

Silk ROAD TO SOUTH AFRICA

There are nine months to go until Australia takes part in the greatest sporting show on earth: World Cup 2010. TONY WILSON gives a taste of what's to come.

Australia's final round of World Cup qualifying began on the Silk Road in Tashkent, and never really got off it. It is not meant to be this smooth. Nigeria needs a miracle to qualify. Powerhouses such as Portugal and France are still sweating. Argentina is fifth in a South American slugfest where only the top four nations go through automatically. Its fans are terrified. Just like we were last time. And the time before that. World Cup qualification is meant to be terrifying.

And yet this time it hasn't been.

Well, that's not exactly true. In the first qualifying stage in Kunming, China, the brilliant Mark Schwarzer gave away and then saved a penalty that might have represented our bacon. And the away fixture with Bahrain in Manama (cue Muppets song) was a 92-minute horror show with an ending so unjust and so wonderfully unlikely that it could have barely surprised more had the camera panned back to Mark Bresciano with a full head of hair.

But we kept winning. Nine points out of a possible nine. Then that brave draw with Japan after a difficult preparation in Yokohama. On June 6, 2009, we became the second country to earn qualification to South Africa, beaten out of first place only by the Blue

Samurais enjoying an earlier kick-off time.

And yet the nation barely paused to celebrate. If John Aloisi's penalty was a pyrotechnic moment in the history of Australian sport, 0-0 against Qatar in Doha was like a night at home cleaning the kitchen. Yet the result was the same. As Fox Sports commentator Simon Hill put it when the final whistle blew that night: "It's not quite the party that it was in Sydney

four years ago, but it will mean just as much. The Socceroos are off to join the world's biggest party – South Africa here they come."

Hill has called all but one of Australia's qualifiers in this campaign and, in his view, the

latest effort is even more meritorious than 2005. "People have really underestimated how difficult this qualification was because the Socceroos made it look so easy. It's sometimes difficult for people back home to understand how hot it is in Qatar, or how body-sapping the altitude was in China," he says.

"While it's fair to say Australia did have the more straightforward of the two Asian groups, it was a road full of potential potholes – and they managed to avoid most of them."

In Germany in 2006, our 32-year absence from the World Cup finals meant fans couldn't realistically expect anything. Those mad 10 minutes against

0-0 at home against Qatar in Doha was like a night at home cleaning the kitchen.

UNITED FRONT
As the Australian team
warms up before the
World Cup qualifier
against Iraq in June
2008, Australian fans
show their support.



Japan would alone have been enough. But then there was an even better performance against Brazil, and the unforgettable heroics against Croatia. The Qantas Socceroos didn't just fall into the second round; they deserved to be there. And then came Kaiserslautern part II and Italy and a penalty that broke our hearts – if only because it was such an imperfect end to such a near-perfect tournament. We couldn't complain (actually we could complain, and did!), but when we had all cooled down, we feted Guus Hiddink and the players, and dared to wonder if Australia might have stuck a Blundstone into the tiny puddle containing football's elite.

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captain, Lucas Neill, is making similar noises, as though a failure to progress further than 2006 would constitute stagnation — an inability to atone for the pain inflicted by Italy.

And yet getting out of the group stage will still be a major achievement. This time, Australia will fly under nobody's radar. It was different in Germany. Who could forget USA coach Bruce Arena labelling the Socceroos, alongside Trinidad and Tobago, as the weakest teams at the tournament? Fans of other countries adopted us as their second team because of the way Hiddink had us playing, and because we were that beloved thing in sport – an overachieving underdog. But now the team's stellar form has lifted our world ranking to the mid-teens (Australia reached its highest spot of

14th in September 2009). We are for the first time a genuine threat, a contender. In South Africa, the rest of the world will be ready.

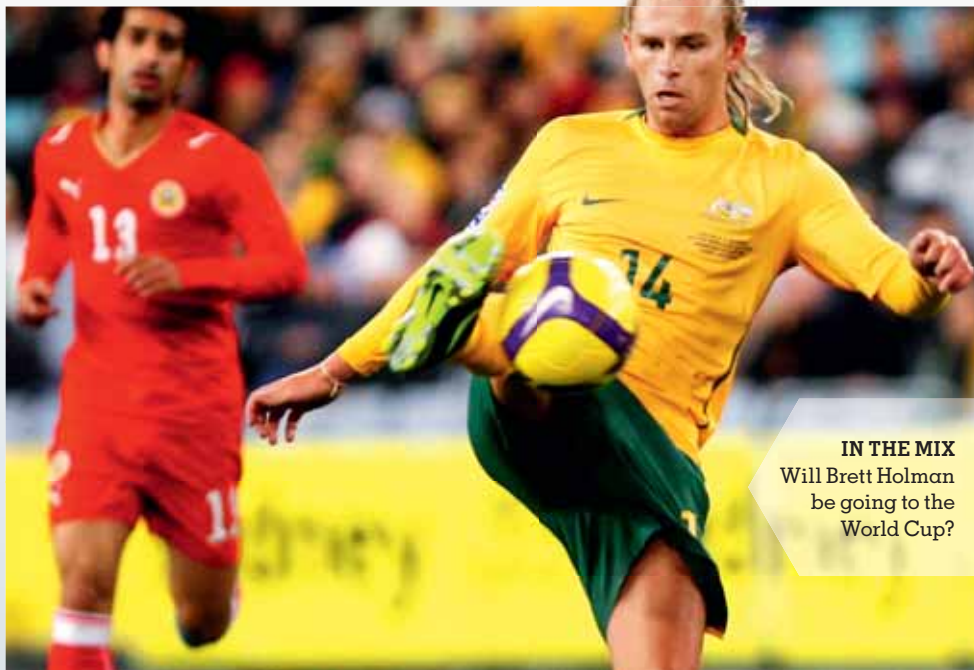
Having said that, our boys should be ready too. Another great advantage of taking the high road to qualification is that Pim can now experiment with personnel and formations. Already we have seen new names such as Rhys Williams, Shane Stefanutto, Nikita Rukavytsya, Dario Vidosic and Matthew Spiranovic. There's also a chance for middle-tier players who weren't part of the 2006 campaign to press their claims – players such as Brett Holman, Jade North, David Carney, Scott McDonald and Nick Carle. The FFA has already scheduled five matches between October and March. Four of these will be Asian Cup qualifiers and so the selectors for South Africa will scrutinise players under tournament pressure. The core of the squad, though, will be the same as it was for Germany.

For mine, our four best players are still Tim Cahill, Harry Kewell, Schwarzer and Neill. The next five are more debatable, but are probably Brett Emerton, Luke Wilkshire,



WORLD BEATERS

From left, Craig Moore, Tim Cahill and Harry Kewell show their delight against Croatia in the 2006 World Cup.



IN THE MIX
Will Brett Holman
be going to the
World Cup?

Vince Grella, Jason Culina and Bresciano – all veterans of 2006. Josh Kennedy is still our best game-breaker. Craig Moore, at 33, and back from international retirement, still looks the best option alongside Neill. Should we be celebrating this remarkable stability or panicking over our apparent failure to unearth the next big thing? Or doing both. Celebrating because World Cup finals experience is rare and invaluable; panicking because old legs get tired, and because a fan's default position for contemplating World Cup performance is panic.

Simon Hill admits to being a pessimist by nature, and says that he is worried too. "I know Pim is aiming for the last eight, but I reckon another second-round exit would be a major success. A lot depends upon the draw," he says.

"They will miss (Mark) Viduka (in all likelihood), whose experience and hold-up play against strong teams would have been so useful. There are questions marks over the centre of defence, and can Pim overcome his cautious nature and really go for it if needs be?"

But as Hill is only too quick to point out, Australia's recent form says there's cause for optimism too. The first team to qualify in Europe was the Netherlands, and Pim's men beat them 2-1 in Eindhoven

last September. The other best-credentialed team in Asia is Japan, and the Australians had its measure not just in that famous match at Kaiserslautern, but in the final qualifying fixture at the MCG. We have genuine quality: 'Super, Super Tim' would get a game for any national team on the planet. Kewell still has the pace and skill to beat defenders

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and manufacture miracles. Schwarzer is a phenomenon, as evidenced by 670 minutes in second-stage qualifying without conceding a goal. And perhaps the most important of the lot is Neill, who showed on the biggest stage in Germany what he is worth. If any of those four get injured ...

But if depth is our weakness, in Hill's view, spirit and resilience is our great strength. "I know it's an old chestnut, but the spirit of this team is phenomenal," he says. "To get some of the results they have in recent years shows just how hard they work for each other, how much pride they have in playing for their

country, and how much they trust Pim Verbeek."

I trust Verbeek too. Even in as banal a forum as a post-match interview, he speaks with a measured authority, tossing around reasoned analysis with support for his boys and just enough English syntax errors to keep us all entertained. If Pim is ever stupid enough to venture online, he'll discover a blazing debate on whether we should play a single man up front, or whether this set-up is too defensive. But given his record and the fact of qualification, few could dispute the FFA picked the right man. We love him. The Qantas Socceroos are one of the country's best-performed national teams this year. For that, Verbeek deserves much of the credit.

It will be interesting to see how many A-League players Verbeek selects in the final squad of 23. Barring injury, Culina and Moore appear to be certainties. Mile Sterjovski and Chris Coyne are well in contention. A headache for Verbeek is that some of these players finish their seasons as early as February 2010, leaving them short of match practice for a tournament starting in June. The solution? My answer is that the whole lot of them are loaned to Melbourne Victory for its Asian Champions League campaign. The FFA and the national selectors will

Who's on the plane?

Pim Verbeek and the selectors will choose a 23-man squad for the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Certainties

Mark Schwarzer (gk)
Lucas Neill (def)
Luke Wilkshire (def)
Mark Bresciano (mid)
Tim Cahill (mid)
Jason Culina (mid)
Brett Emerton (mid)
Vince Grella (mid)
Josh Kennedy (fwd)
Harry Kewell (fwd)
Scott McDonald (fwd)

Probables

Brad Jones (gk)
Scott Chipperfield (def)
Craig Moore (def)
Jade North (def)
David Carney (mid)
Brett Holman (mid)
Carl Valeri (mid)

Possibles

Adam Federici (gk)
Ante Covic (gk)
Michael Beauchamp (def)
Chris Coyne (def)
Patrick Kisnorbo (def)
Adrian Madaschi (def)
Mark Milligan (def)
Shane Stefanutto (def)
Jacob Burns (mid)
Nick Carle (mid)
Richard Garcia (mid)
Mile Jedinak (mid)
Mile Sterjovski (mid)
Rhys Williams (mid)
Bruce Djite (fwd)
Nikita Rukavytsya (fwd)
Archie Thompson (fwd)

Smokies

Michael Petkovic (gk)
Shane Lowry (def)
Matthew Spiranovic (def)
Dario Vidolic (fwd)
Mark Viduka (fwd)

probably settle for them being loaned anywhere.

Lastly, a footballing topic on which I can speak with authority. For all those undecided about whether to book their annual leave for June next year, do it!

I've heard from the 'It won't be as good as Germany' camp. I've heard from the 'I might just wait for Brazil in 2014' collective. My experience at France 1998 and Germany 2006 tells me that it is virtually impossible for a football fan to be unhappy at a World Cup. It is Disneyland for sports fans. Indeed it's the 'It's a Small World' ride played over a month – joyous, inclusive, a reason to have faith in humanity's ability to connect across cultures and creeds.

It would be great even without the Socceroos, but the fact they have qualified is such a sweetener. This golden generation of footballers remains intact for one last campaign.

Get on board. South Africa 2010 will be unforgettable. ●

What's next?

The key dates in the countdown to South Africa.

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| October 10, 2009 | Qantas Socceroos v Netherlands, Sydney Football Stadium, Sydney |
| October 14, 2009 | Qantas Socceroos v Oman, Etihad Stadium, Melbourne |
| November 14, 2009 | Oman v Qantas Socceroos, Muscat |
| December 4, 2009 | FIFA World Cup Draw, Cape Town |
| January 6, 2010 | Kuwait v Qantas Socceroos, Kuwait City |
| March 3, 2010 | Qantas Socceroos v Indonesia, Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane |
| May 2010 | World Cup squad selected; international friendly at MCG (opponent and date TBC) |
| June 2010 | Squad travels to camp in South Africa (base city TBC) |
| June 11-July 11, 2010 | World Cup finals in South Africa |



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Mark Schwarzer, John Eales, Layne Beachley and Andrew Gaze to help keep Australian sport safe and fair for everyone

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