

## Sport

# German system that has made them the team of the century

James Gheerbrant tells the inside story of the model that has become the envy of the football world



They're a perfectly ordinary school," Mike Dierig repeats. It's lunch hour at Gesamtschule Berger Feld on Adenauerallee, and as you walk through the dusty corridors, echoing to the clang of lockers and the chatter of children on their breaktime, past the papier-mâché sculptures of a teenage art class, it is quite possible to believe him. Then he closes the door to his office and from the pictures on the wall, stars twinkle.

Yes, that is a young Manuel Neuer in the orange-and-black goalkeeper top, and yes, that is Mesut Özil with the blond streak in his hair, and yes, that is Leroy Sané with the toothy grin. Julian Draxler and Benedikt Höwedes were also educated here, meaning that 4 per cent of the men who have lifted the World Cup trophy this century have passed through the halls of this nondescript comprehensive on the outskirts of Gelsenkirchen. Out of normality, greatness.

Gesamtschule Berger Feld has been an Eliteschule des Fußballs (Elite Football School) since 2007. Of the 1,400 pupils here, 80 are part of the "football project". Most are attached to the academy of Schalke, the Bundesliga club with which Gesamtschule Berger Feld has a special partnership.

After Germany suffered early exits at the 1982 World Cup and Euro 2000, the German football association, the DFB, established a network of partner schools, which now number about 30. This allows promising youngsters to train two or three mornings a week and ensures they receive a good education.

Although creating elite footballers is the outcome here, it is not the objective.

Their aim is simply to supply rounded individuals, with hinterland and self-reliance, capable of cohering in group environments and taking initiative under pressure. It takes men to populate *Die Mannschaft*.

"It's a gigantic machine, and we're one of many small cogs," Sebastian Meier, Dierig's colleague, says. And like most German-engineered machines, this one rarely breaks down.

I have come to Germany to try to understand what makes the national team so extraordinarily successful. Germany are the defending world champions, having won their fourth World Cup in Brazil four years ago, and are bidding to become the first team to retain the trophy since 1962.

In the world's most globally competitive sport, their ability to stay

at the top is incomparable. Germany have reached the semi-finals of their past six major tournaments. They are the only side who have made the last four of every World Cup this century. They have contested five of the past nine World Cup finals. Germany have found a way to decrypt England's kryptonite.

So how do they do it? If anyone can answer that question, it's Lothar Matthäus. He was the captain of the victorious 1990 team who inspired Gary Lineker's evergreen quote about football being a simple game in which, at the end, Germany always win. He went to five World Cups and his 25 games, for West Germany and Germany, are the most anyone has ever played at the tournament.

Matthäus believes the common factor in Germany's success, the golden thread that runs through each of their world-conquering teams, is their *Teamgeist*, or team spirit.

"When I was captain, just as when Franz Beckenbauer or Philipp Lahm were captain, the team was built on unity," he says. "No individual

journey through German football, it is that there is no *Erfolgsgeheimnis* — secret to success. The magic of German football is that there is no magic.

"In our youth development, we don't just consider ourselves coaches, imparting technical and tactical information," Norbert Elgert, Schalke's charismatic under-19 coach, says.

"We also believe that the modern coach has the duty to impart other values, like respect, humility, honesty, helpfulness and teamwork. It's about preparing them for life, not just professional football.

"You have to take care of the mind and soul of the person. We liken it to the job of a gardener, who has to water his plants and take care of them until they begin to grow. We have the same duty: to help our players grow."

Elgert is 61, with a rockstar mane of silver hair that reaches his shoulders and a list of protégés that is just as long and radiant. He is revered as a youth-development guru, having mentored Özil, Neuer, Draxler, Höwedes, Sané and others including Joël Matip and Sead Kolasinac.

He encourages his charges to finish their education. As Marius Heck, one of the players in the under-17 squad and a pupil at Gesamtschule Berger Feld, says: "Everything that you learn in school you can take with you and put into practice, either on the pitch or off it."

Heck is taking his Abitur, the German equivalent of A levels, something which is only becoming more common. Among Germany's World Cup-winning squad of 2014, 13 players finished school with the highest-possible qualification. In the construction of a world-beating generation, education is a cornerstone.

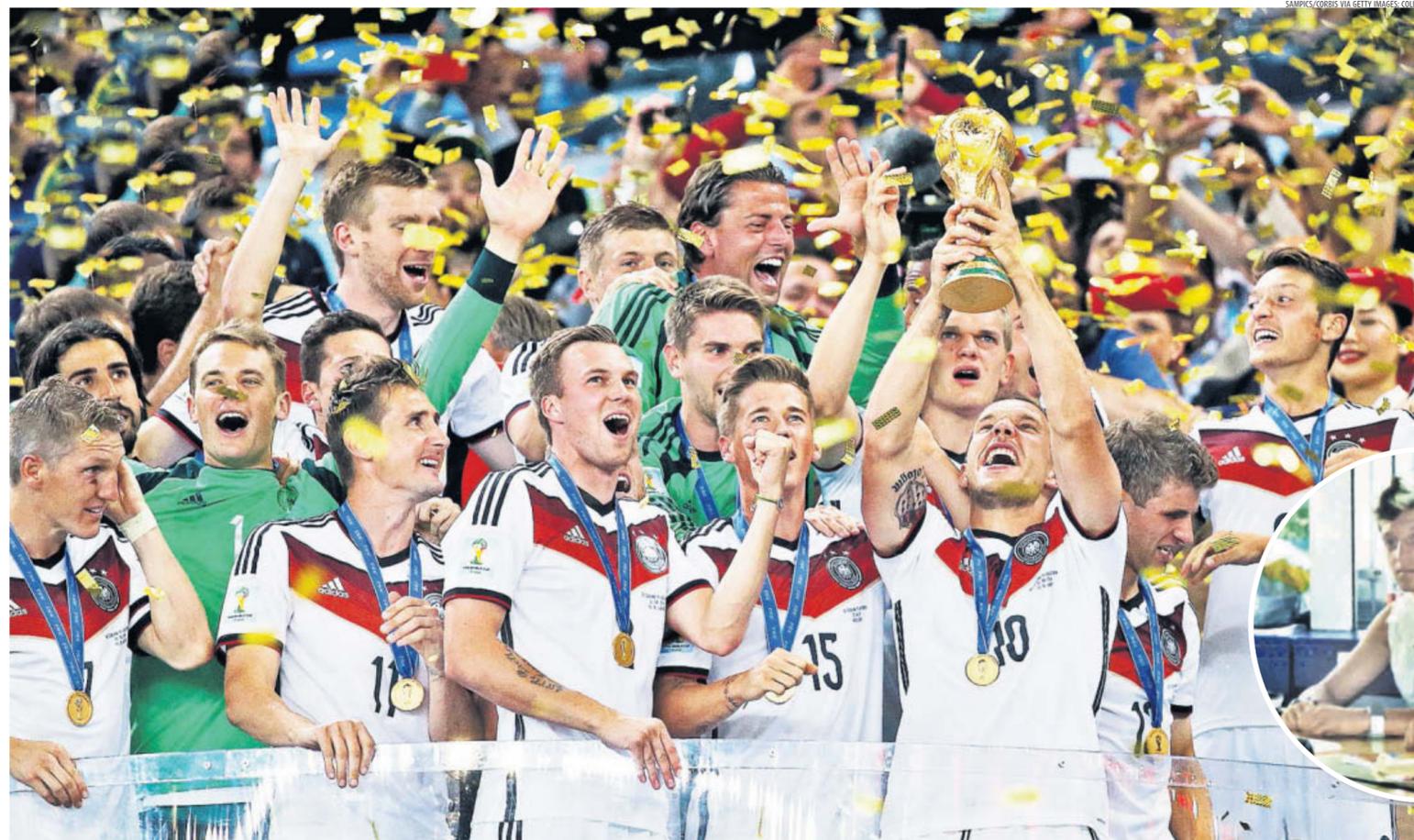
The most common rationale you will hear for this trend is that it equips players with a plan B if they don't make it to the professional echelons of the game. But could it be that it also benefits those who do make it to the very top? Does the superior education of Germany's elite players actually make them better footballers?

"Attaining a good school diploma gives a certain assurance," Meier says. "At the back of your mind, you know that you're not entirely dependent on your sporting career. I think that gives a certain freedom of thought on the pitch."

At Gesamtschule Berger Feld, they have high hopes for their next superstar alumnus: Thilo Kehrer, a 21-year-old centre back who played 28 times for Schalke last season and has already captained Germany Under-21. He too graduated with an excellent Abitur. There is a prototype being made in Germany: the sort of player who can not only pass with his left and his right, but is able to stand on his own two feet, too.

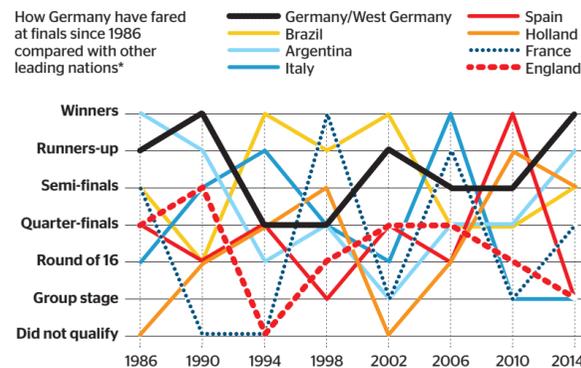
On the pitch, it is clear that Germany are miles ahead of England. But in the battle of minds, too, the chasm yawns wide. Only three Englishmen have managed in the Champions League this decade: Gary Neville, Craig Shakespeare and Harry Redknapp. When next season's tournament begins, Germany's figure will be at least 14. And the talent keeps on coming: this season, the 32-year-old Domenico Tedesco managed Schalke to second place in the Bundesliga, while Hoffenheim, under the 30-year-old Julian Nagelsmann, were third. While English football subsists on regurgitated wisdoms, the bloodstream of the German game

## WORLD CUP. RUSSIA 2018



## Germany's World Cup domination

How Germany have fared at finals since 1986 compared with other leading nations\*



\*Current group stage/knockout format used

Football factory: Özil, inset, and Neuer came through the German football production line at Gesamtschule Berger Feld, and they played together with the Under-21s, right, and Schalke, far left, before being key members of Germany's 2014 World Cup winning squad, main picture



I express surprise that there is so much gloom in Germany, when, from afar, the procession of playing and coaching talent seems like an endless production line.

"Maybe we're approaching it too much like a production line," Niedzkowski says. "And it's not endless, that's for sure. We can see the end of it right now."

All of this explains how the German supremacy is cultivated, calculated and even critiqued in its heartlands. But it doesn't quite tell the whole story. After all, getting the infrastructure right is only half the battle. You can put all the right people in the driving seat, lay the perfect tracks, only for the national team to be derailed by the pressure or sheer blind random chance of a knockout tournament. And yet Germany seemingly never are. Why do they always seem to have ice in their veins, while England have ice in their brains?

"Fear is like a wildfire," Elgert says. "If a couple of players are fearful, they take the whole team with them. And with fear, it's impossible to play football."

"The crucial thing is to teach players to deal positively with pressure. We have a training atmosphere here where pressure is generated, not to finish anybody off but to make them stronger.

Mental strength is crucial. If a player has it innately, that's ideal. But there are also ways in which you can help players get better."

In German youth competitions, players such as Schalke's Heck get used to playing in front of large crowds from a young age. "The first time you play in front of lots of spectators, the fear is great," he says. "But over time, the pressure decreases. I have already noticed that in many situations I react in ways I wouldn't

have reacted before."

Niedzkowski believes this is crucial for the robustness of German football on the biggest stage. "Youth football in Germany is very result-oriented, and has been for a long time," he says. "The ones that come through are used to playing in higher-pressure environments, and that's one reason for them being prepared for high-pressure environments later on."

"When you watch a youth Bundesliga game here, there are tons of agents and parents, and all sorts of crap is thrown at the players at that age already. So they get used to much more noise around their game, and maybe that helps them, in contrast to the English player, who doesn't get exposed to that early on."

If you squint, you could conclude that the rest of the world doesn't have that much to fear from Löw's team at the World Cup. Germany have won only one of their past six games, an impressive 2-1 victory over Saudi Arabia.

They don't have a single player who has finished in the top 15 of Ballon d'Or voting in the past two seasons. Özil is inconsistent, Thomas Müller is doubted, Neuer has barely played this season, and the left back, Jonas Hector, finished bottom of the Bundesliga with Cologne. It doesn't sound like the résumé of a fearsome contender.

Nobody is fooled. More than perhaps any other team, Germany's strength, their aura, depends not on their form but who they are. When the whistle blows in Russia, when the world is watching, they will be there, as they always are.

Germany sometimes have trouble recognising the image of their country that outsiders carry in their heads: the flawless, clockwork socio-industrial utopia. As I journey back to Cologne-Bonn airport, we pass a set of roadworks. "Bloody roads," my taxi driver laments. "They're always messing around with them." He shakes his head. "I bet you have better roads in Britain." So it is with another facet of the German stereotype: football. We see only the smooth, finished Autobahn ferrying the *Nationalmannschaft* to another glittering destination. But behind an enviable infrastructure lie toil, manpower, vision, even the occasional pothole. The road to success requires constant maintenance.