

INTRODUCING ALAN 'DEVO' DESALVO NEW AVF CEO U21 WORLD CHAMPS

SPIKE

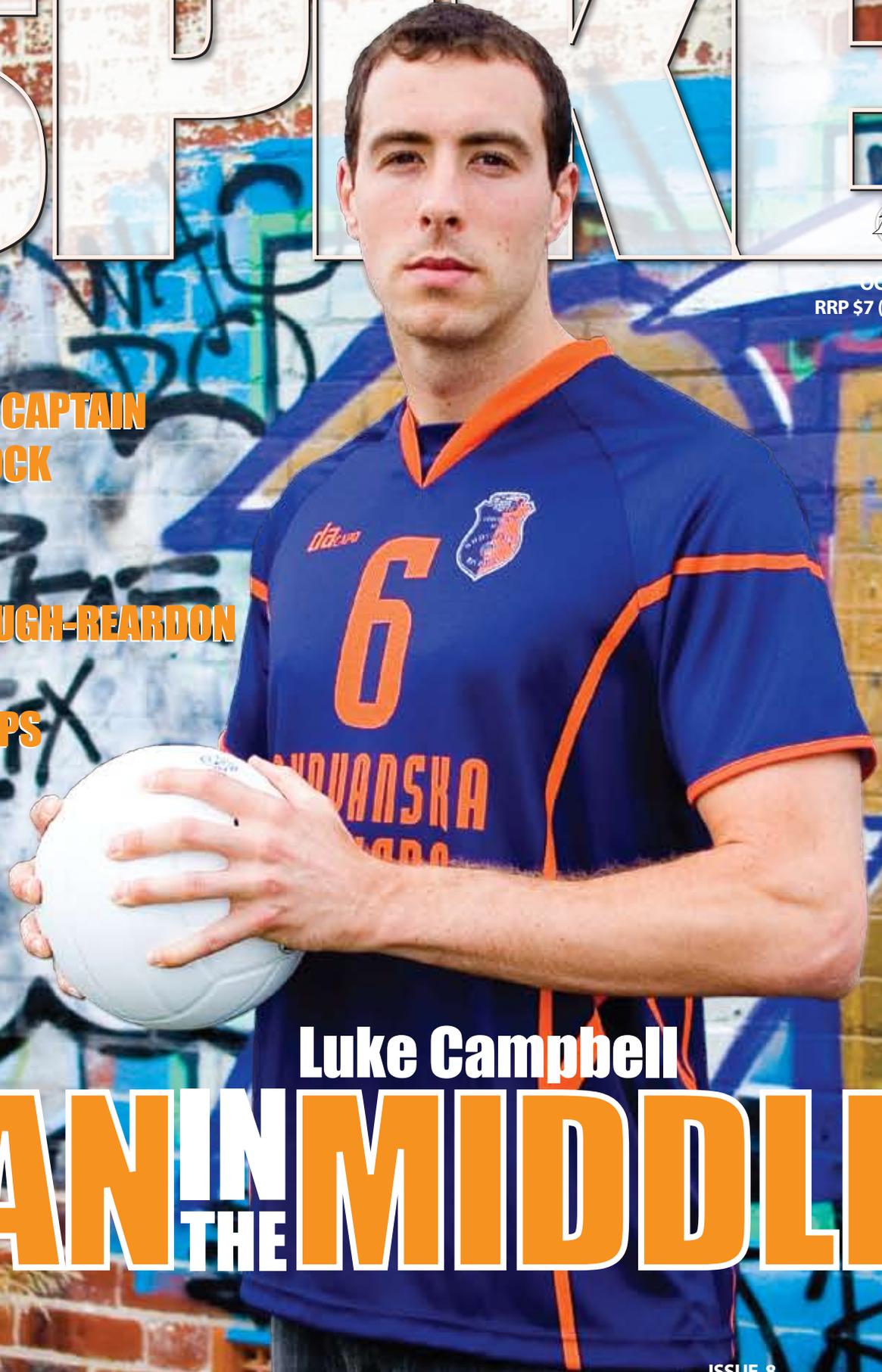


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AUSTRALIAN CAPTAIN
ANNA MAYCOCK

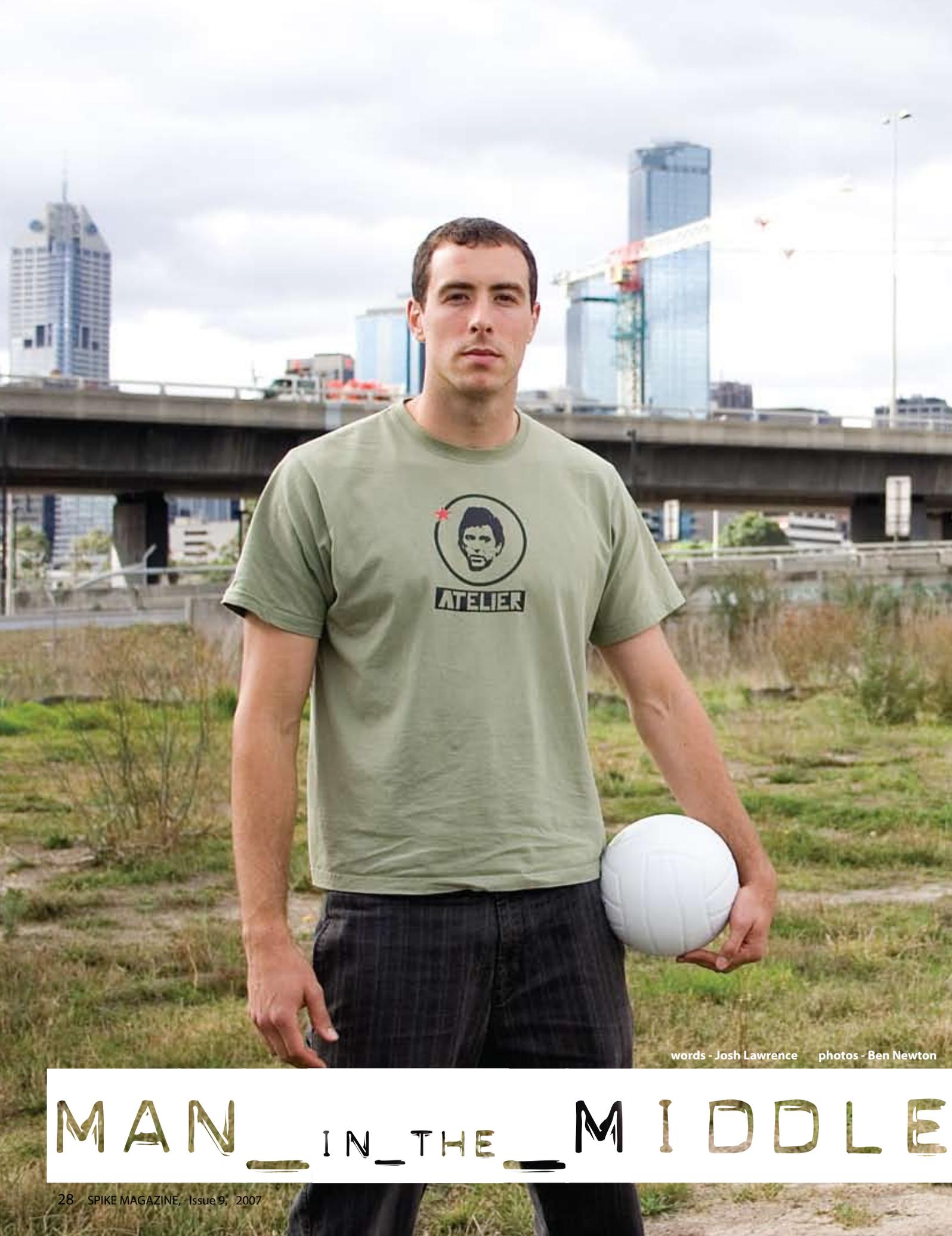
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GOLDSBOROUGH-REARDON

ASIAN CHAMPS



Luke Campbell

MAN IN THE MIDDLE



words - Josh Lawrence photos - Ben Newton

MAN _ IN _ THE _ MIDDLE

As Australia's starting middle blocker, Luke Campbell has, quite literally been at the centre of the Australian men's indoor team's recent success. He spoke exclusively to Spike about playing professionally overseas, his time with the Australian team and perhaps most shockingly how bullying almost made him quit the game before his career had even started.

Like almost all of Australia's volleyball stars, Campbell's volleyball journey began in the most humble of circumstances, in year eight at Yarra Valley Grammar. Mary Carroll was the PE teacher responsible for setting him on a course that would see him represent school then State and finally his country. "I picked him out as a prospective player because he was tall, had good ball skills (as a basketballer) and his older brother Ryan was a gun volleyballer and captain of my Open Boys team, so hopefully volleyball 'was in the genes,'" says Carroll of those initially tentative steps.

His guts and determination were plain to see for all in those early days. When he was 15 and in Year 9 he travelled to Canberra with Yarra Valley for the national schools cup (prior to its move to Melbourne). Campbell's team made the grand final but in hot and oppressive conditions that were affecting everyone he passed out – stone cold – on court during the second set. He came around fairly quickly and was so determined to get back on court that the coaching staff eventually let him. Carroll recalls his brother Ryan, commenting "that he'd never seen his brother so pumped or show so much determination in any sport."

In fact his determination (some would say stupid blind stubbornness) is what reportedly earned him his nickname 'Ralf'. At State training it was reportedly not uncommon to find Campbell vomiting at some stage and hence the nickname 'Ralf' was born. It has stuck to this day.

The 27-year-old (28 in November) is now the fourth most experienced member of the current Australian squad, with more than 200 international matches to his name and while he may not be the point scoring machine of a Ben Hardy or Dan Howard his

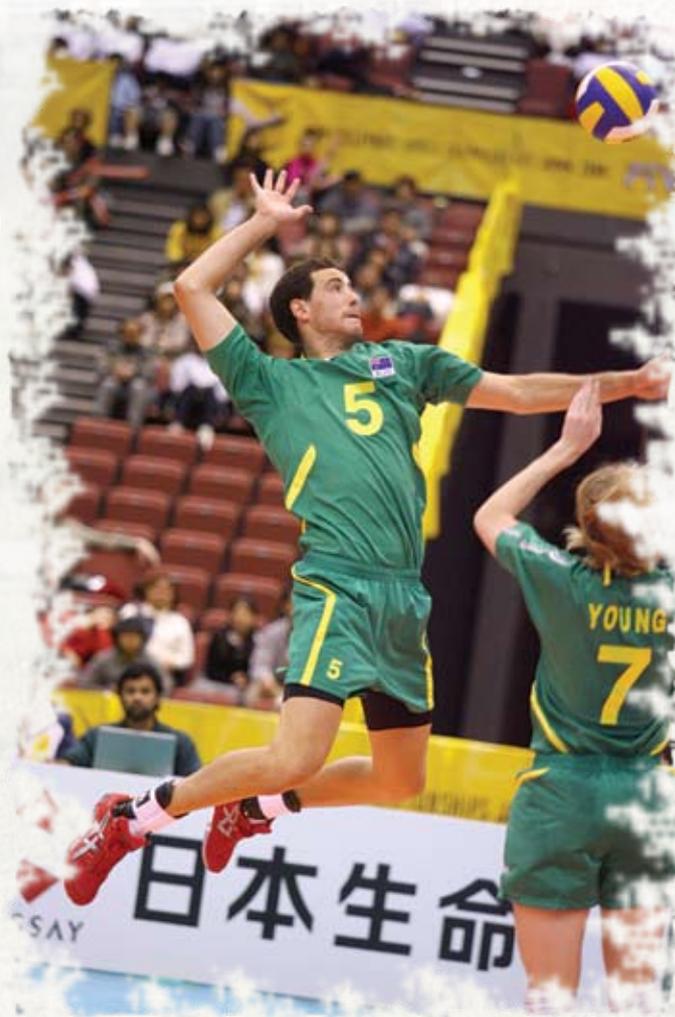
value to the team is becoming more and more evident with every tour. "Luke Campbell has really stood up. He's really showing his experience and been a real General in the middle," said Russell Borgeaud (Australian head coach) of Campbell's performances in the recent Asian Championship lead-up tours in Europe.

At 202cm he is not the tallest of Australia's front row options (Ferguson - 205cm, Howard - 209cm, Paul Carroll - 207cm) but he is an integral part of the national team structure. Anyone who witnessed any of last year's matches against Argentina on home soil will attest to his vocal nature on court, providing plenty of spirit and grunt to keep the team fired up throughout its matches.

He wasn't always this confident though, especially in his early days at the AIS. Campbell, like almost all national athletes these days, was identified from the schools cup run in Canberra back in 1997. That didn't grant him a spot at the AIS but did land him a position on a junior tour in January of 1998 that visited Thailand, Finland, Sweden and Denmark. During the tour Campbell was playing well enough to pester Russ Borgeaud and Andrew Strugnell about whether a scholarship was a possibility. The scholarships were full but they promised the young Campbell they would talk to coach, Stelio de Rocco and see if anything could be worked out.

Eventually de Rocco said yes and the day after he returned from the tour of Europe Campbell packed his bags and drove to Canberra.

While he managed to land a scholarship (not a full scholarship) at the AIS, his existence was not exactly something to write home about. He wasn't permitted to live in residence and received just \$50 a week allowance which was, in theory, supposed to cover rent, food





and perhaps most importantly keep his car running so he could get to training every day. As with many athletes battling to keep their sporting dreams alive he got a job and his mum and dad stepped up their financial support, which Campbell admits "mum and dad helped out a lot, otherwise I wouldn't have had a chance (of surviving in Canberra)."

Surprisingly despite his persistence to reach the AIS he admits he wasn't a great junior player back then. "I wasn't very good in 98, my first year on scholarship. I heard a few years later that a lot of people around

injuries and made the main team again which meant he wasn't around the young guys very much. I guess I got a bit better in 99' and I got a bit more confident with myself. You learnt to backchat a bit, just tell him to shut up and piss off," he says of eventually overcoming this episode in his life.

Ironically during this same period Campbell suffered a major knee injury that was a catalyst for the changes he needed to make and ultimately cemented his spot in the Australian squad. "In 1999 I had an ACL reconstruction but I wasn't in the team then

"In fact that was the best thing that ever happened to my volleyball wise was breaking my knee."

Australian volleyball said why the hell is that guy there, he's crap. I probably was, I was weak, I didn't jump very high and I was a bit lucky. Pretty lucky to be there. In 1999 I earned my place with some of the improvements I made," he says.

But it was in 1998, in his first year at the AIS, that Campbell reveals he almost quit due to the constant harassment of a fellow member of the team. "I actually quit. Well, certainly tried to quit. I was getting hassled pretty hard, especially by one of the guys, one of the older guys and that really got to me. I wasn't a strong person back then at all. I couldn't really deal with it and I'd had enough," says Campbell quite matter-of-factly.

"He'd give me a hard time on the court as well as off the court and just generally being a prick. As for getting over this guy, eventually he got over his

so I didn't miss much (volleyball). In fact that was the best thing that ever happened to me volleyball wise was breaking my knee because for that next six months I worked at the gym. I caned myself at the gym twice a day five or six days a week. My skin folds went from 78 when I had my op to when I came back to the court it was 54... and I put on 8 kilos. It totally transformed me. Within about a month back at training I was already back where I was before I did my knee, purely on the strength."

In yet another sign of his determination to make his mark, Campbell continued to train with a 10cm titanium screw and a washer 10cm in diameter in his knee. He didn't tell the coaching staff because he knew if he did they would not allow him to train. And train he did, making the Australian team for the final pre-Olympic selection tour in 2000. Realistically



Luke's European hometown

he knew he didn't have much hope of making the Olympic team, behind Ben Loft and Nick Mortimer but it didn't matter. "I spoke to the surgeon about it and he didn't think it was really a risk (to be back playing and training). I wasn't experienced enough and I knew that. I didn't really have a chance (of being selected) but you don't throw the towel in."

Once his non-selection for Sydney 2000 was confirmed Campbell revealed the ruse – coach de Rocco didn't say a word and Mark Lebedew merely laughed.

His journey from that point to now has seen him spread his wings internationally. After two years in Germany, two years in Spain and a year in Holland, Campbell decided it was time for a new experience and turned his attention to Montenegro in Eastern Europe. "I wanted to go somewhere over in Eastern Europe, sort of a different mentality. A bit more hard ass. Volleyball is pretty big in Montenegro although handball and basketball are both a bit bigger, it's still a popular sport."

Perhaps not surprisingly when Campbell mentions his current location to most Australian's, their initial reaction is one of surprise, conjuring images of a war-torn nation, shrapnel and bullet hole ridden buildings. In actual fact he says Budva is somewhat of a tourist town, quite a beautiful town with crystal clear water and friendly people. "I'm in a tourist city. Go inland and it's not pretty, it's poor, it's really poor. There are bullet holes in the walls but its all history, that is. I mean they're still crazy bastards... they fire guns into the air at weddings and all that. On New

Year's eve everyone's firing guns and that but if you do get hit it won't be on purpose!"

Around town he is a familiar face, with local kids regularly high fiving him and yelling "Hey Campbell" because of their limited grasp of English. Three or four times a week his team is featured in the newspapers and they sometimes get TV airtime. In fact, twice a year when they play their main rivals, live TV is not uncommon. It's a far cry from his hometown, Melbourne, where Campbell enjoys a similar level of anonymity to other minority sport stars but he doesn't seem too bothered by that.

With 10 training sessions (two hours in the morning, three hours at night, five days a week) plus game time, Campbell has found the stock market a great tool to keep his mind ticking over between those busy periods. "I don't study but need to get back into it. It's something to keep me stimulated. The idea of making money from doing nothing is nuts." He spends an hour or two a day on it while he is in Montenegro. "If it could be my career that would be great but I don't know. I'm getting better at it."

Later this year he will attempt to learn the local language. Perhaps more importantly he will rejoin with his Australian teammates later this year as they make their charge towards the Beijing Olympics. Whether the Aussies make it or not, there's no doubt that 'Ralf' will be the man in the middle

If you want to get an idea of the power and presence of Luke Campbell on-court why not check out <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MmnWjABf00s>.

