

Klinsmann's challenge

As Germany prepares for its finals assault, many in the host nation are hoping Jurgen Klinsmann's men can replicate the feats of Beckenbauer's team of 1974. That, I'm afraid, appears doubtful.

It's November 11, 1989. I'm on the Werder Bremen bus travelling towards East Germany for a friendly game. As we get closer to the border, crowds of people are waving at our bus. I'm told it's "Tag der Deutsche Einheit" — German Unification Day.

I don't know if it was a coincidence or not that we were there, but what I do know is that after Germany won the World Cup the following year, German football legend Franz Beckenbauer predicted Germany will be unbeatable for years to come given the enormous potential of the East.

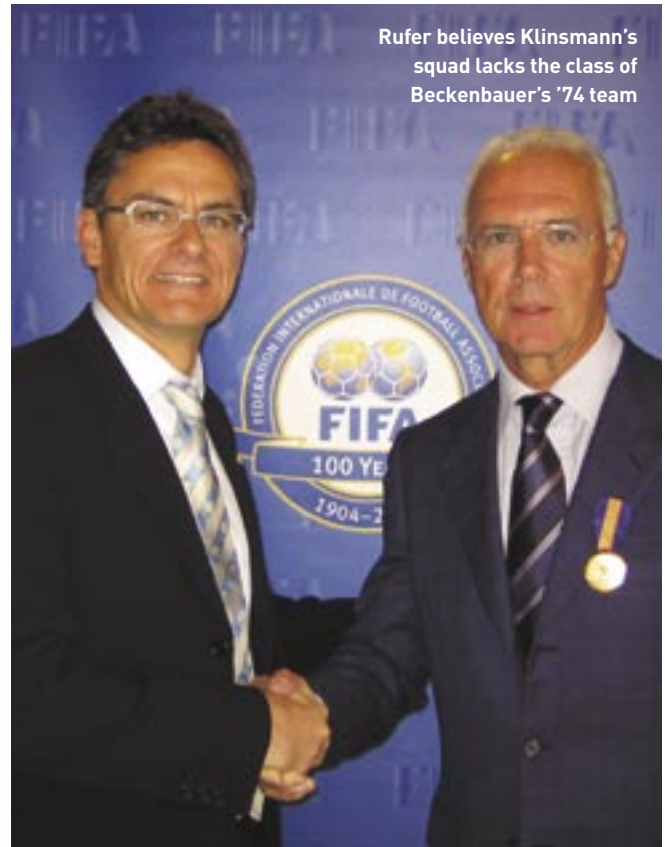
At the time, the Italian Serie A was rated as Europe's number one domestic competition — according to UEFA's five-year ranking system. German internationals Jurgen Klinsmann, Rudi Völler, Lothar Matthaus, Andreas Brehme and Thomas Berthold were members of the victorious Italia 90 squad and all were regulars for their Italian club sides. The German Bundesliga was ranked number two.

Today, it is a completely different story. The Bundesliga is a distant fifth behind Spain's La Liga, the English Premier League, the Serie A and France's Ligue 1 in the UEFA

rankings. Only Robert Huth of Chelsea and Jens Lehmann of Arsenal are German national squad members plying their trade in foreign leagues, raising many to question the quality of German players. Unsurprisingly, huge expectations have been placed on the shoulders of Germany's talismanic leader, Michael Ballack.

Although the squad advanced to the final at World Cup 2002, Klinsmann wielded the axe shortly after his appointment in 2004, replacing old blood with the new. And though he got absolutely caned for it from various sectors, not only was it needed but I personally believe he has done a superb job in overhauling the national team set-up in the lead up to the 2006 finals.

Klinsmann parted with old philosophies and ousted staff that seemed to have been in the national fold since WWII, which included goalkeeper coach and national hero, Sepp Maier. He employed American fitness experts whose methods have challenged the Bundesliga "old school" system, he decided to delay his decision in naming his number one goalkeeper for the finals until just over a month before the finals' kick off, while he



Rufer believes Klinsmann's squad lacks the class of Beckenbauer's '74 team

has opted to live in LA rather than in Germany — much to the uproar of many German football officials. The former striker was also keen to appoint German Hockey National Coach Bernhard Peters as the DFB's new technical director, however, the German FA saved Klinsmann from a crucifixion and opted for former German international, Matthias Sammer.

As Greece national team coach Otto Rehhagel recently said to me, "Politics is quite similar to Fussball, new government, new leader... I promise you this... I promise you that...but Klinsi knows that Fussball has its own rules and the only measurement for success is to win!"

While Beckenbauer proclaimed all those years ago that

Germany would be a dominant force, it appears German fans may have to wait just a little while longer for World Cup success. While Klinsmann has assembled a strong unit, it lacks the international class or dominance of the Beckenbauer era.

Wynton Rufer is a member of the 18-member FIFA Players Committee, which includes Pelé, Franz Beckenbauer, Sir Bobby Charlton, Michel Platini, and George Weah. Rufer was voted the FIFA Oceania Player of the Century, and was included in the FIFA 100 Legends List from 2004. He has been a member of the FIFA Ambassadors for Racism Committee since April 2005 and was also selected in the FIFA World XI in 1995 and 1999. SI