

He is surely the only soccer player on Earth with a Baker's diploma and a World Cup winner's medal. At the age of 18, he did two extra training sessions per week with athletic coaches to improve his stride and speed. When he had made it as one of the world's top strikers, he would arrive for work at London club Spurs in a nearly 20 year old Volkswagen Beetle. Juergen Klinsmann has always been an independent thinker.

# Juergen Klinsmann

## HEAD-ON: STILL AN INDEPENDENT THINKER

By Justin Kavanagh

Originally *90 Minutes* had approached the retired legend to talk about his work with SoccerSolutions, his advisory role with the L.A. Galaxy and to get his take on American soccer. That was just before national coach Rudi Voeller resigned after Germany's poor showing at Euro 2004, and the DFB (the German football federation) unexpectedly chose Klinsmann as his successor. Suddenly, Juergen Klinsmann's commute to work has gotten a lot longer, and his diary has quickly filled-up as far as the Summer of 2006, when Germany will host the World Cup. Frankly, we reckoned we did not have much of a chance for our interview, but the man showed the same class he once displayed in the white shirt of Germany, and, remaining true to his word, he honored his commitment to talk to *90 Minutes* next time he arrived back in the U.S.

Commitments and controversy are dealt with by Klinsmann the same way he once met crosses—head on.

It is Klinsmann's response to the thorny question of the "poisoned chalice," as the German national coaching post has been depicted, that provides the telling moment in our conversation. He meets the question coolly, clinically and unflinchingly. And the response says a lot about Klinsmann: He retains all the pride and all the pragmatism of his German roots, while embracing the positive, "can-do" attitude that he believes fosters success. Taking the negative and turning it into a positive with eloquent authority. That's Juergen Klinsmann. Still his own man, still an independent thinker.

**90:00** Juergen, your moves to new clubs as a player were frequently surprising. But this latest job offer must have taken even you by surprise?

**Klinsmann** Absolutely. Germany had made it to the final of FIFA World Cup 2002 and gone unbeaten in the qualifying for Euro 2004; so, there was no way to predict a first round exit from the competition followed

immediately by Rudi's resignation. Also, I had been outspoken in urging changes in German soccer—particularly related to player development, so it was certainly not clear that the DFB would turn to me to lead the National Team program. But, I'm glad they surprised me, and I am also very respectful of the responsibilities I have been asked to fulfill by the DFB.



**90:00** Presumably, Rudi Voeller gave you an update on the state of play within the squad he was leaving. The role of German National Team manager has been portrayed in the German press as a somewhat "poisoned chalice," with the implication being that the players coming through are not as good as in the past. Is this fair criticism?

**Klinsmann** Germany has a rich heritage of success in soccer to draw upon. Since the modern Bundesliga was established in 1963, the German National Team has never gone more than six years without being in the finals of either the World Cup or the European Championship. And, in these forty years, Germany has been a winner five times. My job is to pick up this chalice of success, toast the past, and challenge the current generation of players, who share this heritage as well as the opportunities and responsibilities it brings, to lift the chalice up in another major victory.

**90:00** Your appointment has been controversially received by certain ex-players like Lothar Matthaus. What do you say to the allegations that... a) Juergen Klinsmann's was a "political" appointment?

**Klinsmann** I have always been known as an independent person, and I did not campaign to be National Team coach. So, there is no basis for using the term "political."

**90:00** And b)... that your lack of top-level coaching experience will be a disadvantage?

**Klinsmann** I just hope to win one more match than Franz Beckenbauer did in 1986. If you remember, he coached Germany to the World Cup final after being appointed National Team manager in 1984 with no previous coaching experience. Obviously, I have tremendous respect for Franz having played for him as he coached us to victory in the 1990 World Cup. So, while I understand some of the questions about inexperience, I do not think it is necessarily a disadvantage.

**90:00** And finally c)... that you should not be in charge unless you are willing to move back to Germany full-time? I saw you with your son at a Bundesliga game on TV last weekend. How will you divide your time now between Germany and the U.S. or is it really an issue when the team plays only one game every month?

**Klinsmann** Where I live has very little to do with how I get the job done. I have established a solid management staff for the National Team, so all the players being considered and their clubs are being regularly con-

tacted. The team plays on average once a month, alternating between home and away. I am in Germany for any business that needs to get done, and I must also be aware of the international soccer scene, because that is where our competition will come from at FIFA World Cup 2006.

**90:00** Does the fact that Germany's next competitive game is two years away give you breathing space or would you rather have the cut and thrust of a qualification series, given many European club's reluctance to release players for friendlies?

**Klinsmann** I'm very comfortable with the opportunities we have for competition. Some of our matches will be friendlies, but there will still be intensity because when Germany plays Austria or Holland (to name a couple of opponents), that is the nature of the competition. Plus, Germany hosts the Confederations Cup next year, which will bring the best National Teams from each confederation to play in a tournament atmosphere. I'm also very confident that we will have good cooperation from the clubs in terms of their players. The clubs know we respect their situations because we regularly communicate with the clubs. And, the players want to participate in the National Team schedule because they want to be selected to play in the FIFA World Cup.

**90:00** I read that, "Klinsmann is believed to have been influenced by American ideas on coaching where responsibility is shared by several coaches working under a head coach." Can you explain your coaching philosophy and your choice of personnel around you in the Germany job?

**Klinsmann** I was fortunate to play in four major soccer countries and, also, to live in the United States, which has a number of major professional team sports leagues. And, I've also been fortunate to play for some of the best coaches in the world. ▶

#### FOOTER TRIVIA

Against which club did Juergen Klinsmann score four goals against in a late season match in 1998, saving Tottenham from relegation? (Answer on Page 61)



So, my philosophy is the result of very competitive experiences in a number of different environments with a number of excellent leaders and teammates. The bottom line to me is that players and their coaches need to accept personal responsibility, be confident and positive that they can be successful, be committed to contributing to the team effort as well as their own individual development, and demonstrate their commitment and passion everyday they come to train and play. The other members of the National Team staff reflect and support this thinking, as will the players we select to represent Germany.

**90:00** What changes do you propose making to the current DFB set-up?

**Klinsmann** As I implied earlier, the DFB, as a federation, has been very successful. The Bundesliga is one of the top Leagues in the world. The federation is helping Germany host its second FIFA World Cup in the past generation (Germany hosted—and won—in 1974). The Women's National Team are the current World Champions.

My primary focus is on one component of German soccer: developing the National Team for the upcoming FIFA World Cup. I fully expect to continue to receive the support of all members of the German soccer community—the fans, the players, the clubs, the sponsors, the media, the officials—as we prepare to successfully represent Germany during the FIFA World Cup. Obviously, I will make the decisions regarding player selection, leadership, and direction that the National Team staff think are necessary for us to be successful.

**90:00** Juergen, if we could switch the focus to soccer in the USA for a while, can you tell us about SoccerSolutions and how you got involved in U.S. Soccer?

**Klinsmann** SoccerSolutions is a sports marketing consultancy focused on soccer. My two partners, Mick Hoban and Warren Mersereau, have a wealth of experience in different aspects of the game, including living overseas, and they respect the game as well. When I moved to the United States after retiring as a player, I wanted to broaden my understanding of the business side of soccer and make a contribution back to the game at the same time. SoccerSolutions has allowed me to do both. Our work involves event and brand management, business and marketing development, sponsor relations, and networking as well as generating concepts for player development.

**90:00** What impresses you most about soccer in this country?

**Klinsmann** The United States has a vibrant and enthusiastic soccer community, particularly in terms of youth participation. Both boys and girls are encouraged to play. The development of facilities and commitment to youth development are impressive.

**90:00** And about MLS?

**Klinsmann** The MLS needs to be given due credit as a new professional league. It is less than 10 years old and already appears to have a good fan base, strong sponsor and investor relationships, and a growing number of soccer-specific stadiums. Compare that to the first 10 years of any other professional league and the results are substantial.

**90:00** And what least impresses you? What should change?

**Klinsmann** Obviously, fan support, which leads to growing commercial opportunities from television contracts to merchandising to ticket programs and so on, depends on having exciting players, teams, and games on the fields of play. It's a chicken or the egg question: What comes first—fans or top players? The MLS has tried to be both financially responsible as a business and attractive as a competitive sports experience. That's a tough balancing act in today's international soccer environment. Hopefully, the MLS will be able to expand its ability to sign top players going forward.

**90:00** Your company's (SoccerSolutions) philosophy includes the statement, "Winning is important, but it's not everything." Is this a hard concept for Americans?

**Klinsmann** This philosophy should be no more difficult for Americans to embrace than for people from other countries and cultures. SoccerSolution's philosophy is based on integrity and that is what the quote you referenced refers to. The game of soccer—as a metaphor for life—has rules, traditions, and relationships to respect. Competition is meant to test these essential characteristics, but competition, particularly the concept of winning, is not meant to take place at the expense of these characteristics.

**90:00** In terms of mental preparation, how would Juergen Klinsmann, the coach, motivate his players? What atmosphere would he foster in his locker room?

**Klinsmann** The key to mental preparation is self-responsibility. Of course, coaches try to provide the right conditions for players to be able to perform at their best. But, coaches





**Klinsmann** Youth soccer is about encouraging youngsters to have fun, to explore their physical and, later, their mental capabilities. It is about encouraging youngsters to enjoy participating with friends and teammates, to challenge themselves against their peers and also against their personal levels of achievement as they increase their own abilities, to be a part of a larger sporting and social fabric, and to grow physically and emotionally with support from the adults who provide the organization for them.

Today youth sports, not only in the United States but in many countries, are very organized and adult-driven. I like to think back to the days when youngsters went out by themselves and organized their own games in the street or the playground or the schoolyard. Children made up their own rules, officiated their own games, picked their own teams, and played until they got tired, they got called home for dinner, or another interesting activity caught their attention. That is the attitude we as adults need to promote as we provide organized opportunities for our children today. Let them be youngsters. Let them have fun. Let them have some control over their own activities. ⚽

Klinsmann celebrates scoring the equalizer against Spain at World Cup 1994.

don't actually play the game. Players do. So, over time, the players have to find how they can best prepare themselves for personally accepting the challenges they face on the field.

Everyone is different. So, the coach has to be clear in his or her expectations for each player and for the team; the coach has to explain the plans and problems that face the players and the team, and the coach has to provide the flexibility that allows each player to use his or her own methods for achieving focus and commitment for the tasks ahead prior to going out on the field.

*At this point, I decided to put a few of my opinions on coaching youth soccer in America up in the air to get the reaction of this World Cup winner and parent with direct experience of our soccer culture. I mentioned the tendency to over-coach kids at a young age, when all that should be important is that they play, as well as the frequently raised complaints that there are too many youth tournaments and too many substitutions. Juergen Klinsmann met these issues on the volley and his thoughts make interesting reading for American coaches and parents.*

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#### FOOTER TRIVIA

True or false: Germany has won the World Cup. (Answer on Page 61)