

athletes



ORANGE CRUSH

His sublime skills made Thomas Broich one of Queensland's most welcome sports imports. And his move from Germany not only revived his passion for football but gave Brisbane Roar a man for all seasons.

Story Andrew McMillen Photography Russell Shakespeare

The Saturday morning sun warms the turf as 20 or so men in orange shirts follow the path of a round ball. Players yelp after bone-shaking tackles and groan at the sight of missed shots skirting the crossbar. Complimentary coffee and bacon-and-egg burgers are on offer for the crowd that has gathered outside Ballymore Stadium in Brisbane's inner-north Herston for this open members' training session.

Wendy Shaw stands with arms crossed beside a sign that reads *Beware: flying footballs*. The 55-year-old supermarket manager hasn't missed a Roar home game since the club's inception nine years ago. She stares intently at number 22, a tall, tanned man with dark hair and green boots.

"He's had a shave, that's always a good thing," Shaw laughs. "That's one of our superstitions – if Thomas has had a shave, it means we're going to win!"

Just out of earshot, attacking midfielder Thomas Broich is delivering cross after cross to the team's strikers, who attempt to put the ball past goalkeeper Michael Theo. The 33-year-old

Broich – who earlier this year played his 100th game for the club – has been a professional footballer for nearly half his life, and has been subject to intense media and fan scrutiny.

After a rollercoaster ride of a career throughout the 2000s in the German premier league, the Bundesliga – the world's most attended football competition – Broich was near the end of his tether, and considering quitting.

It took a timely transfer to a club halfway around the world to reignite his passion.

Since he first wore the orange jersey in the 2010-11 season, Brisbane Roar has been a consistent presence at the pointy end of the A-League, winning two of the past three championships.

A home game on March 22 saw the team secure its second premiership in four years; the match-winner arrived in the 92nd minute, when Broich attracted the close attention of four Melbourne Victory defenders before he passed to midfielder Luke Brattan, whose pinpoint strike sealed the game 1-0. The team heads into the finals series later this month as favourite to take its third A-League championship.

SO DEAFENING WAS THE BUZZ SURROUNDING the young midfielder in the seasons leading up to his Bundesliga debut that a television journalist named Aljoscha Pause approached him in 2003 with a tempting offer: to be the subject of a feature-length documentary, the first such film portrait of a German footballer.

"I wanted to find somebody who would be charismatic enough to carry a whole film, and intelligent enough to reflect the business from inside – not an easy task," Pause says. At the time, Broich was 22 and playing in the second-division Bundesliga; the project was initially scheduled for two years.

"It was meant to show me break through into a big club, or the national team," says Broich. "Then it just turned to shit. Excuse my language!" He gives a sheepish grin, momentarily forgetting his well-practised media manners. "It went the complete other way. That's when the project became interesting for completely different reasons – it wasn't about the rise of a footballer any more, it was more about the fall of a footballer."

Pause estimates that the pair spent about 400 hours filming together, over the course of eight ►

years and several club transfers, first with Borussia Mönchengladbach (2003-06); later, FC Köln ('06-'09); and finally, with FC Nürnberg ('09-10). The pair became close during the process, which made Pause's job more difficult; the line between filmmaker and friend became blurred. The result, *Tom Meets Zizou*, was released in 2011 and charts Broich's youthful naivety. Early on, the football press picked up on his preferences for classical music and philosophy, dubbing him "Mozart". The youngster was eager to please, and played up to the caricature by posing for photographs while engaged in intellectual activities such as reading, chess, and playing piano. These points of difference weren't particularly well received in the hyper-masculine world of professional football. Says Broich with a grimace in 2014: "I look at the young guy in the film and think, oh my god, you're so stupid. Who do you think you are?"

Ultimately, the film chronicles an optimistic, skilled young player being gradually worn down by a ruthless industry. It was only when then-Brisbane Roar coach Ange Postecoglou travelled to Germany to offer Broich a lifeline that a fitting dénouement became clear. "When I hit rock bottom, I made the decision to come to Australia, and that's where the fairytale started for me," says Broich. "For the first time in years, I was able to enjoy my football again."

The film ends with the Roar's spectacular first grand final in March 2011. Before a record home crowd of more than 50,000, Brisbane was down 2-0 to the Central Coast Mariners with just three minutes of extra time remaining. It would take something remarkable to claw back the scoreline. In response, Broich made a casual assist in front of goal to the Brazilian striker Henrique, who netted the chance and made it 2-1. Then, in the 120th minute, Broich sent a corner kick onto the head of fellow midfielder Erik Paartalu, who tied the game, resulting in a penalty shoot-out won by the home team. It was Broich's first championship trophy. He was 30 years old.

Graham Arnold was the Central Coast Mariners' head coach who watched his team wrench defeat from the jaws of victory that March evening in Brisbane. "Everyone knew it was the last kick of the game," Arnold says on the phone from Japan, where he now coaches Vegalta Sendai. "[Broich] was under enormous pressure, yet the delivery was inch-perfect, like a lot of his set pieces are. At the end of the day you have to recognise that, as an art that he's practised. I've got a huge amount of respect for him. In my view, he's one of the best foreigners ever to come to this country. We should be very thankful that Brisbane brought that calibre of player to the A-League."

Brisbane Roar captain Matt Smith agrees with Arnold's assessment: "On the pitch, his vast array of technical abilities are far superior to probably



99 per cent of the A-League." Says left-side defender and vice-captain Shane Stefanutto: "He's a German-Australian legend already. I'm thankful of the day he arrived in Brisbane; he's done a lot for football in this country."

Roar head coach Mike Mulvey describes Broich as "the complete package. He's a team player; he's deeply knowledgeable about the game. He's inspirational to the crowd, and to our players," says the 50-year-old Manchester-born manager, who took the reins in December 2012. "He understands the finer points of life. Football is vitally important, but there's plenty of time for enjoying music and reading. I've given him some books and tapes. We're very similar in that we're both trying to find out the meaning of life – what else is there? He's a deep thinker, and softly spoken. He doesn't speak for the sake of it, but when he speaks – listen. He makes a lot of sense."

BORN IN MUNICH IN 1981 TO A SOFTWARE engineer father and a mother who worked for a law firm, Broich moved with his family to the town of Wasserburg – population 10,000, 45 minutes' drive east of the Bavarian capital – when he was six. He and younger brother Stefan spent much of their childhood outdoors: mountain biking and skiing, and playing ice hockey, basketball and tennis. "There wasn't much else to do," Broich says.

Football became an obsession early on; as home movies in *Tom Meets Zizou* show, he would re-enact and commentate entire games played by Bayern Munich, his favourite team, which has dominated the Bundesliga since its inception. In 1990, when Broich was nine, Germany won the World Cup. "It was massive; people were dancing in the streets," he recalls with a dazed smile. "As kids, we were allowed to stay up late and watch the games, including some legendary matches against the Netherlands and Argentina." The enthusiasm was contagious, and solidified in his mind his life's purpose: to become a professional footballer.

The contrast between how his parents responded to this dream was stark, however. While his mother



would regularly make the 90-minute round trip to take him to practice and games in Munich, his father was indifferent toward his son's passion. "He thought it was a phase, and that I should focus on school. He wasn't shy to express that, either," says Broich. Naturally, this was saddening, but it didn't foster in the youngster a desire to prove his father wrong. "I was never one to operate on negativity," he says with a shrug.

The gift of a junior-sized football goal from an uncle at the age of 13 was "my favourite present of all time", says Broich, his eyes lighting up at the memory. "I've thanked that uncle a million times." Stefan wasn't nearly as football-mad as his elder brother, and neither were the few similar-aged children in their neighbourhood, so Broich would often practise in the back yard alone. "All

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– Roar coach Mike Mulvey

Midfield marvel ...
(far left) Broich playing
for Germany’s Under
21s against Turkey
in 2003 and (right)
celebrating a goal
with Brisbane Roar
teammates during
the 2011-12 season.



you do is dribble around, pass it against a wall, receive it back; it’s about your touch, basically,” he says. “I was never good at scoring goals, because I never really had a goalkeeper!”

His sporting commitments meant he avoided part-time jobs in his teens. After he signed with a third-division Bundesliga club for about 2000 deutschmarks (\$A1550) per month, his father acknowledged that this career might have some financial potential after all. “When I got my first half-decent contract, he was sceptical, but when I started at the bigger clubs, it was obvious to everyone.” The pair has not spoken in several years, however. “He never really took much of an interest,” Broich says. “I’m so grateful for what he did for us as a family. There was nothing major; it’s just that our lives grew apart, that’s all.”

While moving through the ranks and transferring between Bundesliga teams, Broich began to experience disaffection toward what the game had meant to him as a child. He came to realise that “a lot of it is just entertainment; the players are like a blank screen, and you project your own movie onto that screen”. Cynical thoughts such as these are telling of Broich’s

discontent within the high-pressure business. “[While living in] Cologne was when I blocked football completely out of my life. I didn’t want to feel it, I didn’t want to talk about it; I had no interest whatsoever,” he says, describing this period where a distinct line between his professional and personal lives emerged.

Though he studied English in high school, it wasn’t until moving to Australia and becoming immersed in the language that he became comfortable with it. He and his partner of seven years, Helena Blech, tend to speak German at home. They met while partying in Cologne during what Broich dubs his “wild years”. “She was the only good thing to come out of it,” he says. Blech only moved to Brisbane a year ago; the pair soldiered through three years of long-distance romance while she completed a Master of Education (she is now studying fashion design). That dividing line between his public and private life remains stark and – as shown in the film – hard-earned; accordingly, Blech opts not to join us for lunch.

Music has long fascinated Broich, hence the “Mozart” tag ascribed early on; he first learned piano but in recent years has switched to guitar.

He was anxious about asking his first Roar coach, Postecoglou, for permission to take his acoustic guitar on away trips, and was relieved to find that all of his Australian coaches looked fondly on such extracurricular activities. Since mid-2011, he’s been a regular attendee at a Brisbane jam night, but it’s taken him years to work up the courage to play in front of an audience – a curious type of stage fright for a man who has played football in front of huge crowds.

Broich declines *Qweekend*’s request to sit in on one of these sessions – another example of that firm line between public and private – yet his friend and singing companion, Georgie Prestipino, is happy to fill out some of the details. “He now makes the soundcheck his gig, which has been a massive process, and a big step for him,” says 21-year-old Prestipino. “I keep telling Thomas: ‘One step at a time’. When he’s ready, he gets up, which is awesome; he’ll get there at 8pm, play two songs, and that’s his gig,” she laughs. “He’s loving the Red Hot Chili Peppers right now – he keeps begging me to learn those songs for him! – and he’s idolising Jimi Hendrix.”

Broich has been blessed by a relatively injury-free career, never missing more than a handful of games in a row. He smiles and makes a point of pressing his knuckles to the table as we discuss this topic, making light of the stereotypical sports superstition. (“He gets whacked every week,” says Roar manager Mulvey with concern. “It takes its toll.”) Player salaries are a closely guarded secret in all forms of the game; apart from his early earnings with German clubs, Broich won’t be drawn on the subject of money. Owing to his status as Brisbane Roar’s “international marquee” player, his contract is exempt from the \$2.5 million salary cap afforded to each club.

In September 2012, Broich signed a four-year extension with Brisbane, which will keep him with the Roar until 2017 – a move which, coupled with his partner’s relocation and the recent purchase of a house in northside Newmarket, can be read as a sure sign of his happiness in the Queensland capital. It’s a far cry from the cynicism and depression that characterised his final playing years in Germany. “In three years’ time,” says Mulvey, “I’d like to think Thomas has achieved everything that he wants to achieve in football, and that he’s turned his mind to how he can influence future young players. He could be the architect of something pretty special off the field in future ... if he chooses.” At present, says the A-League-leading head coach, “Thomas has got everything except his next trophy. It’d be a shame to do what we’ve done this year without picking up the silverware.” ●

Brisbane Roar plays Western Sydney Wanderers tonight and Central Coast Mariners at home next Saturday in the last two rounds before the A-League finals.