

## Youth Training and Development at Professional German Football Academies: A Practical Study of 1.FC Union, Berlin

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### Abstract

The youth training system of the German Football Federation is widely considered to be amongst the best development schemes in the world. By extension, it could be expected that practices and policies at professional German club academies are of a similar standard and that they adhere in large part to the five key elements that previous research has attributed to the most successful and established clubs<sup>15)</sup>: Footballing identity and philosophy, stable leadership structures, links between academy and first team, talent identification and recruitment, and education and welfare. Thus, this notion was investigated in two phases. The first phase examined policies and practices at the youth academy of Hertha BSC, a club in Germany's top division; the findings of that study are presented elsewhere<sup>9)</sup>. The second phase entails the current investigation and focuses on the next-highest tier of play. Through observational and semi-structured interview data, this practical study follows up on the previous assessment at Hertha by examining how best practice elements are addressed at the youth academy of 1.FC Union Berlin, a traditional club that plays in the country's second division. The paper closes with a summary assessment of youth development at both tiers of German professional football as well as suggestions for similar evaluation of practices within the Japanese youth development scheme.

**Key words:** Football, Youth development, Youth academy, 1. FC Union, Germany

German football has an impressive record on the international stage at both senior and junior levels. The four-time world champions most recently won the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, were runners-up on four additional occasions, and boast a further four third-place finishes. At the European championship, equally noteworthy results include three winners' titles accompanied by three second-place medals and three additional appearances in the semi-finals<sup>3)</sup>. In the lead-up to those senior successes, of course, German youth national teams have also fared very well. To illustrate, the country holds U20 FIFA World Cup honours<sup>3)</sup> and has won the European championship at the U17 (three titles, plus four-time runners-up), U19 (three titles, plus five-time runners-up), and U21 levels (twice, including 2017, plus runners-up once)<sup>16)</sup>. Accordingly, the youth development system of German professional football is often described as one with a never-ending supply of youth talent<sup>8,9,18)</sup>.

Nevertheless, football continues to evolve, and both the nature and speed of the contemporary game are such that

performance relies increasingly on technical ability and individual skills within flexible and attack-oriented tactical plans. Thus, the changing patterns of international football require professional development programs to adapt with those changes<sup>8,18)</sup>. In Germany, this has led to an expanded network of youth training centres by the German Football Federation (Deutscher Fußball-Bund, or DFB) as well as an updated playing/coaching philosophy and a greater number of licensed youth coaches working together with the country's professional clubs<sup>8,9)</sup>. These DFB initiatives have been in place since the early 2000s and are outlined in greater detail by Geisler and Shah<sup>9)</sup>, but in brief, their main function is to identify top prospects in every region of the country and further refine those players' abilities as a supplement to their club training at one of the approximately 28,000 football clubs in Germany. The DFB's extensive programs notwithstanding, however, it is the clubs that bear most of the responsibility for youth development in the country. Club football in Germany is headlined by the professional *Bundesliga*,

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which is divided into a first and second division (1. Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga). There is also a professional third division (3. Liga), and the various clubs across all three tiers train their most talented youth prospects in highly-regarded academy programs.

Bayern Munich can easily be considered Germany's strongest and most decorated club team, having won the Bundesliga title and German Cup competition 28 and 18 times, respectively, and the European club competition (UEFA Champions League) on five occasions<sup>2)</sup>. Bayern's youth academy naturally reflects this pedigree, but with the 'never-ending supply of youth talent' that the country is said to enjoy, there can be little doubt that high-quality training systems also exist at Germany's lesser-known clubs and/or those with a lower level of international recognition. Examples of such clubs within the 1. Bundesliga, among others, include Hertha BSC, Borussia Mönchengladbach, RB Leipzig, TSG 1899 Hoffenheim, and VfL Wolfsburg, each of which has made significant investments in recent years to improve their youth academies<sup>5)</sup>. In view of such developments, previous research by Geisler and Shah<sup>5)</sup> examined the youth training structures at Hertha BSC (the signature club of Berlin in the 1. Bundesliga) and offered an overall (positive) assessment of the organization's role in grooming young German players for top-flight football in both local and international contexts. That assessment was based on Shah and Geisler's<sup>15)</sup> review of best practice at the most successful European youth academies, which identified five key factors that are consistently emphasized at those clubs: Footballing identity and philosophy, stable leadership structures, links between academy and first team, talent identification and recruitment, and education and welfare.

Not all of Germany's youth prospects train at 1. Bundesliga clubs, however, and the nature of youth development practices within the second tier of German football is less clear. Thus, the purpose of this practical study was to follow up on Geisler and Shah's<sup>5)</sup> overview of Hertha BSC and take a closer look at the youth academy scheme of a team in Germany's second division, where work is also done to develop promising young players into future professionals. The target team of this assessment was 1.FC Union, which has its roots in the former East Berlin and is the city's second-largest professional club. 1.FC Union has fewer financial resources than Hertha BSC, but the professional (first) team finished the 2016-17 season in 4<sup>th</sup> place of the 2.

Bundesliga and narrowly missed out on promotion to the top league. They did less well in 20017-18, but still finished in a respectable 8<sup>th</sup> place amongst 18 teams. Accordingly, 1.FC Union has yet to compete in the 1. Bundesliga, but the club makes for an interesting case study given its plans to expand the current academy facilities, build a new academy dormitory and club centre, and ultimately move to the first division.

In order to collect relevant data, the principal author visited Berlin in March 2018 to observe youth training sessions and games, and to conduct semi-structured interviews (on the basis of availability) with the former youth academy director and current head coach of the U17 team. Observations included training at the U14, U15, U17, and U19 levels as well as games of the U17 and first (professional) team. To facilitate presentation and interpretation of the information obtained, the findings are discussed against the backdrop of Shah and Geisler's<sup>15)</sup> five key features of successful youth academies. That is, those features are briefly described once more, and within each section, reference is then made to the nature of 1.FC Union's initiatives on that factor and compared with similar initiatives at Hertha BSC<sup>5)</sup>. Unless otherwise noted, commentary on practices at 1.FC Union are derived from the interview data described above; in the case of Hertha, from the aforementioned Geisler and Shah<sup>5)</sup> study. The paper concludes with a summary assessment of 1.FC Union's current academy program and suggestions for follow-up examination in Japanese settings.

### **Footballing Identity and Philosophy**

A clear team identity and footballing philosophy plays an important role in youth development to the extent that it guides decision making and promotes consistency within the club<sup>11,12)</sup>. This consistency should permeate every team and age bracket of the academy in order to facilitate players' transitions through each stage of the system, and one means of doing this is to have all teams of a club adopt the same formations, tactics, and playing styles<sup>11)</sup>. Barcelona's famed La Masia academy provides an example of this approach in that youth players at all levels learn the tactical patterns of the first team<sup>11)</sup>.

The perspective at both Hertha BSC and 1.FC Union is somewhat different, however, as young players do not follow the formation and tactical systems of the first team. Rather, they are purposefully exposed to various systems of play in the interest of the players' individual development and versatility (rather than the immediate

interests of the professional squad). At 1.FC Union, this is an especially important consideration since very few will ultimately become professional players with the club. Thus, teams within the U14 to U16 brackets play the first half of the season with one system before changing to another system for the second round. At the U17-U19 levels, team formations and tactics are matched to the traits and abilities of the players in the squads, as is generally considered to be standard coaching practice. In that way, the senior-most academy teams are trained to be competitive. This means that the playing system might also be adjusted on occasion to maximize immediate win possibilities if teams find themselves in promotion or relegation battles.

Extending from the above, 1.FC Union's youth training philosophy stipulates that players below the U17 level are to gain experience in at least two positions, in keeping with the notion of versatility and developing multidimensional skill sets amongst players. The corresponding positions are typically ones that are linked in some way, such as centre back and central holding midfield. At the U17 level and above, however, it becomes more common for players to specialize and primarily play one position. Overall, 1.FC Union has become more professional with respect to club organization and structure in recent years, and the aim is to gain promotion to the 1. Bundesliga as soon as possible. Nevertheless, that goal is not to be achieved recklessly or at a 'quick-fix' price (e.g., by signing veteran players from other clubs to expensive short-term contracts), as this can sometimes lead to relegation once again after a short period of time and even greater difficulties in returning to the top flight.

### **Stable Leadership Structures & Links between Academy and First Team**

Successful youth academies provide frequent opportunities for interaction between the club's youth teams and current first team members<sup>11)</sup> so as to prepare young players for the climate of the professional environment<sup>13)</sup>. Common ways of cultivating relationships between first team players, youth players, and staff are to maintain a degree of stability within the academy leadership/personnel and to encourage the first team coach to follow the development of the club's youth players<sup>11,13)</sup>.

At Hertha BSC, it is an unwritten rule that academy coaches of the U14 squad and above must have played professionally for the club at some point in their careers.

In contrast, 1.FC Union does not put such constraints on upper academy positions; that is, coaches do not have to be ex-Union professionals. Instead, Union's academy coaches are matched via their coaching qualifications and personalities to specific age brackets and must possess a strong capacity to demonstrate and explain the applicable technical skills and tactics. As a result, members of the coaching staff do not usually have the same long-term history with the club as those at Hertha, but all of Union's full-time coaches receive 2-3 year renewable contracts. This provides a reasonable degree of stability (within the context of professional sport), as underlined by the fact that the current academy director has been with the club since 2008 while the previous director and current U17 coach began in 2010.

The links between academy and professional team personnel at 1.FC Union are very close. Every month, there is a meeting between all full-time employees to discuss and analyze the current state of the club from various perspectives. In addition, the academy director and U19 coach meet once per week with their first team counterparts, and every three months the club holds meetings between the entire coaching and support staff of the professional, U17, and U19 teams. Furthermore, the first team's head and assistant coaches attend U17 and U19 games twice per week when there is no overlap with the professional team's games. Lastly, coaches' continuing professional development is facilitated both internally and through DFB programs, and on a more casual level, every Friday sees all of 1.FC Union's first team and academy coaches play small-sided football together.

With respect to connecting the first team players with top academy prospects, Hertha BSC sets a very strong example as youth players train with the first team or join the senior squad at training camps on a fairly regular basis. During the 2016 season, for example, 12 academy players in total received such invitations at various times<sup>6)</sup>. The approach at 1.FC Union is less extensive, but such connections are made nonetheless as 1-3 senior youth players are invited to train with the professional squad each year and can potentially earn the chance to play in selected friendly matches. During the 2017-18 season, in fact, four members of the U19 team trained with the first team on 2-3 occasions per week.

Ultimately, the target at Hertha BSC is to have one academy player from each age group eventually sign a professional contract. A similar goal is set at 1.FC Union, and it is not uncommon for 2-3 players per year to be

offered contracts by the first team. However, most of those players do not actually end up playing, and patterns to date suggest that success in this regard is achieved if the club can produce one player every two years who makes it to the professional ranks and becomes a regular squad member. Regardless of the direction that players take, it is hoped that each will continue to be fans and/or club members after their football careers end.

### **Talent Identification and Recruitment**

The early identification of talented young players is a key consideration for youth academies in the quest to develop prospects into professional team members and, where possible, into national team players<sup>1)</sup>. In addition, the contemporary understanding of sport science and its important role in player development means that top European clubs employ sport science teams made up of physiologists, nutritionists, and psychologists, to name just a few. Larger and wealthier clubs also put together extensive scouting networks that look for top youth prospects locally, throughout the country, and in some cases, beyond the nation's borders<sup>19)</sup>.

Hertha BSC has 35,000 registered club members and 22 partner cities across Germany that are involved in exchange initiatives and programs. This leads club officials to feel that they are well acquainted with all of the top prospects in Berlin, the surrounding areas, and other parts of the country<sup>6)</sup>. The club does not typically recruit outside of Germany, but will entertain the possibility of international players if truly exceptional talents are brought to the club's attention. The approach at 1.FC Union is generally similar, despite fewer financial resources. The club employs one full-time scout, who has been with the organization since 2015, as well as five who are hired on an honorarium/part-time basis. Accordingly, Union's personnel consider themselves to be familiar with essentially all of the top prospects above the U12/U13 age bracket in the Berlin-Brandenburg region, and as such, it is not customary for local players beyond that bracket to present themselves to the academy in hopes of a tryout. For small-pitch players (U13 and below), there are at least three showcase events per year whereas U13-U18 players are often selected from All-Berlin select teams, which extend into the full Brandenburg region. From the U17 level onward, player recruitment is based mainly on positional needs within the applicable team, and approximately 8-9 players from the U17 cohort are promoted to the U19 squad each year. When necessary,

players are also brought in from other parts of Germany, but this can involve complicated administrative processes. Therefore, it is done only if more local options are sparse, and such recruitment is generally limited to one player per team. As a rule, players at 1.FC Union are not recruited from countries outside of Europe.

Union also has the type of coaching and support staff that is characteristic of modern elite programs. That is, all of the full-pitch teams (U14 and above) have a head coach and assistant coach as well as a part-time physiotherapist. There are two goalkeeper coaches who deal with both the small-pitch and full-pitch teams, while the professional squad's goalkeeper coach also works with the U19 team. Moreover, the club employs a full-time/head physiotherapist, a head athletic trainer (since 2016), a nutritionist and doping consultant (also since 2016), and a sport psychologist (since 2017); the latter has a room in the academy dormitory and consults with players on site. These support services have earned 1.FC Union a 3-star rating (the highest rating possible) from the DFB.

### **Education and Welfare**

The reality of modern football is that only about 10% of elite youth players attending top-flight academies go on to play at the professional level<sup>10,11,16)</sup>. Thus, the best youth academies understand the need to provide a thorough academic education alongside a sufficient set of life skills to complement football training, as it is imperative for young players to have a smooth adjustment to the routines and career opportunities that they will face after their competitive football careers end. Many European academies have boarding facilities and links with local schools, and Germany is no exception. In fact, the importance of interaction between schools and professional football clubs has been noted by the DFB's Academies Committee<sup>14)</sup>.

At 1.FC Union, the youth training philosophy is summed up by the statement of "finish school and become a professional"—if the latter cannot happen at Union, then perhaps at another team. However, club officials are fully aware that most players will not go on to sign professional contracts, and consequently, they have an education policy that is not unlike the one at Hertha BSC. Specifically, the "Poelchau Schule" within Hertha's Olympic grounds is a fully accredited school for students from senior-elementary to secondary levels, and a high percentage of players complete the final exams that are prerequisites for university admission in Germany<sup>6)</sup>. The

equivalent at 1.FC Union is the club's tie-up with "Flatow Oberschule", which accommodates students from grades 7 to 10 and has the capacity to take in 80-90 players. Like Hertha's Poelchau Schule, athletes from other sports are accepted at Flatow Oberschule as well, and the club encourages players to enroll as it allows for close monitoring of their training loads as well as their academic tutoring needs. During the 2017-18 season, eight (of 20) U17 players at 1.FC Union were students of Flatow Oberschule.

As is the case at Hertha and all of Europe's top youth academies, players at 1.FC Union can live free of charge in the academy dormitory if their family circumstances necessitate it. Union's current dormitory houses seven players, though the building can accommodate 10 people in two separate apartments with five bedrooms each. However, a new boarding facility will be built for the 2019-20 season, and once completed, it will have rooms for 16-20 academy players.

In summary, information obtained during the observation period at 1.FC Union suggests that, much like the previous review of Hertha BSC<sup>5)</sup>, the club can be rated highly on each of the five factors that Shah and Geisler<sup>15)</sup> ascribed to successful youth academies. The new academy and dormitory facilities to be built, the leadership structure and localized focus in player recruitment and training, the opportunities for academy players to train and compete with the seniors, and the holistic education that youth players receive (alongside the repeated emphasis on completing one's schooling) make it a reasonable assertion that 1.FC Union's academy system plays its part in the overall development of German youth players and the 'never-ending supply of youth talent'<sup>8,9,18)</sup>. In other words, 1.FC Union's youth academy can be placed alongside the academies of other Bundesliga clubs, suggesting that the development of German talent is indeed spread out across a wide range of clubs at various tiers of play.

With regard to next steps, it would be interesting to extend such assessment to youth training systems outside of Germany and even Europe altogether. Within Asia, for example, Japan can be regarded as the country which has established the closest and most successful version of the European academy scheme<sup>7)</sup>. The men's national team ("Samurai Blue") has qualified for every World Cup since 1998 while the women's squad ("Nadeshiko Japan") won the FIFA Women's World Cup in 2011 and has participated in every tournament since the competition's inception in 1991<sup>4)</sup>. There is reason to believe that these successes are

linked to Japan's youth development system, which includes a wide network of national development/training centres throughout the country, club licensing criteria, and a coach development and licensing scheme<sup>4,15)</sup>. Given the depth and professionalism of this approach, it is conceivable that an assessment against the aforementioned five categories of successful European academies could help push Japan toward its goal of winning the men's World Cup in the foreseeable future.

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