho danced around Chipperfield and unleashed a fierce strike past Schwarzer's left post. Minutes later, he forced the Australian goalkeeper to save off his legs. The intent was clear. Shut the Socceroos down. Knock 'em out. Except the Aussies' resolve was unshaken.

The action was end to end. Bresciano had a half-bicycle kick from an Aloisi header saved by Dida, and Viduka, under pressure, had a volley swallowed in the roof of the net. Downfield, Brazil's best chance came when a zipping header from Kaká hit the near post off a Ronaldinho corner. The Brazilians had been pushed back onto the ropes. It was a measure of how good the Australians were playing that the Seleção were relying on long aerial balls to mount any sort of effective offence.

But Parreira had one final trick up his sleeve. He pulled off Adriano and threw on Frederico Chaves Guedes, or Fred, the Olympique Lyonnais striker who had the enviable record of scoring the fastest goal in Brazilian football – 3.17 seconds. It was the killer blow. It took just 108 seconds to open his World Cup account.

* * *

The FIFA official, an Engelbert Humperdinck lookalike, was amused. There we were, the international press, pinned up against a flimsy partition like cattle jostling for space in a slaughterhouse, thrusting our voice recorders into the face of the greatest footballer on earth, Ronaldinho. He might have had something interesting to say, except a) I couldn't get within two metres of him and b) he was speaking in Portuguese, a language for which I have no faculty whatsoever. Still, I pressed forward, desperate for a quote, any quote, beseeching Brazil's number ten to turn his boggle-eyed gaze my way. 'DINHO! AUSTRALIAN! AUSTRALIAN REPORTER!' If it were possible, the journalists behind me looked even more anguished. It must have been a pathetic sight, which explained Humperdinck's smirk. It was also futile. In seconds, Ronaldinho had been bundled ahead by his minders into the blazing lights of the waiting TV cameras.

I'd never seen a post-match press free-for-all like it. Five hundred journos – mostly Brazilian and Japanese – sweltering inside a space the size of a car showroom, with no air conditioning and a corridor for players and staff snaking through the middle of the maelstrom. The 'mixed zone' is what FIFA calls it, a term which suggests an air of peaceful fraternisation between players and press; in reality, it's little more than an uncivilised shitfight.

Most Australian players were happy to chat, though Cahill stormed right through. Perhaps he was still annoyed at having been subbed for Kewell. The Liverpool winger himself was keeping an equally low profile, perhaps mindful that anything he said could compromise his chances of escaping a ban for verbally abusing Merk after the match. Culina, more diplomatically, thought 'individual brilliance' turned the game, but the 'referee could have done a little bit too'. Neill was typically downcast – he always is, given his natural competitiveness – and said 'if it wasn't for two dubious goals the game could have been a lot different', but admitted the Aussies hadn't made the most of their opportunities: 'At this level it's very hard to score goals... it hurts badly because we created four or five good chances against the world champions; we had chances to score but we didn't take them.' Viduka continued in the same vein: 'We were hurting them... in the first half we played some nice football, but we didn't get into the area where we could really hurt them.' Grella was asked how the Brazilians had reacted after the final whistle. What had they said to the Socceroos? 'Well done. Good luck. Same sort of bullshit everyone says after a game,' he said, wiping his chin and looking at the floor. 'Nothing special, mate, nothing special.'

Grella's honesty was charming but jolting. Life went on. It was over. No matter how valiantly they had played, or how amazing the experience had been, Brazil had still won and Australian football, after a short flight in orbit, had been brought crashing back to earth.

CHAPTER FIVE

RIPPING UP THE TABLECLOTHS

'In football everything is complicated by the presence of the other team.'
Jean-Paul Sartre

Tito's Yugoslavia was once a powerhouse of European football, but the irresistible force of history had detonated communism in the early 1990s and split the national side into half a dozen new teams. Two of them, the strongest, were in Germany: Croatia and Serbia & Montenegro. In a bizarre turn of events, they became a trio for all intents and purposes, as Montenegrins had voted to secede from Belgrade three weeks before the tournament started.

A narrow loss for Serbia & Montenegro in its opening game against Holland had been followed by a catastrophic 6–0 humiliation by Argentina, and with those two defeats the most admired defence in Europe – the Serbs conceded just one goal in qualifying – had been reduced to a bickering, jaded mess. Amid the internecine strife, an Australian midfielder, Ivan Ergic, would start for the Balkan team in its third match, a dead rubber against Ivory Coast in Munich. So fluid is the concept of nationality in football that before the tournament kicked off, Ergic, ex-Perth Glory, had not yet played for Serbia, was born in Croatia and had an Australian passport.

His case wasn't exceptional – Tony Dorigo had turned out for England at Italia '90 – but Germany 2006 was, given that three other Australians were selected for one foreign squad: Croatia.

These were typical Aussie boys who'd enjoyed typical Aussie childhoods, been to typical Aussie schools, and had typical Aussie aspirations. They were Aussie through and through. Yet when Croatia came calling in 1997, that wasn't enough for Hajduk Split's Anthony Seric to stay loyal. As far as he saw it (rightly or wrongly), Australia offered no viable path to the World Cup. Four years later, Hertha Berlin's Josip Simunic followed. Joey Didulica, then of Austria Wien, made his switch in 2004 when it became clear he was behind Mark Schwarzer and Zeljko Kalac in the pecking order of Socceroos goalkeepers for the Germany 2006 campaign.

The vilification of these men by some fans and parts of the local press was extreme. Yet they were hardly doing anything that hadn't been done before, even by Australia, for whom newly arrived British and Eastern European talent had formed the bulk of national squads in the 1970s and '80s. In this new era of ridiculous money and loose morals, loyalty to club was a quaint eccentricity; it was inevitable that loyalty to country would become just another thing to hock. For years, Italian, French and Spanish clubs had been doling out forged EU passports and other documents to South American players they couldn't bear to part with under foreign quota restrictions. There were five Brazilians playing for countries other than Brazil at Germany 2006. This was the ugly reality of international football. Where there was money, there was opportunity. Where there was opportunity, there were pragmatic choices to make. Some people can make these choices and live with them. Simunic, Seric and Didulica had made theirs and never looked back.

If there were positives for Australia in their defections, it was that their opportunism made players such as Mark Viduka – who'd played in Croatia, owned property there and married a Croatian girl – more admirable. The same with Josip Skoko or any of the five other players with Croatian heritage in the Socceroos squad.

Viduka, who knew Simunic from his time at Melbourne Knights and the Australian

Institute of Sport, wasn't scornful of his colleague's decision to play for Croatia.
'Did I respect it?' he said, when I asked him about it. 'At the end of the day it was his decision. I would have loved for him to play for Australia. I remember, Joe rang me up and asked me, "What do you think I should do?" I told him he should play for Australia but he should do what he has to do. He's played in a World Cup already and the European championship, so from a career point of view he's done well.'
Put simply, as far as his friend was concerned, Simunic had made his choice. There was nothing else to discuss.
Viduka made a different choice. It had been just as simple. He chose Australia but didn't turn his back entirely on the country of his father, Joe, who'd arrived in Melbourne as a teenager and found work butchering at Smorgon's. When Viduka captained the Young Socceroos at the world championships in Qatar in 1996, he wore an armband in Croatia's colours: red, blue and white. A gesture that could have come across as maudlin was instead poignant.
'I love Australia and I love playing with the boys for my country,' he said. 'When I was a young boy, my only goal was to play for Australia, and that was that. There was nothing else.'
Now in Stuttgart, where his uncle worked at the local Mercedes factory, Viduka's passion for leading his country remained undimmed. When Hiddink had approached him to be the new Socceroos captain in Honiara in late 2005, he'd felt 'chuffed and surprised, a mix of emotions'.
'I didn't have a clue that I was going to be captain before then. Guus said, "Mate, I've decided to make you captain." And I just said, "Whoa, thanks."'
Now Simunic and Viduka, two men who'd made very different choices a decade ago, were walking onto opposite ends of the Gottlieb-Daimler Stadion, about to mark each other for 90 minutes for a place in the final 16 of the World Cup.
You couldn't have made it up.

* * *

Croatia was the hottest destination in travel, a place where the beautiful young people of Europe went on their summer holidays and where some of the richer ones bought holiday villas on the Istrian or Dalmatian coasts. I had toyed with the idea of taking a short break there with my family after the football was over. The promises were suitably alluring: 'The Mediterranean As It Once Was' was the slogan used in the country's tourism ads.
Somehow, though, the placid idyll evoked by the filtered photos of deserted beaches and Roman ruins in the countryside didn't quite compute with the image its football team and their fans projected. The team's very nickname, Vatreni, 'The Fiery Ones', suggested an altogether different scene, one that more closely resembled recent events in the fledgling state's turbulent past.
Croatia wanted to be seen as a modern, secular, westernised state. It was democratic, capitalist and had handed over accused war criminal (or heroic patriot, depending who you spoke to) Ante Gotovina to the International Criminal Court. It had even followed Germany's path by making it a criminal offence to praise 'fascist, Nazi and other totalitarian states and ideologies or promote racism and xenophobia', specifically displaying symbols relating to the Ustaše, the murderous regime that existed under Nazi patronage during World War II.
Notably, the day of the match, 22 June, was Anti-Fascist Resistance Day, an official public holiday in Croatia. Yet the unsettling reality was that politics and nationalism

were the lifeforces that fuelled Croat football.
Croatia fans had a reputation for wanton destruction – more than 100 had been arrested at Ta'Qali Stadium in Malta during qualifying, and thugs ran amok in Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina, after the Vatreni's defeat in Berlin. In Stuttgart the organised fan groups were out in force – the BBB, Torcida, Kohorta, Demoni, Tornado – but they weren't causing trouble. Perhaps, like everyone else in Germany, the bad apples simply couldn't get tickets.
There are some great national anthems that never fail to stir – the Welsh 'Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau' ('The Land of My Fathers') and the French 'La Marseillaise' – but 'Lijepa Nasa Domovino' ('Our Beautiful Homeland') must surely top the list. Baroque and turgid, it's the kind of thing you'd expect to hear before going into battle against an army of the dead. The opening lines verge on militaristic, and it's a wonder they weren't banned like everything else at the World Cup:

Oj junacka zemljo mila,
Stare slave djedovino,
Da bi vazda sretna bila!

(Our beautiful homeland,
Oh dear, heroic land,
Fatherland of ancient glory,
May you always be happy!)

'We've golden soil and wealth for toil/Our home is girt by sea' was hardly a shattering riposte to this quasi-war cry, but the Aussie fans weren't deterred. As the many customised supporters' flags in the stands – Eureka, Casula Boys, Canberra Arrows, Pagewood FC – fluttered in the cool summer night, they positively belted out 'Advance Australia Fair'. Whoever had called ours a lame-duck anthem obviously hadn't heard it sung at a World Cup.

* * *

Perhaps nerves got the better of him, but with almost his first touch Viduka mistimed a midfield pass to Vince Grella, who failed to trap the ball and was burgled by Niko Kovac. The Socceroos captain, eager to make up for his mistake, ran after the veteran midfielder and crudely brought him down five metres from the 18-yard box, gifting Darijo Srna a direct free kick. Seconds later, the Shakhtar Donetsk midfielder had smacked the right corner of Kalac's net so hard the ball cannoned back onto the pitch as if this were a game of squash, not football.
There was nothing the goalkeeper could have done; indeed, it was one of those rare strikes that compel you to just sit and take a couple of slow, deep breaths before applauding its perfection. Then instinct returns. Sheer naked hatred takes over. Your team is a goal down and the clock says 02:10. How do the Socceroos dig themselves out of this mess, just when you'd started believing that maybe this wasn't all some elaborate joke, Australia being here? You have no idea, nor do those 11 guys on the pitch, but you know what you have to do now – you're not going to stop screaming till it's all over.
Immediately the Australians took to the long ball to counter the Croatian superiority in midfield, which saw the Vatreni fall back in defence and brought the muscular and effective Viduka into the game. Clueless about how to match his speed and guile, the Croatian defenders resorted to treachery. Stjepan Tomas knocked down the Socceroos

captain with his left hand, while Simunic, his slicked-back hair and three-day growth making him look like one of Christopher Moltisanti's deadbeat mates from *The Sopranos*, brazenly used both hands to tackle his old friend as if he were a dummy half tearing away from the base of a rugby league scrum. It was one of the most craven acts of foul play ever seen in a game of football, perhaps even worse than the two-handed job similarly inflicted on Viduka in the Iran game in Melbourne in 1997, but English referee Graham Poll refused to award the Australian anything but a shake of the head. When I asked Viduka about it after the game, he stuck to diplomatic niceties: 'Everybody's competitive. I don't hold it against anyone.'

Mile Sterjovski and Brett Emerton, backing up from Brazil, were harder to catch. Sterjovski, the Basel winger and favourite of Frank Farina, had expected to miss out on a place in the Australia squad for the World Cup but had been startlingly recalled by Hiddink. Now he was ripping shreds off the Croatians. He executed a brilliant one-touch volley from a Culina long pass to centre for Viduka in the box, only for the big guy to be brought down by Simunic. Later in the half, down the same flank, he collected a 40-metre downfield lob from Grella, backheeled to himself, turned Marko Babic inside out, and then crossed a low bouncing shot into the box to Viduka's feet. Emerton's key moment came when he chipped from inside the Australian half to Tim Cahill, who made a short pass to Culina on the wing. Culina then tickled it back on to Emerton, who pushed it with his left foot to Craig Moore, freeing up Emerton to canter forward. Moore passed to Kewell, and Kewell laid it up for Emerton, who took it sweetly with one touch and threaded a perfect ball through to Viduka. An Emerton cross from the same wing drew Australia's first goal. Dario Simic handled Cahill in the box and Tomas made a blatant handball trying to head it away. The penalty for Moore was easy pickings.

It had been an extraordinary recovery by the Socceroos, appropriate reward for 30-plus minutes of sustained, relentless pressure. As in the Brazil game, the only serious flaw in their play was an almost complete lack of penetration from corners. Scott Chipperfield had taken over the duties from Culina, but the results were depressingly familiar. Without a good corner taker, it was like the Australians wanted to make winning just about as difficult as possible. But these were guys who were used to doing things the hard way.

* * *

In the second half the Australians moved up another gear, upfield forays by Neill, Emerton and Kewell creating the illusion that the game was as good as over.

It was hard to believe Brazil had been dominated by Croatia in Berlin. But one good shot in open play had reversed that equation, and one good shot in open play was what the Australians were missing. Without it, every glorious, exhilarating stride down the park counted for nothing.

Especially when they went another goal down. Kalac made an awful spill for the Croatians' second, but in fairness there were two other factors that allowed the situation to pass: Cahill's marking of Kovac and the fact that the Croatian's strike went through Moore's legs. The AC Milan goalkeeper didn't get a decent look before the ball skidded into him.

There was no doubt Kalac was rattled, though, almost from the time he was picked ahead of Schwarzer. The controversial decision had gone in Kalac's favour because of his supposed superior aerial ability. It was the culmination of 14 years' hard slog, first as the third-stringer behind Mark Bosnich and Schwarzer, then, when Bosnich's career

was immolated in an inferno of hard drugs and egomania, as back-up to Schwarzer. Now, after all the hardship and thankless travelling, all those economy flights with kneecaps almost touching his forehead, he was in goal for Australia's most important game ever. But the unstoppable bullet from Srna had shaken his confidence. He'd almost fumbled the ball over the line in the 40th minute from a simple flighted corner, also from Srna. Now, 20 minutes on, he'd committed a goalkeeper's cardinal sin – the howler.

'The ball just bounced in front of me – and I didn't get my top hand over the top of it – flicked the top of my hand and it's gone up and spun back in,' he told me later. 'One of those goals you just don't wish on anyone.'

Hiddink's dangerous bluff had come unstuck, but there was still 25 minutes left to salvage a draw. The game had entered a critical phase. Croatia seemed indolent, content to sit back and push the ball around. They'd obviously not been watching the tapes of Australia's past few games. Hiddink seized the initiative: John Aloisi came on for Grella, Mark Bresciano for Sterjovski, Josh Kennedy for Chipperfield. The momentum shifted instantly. Bresciano, from the moment he ran onto the field, took over the running of the game. Corners and free kicks assumed their rightful menace. Rising for one trademark Bresciano dipper, Tomas again handballed in the box, this indiscretion even more blatant than the one that had earned Australia's goal in the first half – it was a move from beach volleyball. But Poll refused to award a penalty. A lesser team might have lost heart then and there, packed it in, but the Socceroos refused to countenance defeat, rushing the forward line. All the invention was theirs. Even when Croatia went on the counterattack and space would open up, Australia was able to calmly close down the opposition. Against Iran at the MCG in 1997, at the same stage of the game, such tactics had proved beyond their capability. But this was a different Australia. There was ambition, experience and skill on show in Stuttgart. Hiddink's unbreakable self-confidence, his Chili Palmer–like coolness, was rubbing off on his team. It was just a matter of being patient.

The leveller came from a flighted Bresciano ball into the box that shaved Aloisi's head and fell behind to where Kewell, who shouldn't have even been on the park – the plan had been to keep him on for 60 minutes – was in a marginally offside position. The strike was clinical, but his reaction wasn't. It was a look we'd seen on highlight reels of his glory days at Leeds United, a look he reserved for moments when he'd pulled off some unthinkably audacious piece of magic. That look seemed so long ago. But here it was again. The open mouth. The closed eyes. The tensed jugulars. The pumping fists. The white noise. This was more than a goal. It was a purging.

The tense, hair-trigger edginess of the contest descended into violence and chaos. Igor Tudor received the ball in front of the Aussie goal from a long cross from out wide and shot straight, with Kalac marooned alone in goal, but Emerton wrapped himself around his shooting leg and Neill got a touch from his boot in a last-gasp lunge to allow Moore to clear away on the goal line. A minute later, Kovac spooned a cross straight at Kalac, who collected cleanly but threw straight at midfielder Jerko Leko, who clobbered a fairway drive into the bleachers. Substitute striker Luka Modric had a clear shot outside the box but clipped Aloisi's right boot to push it outside the left post. The Australian fans could barely look at the field. They'd seen so many games lost when the game was as good as over.

Referee Poll had by now lost whatever control he'd had. Simic and Emerton had been sent off for second yellows. Simunic rugby-tackled Viduka for a second time, then, for the hell of it, did the same to Kennedy. A second yellow meant he too was gone, but in the verbal altercation that followed, Simunic somehow escaped being sent off. (It wasn't

the first time Poll, 'The Thing from Tring', had stuffed up in the tournament; in South Korea's opening game against Togo he'd produced a red card before a second yellow when he sent off the Sparrow Hawks' Jean-Paul Abalo.) Moments later, the slippery Kennedy was again thrown to the ground, this time just metres from the goal. Aloisi collected the stray ball and put it into the net but the whistle had gone. Was the game over? Was the goal allowed? Was Australia penalised?

Kewell was just as mystified as anyone. 'I thought it was a goal. I didn't know what had happened,' he told me afterwards. 'I was celebrating, then I said, "What?", then I'd start back, then I was celebrating, then I stopped. I didn't know what was going on.'

Poll blew his whistle for the final time: 2–2. Viduka rushed to embrace him. Simunic taunted the Englishman for not sending him off. Poll shoved him aside, stepped a few paces off to his right, rummaged in his shorts and thrust another yellow into the air – Simunic's third. A red then materialised from his shirt pocket. It was the correct card but four minutes too late. Watching the Vatreni self-destruct was like watching a feral cat being hit by a car. They wobbled, snarled, clawed at the air, then they were dead. Bodies lay scattered everywhere. The Army of the Dead had been slayed.

As AC/DC's 'You Shook Me All Night Long' thumped from the ground speakers (a brilliant choice – whoever picked the playlist that night will live in infamy), a lone Croatian fan stood silently at the front of the media stand, holding aloft the national flag. He didn't move for 30 minutes.

CHAPTER SIX

GROSSO POINT BLANK

'The truth lies on the field.'
Otto Rehhagel

The morning after the Miracle in Stuttgart, I walked up the Rue des Grandes Arcades in Strasbourg and bought the international edition of *The Guardian* and whatever other English rags I could find. The British papers had gone batty-eyed over Mark Viduka, a surprising turnaround given they generally thought him one of the laziest, fattest and most ineffective players in the Premiership. But not even the most cynical hack on Fleet Street could deny he'd had a great game befitting a captain, and the reports were full of praise for his team. Even more optimistically, these being British papers, there was talk England could meet its recalcitrant colony in the final. They wished.

Back home, a photo of John Howard leaping from his chair after Craig Moore's equaliser added weight to the notion that the Socceroos had breached that once-impervious barrier to become part of the mainstream. Football was no longer just the stupid passion of a bunch of deluded journos and a few thousand dateless fans who should have known better. Now, with three-time world champion Italy lying ahead in Kaiserslautern on 26 June, it was Australia's stupid passion too.

The mood even in Italy, spiritual home of the cocky footballer, was such that anything was possible for Australia. Memories of Korea–Japan 2002, where the Italians had come unstuck at the same stage against Hiddink's Taeguk Warriors in a 2–1 golden-goal thriller, were still fresh.

That result, the highlight of the previous World Cup for many, had destroyed the career of the Ecuadorian referee, got the Korean goal scorer the sack from his Italian club, and spawned more conspiracy theories than the death of Princess Diana. Against Australia, Italy wasn't facing a Germany or a France or a Brazil – teams that could automatically strike fear into Italian hearts – but defeats to the two Koreas in 1966 and 2002 had proved no one, least of all an 'Asian' team, could be underestimated.

As sports journalist Gaia Piccardi warned in a piece for Italy's leading daily, *Corriere della Sera*, before Hiddink came along Australian football had been *uno sport per signorine* – a sport for little girls. That was no more. With *il mago*, that wizard, in charge, if Italy weren't smart the Socceroos could pull another Korea.

* * *

Australia's big day necessitated a return to Kaiserslautern, but this time around I took the train from Strasbourg. Jamo and Harro had happily returned to Australia the day after the Croatia game, feeling they couldn't ask for more than they'd already received from their two weeks in Germany. After getting daily SMS updates of the Socceroos mania engulfing Australia, they wanted a taste of what it was like on the other side – to watch the World Cup at home, to wake up in the middle of the night, wrap themselves in a beanie and scarf, and party hard with their mates at Wheeler Place in Newcastle. They'd been waiting all their lives for something like this.

I arrived early, before 8am, and the concourse outside the station was deserted. In town, shop vendors were putting out their displays of cheap plastic flags, knockoff jerseys and other hideous trinkets. By late afternoon, though, the streets were packed with rival groups of fans drinking beer, eating sausages and bantering good-naturedly

about how they were going to rip each other to pieces at five o'clock. It was a clash of civilisations in more ways than football. Many of the Aussie supporters were getting around in yellow T-shirts featuring a road sign of a drunk crawling on his knees beneath the slogan 'SOCCEROOS KAISERSLAUTERN GERMANY 2006 – AUSSIES CROSSING'. Some of the Italians, meanwhile, had dressed as if they were about to go clubbing.

At the stadium, it was business as usual. When the players came out to inspect the pitch, Viduka took some time out from listening to his iPod and walked over to the crowd to kiss his son, Joey, and pose for happy snaps. Zeljko Kalac followed. For a game in which they were without their two most effective impact players – Harry Kewell courtesy of a phantom injury and Brett Emerton through suspension – the team seemed remarkably relaxed.

As had been announced the previous day, Mark Schwarzer replaced Kalac and took up his position between goal to do some warm-up drills. Mark Bresciano chatted with some of the Italian players. Downfield, the world's most expensive goalkeeper, Juventus's Gianluigi Buffon, ran onto the pitch and, arms raised, did a Rocky Balboa–like jig to a rapturous ovation.

A show of another kind was going on in the stands. Twenty metres away from the media seats, in the VIP box where Sepp Blatter and Franz Beckenbauer were vigorously pumping hands, some of the biggest powerbrokers in Australian sport were hurrying to their seats: Frank Lowy and his sons; James Packer; former federal sports minister David Kemp. Whatever happened over the next 90 minutes, their presence was a sign that Australian football was at last on the front foot.

* * *

Right from the kickoff, it was clear the Socceroos had a markedly different game plan. As the commentator for ESPN Gamecast's live blog joked: 'Australia have lined up with what seems to be a 3-1-4-1-1 formation – possibly.'

It was also immediately apparent that, unlike the chaos of the Japan game and the end-to-end action of Brazil and Croatia, the Socceroos seemed content to slow things down a bit. Given the disparity in the squads' quality I had thought Hiddink might revert to some of the tried and true strategies of Australian football – tight man-marking, crunching tackles – as the only way to handle the Italians, but the Australians kept a respectful distance, pushing the ball around like they were office mates having a kickaround on their lunch break.

The illusion only lasted a few minutes. On their first move upfield the Azzurri had the Socceroos in all sorts of trouble when Alessandro Del Piero got the ball deep down near the left corner flag and, stalling it with his left instep, caused Jason Culina, who was tracking back, to fractionally misposition himself. Del Piero stroked the ball aside with the same foot and beat his man with a cross to striker Luca Toni, who evaded Scott Chipperfield. Toni's header went outside the right post by a foot. Schwarzer would easily have been beaten if it had been on target.

With the midfield as passable as a Himalayan border post in winter, both teams began testing each other's defences with long balls. A hard, low Marco Materazzi pass upfield found Toni, who played in Del Piero. His cross to Simone Perrotta ended up behind the Roma player's legs yet still he managed to lay it off to Alberto Gilardino, whose shot crashed into Chipperfield's outstretched leg.

More aerial pingpong followed. With the Australian defence rushing forward and left short at the back, Gennaro Gattuso delivered an exquisitely flighted pass to Toni, who

headed on to Gilardino. But with the onrushing Neill about to close him down, he was forced into making a side-on bicycle kick at head height.
Schwarzer tipped the shot over the crossbar with both hands, falling back like he'd been hit by a dumping wave, which was exactly what the remorseless Italians were proving to be. Minutes later, Pirlo lobbed a pass from metres inside the halfway line to Toni, who turned his back to Grella, poked the ball with his right foot, then swivelled around and smacked a low shot with his left. Only Schwarzer's right boot saved a certain goal.
Australia's chances, and half-ones at best, were few and far between. Chipperfield cantered down the left wing and somehow slipped the ball past two defenders while lying on the ground to Viduka, but the Australian captain did one backheel too many and was snaffled by Gianluca Zambrotta. Viduka also got his head onto a Mark Bresciano free kick, but hit it straight at Buffon. Another Bresciano set piece resulted in an unexpected opportunity when the ball slipped off Moore's backside in the box and sat up for Chipperfield, who was steaming down the left unmarked. Again, though, the shot thudded right into Buffon.
The Azzurri had done what Australia's other opponents had failed to do: nullified its strength, its flanks. And in trying to counter the midfield lobs of Pirlo, the Australians were being forced to play deep in defence, opening up space where there should have been none.
AC Milan's playmaker was on another level entirely. According to the *New York Times*' Roger Cohen, by the end of the tournament Pirlo had touched the ball 632 times, 203 more than Zinedine Zidane. This sort of *il fantasista* player, a ball-controlling creative playmaker, was something Australia had lacked at the World Cup. Bresciano was talented enough to fulfil that role but had been reduced to cameos. The only other player in the squad who could have played the part was Josip Skoko, but there wasn't much he could do about it, cooling his heels on the bench.

* * *

Italy coach Marcello Lippi clearly had the edge, so Hiddink decided to change tack. The Australians went out for the second half intent not to give up possession as easily; to make the Italians work for the ball; to keep it on the deck. Every second Pirlo didn't have the ball was another second towards extra time, something Lippi wanted to avoid. Off came Gilardino, on came Vincenzo Iaquinta, a taller, heavier striker.
Within minutes Iaquinta had got around Neill deep on the right wing and sent a searing low cross into the Australian box; Toni sprayed the rebound over the bar.
Lippi's second substitution was forced on him. Materazzi, the stand-in for the injured Alessandro Nesta, caught Bresciano's trailing leg in a mistimed tackle and was sent off, prompting a straight striker–defender switch. This was where Hiddink would normally have played his first trump card – Kewell. But Australia's star was on crutches. What other player was right for the job? Josh Kennedy was not really suited to the opposition; the world-class Italian defence would be adroit at shutting him out. Hiddink needed a dribbler, an attacking player to smash up the Azzurri fortress down the centre of the pitch. Emerton could do it, but he was suspended. The alternatives – Stan Lazaridis, Archie Thompson, Skoko – hadn't kicked a ball all tournament. Throwing them on now, with everything on the line, would be risky. John Aloisi, an out-and-out striker, was the only other option. The minutes ticked over. A decision had to be made. But Hiddink chose to just sit.
'Guus is a gambler,' said Graham Arnold. 'He plays this Dutch game called *toepen*, where you risk everything on the last card. You only get four cards. It basically summed

up how he coaches. It was a massive gamble to leave Harry out in Sydney. It was a massive gamble to play Kalac ahead of Schwarzer. He gambled against Italy – and still to this day I've never actually sat down and spoken to him after the game about things – but I said to him with 15 to 20 minutes to go: "Do you think it's time to get Josh on?" And he said: "We get them in extra time." He gambled to keep the two fresh subs up our sleeve for extra time to apply the gas at the end, 'cause he said physically we'll run over the top of them.'

Whether he was being cautious or playing a high-risk game – most likely somewhere between the two – Hiddink's strategy appeared prescient, with Neill rushing down the left, taking a pass from Bresciano and sending a square pass to Chipperfield unmarked on the edge of the box. He spun around and shot hard and straight but Buffon positioned himself perfectly. Now, with Italy a man down, the Australian flanks had been liberated. Everything was happening down the wings.

With 20 minutes to go, Australia had all the running. Italy was sitting back, happy to absorb the pressure and then spring forward on the counterattack. But when Francesco Totti came on for Del Piero five minutes later, it was a signal that Lippi hadn't given up. Totti had been an underperformer for his team and was still playing himself back into form after breaking the fibula in his left leg and sustaining ankle ligament tears in a Serie A match four months before. His rehabilitation had been a national soap opera, Italy's unpopular prime minister Silvio Berlusconi, who also happened to be AC Milan's president, deigning to visit the injured AS Roma captain by his bedside. It wasn't enough to keep him in office.

Yet with almost his first touch outside the 18-yard box Totti had four Aussies around him and still managed to cross inside with his left foot to Perrotta. Only Neill's quick thinking and hard buttocks stopped an unlikely winner. The pressure switched back to the Aussies. Bresciano had one half-chance but duffed his strike, Viduka was doing his tricks but had no one around him to capitalise on the space he was creating, and Cahill got a clean header but donked it over the bar.

Finally, with just nine minutes left in normal time, Hiddink made his move. Mile Sterjovski came off, Aloisi went on. How many times had Aloisi been in this position? From 40-odd appearances in the green and gold since 1997 and 20-odd goals, he was a reasonable striker by any standard. But better if you considered he'd played the lion's share of those games as a replacement, often getting little more than 15 minutes to make an impact.

'In the [1997 and 2001] World Cup campaigns I played a total of five minutes in the four games. That was upsetting,' he told me. 'But you know that whenever you get the chance you have to perform, so you have to have confidence in your own ability. 'That's where you have to be mentally strong. Sometimes I think I should be playing and I'm not, but every player thinks they should always be playing. When I get that chance I like to show that I should be playing.'

Aloisi's assignment in Kaiserslautern, though, called not just for a goal but for delicacy. It was to bag the winner while not turning over possession. For every attempt on Buffon's goal, the Aussies would have to defend on the counter. Italy was renowned for grinding out results when the chips were stacked against them.

'I think the send-off of Materazzi may have cost us,' said Craig Foster. 'You knew Italy would close up. If anyone's going to put ten men behind the ball in the world, the best at it – and the one you don't want to have to play against to try to break down – is Italy.' Rale Rasic, Australia's 1974 World Cup coach, agreed: 'Marcello Lippi was reduced to ten men and he knew how to sell half of the field. Straight away he put it on the market for sale. Dropped two strikers. Played with ten men in his own half, introduced Totti

when he was needed, and attacked only with Grosso and Zambrotta. You analyse Lippi's tournament, this was the first time in the history of football that one coach attacked with a left fullback and a right fullback.'

Hang on, who was playing total football here? Bresciano slammed a left-footed strike around Italy's left-back Fabio Grosso but the ball sailed way over Buffon. A couple of times the Italians looked close to scoring on the counter, but frantic manning of Schwarzer's goalmouth prevented an upset goal. The best chance came when Aloisi, true to his flash-in-the-pan reputation, sheared his legs into the air and pulled off a spectacular bicycle kick attempt in the 89th minute, but missed the ball completely. It quickly returned to the Italians' possession. There was just 30 seconds to go.

What happened next, not Grosso's infamous penalty, was where Australia made its big mistake. While Viduka and Gattuso were jostling on the Italian side of the halfway line over some piffling disagreement, Totti, marked by Cahill, was left on the ball for a total of eight seconds. It might not sound like much, but at that stage of the game, with a sudden-death World Cup match on the line, it can be seen as a major error. Worse, it was one Hiddink had repeatedly warned the Australians to be vigilant about. While fatigued during training sessions, some of the Aussies had reverted to their old habits of not tracking and closing down players. Now they were doing it in the biggest game of their lives.

'For Totti, Maradona, Pelé, Ronaldinho, eight seconds is equivalent to eight minutes,' said Rasic. 'Players like Totti need just a split-second to solve all the problems of the world. That's why they are special.'

In that short amount of time, Totti could see there were three Australian players in or just outside the centre circle marking three Italian players. Ahead of them were three Australians marking three Italians, with one Australian high up the park marking nobody. At the last line of defence, there were two Australians marking two men, Grosso on the left and Iaquinta in the centre, yet one more Australian player on the right flank was on his own. Totti correctly judged the percentages lay with getting a pass down to Grosso on the left, where he had only one man to beat, Bresciano, the wrong man in the wrong position. If Grosso could get around him, he would only have Neill and Iaquinta in front of him, and Schwarzer in goal.

Totti was cultured enough to deliver the perfect pass, and he did, the ball bouncing just ahead of where Grosso was trying to lose Bresciano. Grosso took two touches and with his third made a feint to suggest he was going to the line but cut the ball back in, leaving Bresciano off balance and making him go to ground. Neill, who'd moved away from Iaquinta to deny Grosso a direct shot at goal, with Moore covering for him, blocked the defender's run but overextended his leg by half a yard, simple gravity dictating he had to fall to the grass.

God forbid the decision be analysed again – football fans still can't agree that Geoff Hurst's second goal in the 1966 World Cup final was legitimate – but even if a case were made for obstruction, Spanish referee Luis Medina Cantalejo was heavy-handed in awarding a direct free kick when an indirect free kick would have been the proper sanction. In going to ground, Neill technically 'impeded the progress of an opponent', but in any fair assessment of the situation Grosso threw himself on Neill's prostrate body, meaning the Australian could not really be at fault for the nature of the ensuing contact.

The fact remains, however, that Neill was there to be tripped over, so ultimately the future team captain must accept responsibility for what happened, which to this day he selflessly does. Such is football. It was a tragedy for the Socceroos, and a personal tragedy for Neill, but the greatest tragedy of all was still to come. That was when

Australia, like Italy, England and Portugal before it, developed its own World Cup persecution myth.
When FIFA president Sepp Blatter later apologised for the Grosso penalty on Australian television, and even said the Socceroos should have gone to the quarters in place of the Italians, it became official. The fact that Blatter quickly retracted his comments when the Italian press got in a flap about it only gave the myth more currency.
A persecution myth is the last thing the Socceroos wanted in their baggage when they left Germany. With one, though, nobody could ever accuse us of not being a football nation.

* * *

An hour later, in the mixed zone, Arnold was already at it, muttering about how Australia was 'a small footballing nation that gets no favours' and 'all we asked for was a fair go, and I don't think we received it over the four games'. Tim Cahill was pushing the same line: 'I just can't believe it, mate. I'm furious. The luck we've had with referees at this World Cup, everything's been against us and we've fought hard to make everything work for us and in the end it doesn't work for us. All that hard work... one decision has changed everything. It's changed Australian football. It's changed our lives.' Viduka complained about a handball from Zambrotta in the final few minutes that wasn't given: 'Somehow we don't get these decisions.'
Others were more philosophical. Vince Grella thought the Socceroos were 'stronger' than Italy, 'at about the 70-minute mark they were starting to die down', but the Azzurri 'tactically were very intelligent because they sort of always were leaving us with a wing free but we weren't really taking advantage of it. They were boxing up the area, but even [when we were] a man up they could break us down.' Said Aloisi: 'They weren't better than us. They got through because they had more experience. They were probably more street smart... you don't want to go out of the World Cup like that but it's gone and we just have to try and get over it.' Schwarzer was more blunt: 'We had one hell of a chance to go through and we didn't take it.'
The players were holding up better than some of the journalists. Comedy writer and football tragic Santo Cilauro was in tears. 'That's why it's beautiful – it's so cruel,' he said morosely. I wasn't sure whether he was joking. Others were trying to be brave, saying that this was a result we needed to have. That injustice was all part of the game. Australia's beautiful innocence had got us this far; only hard-hearted guile could take us further.
I asked Cahill what impact he thought Australia had had on the tournament. 'Everything. Honesty. Discipline. Bright. Colourful,' he said. 'We like having a laugh. We've been ourselves. We shouldn't be overawed by these games. We've earned enough respect to play what we've played and we've done really well, so it just goes to show how far Australia has come as a nation. Maybe we're too honest. Maybe so. Maybe not. The thing is, we'd prefer to go out of a World Cup with our heads held up high than to just stay in it. We've rocked the nation. We've rocked the world. It's all good.'
Aloisi, though, wasn't thinking much beyond how he was going to get through the night. 'The world's taken notice that we're no mugs. We got through a tough group. We earned a lot of respect.' He paused a beat. 'But at the moment it doesn't mean too much.'

* * *

The 2006 World Cup will be remembered as the tournament where defence triumphed over attack, where creativity was stifled by *catenaccio*. Lippi's Azzurri would win the final against France in Berlin on 9 July unconvincingly, Zinedine Zidane's brain snap gifting them a victory they scarcely deserved. The best teams, after all, don't always win World Cups.

For me, though, the tournament was all about heroic failure, and no teams represented this more than the Socceroos and their hosts, Germany. The result in Kaiserslautern on 26 June was greeted with unexpected shock and anger around the world, and for once an Australian sporting team was looked upon with some sympathy. Though the ending of the story was not kind to Australia, we left Germany as one of the few 'fairytales' of a competition that didn't spring the hoped-for surprises of World Cups past. Even *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, Italy's notoriously partisan sports rag, had the grace to admit Grosso's penalty was 'doubtful' and Italy's progression in the tournament seemed 'marked by providence'.

More heartening news was to follow. Information Builders, a British software company, released an alternative set of data to FIFA's Fair Play Index called the 'IBI Foul Play Index', which collated dives, intimidation of referees, fake injuries, even players failing to sing national anthems during the four weeks of football. Italy topped the dive count on 40, with Portugal second on 30. Australia came in with eight dives. They placed equal 22nd.

As for Jürgen Klinsmann's team, they produced the best attacking football of the tournament, overturning all the clichés about the dourness of the country's football and repositioning Germany's brand, as their coach promised he would. It was extraordinary to think there'd been calls for Klinsmann to appear before parliamentary committees prior to the World Cup to explain how he was going to win it. He didn't appear, nor did he win it, the Nationalmannschaft finishing third after bowing out to Italy in a pulsating match in Dortmund – Grosso again playing the spoiler. Such was the feeling of elation about the spirit in which his team played, though, that in the days following the game Klinsmann could have run for chancellor and won hands down.

Before leaving Australia for the World Cup, I'd attended a grim German National Tourist Board promotion at Sydney's Hilton Hotel. The audience, which included a smattering of bored sports journalists, were told Germany wanted to be seen as 'modern', 'open to the world', 'a place for business opportunities' and a 'world champion in experts'. Above all, they assured us unconvincingly, 'We want to be LOVABLE!'

I was sceptical the host country could achieve any – certainly not all – of their aims in just four weeks, but when it was all over the World Cup had lifted the veil of darkness that post-war democracy, consumerism and enforced pacifism could not. The German people couldn't recover what they had lost because of the Nazis, but these four weeks of football showed they could celebrate what they still had.

That said, the security could have eased up a bit. For all their desire to make friends, the World Cup organisers still showed an over-zealous and sometimes absurd adherence to the rules – Dutch fans in orange *lederhosen* were stripped to their underwear in Cologne, all because the logo on the front was from a brewery that wasn't an 'official partner'. Still, they fared better than Bruno, the only brown bear to pass into German territory for nearly 200 years. His shooting was the biggest story outside the World Cup. When asked why the bear had been shot, Otmar Bernhard, Bavaria's deputy environment minister, told reporters: 'It's not that we don't welcome bears in

Bavaria. It's just that this one wasn't behaving properly.'
Germany's great rival, France, began unconvincingly but by the second round were playing the sort of football Brazil promised but didn't deliver. The resurrection of the legend of Zidane became the main narrative for the world's media in the lead-up to the final, but it was the team itself that was the great story. After hobbling into the second round, the superannuated Les Bleus proceeded to embarrass the Spaniards, Brazilians and Portuguese with their exquisite skill and superb control in midfield, though Thierry Henry disgraced himself with dives against Spain (a feigned blow from Carlos Puyol) and Portugal (an innocuous ankle tap from Ricardo Carvalho that prompted him to throw himself into the air as if jumping off a bridge). The player Henry had lambasted in France's opening game, Franck Ribéry, emerged as one of the stars of the tournament.
As is often the case at the World Cup, the so-called 'lesser' ties, such as Saudi Arabia vs Tunisia, Angola vs Mexico or South Korea vs Togo, captivated fans. Perhaps it was because these teams had everything to play for and nothing to lose. (That, or I was simply watching too much football.) The players seemed more agile, more prepared to take risks. Everything that football's first-world nations – especially tortured, timid England – so conspicuously lacked. As Roger Cohen cracked: '[Sven-Göran] Eriksson's gone now into the Scandinavian night. He deserves to shiver there for a while.' Some of the 'bigger' ties, of course, did come very close to delivering real drama, such as Ivory Coast vs Argentina and Brazil vs Croatia, but the much-hyped blockbuster in the historic grudge-match stakes, Germany vs Poland, proved to be an unmitigated bore.
Of the Socceroos' opponents in Group F, Japan would ultimately return to Narita with just one point from three games. Yet it all could have turned out so differently – leading Australia for over 80 minutes, blowing a gilt-edged chance in their nil-all draw with the cocky Croatians, going a goal up against a scoreless Brazil from debutant Keiji Tamada's superb long-range strike.
Rather than accept responsibility for his tactical mistakes, Zico sheeted blame to tournament organisers for unfavourable kickoff times and to his players for their height, and intimated it had all been impossible anyway. Asian football, he wagered, was never going to be any good until the Asian leagues were on a par with Europe (conveniently not mentioning Hiddink's achievements in 2002). Within a week he was the new coach of Turkish club Fenerbahce, making the same sort of promises he failed to keep with Japan. Football's coaching merry-go-round went on.
Brazil would come off second best in its tussle with *oba oba*. In 2005, I'd choked on a pork knuckle as I watched Brazil's attack – Ronaldinho, Adriano, Kaká, Robinho – murder Argentina in the Confederations Cup final, four goals to one. They had made the Albicelestes, the world's second-best team, look like an under-11 boys' park side from Launceston. It was at once the most thrilling and most disturbing game of football I'd ever seen; they were a *galaxy* apart in class. Unfortunately for the World Cup organisers, that same team didn't play in 2006. This one had Ronaldo, who had given himself a holiday while his teammates tore apart German pitches the year before.
Despite a tsunami of Nike ambush marketing, the world wasn't fooled by Brazil. The greatest fools were the Brazilian players themselves, who had started to believe that just turning up to their games guaranteed a clear passage to the final in Berlin. Their insouciance was perfectly summed up when Roberto Carlos adjusted his socks in the quarter-final defeat to France just as Zidane was lining up his penalty kick. Zidane spotted the bent Carlos and connected with Henry, who volleyed the ball into the net unimpeded. And with that bizarre goal, the world champions were out of the tournament. Despite this, Carlos Alberto Parreira, who had the gall to declare that his

team 'dealt well with the favouritism', walked into a four-year deal with future World Cup hosts South Africa on a cool US$250,000 a month. Nice work if you can get it.
In Munich, the Brazilian media was still in awe of their team, despite obvious signs that all was not well. Carlos and Ronaldo slinked through the mixed zone like movie stars pausing to sign autographs at a premiere. But in Stuttgart, refreshingly, the Croatian media wouldn't have a bar of any attitude from their players. Following their capitulation to the Socceroos, Dado Prso and Niko Kranjcar shot straight through the mixed zone, heads down, not prepared to say anything to anyone. But they were taken to task – *loudly*. Fists were shaken, insults thrown. It looked like it would come to blows. Croatian football writers could be even fierier than their football team.
Croatia's coach, Zlatko Kranjcar, who refused to admit he'd erred, saying his team was undone by bad luck, was sacked within two weeks of his return to Croatia and replaced by former World Cup defender and national under-21s coach Slaven Bilic.
A rattled Graham Poll took a short break from refereeing but returned to the park in early August for Colchester United's loss to Barnsley. The fans had suitable fun at his expense. 'Two more! He only needs two more!' one wag cried when Colchester midfielder Kemal Izzet was given a yellow. The following year he announced he would give up refereeing.
Putting the eventual world champions to the sword wasn't enough to keep some of the Socceroos from ruling out their own retirement. Viduka was bitterly disappointed at the manner of Australia's elimination, and had refused even before the World Cup to be drawn on whether he would commit to further games with the national team. From his hangdog look in Kaiserslautern, though, it appeared he'd all but had his mind made up for him.
'For myself it will be very demanding, on everybody as players,' he said. 'I'm curious to see if I've got the drive and determination [to get to South Africa 2010]. My number-one priority is my family.' He ended up quitting football in 2009.
As shattered players returned to their clubs for pre-season training or took a few precious days off for holidays with their partners and families, none of the European-based professionals who got game time in Germany officially declared their international careers were over. Some, including Schwarzer, didn't hesitate to state their intention to back up for another World Cup campaign.
My own feelings were of relief. Getting so far in a World Cup requires nerves, stamina and a preparedness to have your heart broken. As any football fan knows, whatever your team, whatever the competition, there comes a point where you're going to get hurt – badly. In a World Cup, that pain is compounded many times over.
The Socceroos proved that losing can sometimes be positive. The fact that Italian players and team management could look at the slow-mo replay of Grosso falling down so theatrically over Neill and feel not the slightest bit of shame going into the next round said something about the culture of Italian football. Conversely, the way Neill dealt with his anguish, and the way his teammates rallied around him, said something about our own. Had he been playing centre-back for England or Portugal, Neill would most probably have been crucified for his mistake.
As Rale Rasic told me later when we discussed the incident: 'Sport is something that requires pride and honour. Winning is not everything. Honour in winning is greater than winning itself. Historically Aussies are not the best losers, but we know how to handle failure, and we proved to the world that we can be great in defeat.'
This, the way we accepted our elimination, not our unexpected progression, was how Australia found acceptance as a football nation at the 2006 World Cup. The Socceroos set themselves apart with their positivity, their fearlessness and, above all, their

ingrained sense of fair play in a tournament that would be marred by cheating, violence and gamesmanship. (Only once, during the course of Australia's four games, could I recall anything approaching pantomime: when Cahill went down after an ankle tackle from Brazilian captain Cafu and clutched at his face as if he'd been splashed in acid. (Not that he was doing anything the Brazilians weren't already doing with much more exaggeration.) Old myths were also destroyed. No longer could Australians be called 'dirty', a rabble of hackers and knuckle-dragging colonials who tore holes in opponents' shins. The Socceroos played good technical football as well as anyone and showed they could adapt to whatever system Hiddink asked them to play.

Australia showed the world it was possible to perform without cynicism or underhandedness and still win. The Socceroos may have ultimately had their football naivete exposed by a more cutthroat team, yet the players, and their supporters, wouldn't have had it any other way. This might have been the 'world game', but we still played it with Australian values first, European style second.

Frank Lowy's bold punt in appointing Hiddink a year before had paid off, just another extraordinary investment in a business career without parallel in Australia. Yet after the defeat in Kaiserslautern, Hiddink was noticeably downcast. For a footballing mercenary who had pocketed almost $4 million for his trouble, he was showing uncharacteristic attachment to his men.

'You don't realise how much I loved doing this job,' Australia's now former coach told Graham Arnold. 'A lot of jobs I do because it's a job. But I would have done this one for nothing, I enjoyed it that much.'

So did we, Guus Geluk. So did we.

* * *

After the Australian and Italian players and their entourages had finished piling onto their buses in Kaiserslautern, I realised I had lost track of time and was about to miss the last train to Strasbourg. I ran down the stairs and into the car park, where I jumped on one of the media shuttles. It was the wrong bus – in my haste I hadn't asked the driver where it was going – and ended up in another car park 20 kilometres out of the city. Fortunately, though, I wasn't the only one to have made the mistake. There were two other journos onboard. One was Richard Williams, the senior football columnist for *The Guardian*. While we were talking about the match, he took a call on his mobile. His sub-editor in London was ringing to check his copy.

'Yes, *cannoniere* – C-A-N-N-O-N-I-E-R-E,' he said, referring to the Italian word for striker. 'And you don't think it's terribly gauche of me to give man-of-the-match to Totti, do you? Well, he did make the difference.'

I could only shake my head. But that's the way truth is in football. It may lie on the field, but what two people see on a football pitch can never be the same.

When I finally reached the station, I'd missed every connecting train to the border and was told I'd have to get off in Offenburg and catch a taxi to Strasbourg. It was well past 9 pm, yet the trains were still overflowing with fans on their way back to hostels, campsites and hotel rooms. I found a space in the vestibule and sat down on the floor. Two young Japanese women were standing by the exit, both uncommonly attractive and wearing wristbands in the colours of the Italian flag. As passengers filed past from carriage to carriage, a Mexican guy stopped, pointed at their wrists and gave a thumbs-up, as if to say, 'Good game'. The girls smiled politely and brushed him off, turning to look at the night lights out the window. Chastened, the Mexican guy returned to his seat.

I couldn't help but smile. It would take time – maybe decades – but one day, in another railway car late at night somewhere at another World Cup in the heartland of Europe, those wristbands would be green and gold.