

TIM CAHILL BOWS OUT OF SOCCER WITH A THANK YOU TO HIS DOUBTERS

When Australian football legend Tim Cahill wears the green and gold Socceroos jersey for the final time in his farewell international game this Tuesday, he'll be giving silent thanks to everyone who ever told him he'd fail.

The champion striker is looking back on a remarkable 23 years playing elite football on five continents, scoring 50 goals in 107 caps – five of those in four FIFA World Cups – making him Australia's all-time leading goal scorer. He was the first Australian to score in a World Cup and is often described as history's greatest Socceroo.

And yet he's been told from the start of that stellar career that he has no place on a football pitch.

"I fought so many barriers to play for Australia," he says. "From the youngest age, I was told I was never going to be a professional football player. I was always the smallest in the team, I wasn't as quick, so I knew very early on that I had to do more on and off the park to be recognised. I had to be smarter, I had to train harder."

Growing up in Sydney's western suburbs, the youngster refused to be discouraged. "It was a motivation for me, even at such a young age. I tried to learn how to make myself run quicker- standing on a trampoline in front of a mirror, trying to change my running style, doing push-ups and sit-ups every night before bed," he recalls.

Even after he scored his first professional contract at top English side Millwall at 16

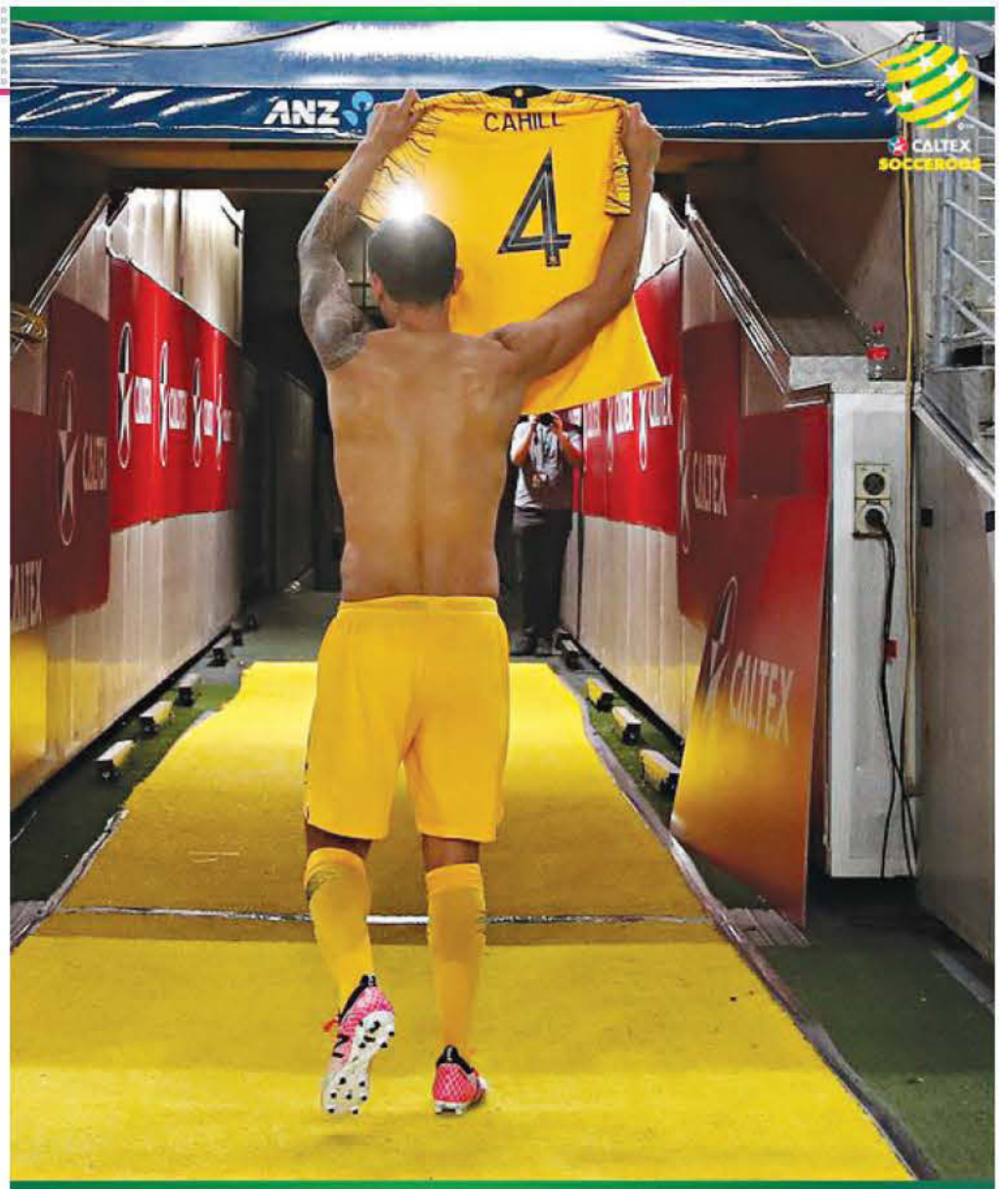
years old, Cahill came up against the same criticisms. "There were a few people in my team who were the smallest, and we'd find ourselves on the bench – but barriers are part of life and with that comes your work ethic to get through it."

That work ethic, along with the values of respect, humility and gratitude, was instilled in Cahill by parents who did it tough, working several jobs to make ends meet.

"My inspiration is my family," he says. "Seeing how hard my parents had to work just for us to rent a house, this gave me an understanding at a very young age that if you had a pair of boots or a football how much you were going to protect that. Even to this day I still wash my own boots after training. I look after everything."

Cahill's parents took out a hefty loan of more than £10,000 (over \$30,000) to back his shot at a pro career, funding his trip to England to live and play when he was just 16.

Cahill's mum, Sisifo also helped him with the emotional challenges of travelling alone to a faraway country at such a tender age. "I used to cry on the phone all the time," he says. "I was living in digs with a family I'd never met before – a kid on the other



Aged 38, Tim Cahill has played all over the world, most recently in the fast-growing Indian Super League.

side of the world; lights off and you're alone – that's the reality. It's different now, but back then it was just get on with it and do it."

Sisifo remembers those conversations well: "He'd call in tears and say he had blisters, it was cold and he missed us. I would tell him to remember how much he wanted to do it. I knew he was strong."

Says Tim: "Inside I knew I was going to make it, but there are also so many barriers that can stop you: homesickness, injuries, whether you can stick it out for another 20 odd years."

Young Timmy did stick it out, at Millwall and then through a goal-crammed eight years with Everton and after that the New York red Bulls, Shanghai Shenhua, and now at almost 39, in the fast-growing Indian Super League. Along the way, he was an instrumental figure in four World Cup campaigns, gaining new respect and status for the Socceroos.

That ride to the top of his game has been dogged by media criticism and sceptics. "If you look back at the biggest moments in my career, in the weeks leading up to them there's always been a commentary of 'you can't'," says Cahill. "I remember when they said I'll never get to 38 goals, that I'd never play the third World Cup let alone the fourth, then later they started saying I was done, too old. But each time, I proved them wrong again."

He adds: "When someone says you can't, the best response is silence. Let your actions do the talking."

He bears no ill will towards his detractors. In fact, he's grateful for their contribution. "Criticism, even constructive criticism, is amazing for an athlete and it's something

I've used as a tool throughout my career. To the people who said I couldn't do it, I say thank you."

His 'never say can't' attitude has made Cahill an ideal ambassador for Samsung. He says: "When I first heard about the interest from Samsung, I wrote down my thoughts and shared them with the team there."

Cahill had written: "It doesn't stop unless I want it to stop. To those who doubt me, I'm the conductor, not you. If there's an obstacle I'll go through it, I'll go around it, I'll go over it."

Cahill's next barrier is something very different: stepping off the football pitch for good. "The greatest challenge next for me is to stop playing," he says. "Physically my body will allow me to have a kick around with the boys; I'm 39 next month but I'm still playing in a great league in India. Could I continue playing for another few years? Easy. Would I want to? Probably not."

Other goals are calling him he says; business ventures, family time with his wife Rebekah and their four kids, and maybe even coaching. But first, there's his final appearance for Australia on Tuesday night at the ANZ Stadium, in a friendly against Lebanon.

The normally calm Cahill fears that this match will stir him like no other. "It will be quite emotional, because of everyone that's played a part," he says. "I'm not someone that carries emotions a lot onto the pitch, but this time will be different, because I'm thinking back on it all, how hard it was to make it and the effort that it's taken me to be there. It's humbling but at the same time, I am proud. Everyone's got dreams, and I never let go of mine."

