

Sol Campbell shows there is life yet in the old warhorse

Arsenal's centre-back put in a solid performance despite the shaky reception he received on his return to White Hart Lane

It was in the moments just prior to kick-off when a team of young ball-boys emerged from the tunnel holding the four corners of a banner. Get On With The Game, read the message, with the Premier League's logo above it serving as the stamp of approval. Sol Campbell was back in town as an Arsenal player, in the latest scarcely credible twist to his personal story, and it seemed that the message had to be directed at the Tottenham Hotspur crowd, who have heaped such vitriol on their former player since his infamous defection in 2001.

Campbell was made to feel at home. His every touch was booed and he received foul and abusive chants from the Tottenham supporters. Yet this was no hate campaign inside the stadium.

Arsène Wenger, the Arsenal manager, got worse with the sickening chant that, regrettably, has yet to be drummed from various grounds. A rip-roaring derby rose above the Campbell sub-plot and any pre-match fears. Tottenham, who refuse to abandon the dream of Champions League football, simply had bigger fish to fry. The tone might have been different had Arsenal gone ahead in the first minute when Campbell, of all people, saw a deflected effort cleared off the line by Benoit Assou-Ekotto.

Instead, Tottenham sent shivers of excitement down their fans' spines when Danny Rose, the Premier League debutant, fashioned his Roy of the Rovers moment. It was replayed again and again on the big screen at half-time, and the smirking pitch-side announcer appeared to take great delight in goading the travelling support with it. Campbell owed his selection here to injuries to William Gallas and Alex

Song, and to how Mikaël Silvestre auditioned for the role against Barcelona at Camp Nou last Tuesday. Silvestre, however, was on from the substitutes' bench soon enough, following the injury to Thomas Vermaelen.

Campbell and Silvestre was hardly the dream central defensive pairing envisaged by Wenger at the beginning of the season for such a vital derby but, then again, injuries have repeatedly made his squad feel thin.

Although Campbell emerged with great credit for his performance, Silvestre again had Wenger clutching his head. Silvestre's lack of awareness played a full part in the excellent Gareth Bale's goal.

When Campbell left Portsmouth to sign for Notts County in League Two last summer, it appeared that his days on the grandest of stages were over. You could have got long odds on him returning to play his part in the fight for the Premier League title and similarly lengthy ones on his wearing the red of Arsenal at White Hart Lane once more.

The shirt is like the proverbial rag to a bull at the best of times in these parts but, when worn by Campbell, it makes the locals' blood boil.

The 35-year-old never thought that the ill-feeling would be so intense and sustained when he made the life-changing decision to ignore the offer of a new contract by the Tottenham chairman Daniel Levy and waltz off down the Seven Sisters Road on a free transfer to Arsenal.

"He did it because he wanted to play for titles and you cannot stop him," said Wenger. "You have the right to go where you want when you're out of contract. Jamie O'Hara was a young-

ster with us. He went to Tottenham and is making a good career. Good luck to him."

Wenger was on thin ice comparing O'Hara's situation to that of Campbell. The big defender did win the trophies that he craved at Arsenal and he has since watched Tottenham win a solitary Carling Cup. Vindication, in footballing terms, would seem to have been his.

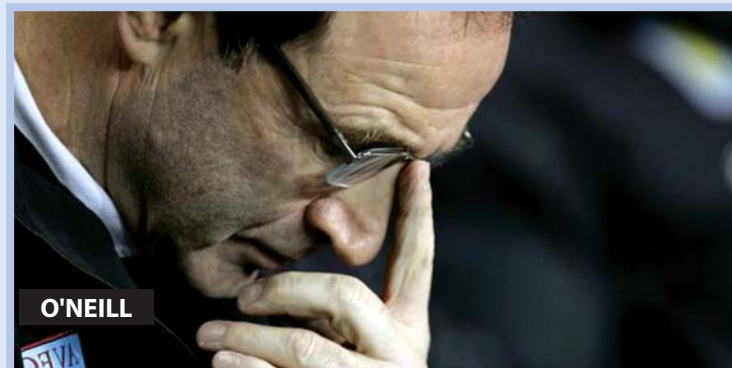
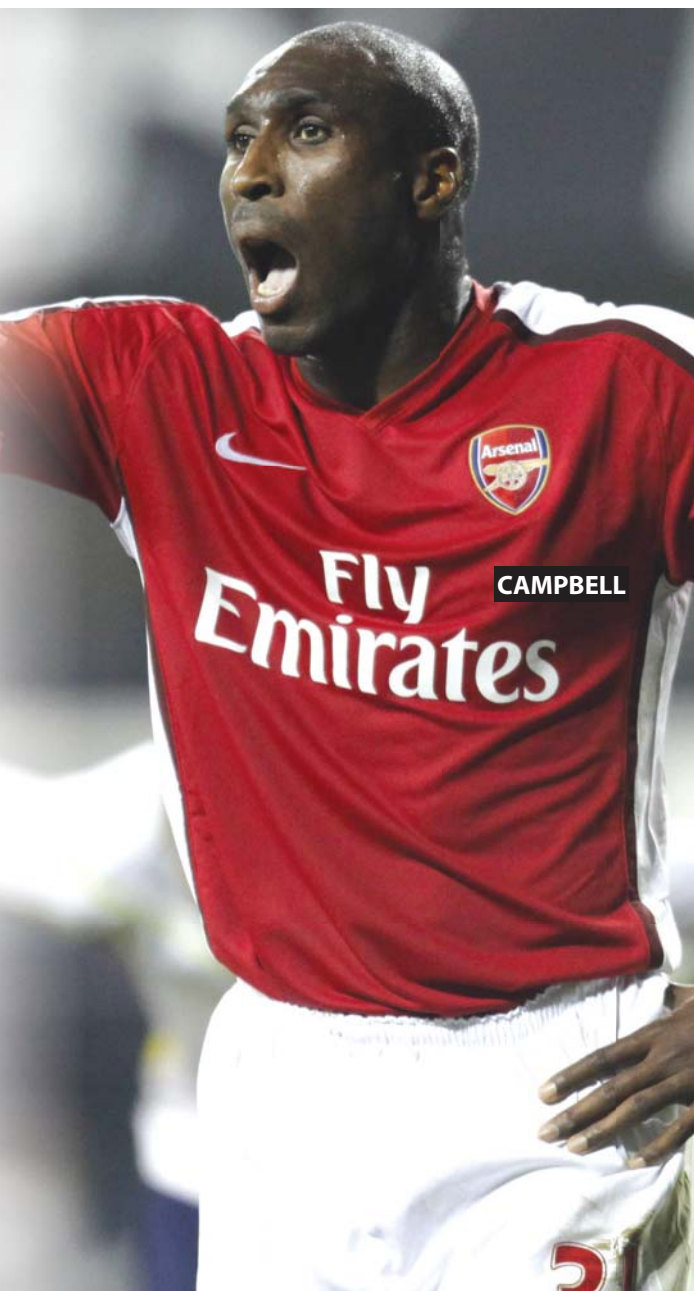
But, to paraphrase Harry Redknapp, the Tottenham manager, Campbell has suffered from greater terrace abuse than any modern player, although a clutch of Manchester United players, chief among them Eric Cantona and Paul Ince, might argue the toss. O'Hara, currently on loan at Portsmouth, does not quite engender the same feelings.

Campbell has never won at White Hart Lane as a visiting player and, with Wenger having made it plain that victory was essential for his team to sustain a title challenge, the continuation of Campbell's sequence brought frustration.

As ever, it was manifested in Wenger flapping his arms by his sides on the touchline like a great bird seeking lift-off.

The irony was that Campbell, who has looked off the pace at times since his return to Arsenal, had a fine game. From his early near miss, he was a commanding presence on the ground and in the air. One of his eye-catching moments was a saving intervention to dispossess Jermain Defoe; another, when he stepped out to halt Bale. He also hit the bar with a late header.

There is life in the old warhorse yet. Sadly for him, however, there is little chance of one more medal at the end of the season.



O'NEILL

With no trophies or Champions League spot, will Aston Villa's season be judged as a success?

but ended the club's hopes of finishing fourth in the Premier League this term.

And I believe a Champions League spot was a burning ambition for the club's US owner Lerner, who has pumped in £179million since 2006.

Now with crunch talks scheduled with O'Neill this summer to decide the club's future direction and budget, Lerner must be assessing his investment closely.

This season he has definitely got another return with two trips to Wembley in the Carling Cup final and the FA Cup semi-final.

But Villa lost on both occasions in controversial circumstances to Manchester United and Chelsea respectively.

So Lerner sadly still has no trophies to show for his huge outlay.

But I believe O'Neill will still claim the campaign has been a success and he has a point.

With a little more good fortune, Villa could have won either the Carling Cup or FA Cup when crucial early decisions went against them in both games they lost.

Nemanja Vidic somehow stayed on the field despite conceding an early penalty before United rallied to beat Villa 2-1.

While Gabriel Agbonlahor also should have been awarded a first half penalty against Chelsea with the score 0-0 but the decision was not given to the frustration of O'Neill.

Villa's prolonged Cup runs must have affected their League form because O'Neill is always so reluctant to utilise his squad and rotate his players.

Men such as Luke Young, Habib Beye, Steve Sidwell and Nigel Reo-Coker, who are all earning very big money at Villa Park, have spent much of the campaign on the sidelines.

So Villa's lack of freshness has probably

caught up with O'Neill's first choice XI as they have faltered of late.

People will now question the quality of Villa's fringe players but there can be no doubt that the Villa squad O'Neill has created is infinitely better than the one he inherited in August 2006.

O'Neill has spent a lot of money on players - around £80million net at the last count - but James Milner, Ashley Young, John Carew and ex-trainee Agbonlahor would all go for a huge profit should they ever be sold.

And if we are to consider whether the club's campaign has been a success or not, let's also not forget that Milner has been an absolute revelation in the centre of midfield.

He definitely gets my vote for player of the season at Villa Park after stepping up following Gareth Barry's sale.

And the discovery of Milner as a brilliant, versatile midfielder could also prove crucial for England at the World Cup this summer.