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“I’m not bang
into golf like
most footballers”

IN FACT, SOL CAMPBELL'S NOT LIKE MOST
FOOTBALLERS AT ALL. HE HANGS OUT WITH THE
TORIES, HAS 'WHITENED UP' FOR RACIAL
EQUALITY AND LOVES NOTHING MORE THAN
TO SHOOT HIS OWN SUPPER

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ol Campbell scans the skyline with the trance-like intensity of a toddler with an iPad. It's a look we've seen before, like when he'd

steamroll a striker dribbling towards the net or mouth the national anthem as if quietly channelling some inner power. Yet, in this moment, standing in a field in hunting boots and a massive leather gilet, he looks happier than he ever did playing football for Tottenham, Arsenal, Portsmouth or England. Then again, he didn't shoot much as a centre back.

"PUUUULLL," he bellows, in a voice that's not as deep as you'd expect for a man of his size. Two disks fizz into the air and, in one deft motion, he lifts a Beretta gun to his shoulder, aims and lets off two rounds. Crack. Crack. He misses both by some distance.

"Argh, I need to practise that," he exclaims. "When they come across you like that, they're so difficult to hit."

Rewind one hour, and we've just met Sol at the West London shooting grounds of gunsmith-to-the-Queen Holland & Holland for an afternoon of blasting clay pigeons out of the sky. The grounds are resplendent with rustling trees, while the clubhouse, oak-panelled with gun cabinets and stag heads, feels terribly lord-of-the-manor. Yet, this working-class immigrants' son from East London couldn't feel more at home.

"I'd prefer an over-and-under 12-bore with a 32-inch barrel and standard chokes, if you have one," he politely tells Chris, our instructor. This, you may have guessed, is not Sol's first time. He drapes his weapon of choice over his arm with the nonchalant air of a country squire.

"People think it's strange that I'm into shooting," he tells us as we walk to our first range. "But there are a



few ex-footballers who shoot, you know?" We confess we didn't. "Vinnie Jones, I've heard, likes it," he says. "So does Paul Gascoigne, apparently."

How did Sol get into it? "I'm not bang into golf like most footballers," he says. "I fell into shooting through my wife [Fiona Barratt-Campbell, heiress to the Barratt Homes empire]. Once I retired I thought, why not? You can meet different people, have a laugh. There's good banter."

What, like football dressing-room banter? It's hard to imagine teams of tweedy huntsmen hiding each other's cartridge bags and willy-tapping all the way to the grouse moor.

"Nooooo," protests Sol in falsetto. "Just taking the mick out of your hat, or whatever. It's fun."

None of us are wearing a hat, so we just take his word for it. It's not just clay pigeon-shooting hat bantz he likes, either. "I've started shooting pheasants, but only about 30 a year,"

he admits. "Obviously, if I'm shooting birds I'm going to eat them. If they end up on a dinner table, it's OK."

Sol Campbell seems a man reborn. Now 40, his jaunty demeanour and very impressive belly laugh feels a lifetime away from that fragile 31-year-old who, in 2006, broke down on the pitch after suffering unspeakable racist and homophobic abuse from the stands. He's deep into politics now, having put his weight behind the Conservative Party in the run up to May's general election.

In September, he'll have completed his Uefa coaching badges and, when he's not hobnobbing with the Tory elite or shooting his supper, he's running an interior-design company with Fiona while bringing up their two children between a home in West London and their vast Northumberland estate. Not bad for a man who essentially made his name hoofing a ball about

and being really good at headers.

As a player, Sol Campbell was a one-man brick wall; a Tyrannosaurus-thighed warrior with a superhuman ability to grow more composed the more pressure he faced.

During his 19 years as a footballer, he played in five international tournaments, was a Fifa Select XI Hall of Famer at two World Cups, was a member of Arsenal's 'Invincibles' team that was unbeaten during the 2003-04 league season, scored in a Champions League final and, to date, is England's greatest black footballer.

Yet he was also sensitive, a self-diagnosed loner with few friends on or off the pitch. Despite his successes, he felt ripped off. Why was he the target of such venom? Why was he never honoured for his services to football? And why, most

importantly to him, was he only made England captain for three out of his 73 caps? He caused a storm when, in his authorised biography last year, he blamed racism at the FA. They

"I WANT TO SHOW THAT DIVERSITY WORKS. NOT EVERYBODY IS SUCKING THE COUNTRY DRY"

denied it, he maintained it. Does he regret calling them out?

"No," he replies defiantly. "I should have been captain more than three times in 10 years. It's embarrassing."

You seem bitter. Are you bitter? "I just hope colour and race don't come into it again," he says.

Sulzeer Jeremiah Campbell was born on 18 September 1974, the youngest of 12 children, to Jamaican immigrants who settled in Stratford, East London. He admits his

was a lonely childhood. His father, Sewell, worked long hours for London Transport while his mother, Wilhelmina, wrapped cables in a factory. There wasn't time for hugs or bedtime stories. And no one ever came to his school football matches. By his teens, he had become a "recluse" in his own home.

"We didn't have two pennies to rub together," he recalls. "There was love, but you had to fight for everything you got. With such a large family there was no space to grow, evolve, breathe, and that affects you as a kid."

He says, as the "baby of the family", he didn't get to speak much, so

WITH THANKS TO HOLLAND & HOLLAND SHOOTING GROUND (HOLLANDANDHOLLAND.COM)

football became his expression. "Every day I went out to practise. Nobody asked where I was going. I could kick a ball against a wall all day."

It paid off. Soon he was picked up by West Ham, where he played as a youth-team striker before moving to Tottenham Hotspur in 1989. Youth team manager Keith Waldon later recalled that it was Sol's physicality rather than ability that caught his eye.

"I was very shy as a kid," Sol remembers. "But when I played football I became a different person. I was bossy, verbal. I just loved competing. You wouldn't have liked me if you'd met me on the pitch," he laughs, letting out another hair-drying guffaw.

We've moved to an area where the disks bounce low along the grass. Sol's eyes light up. "Aha," he exclaims.

"This is the rabbit clay – it runs along like rabbits. This, I am good at." He's not joking. In six shots, he hits five.

As his fortunes improve, the weather does the opposite, with dark clouds hanging ominously on the horizon. This seems as good a time as any to probe his controversial move from Tottenham to arch-rivals Arsenal in 2001, even allowing his contract to run down so Spurs wouldn't get a transfer fee. "I was frustrated at Tottenham," he reflects. "There just wasn't enough quality – there were good players, but not a squad."

The fans never forgave him. He

was racially abused, victim of a homophobic whispering campaign and branded 'Judas' for his disloyalty. What did Tottenham do that made him want to piss them off so much? "It's fair to say they pissed me off as well," he retorts. "I was on crap wages when others were on decent money, without a good enough side. I wanted to be in a more successful team."

He got his wish. Within four years at Arsenal he'd won three FA Cups

"OBVIOUSLY, IF I'M SHOOTING BIRDS THEN I'M GOING TO EAT THEM"

and two Premier League titles, including the 'Invincibles' season.

"Once I went to Arsenal I was very happy because there were more like-minded people at the club," he says. "I felt comfortable for the first time in my career, with the chance to have intelligent conversations."

That happiness soon soured. The spores of tribal hatred spawned on the terraces of White Hart Lane spread to other grounds. Soon, every game he played seemed soundtracked by his own bespoke playlist of frenzied taunts, jeers and wanker signs.

"The abuse was disgusting: racial,

homophobic, the lot," he says. "Not a lot of footballers have been under that type of pressure and come out of it a human being with spirit."

Perhaps it was inevitable that he would snap. It finally happened in 2006 during a game against West Ham. He was still grieving the death of his father, and his brother, John, was in jail for beating up a man for calling Sol gay. With Arsenal 2-0 down at half-time – his blunders having led to both goals – he refused to play on, before driving out of Highbury, still in his No 23 shirt. He moved to Portsmouth at the end of that season and skippered the team to FA Cup triumph two years later. Did he have a full-blown meltdown?

"Nooo," he laughs, a little uneasily. "It just got to the point where I exploded. Everyone has a threshold. I've got thick skin and it was fine when it was only affecting me, but it started affecting my family – my mum especially."

While he has laughed regularly throughout our time together, he suddenly looks glum.

"My mum died two months ago," he announces, with startling honesty. "I'm still having a hard time dealing with it."

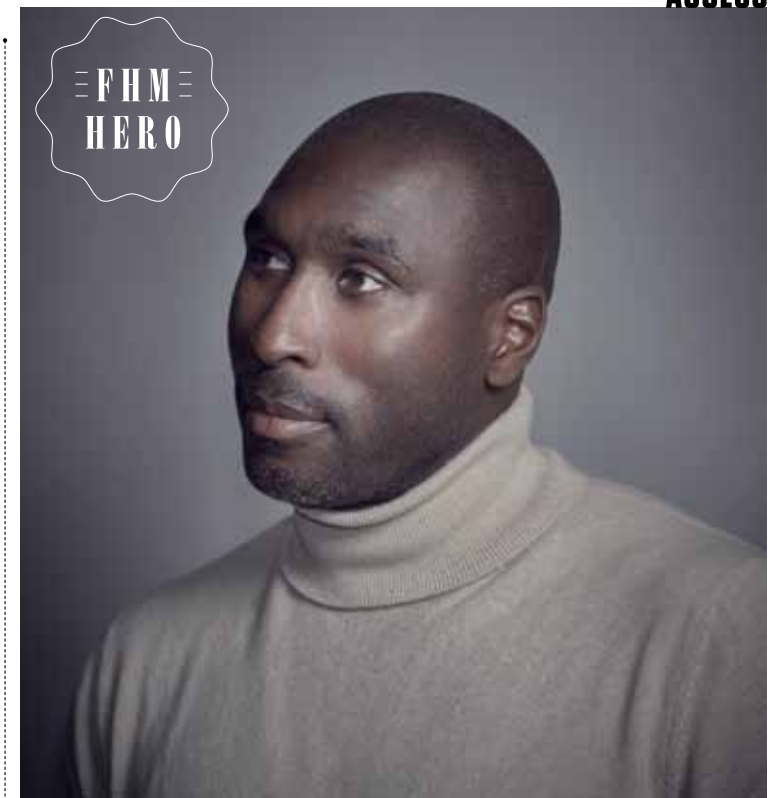
But despite his sense of loss, her death has given Sol a strength he never knew he had. "You realise you have to step up so as not to let little things consume you. She taught me to be tough, but also to care."

That's why Sol has thrown himself into politics. Earlier this year, he painted his face white, alongside a host of black celebrities, for an Operation Black Vote poster campaign and has been helping the Conservative Party on race-related issues ever since. Two weeks after our interview took place, he even confirmed his intention to stand as the party's candidate for London Mayor, based in the capital's City Hall.

What, we wonder, does someone with his background have in common with the Tory Party? "I like the way they think," he hits back. "Look, I'm a self-made man, an entrepreneur. I don't want handouts. If I hadn't been in football I would probably still work my way up to the top, whether it be as an electrician, a politician, an architect. Not everyone from my background is like that but that's just the way I am."

He tells us about a speech he gave last year in the House of Commons about racial diversity, for which he received a standing ovation, and how his dream is to make Parliament more diverse. "Politics needs a racial overhaul, not just the Conservatives," he tells us. "Hopefully this will show that diversity does work and not everyone is sucking the country dry. It's what I'm passionate about."

Sol Campbell is clearly a passionate man. But he's also a complex one. He is a man who has visited the dark side and returned, he claims, in one piece. He has an



ego the size of his gilet and didn't much like it when we beat him at shooting (a complete fluke – we'd never even held a gun before, though he didn't believe us). But he is also intriguing company. He is animated, smiley and refreshingly honest. And despite all the mud that's been thrown at him, his self-belief is gleaming. On the surface, anyway.

"I want to make a difference to people," he says, stepping into his

Land Rover and turning the key (he has a Tory party debate to attend). "When you're in a privileged position, you should use it in a positive way."

And, we ask, you think you're comfortable doing that from the Tory backbenches in the Commons?

"Well," he smiles wryly. "I feel much more comfortable in City Hall."

Sol is available for public speaking (krugercowne.com)

SOL'S LIFE ON TWITTER



• I went skiing in February. I'm a beginner but, now I've retired, I'm trying to learn new things.



• Dennis Bergkamp. Legend. Once I went to Arsenal I was happy because there were a lot more like-minded people at the club and I felt comfortable for the first time.



• That's me and Fiona at a tea party hosted by Keith Vaz MP. He presented us with a fourth anniversary cake. Lovely man.



• With Patrick Vieira at an event in Switzerland. We're still mates. He's a nice, serious man.



• I gave a 20-minute speech about diversity in the House of Commons last year. I love the environment there. It's such a special place.