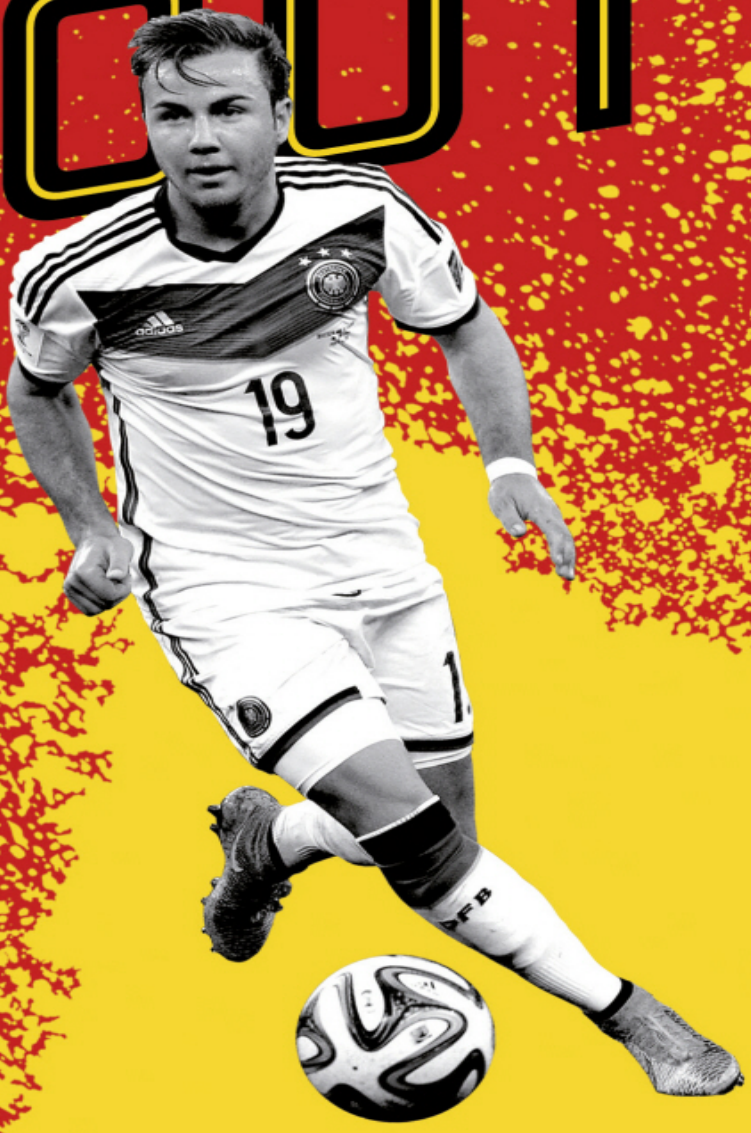
RAPHAEL HONIGSTEIN

DAS REBOOT

HOW GERMAN FOOTBALL REINVENTED ITSELF AND CONQUERED THE WORLD



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ABOUT THE BOOK

13 July 2014, World Cup Final, the last ten minutes of extra time: Germany forward Mario Götze, receiving a floated pass from his international teammate André Schürrle, jumps slightly to meet the ball and cushion it with his chest. Landing on his left foot, he takes a step with his right, swivels, and in one fluid motion, without the ball touching the ground, volleys it past the onrushing Argentine goalkeeper into the far corner of the net. The goal wins Germany the World Cup for the first time in almost twenty-five years. In the aftermath, Götze looks dazed, unable to comprehend what he has done.

In *Das Reboot*, journalist and television pundit Raphael Honigstein charts the return of German football from the international wilderness of the late 1990s to Götze's moment of genius and asks how did this come about? How did German football transform itself from its efficient, but unappealing and defensively minded traditions to the free-flowing, attackingfootball that was on display in 2014? The answer takes him from California to Stuttgart, from Munich to the Maracanã, via Dortmund and Durban. Packed with exclusive interviews with the key protagonists, Honigstein's book lifts the lid on the secrets of German football's success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raphael Honigstein is the UK's top expert on German football. He is a columnist for the *Guardian* and ESPN, writes for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Sport 1* in Germany and appears as a pundit for BT Sport and ESPN as well as Sky in Germany. He is also a regular fixture on the *Guardian* 's award-winning podcast, Football Weekly. His first book, *Englischer Fussball*, was shortlisted for Football Book of the Year.

Also by Raphael Honigstein

Englischer Fussball:
A German View of Our Beautiful Game

To Opa Leo who loved football, and to Opa Heinrich who didn’t.

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How German Football Reinvented Itself and Conquered the World

RAPHAEL HONIGSTEIN

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This is a story about control
Janet Jackson

ANGST 2014

The crushing bleakness of the day was sliced through by a metallic roar. Two Mercedes sports cars, driven by Formula 1 ace Nico Rosberg and Pascal Wehrlein, the teenage Deutsche Tourenwagen Masters driver, chased each other down an alpine pass. Rosberg braked sharply at a clearing ahead of a tight right–left turn, then accelerated on the straight descent towards the centre of the village of St Martin, in South Tyrol. As he passed an open wooden barn on his right, he slowed abruptly. Behind him Wehrlein squeezed his car to the left to avoid a crash and shot up the driveway of a guest house on the same side. There was no time to brake for the steward and the German spectator.

Benedikt Höwedes, Wehrlein's passenger, jumped out to administer first aid to the victims of the horrific accident. The steward, who later explained that he had tried to drag back the middle-aged holidaymaker from the closed-off rally course, suffered moderate injuries and was driven to a local hospital. The second man's life-threatening head injuries meant that he had to be airlifted to receive more specialist treatment in Bolzano. 'I think these images will stay with me for a while,' said Höwedes. The Schalke 04 defender and his club-mate Julian Draxler, who was sitting next to Rosberg, were unhurt, but needed the help of the national team psychologist Hans-Dieter Hermann in the aftermath.

The disastrous PR stunt with Mercedes-Benz, the German national team's main sponsor, midway through the training camp in northern Italy, marked the nadir of a pre-2014 World Cup preparation that couldn't have gone worse. A

couple of days earlier, news of a most unfortunate off-target attempt by Kevin Großkreutz had broken. The Borussia Dortmund midfielder had urinated drunkenly in the middle of a Berlin hotel lobby and clashed with an employee and guest in the wake of his side's 2-0 defeat against Bayern Munich in the DFB Cup final. Großkreutz's lapse threatened the clean, positive image of the German team that general manager Oliver Bierhoff and coach Joachim Löw had worked very hard to cultivate. 'Oliver Bierhoff and I have had a serious talk with Kevin,' said Löw. 'International players are role models off the pitch as well as on it.'

Löw, however, it was soon revealed, had himself fallen rather short of such exalted standards. The *Bundestrainer* had to confess to having lost his driving licence after being caught speeding and using his mobile phone while driving. 'I've learned my lesson and will change my behaviour on the road,' said Löw. Bierhoff, appearing at a press conference ahead of the Mercedes event, tried to downplay Löw's offence with humour: 'These things happen, we'll make sure he'll only get cars with a speed limiter in future.' The light-hearted tone appeared particularly ill conceived when Wehrlein's car slammed into the two bystanders later that afternoon. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*) deplored the German team for 'straying from reality' in their isolated Alpine set-up and for 'losing its self-control'.

The near-fatal accident outside the Holzerhof guest house was only the latest and most dramatic example of corners being cut two weeks before the start of the tournament. Löw had made it a central tenet of his 2014 World Cup plan over the preceding two years that only players in peak physical condition would be selected for Brazil, where the national manager expected to grapple with 'supernatural forces'. But the 'no compromise' line was quietly shelved as key players Manuel Neuer, Philipp Lahm, Bastian Schweinsteiger (all Bayern Munich) and Sami Khedira

(Real Madrid) turned up in northern Italy in varying states of unfitness. Doubts over the physical shape of veteran striker Miroslav Klose after a season with little football at Lazio added to the pervading sense of uncertainty. Instead of being able to rely on his team's spine, Löw was staring at a team sheet full of question marks.

Neuer, the outstanding goalkeeper, had hurt his shoulder in the DFB Cup final and missed the first days of the training camp, along with the consistently excellent and versatile Lahm, who was nursing a complicated ankle injury. 'There were days when I couldn't run in straight lines,' recalls the captain, sitting in his agent's office in Munich's fashionable meatpacking district. 'The team were already in Italy, yet I was still with the doctors in Munich. They were saying that they couldn't really tell me anything because the scans looked so strange. Everything was swollen.'

Khedira, the box-to-box dynamo, had looked woefully short of match sharpness in the Champions League final against Atlético Madrid after spending six months on the sidelines following cruciate ligament surgery. His central midfield partner, Schweinsteiger, the 'emotional leader', as Löw called him, had a long-standing problem with tendonitis.

Löw kept insisting that all his chief lieutenants would be back on their feet in time for the Portugal match on 16 June, but many reporters found his optimism deeply unsettling. They recalled how Löw had refused to bench a patently out of sorts Schweinsteiger in the Euro 2012 semi-final defeat against Italy in Warsaw. The *Bundestrainer*'s loyalty had been admirable in principle but an awful miscalculation in practice. The midfielder's problems in the quarter-final win against Greece in Gdansk had been apparent to everyone. Half of the questions posed to his team-mates in the mixed zone that night had inquired after the fragile state of Schweinsteiger's ankle. But Löw had

wanted to believe that everything would turn out okay. It didn't. His blind faith in one of his big names was seen as one of the main reasons why Germany had failed to advance to the final of a competition they had been expected to win.

Löw's reputation had taken a severe beating in Poland. BBC pundit and former player Martin Keown told British viewers that Germany's collapse was down to 'arrogance', but, if anything, Löw hadn't been nearly arrogant enough with his selection and tactics. He had specifically adapted his formation to counter the threat of playmaker Andrea Pirlo, the bearded maestro who had driven England to distraction with his passing skills in the Kiev quarter-final.

Adjusting to the opposition is not necessarily a bad idea. But it becomes one when it undermines your own strengths or leads to a loss of your own footballing identity. Löw's team were strongest in the wide areas. In Warsaw, they had made life easy for Cesare Prandelli's side by playing narrowly.

The confusion that reigned in midfield after Mario Balotelli's two goals for the *Azzurri* was symptomatic of the muddled thinking on the bench. Perhaps Löw had overcomplicated matters or perhaps he had been too scared of the Italians – the upshot was the same for his talented but fragile team as it had been in the World Cup semifinal defeat against Spain in 2010, when Germany had felt the need to play an ultra-deep counter-attacking game that resulted in almost no attacks at all. 'We were so tired from chasing the ball that we had no energy to do something when we did have it,' Miroslav Klose had said after that chastening 1-0 defeat.

Teams often come to resemble their coach's characteristics after a while, and in late May 2014 there was a widespread belief that both the urbane Löw, a man who valued harmony and shunned open conflict, and his

(overwhelmingly) likeable bunch of prodigies were just that little bit short on ruthlessness and grit. For four major tournaments in a row, they had been found wanting when it came to the crunch.

That Warsaw capitulation overshadowed Löw for the whole of the World Cup qualifying campaign. It was a game that had brought the first sporadic but noticeable calls for his resignation after six years on the *Nationalmannschaft* bench.

Germany won nine out of their ten qualifying games, barely breaking sweat. The tenth, though, a bizarre 4-4 draw with Sweden in October 2012 in Berlin, confirmed the worst suspicions. The team had played beautiful, rarefied football to take a 4-0 lead, then inexplicably conceded four goals in the last half-hour to drop two points. It was a freakish game but the message was a familiar one. When the going got tough, Löw's artistically inclined collective crumbled.

The *Bundestrainer* had tried hard to shed the 'Mr Nice Guy' image with some rousing 'now or never' speeches in the spring. But the more familiar, lukewarm, 'let's wait and see' rhetoric emanating from South Tyrol and the somewhat rudderless preparation saw the ranks of his detractors begin to swell again.

The mood back home was a strange, unforgiving mix of entitlement and grave concern. Germans would regard anything short of a heroic final defeat by hosts, and favourites, Brazil as an inexcusable failure by Löw to do justice to this golden generation. And yet they weren't at all convinced that this team and their coach had what it took to bring an end to eighteen years of hurt since the last trophy, the 1996 European Championship. Surprisingly, one well-placed expert seemed to agree. 'It's almost impossible

for a European team to win in Brazil, the South Americans are basically one step ahead,' Bierhoff had said in March.

'I know we can do better,' Löw stated after the unconvincing 2-2 draw with Cameroon in the penultimate friendly before leaving for Brazil, 'sounding like a doctor trying to reassure his patient', as *Süddeutsche Zeitung* noted. Khedira, the man at the heart of the team, had been unable to set the pace. The other prominent convalescents hadn't even made it on to the Mönchengladbach pitch. And for holding midfielder Lars Bender, a man who'd come into contention for a starting place against Portugal, who boasted the Balon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo, the World Cup was already over. The Leverkusen player, one of the best performers at the Euros, had suffered a torn hamstring in St Martin that would keep him out of the competition.

The loss of Marco Reus, who twisted his ankle badly in the 6-1 victory against Armenia, came as a bigger shock. The Dortmund attacking midfielder had been considered Germany's most important player in the final third: 'We will miss him in Brazil, no doubt,' said Bierhoff. For all the dozen or so creative players at Löw's disposal, there was no one with the same pace and directness. Reus, who his team-mates fondly called Woodyinho because of his passing resemblance to the cartoon character Woody Woodpecker, was so irreplaceable that the manager didn't even bother calling up another attacking midfielder as an alternative. He took an extra defender, Shkodran Mustafi (then at Sampdoria), instead.

What is the German for angst? The pre-tournament anxiety recalled a similar sense of doom and gloom before the 2006 World Cup, when worries about captain Michael Ballack (calf) and left-back Lahm (elbow) had coincided with a nationwide panic about the leaky back line. Four years later, Ballack's absence in South Africa had given rise to

apocalyptic prophecies again. Germany came back with third-place bronze medals after both competitions. But the same achievement wouldn't be enough this time around, and an injury malaise on a completely different scale from the two previous World Cups made a third place look rather fanciful. This wasn't about one or two individuals potentially missing out. The fault line ran right through Löw's starting eleven.

A doomsday scenario of a flight back before the semi-finals no longer appeared unthinkable. Would Löw have a future after a such an early exit, newspapers wondered. 'I don't think [he] would continue, the pressure on him would be too great,' said Ballack, who hadn't been able to reclaim his place after the South Africa tournament.

The sudden rise of Gladbach's Christoph Kramer from twenty-two-year-old rookie to bonafide Portugal game contender underlined the extent of Löw's predicament. Kramer had never played a competitive game for Germany, nor featured in a Europa League game, let alone in the Champions League.

But making do without half of the regulars was only half of Löw's problem. The secret of Germany's generally good showings in competitions under him had been his detailed tournament preparations. Incessant tactical drills had them playing with the cohesion of a club team, a rare quality in international football where many of Löw's peers still believed that simply lining up the country's best eleven players was all that was needed. Without the team's core personnel on the training pitch, however, practising shapes and playing moves would be all but impossible.

Worse still, the very suitability of Löw's strategy was in doubt, too. German FA chief scout Urs Siegenthaler, Löw's closest confidant since Jürgen Klinsmann had brought in both men to overhaul Germany's playing style in 2004, had publicly warned that the Germany manager's favoured passing game of the last couple of years was probably not a

viable blueprint in the tropical conditions of South America. ‘Possession means movement and effort,’ the ‘superbrain’ (*tz*), told reporters, ‘possession in the sense of dominating [the game] is not right for Brazil. European teams cannot play the same way they play at home.’

In a text message to Löw from the Confederations Cup twelve months before the start of the World Cup, Siegenthaler had gone further, as *Süddeutsche* later revealed. ‘We are called upon to move with the times and put the idea aside,’ the Swiss tactician told his superior.

Would Germany play with no idea? And who would be on the pitch? You could almost see the angry and mournful post-mortems condemning the team’s failure to add a fourth World Cup winners’ star to their badge: ‘Those grey, oppressive days in Val Passiria foreshadowed impending misdadventure …’

‘It makes me laugh a bit, hearing that,’ says Oliver Bierhoff. He’s not laughing, but a small smile of contentment adds to the pleasure of the *Fleischpflanzerl*, the Bavarian version of a hamburger, that he is eating. We’re sitting in a less than quiet corner of a country restaurant full of families. Friday lunchtime in Aufkirchen, Lake Starnberg, thirty kilometres south of Munich. School’s out. Just up the road is the birthplace of Oskar Maria Graf, the twentieth-century Bavarian author who chronicled the political and social changes that swept through this region from the time of German unification in 1870 to the rise of Nazism sixty years later in his book *Das Leben meiner Mutter* (The Life of my Mother). (Bierhoff has read it. ‘You have to, if you live around here,’ he says.) Graf took part in the failed Communist revolution of 1919 that spawned its own, still widely popular shandy, a mix of wheat beer and lemonade called Russn (Russian); it was named for the Red Army revolutionaries who were holed up in a beer cellar and diluted their drink to keep their heads clear for the

impending, futile gun battle. Later, in exile in New York, Graf steadfastly refused to remove his Lederhosen. To be Bavarian is a state of mind, a deep sense of self-contentment and feeling comfortable in your own skin that other, less fortunate Germanic tribes often mistake for smugness.

Munich refers to itself, with a wink and a nudge, as 'Italy's most northerly city'. The nearby lakes, the setting at the foot of the Alps, a way of life that values family, good food and tolerance: it all combines to make the Bavarian capital and its environs the destination of choice for those who want a slice of *la dolce vita* within the country's borders.

Many former footballers have settled around Lake Starnberg, including Bierhoff himself, who came here after a successful career in Italy's Serie A with Udinese and AC Milan. He scored the Golden Goal that won Euro 96 for Germany at Wembley but as the son of an upper middle-class father who was a director of a big energy company, and as a player whose breakthrough had only materialised after a move abroad at the age of twenty-three, he was never quite classic folk hero material. The opposite in fact. A *Der Spiegel* article from April 2006 observed that, with his fashionable clothes and smart haircut, the well-spoken general manager of the national team was someone who 'didn't look like a footballer'. He lacked what Germans call '*Stallgeruch*', literally, the smell of the stable, Bundesliga pedigree. Four years later, *Die Zeit* sympathetically described his status as that of 'an alien object'. 'In the conservative environs of football, he's always been an outsider,' it concluded.

At the beginning of his ten-year tenure, Bierhoff's main task was to mediate between the almost revolutionary fervour of then coach Jürgen Klinsmann and the dithering guardians of the German game in the clubs and the German FA. Once Joachim Löw took over in 2006, however,

Bierhoff assumed the role of ‘bad guy’, he says, for their frequent clashes with the *ancien régime* over organisational issues.

The negative coverage in South Tyrol homed in on him, too. This was shaping up to be a catastrophe of Bierhoff’s very own making, the dispatches from Italy suggested, an unholy mess of hubris, foolishness and rampant commercialism gone horribly wrong.

‘In fact, it was the perfect training camp,’ Bierhoff says, ‘the tragic accident aside.’ Bierhoff and the two racing drivers visited the badly injured man in hospital but the team were not affected, he insists. ‘Löw’s driving licence, the Großkreutz affair and the accident, none of these things stemmed from the national team. There were no conflicts within the team. Looking back at Euro 2012, I thought I should have started a fire, attacked somebody, to give the media something to write about. It was too quiet for them there. In South Tyrol, they had a lot to write, and the team were meanwhile able to work in peace and with focus. Lahm and Neuer joining up later was good, too, because they were able to clear their heads. Internally, we were very calm. I’d say it was like the first days of winter: outside it was suddenly very cold, but inside the heating had come on. It was nice and warm, we were happy. We never had the feeling that [the training camp] could endanger the whole thing.’ The loss of Reus robbed the team of a lot of quality, as the BVB forward had been in top form, but there were never any doubts about Lahm and Neuer recovering in time, he adds.

Lahm was much less certain that everything was going to be all right, however. ‘I don’t think people really worried about me because I’m the kind of guy who always says “I’m okay” when someone asks me how I am. But I was still in a lot of pain when I got to South Tyrol. I couldn’t move freely in the first training session, the swelling wouldn’t go down.

I said to the doctors: if it stays like that, I can't play – I will only hurt myself and the team. And Neuer's shoulder really was touch and go.' Lahm would wear a pressure bandage 'day and night for four weeks'. The team doctors had to aspirate the ankle a few times.

The captain was badly needed in a central role because neither Khedira nor Schweinsteiger looked as if they would be at their best come the start of the competition. Bierhoff: 'We worried about those two. We also worried about the full-backs. All in all, my feeling wasn't as good as before the Euros, I felt more sure about the team then. This time, I thought, many things could happen. We would survive the group stage, for sure, I knew that somehow. But afterwards … it's one game. And you don't know who you'll get and what kind of physical condition you'll be in. There were question marks about our ability to stay the course, considering that we had many players who didn't have the continuity, in terms of playing, that they should have had.'

The sheer amount of unknown variables involved had sapped the public's confidence in Löw and Co. coming up with a winning formula at last. 'That wasn't a bad thing, though,' says Bierhoff. 'A year ago I had put out the deliberately provocative theory that winning in Brazil was all but impossible. I didn't like the superficial way the success of Bayern and Dortmund, who had both reached the Champions League final at Wembley [in 2013], was being viewed. There was this sense that we were certified world-beaters again. But who had scored the goals for those two teams, how many foreign players did they have in important positions? Emotions were getting the better of people. So I pointed that out, on purpose, to argue against that sense of entitlement, and I was of course criticised for that, again. Then three months before the World Cup, the mood changed. Code red. People now thought we wouldn't make it past the group. I didn't mind that because it got

everybody thinking about what's really important: our work and the team's performances.'

The coaching staff were apprehensive about another, much less discussed complication. Few outsiders knew just how bad the mood in the camp had been at the Euros, with the sizeable Bayern and Dortmund factions not seeing eye to eye and a number of younger players agitating for more playing time. In a repeat of the 2012 DFB Cup final, Germany's two leading clubs had faced off in Berlin again in the last game of the season, four days before joining up in South Tyrol, and the match had finished in controversial fashion, with the Bavarians scoring two goals in extra-time after Mats Hummels had had what looked like a perfectly good headed goal chalked off for Dortmund.

Six frustrated BVB (the club's full name is Ballspielverein Borussia 09 e.V. Dortmund) players met seven double winners from Bayern in Italy. Löw couldn't allow tribal rivalries and big egos to seep into the national team a second time. His concern was such that he had all but guaranteed Khedira a place in the World Cup squad, weeks before the Real Madrid midfielder could be sure to regain full fitness in time. The Stuttgart-born son of a Tunisian steel worker was somebody who could influence others with his positive attitude and bridge rifts between Bayern and Dortmund players as a neutral. Löw needed him in the dressing room.

The coach and his staff were hopeful that the magnitude of the challenge in Brazil would scale down pride and pretensions. But it took until the last night in St Martin for the national team general manager to witness the squad coming closer together. Very close together, in fact.

The players' council – Lahm, Schweinsteiger, Per Mertesacker and Klose – invited the entire DFB (German FA) delegation to 'sweat for the trophy' in the hotel's 'event sauna', a vast space holding eighty people. Bierhoff: 'The 2014 Sauna World Cup winner was there – no, I didn't

know there was such a thing, either – and he performed a show with music and strobe lights, waving towels around. We were in there with sixty men. Every player, every staff member, symbolically sweating together for this World Cup. That was an amazing idea by the players. It came from them. I don't really believe that there's such a thing as one "key moment". But that night I remember thinking: something is happening here.'

TWO THOUSAND ZERO FOUR, PARTY OVER, OOPS: OUT OF TIME

I spent the worst day in the history of (post-war) German football with a German 'comedian' in a TV studio. To borrow a phrase from Henning Wehn, one of the few German comedians who doesn't need inverted commas around his job description: it wasn't funny.

DSF, Deutsches Sport Fernsehen, had invited me to their Euro 2004 talk show in an echoey hangar, hidden in an as yet ungentrified section of Lisbon harbour, not far from the spot where Chelsea owner Roman Abramovich had moored his yacht, to talk about the ramifications for Sven-Göran Eriksson's England after their quarter-final exit against the hosts, on penalties, a few nights before. I don't know why they invited the comedian.

As we were about to go on air news broke that Ottmar Hitzfeld would not be taking over the Germany job. 'My heart said "yes" but my head won out,' the former Bayern Munich coach declared from his Swiss holiday resort. 'I'm currently not in the right physical shape to help the national team until the 2006 World Cup. My batteries are flat.' To call Hitzfeld's decision a surprise didn't begin to get close to the cataclysmic effect it had on a footballing nation that lay curled up on the floor after the second traumatic group stage fiasco in as many European championships. A bomb going off at the German FA headquarters in Frankfurt couldn't have created more devastation.

Two dour draws against the Netherlands (1-1) and Latvia (0-0), had been followed by the *coup de* (dis)*grâce* at

Sporting Lisbon's Estádio José Alvalade, administered by a Czech Republic B team without any of their big-name players. Popular *Bundestrainer* Rudi Völler had resigned the morning after the degrading 2-1 defeat, explaining that the 'heavy baggage' of this horror show made it impossible for him to carry on for the next couple of years.

German football's despondency was only tempered by the expectation that Hitzfeld, the agreeable, universally respected coach would come in to avert an even bigger tragedy at the World Cup on home soil two years later. His startling refusal after a few sleepless nights of soul-searching plunged the country into deep despair. The hoped-for saviour had abandoned his country, hinting that the scant amount of talent available made righting the *Nationalmannschaft* a task beyond his powers. Völler had come close to admitting as much, too. 'The players wanted to play better,' he said clemently at his farewell press conference. 'You can't blame them.'

The men in charge were desperate to change Hitzfeld's mind. He was so obviously the ideal candidate for the job. The gentle man and gentleman from Lörrach, a small city on the Swiss border, had won six championships and the Champions League twice, with Borussia Dortmund (1997) and Bayern Munich (2001), two of only three European Cups hoisted by Bundesliga clubs since Bayern's heyday of three consecutive wins in the mid-1970s.

They called him '*der General*', and he'd once worn a *Pickelhaube*, the spiked helmet of the Prussian army, to a Dortmund trophy party (Borussia is neo-Latin for Prussia) but his wasn't an iron-fisted regime. He never said anything controversial, always backed his players in public, didn't engage in petty squabbles with rivals, drolly rolled his Rs to make 'Profi', the German abbreviation of 'professional', sound like 'Prrrrrrofi'. He also had the quirky habit of turning up the collar of his voluminous trench coat on the

touchline, giving him the resemblance of a Cold War spy overlooking a prisoner exchange at Checkpoint Charlie.

A qualified teacher (subjects: maths and sport), he regarded team-building as a psychological puzzle. He compared the intricacies of squad composition with putting together a Formula 1 racing engine. 'Bayern are a sensitive construction, like a Ferrari motor,' he said, 'every detail has to be right.' Hitzfeld's teams had strict hierarchies, with one or two leaders, mid-ranking employees and a few youngsters and fringe players who were expected to follow orders. His sides' strong collective ethos, defensive solidity and hard work frequently got the better of more talented outfits, including Real Madrid's *galácticos*, a bunch of megastars whose showy, individualistic and defensively deficient approach was considered anathema to the German football culture. Hitzfeld's international successes, garnered with the help of a sweeper system, were symbols of defiance: the traditional virtues – Run. Fight. Run a bit more – were not yet done with.

Thus, his refusal to heed the Fatherland's call was met with incomprehension bordering on denial. 'The whole of German football wants Hitzfeld,' exclaimed Borussia Dortmund general manager Michael Meier. 'He now has to give something back to German football.' But he had given enough. Six years in charge of the madhouse that was Bayern had left him burnt out. He needed a break. There were rumours that Manchester United had lined him up as Sir Alex Ferguson's successor in 2005.

Who could pick up the pieces, the talk show host asked. I had no idea. The minimum expected of TV experts is being able to fill the silence with big opinions and recognisable names but I was caught short, unable to come up with anyone who seemed remotely plausible to take on this job.

FA president Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder was at a loss, too. 'I don't have a plan B in my pocket,' he told reporters on

the steps of Lisbon's Le Meridien hotel. Other FA board members flew in to deliberate, there was talk of a coup against 'MV' in the offing. Franz Beckenbauer, the head of the World Cup organising committee, was so afraid of the host team spoiling the party that he mooted the employment of a foreign coach. Dutchman Guus Hiddink? Above all, the German FA were at pains to avoid another chaotic appointment procedure like the unedifying mess of 1998, when former international and World Cup winner Paul Breitner had received an offer to take on the role of *Bundestrainer* for a few hours, only for it to be withdrawn to allow the appointment of Erich Ribbeck and Uli Stielike as manager and assistant respectively. They needed a speedy, less messy resolution this time around.

Otto Rehhagel, who was leading Greece to the most unlikely of triumphs with the help of ultra-negative tactics at the Euros, had ruled himself out. Leverkusen's Christoph Daum, in exile at Turkey's Fenerbahçe, was damaged goods after testing positive for cocaine. Matthias Sammer had just signed a deal to take over VfB Stuttgart from Felix Magath, who had in turn been employed as Hitzfeld's successor in Munich. And Thomas Schaaf, a mustachioed man of few words and even fewer smiles, was firmly ensconced at Werder Bremen after winning the Bundesliga that year.

Inevitably, Lothar Matthäus expressed an interest. The Franconian was always interested in any job going. The mention of him was the cue for the comedian to bring up the former World Cup winner's taste for younger women.

The most-capped international, the legendary captain of 1990 had become the butt of puerile jokes in the course of his long, unsuccessful search for employment in his home country; a laughing stock, along with almost everyone representing German football at international level. But no one in the audience of Germany supporters stranded in Portugal after the *Nationalmannschaft*'s untimely

departure cracked a smile. Lothar's demise, it dawned on them, sadly mirrored that of the nation's most cherished sporting representatives.

Some consolation could be found in the fact that Germany wasn't the only big country which had underperformed at the Euros. Italy and Spain had also been eliminated in the group stage, England and France in the quarter-finals. The giantkilling substantiated Rudi Völler's long-held view that there were 'no more minnows' in international football.

The effect of the Bosman ruling, a European Court of Justice case that enabled free movement of footballers within the European Union in 1995, had narrowed the qualitative gap between national teams. Smaller nations, too, could now muster starting elevens made up of players from Europe's top leagues. Lessons learned from the training regimes at elite clubs were filtering through to the rest of the Continent; technically, physically and tactically the underdogs were no longer so far behind the curve. German football, which had for decades relied on the sheer number of good players at its disposal and on their superior fitness levels, as opposed to, say, honing playing skills or new tactical systems, was now being hit doubly hard by this convergence of performance standards. Smaller nations had become just as good without the ball or perhaps even better, and the number of prospective *Nationalmannschaft* contenders, as a percentage of all Bundesliga professionals, had almost halved in the space of a decade.

In 1993–4, foreigners made up only 17 per cent of the 358 players in the top division. Bosman and the economic boom of the Bundesliga saw that figure rocket up to 49 per cent by 2003–4. Energie Cottbus had already broken an unwritten rule when they became the first Bundesliga side to field eleven foreigners in April 2001. Their three substitutes were non-Germans, too.

Growing squad sizes partially offset the net loss of job opportunities for natives in the top flight, but a fifth of German players had disappeared altogether in the course of those ten years. Naturally, many of the foreigners who'd replace them were big earners and important players, so the actual talent pool to choose from for any *Bundestrainer* was shallower still.

At champions Werder, professionals from abroad accounted for two-thirds of all pitch appearances in the 2003–4 league season. Even at Bayern, the richest club, only five German players – goalkeeper Oliver Kahn, centre-back Thomas Linke, midfielders Michael Ballack, Jens Jeremies and Bastian Schweinsteiger – played regularly that year. Völler's 'no more minnows' line hid a more alarming truth: Germany had stopped being a big football nation.

The shortage of skilled personnel wasn't an entirely new problem, either. As early as 1997, there had been so few decent German strikers in the league that national manager Berti Vogts was forced to lobby the government to naturalise South African-born Sean Dundee of Karlsruher SC, a forward without any German background whatsoever. Dundee received his passport in January 1997 but never played for the *Nationalmannschaft* after picking up an injury before his first scheduled game, a friendly against Israel, and losing his form soon after.

Vogts' successor, Erich Ribbeck, equally desperate for goalscoring talent, approached another Bundesliga import, Brazilian forward Paulo Rink (Leverkusen). Rink was able to unearth German grandparents and quickly joined the fold. Fittingly, his game was more German than Brazilian. The muscular but rather immobile striker didn't score once in thirteen internationals from 1998 to 2000.

The unprecedented recruitment of these two *Gastarbeiter* betrayed the onset of a fundamental malaise. At the same

time, the influx of GDR-trained professionals who were supposed to make ‘Germany unbeatable for years to come’, as Franz Beckenbauer had so confidently predicted after winning the World Cup in 1990, had also all but dried up along with the state funding for the specialised sports schools which had drilled talents like Sammer from a very young age. The nation was running out of players, and casting envious glances at the multi-cultural make-up of World Cup 98 and Euro 2000 winners France. Mayer-Vorfelder bemoaned the fact that Germany had lost her colonies after the First World War and thus couldn’t compete with the athletic style of her neighbour.

In the German FA’s defence, they soon understood that the whole youth development set-up needed reform and a sizeable cash injection. By 2004, the first fruits of the changes at grass-roots level were becoming visible in the shape of youngsters like Schweinsteiger and Lahm. Bundesliga clubs hit by the 2002 bankruptcy of the Kirch media conglomerate, their broadcast partner, had also tentatively begun to give players from their own academies a chance. They were cheaper.

Magath’s young VfB Stuttgart side of 2003–4 had become trailblazers for this new trend when they beat Manchester United in the Champions League with a squad full of homegrown kids like Timo Hildebrand, Kevin Kuranyi and Andreas Hinkel. ‘The boys definitely benefitted from the Kirch collapse,’ Thomas Albeck, Stuttgart’s head of youth development, says. ‘The club was not in a position to buy any players for eighteen months and suddenly youngsters like Hinkel, Hildebrand and Kuranyi were seen as an option. Two years later, we were in the Champions League with them. Dortmund and Hertha both struggled financially and had to play their youngsters, too. It’s worked out well for them. More and more clubs woke up to the fact that they could create real value by spending money on the kids.’ The Bundesliga found that fostering talents was not

only good for the balance sheet but also for the brand. Fans flocked to the stadiums to see homegrown players with whom they could identify.

The national teams of Messrs Ribbeck and Völler were hardly touched by those youthful awakenings, however. You had to be an established Bundesliga player to get anywhere near a shirt with the eagle on the badge. That's how it had always been, that's how it still was. Experience was the paramount criterion. At Euro 2000, the average age of Ribbeck's team was twenty-eight and a half. Sebastian Deisler, hailed as Germany's talent of the century, for lack of any peers, was the only squad member under the age of twenty-three. The inclusion of Schweinsteiger, Lahm and 1. FC Köln teenager Lukas Podolski four years later lowered the average age to twenty-seven but Völler's side were unable to benefit significantly from the fresh impetus.

In the six years after the poor World Cup showing in France, the national team's enduringly unappealing performances had given rise to the term '*Rumpelfußball*'. The Federal Republic's best players didn't really play football any more: they rumbled, lumbered and cluttered. Ribbeck's ineptitude – corners were only practised if players felt like it – and Völler's laissez-faire style were contributing factors but the gravest problems were structural in nature. The dearth of creative world-class players had seen Germany receding further and further into their own shell, braced for the onslaught, hopeful of sneaking a headed goal from a dead-ball situation or with a shot from distance. 'Being determines consciousness,' as Hertha midfielder Thorben Marx so memorably put it. Or was it Karl? (No relation).

Völler and his team were instinctively aware of their limitations. Just like Hitzfeld's Bayern in big European ties, they devoted most of their energy to keeping a clean sheet,

ceding possession and space to the opposition. Grim, obdurate midfield enforcer Jens Jeremies (Germany and Bayern) openly confessed that stagnancy was preferable to uncertain offensive play. 'If it doesn't go for you, you have to stand well,' he said after the Bavarians' flattering 0-0 Champions League draw away to Celtic in November 2003.

Standing well the *Nationalmannschaft* could still do. They strangled the flow of the game to 'hold' their opponents, stoically sitting out attacks until the other side punched themselves out and made a mistake out of sheer exhaustion. Fantasy was fought with discipline.

These were the tactics of the underdog. The fact that the German national team and Bayern, the country's best two teams, were muddling through with this kind of reactive, preventative football should have set alarm bells ringing. But in football, as in life, the most powerful lies are always the ones you tell yourselves. Joyless, motionless, goalless performances like that of Champions League holders Bayern at Old Trafford in March 2002 were hailed as a tactical masterclass and a show of the team's 'true face' (Stefan Effenberg). 'These games earn us a lot of respect in Europe, we have to make use of that,' said Oliver Kahn.

Uli Hoeness praised the drab 0-0 as 'a beautiful game, something for gourmets'. I questioned the sausage factory owner's taste buds in one of my first football articles and then got the fright of my life three days later, during an unsuspecting stroll on London's Oxford Street. Hoeness was on the phone, complaining about the sarcastic tone of the piece.

In an age when defence was considered the best line of defence, keeping the ball out of the net was unsurprisingly elevated to an act of heroism. Kahn, a constantly overmotivated alpha male between the sticks who occasionally nibbled on an opponent's earlobe, was the superstar of this era of sterility, quite literally 'the last man'